

It's Always Something

a play by
J. Calvin Dotson

It's Always Something 2

It's Always Something

**a play by
J. Calvin Dotson**

CAUTION: Professionals and amateurs are hereby warned that IT'S ALWAYS SOMETHING, being fully protected under the Copyright Laws of the United States of America, the British Empire, including the Dominion of Canada, and all other countries of the Berne and Universal Copyright Conventions, is subject to royalty. All rights, including professional, amateur, motion picture, recitation, lecturing, public reading, radio and television broadcasting, and the rights of translation into foreign languages, are strictly reserved. Particular emphasis is laid on the question of readings, permission for which must be secured from the author's agent in writing. All inquiries should be addressed to G. T. Griffin, Box 1882, San Luis Obispo, CA 93406.

THIS IS COPY # _____ .

TO BE RETURNED TO N. PRIDEMORE.

NOT TO BE PHOTOCOPIED IN WHOLE OR IN PART.

A Tennessee Trilogy
by J. Calvin Dotson

Holler

It's Always Something

Happy All the Day

It's Always Something 6

ACT ONE

West of Church Circle

ACT TWO

Staircase

ACT THREE

Front Porch Light

It's Always Something 8

First performance

2002

The Renaissance Players

Directed by Nancy Necessary Pridemore

Renaissance Center Theatre

Kingsport, Tennessee

THE PLAYERS

Eugene Payn
son of Hershell Payn and Helen Thresher Payn

Virginia Payn
daughter of Hershell and Helen

Maureen Payn-Townsend
daughter of Hershell and Helen

Tracy Townsend
daughter of Maureen

Adaire Robinson
special friend of Virginia

Aunt Ruby
friend of the Payn family

Gus Clark
Walter Rowley
Mattie Clark
package store clerks

Bud Trotter
Tracy's fiance

Louis Lane
Tracy's former fiance

THE SCENES

Lovedale...

an Upper East Tennessee city

of moderate size...

April, almost May...

Act One

West of Church Circle

Act One

Audio Effect #1 Ambient neighborhood sounds

Audio Effect #2 Car approaches; stops; one door slams, then another.

Audio Effect #3 An old wooden gate squeaks open slowly on its hinges.

(Eugene enters from rear of theatre; drops a sizeable wooden gate.)

Eugene

Ah, shoot fire. I knew that bloomin' thing was about ready to fall off. Sheez.

(He lugs the gate through the aisle; climbs the steps onto the stage. Rests the gate between the front door and the porch swing.) Gonna' have a lot to do.

One whole helluva lot to do around here. Virginia! Gin!

Virginia

What?

Eugene

Virginia!

Virginia

(Entering from the rear also.) Gene! I heard you. Whad'ya' need?

Eugene

Hey, could you look in the bed of the truck and bring me that little toolbox.

Virginia

Gene, I can't carry that thing. You'll have to come out here and get it.

Eugene

No, no, not the big'n. I mean the little one, the little plastic one.

Virginia

Oh, let's see. Oh, yeah. OK. (She enters, climbs the stairs, sets the toolbox down beside Eugene.) There y'are. What are you tryin' to do?

Eugene

Well, I'm gonna try to get this dang gate hung back up. Bolts rusted through, I hope. Sure do hope it's not the hinge wore out.

Virginia

You wanna be messin' with that now? If I's you, I think I worry 'bout that some other time. They'll all be a'comin' d'rectly.

Eugene

(Fussing with the hardware.) Uh, I'd like to get this thing back on. Y'know. I'd really not like everything to look completely run down. It's always been this squeaky gate that meant comin' home to me.

Virginia

Oh, I think that's true for pret' much ev'rybody, Gene. If that thing ever didn't squeak, it'd be 'bout scary. You got everything y'need?

Eugene

(Fussing with the hardware.) Uhhhh. I'd like to get this thing back on. I have to say, sometimes I wonder if this is the right thing to do.

Virginia

Oh, Gene, how could you think that? Everybody's so excited about you're comin' home. It only seems natural. You know I've thought so for a long, long time.

Eugene

Virginia...

Virginia

Now I'm not getting' on your case. You know I'm not.

Eugene

Thank you.

Virginia

Just can't help but wonder what it'd been like if you'd been able t' get back here a little sooner.

Eugene

Virginia, I've always come home. You know I have. Always come home. I was never out of touch. Not completely. Ever.

Virginia

Phone is not the same, Gene. When you're on the line y'seem so close. But when you hang up, it's like your suddenly far, far away, out there somewhere. I can't touch you. Can't feel you.

Eugene

(Making some progress with his project) Well, Gin, you got me now. I'm home, Honey, and I'm here to stay. I don't know how you'll adjust to me bein' around all the time. I was always the Prince, returning on his steed. Until the later years, anyway. Then the big chill when Mother figured out her son had failed her.

Virginia

Gene, you don't have to...

Eugene

Not to mention Dad's clear vision on everything, most particularly my life. The great artiste. The harmonica wizard. The writer of, shall we say, unmentionable fictions? Too bad, Hershell and I never did get things talked out.

Virginia

And that's all I'm tryin' to say. If you'd been here, really been here, maybe things would have worked out a little diff'rent.

Eugene

I don't know. I think that chill was moving only one direction. The thermometer was falling for a long time, Gin. It wasn't going to change directions. I feel like I did the best I could; I did do the best I could. You do believe that, don't you?

Virginia

You know I do, Gene. For the most part I do.

Eugene

That's the most anybody can say, Virginia. All we can hope for is to do our best for the most part, you know. You can start thinkin' about how you'd do things different 'cause of what you found out, what you learned in the meantime. But life doesn't work that way. You start thinking that way and life unravels. Pull one string, and your whole life falls at your feet. Idn't it so? Idn't it true for you?

Virginia

Yes, Gene. You're right. We have to live life as it comes. Time only moves in one direction. I'm just glad you've come home.

Eugene

I'm glad to be here, Sis. (dropping work to give her a hug) I'm really glad. (keeping the hug quite securely.) Things got real weird in San Antone. Out of body experience, sheez. Just out there. I was really out there. That place. My whole life. Like waking up and finding myself walking a tightrope. And

been walking a tightrope all along. The scariest part was I didn't even know it.

Virginia

I feel the same way sometimes.

Eugene

I know you do, Big Sis. I know you do. How is Adaire?

Virginia

Fine. Fine. She's fine. Nothing's particularly easy for her. For us. She'll be here. Tracy wanted to be sure that we'd all be here, everyone. I guess she's going to make her big announcement, is what I think.

Eugene

(dropping the hug) Big announcement?

Virginia

Well, I don't know for sure, but I think Louis and her may finally be getting serious.

Eugene

Serious? (attending to his repairs) There's enough sand falling through that hourglass to have a beach party. You know Gin, I really do think fixing this place up will do us all a world a' good. I know it will be what I need. It's something that needs to be done.

Virginia

It's what Daddy would want.

Eugene

It's sure what Mother 'd want; what she dreamed.

Virginia

She'd be well pleased. Mostly 'cause of you moving back.

Eugene

I know, I know. That was a big part of the problem.

Virginia

She'd sure be glad that people can drive by and see the place not looking s' bad. The old place was really beginning to look haunted, feel haunted. Sometimes I almost felt scared just driving by. Seeing it so empty. All these other houses in the old neighborhood with heavy curtains always drawn. Hard to know if anybody's alive inside.

Eugene

How long since anybody's been inside?

Virginia

I don't really know. We pay this boy to keep the grass mowed. We drained the pipes after Maureen moved out. Left it just like it you see it right now.

Locked tight. There's one light stays on in the upstairs hallway all the time, year in, year out. Spooky.

Eugene

Well, I've got some big plans.

Virginia

You'll not get any trouble from any of us.

Eugene

First thing is to get into that kitchen and...

Maureen

Hey! You all! Great land a' goshen! (entering by the same route as all enter, giving Gene a hug). Eugene! (twirling him around) It feels so good to have you standing up there like that. Using your hands.

Eugene

Well, I'm going to...

Maureen

So, you got it all planned out, huh? When are you going to get started?

Eugene

I think the hardest part is already behind me. (both sisters looking confused)
That was deciding to come back home.

Maureen

Ahhh, was it so hard to come back to your loving sisters?

Eugene

(moving along) I was telling Virginia that I think first thing I'm gonna do is to dig into that kitchen.

Maureen

You're not going to change too much in there are you?

Eugene

Maureen, I think it'd be a good thing to bring the old place into the new century. You know, if we ever decide to sell the old...

Maureen

That attic. I hear you think you can actually use that? You know it's not got a very high ceiling, Gene.

Eugene

That's what Mother always said, but have you ever actually peeked in there?

Virginia

Mother always said there was no space to be up there, you know. Just enough to crawl in.

Maureen

I know it. I know she did.

Virginia

So I never even thought about it.

Maureen

Me neither. You think you can use it, Eugene?

Eugene

I've been looking at pictures of the place from the outside. Looks to me like there should be plenty enough headroom to make a good size room. I can't figure out what Mother was talking about. If it is as big as it oughta be, I think I'll make it into a little studio. Put in a skylight.

Tracy

(entering as the others, with Adaire trailing her) Hey everybody! (advancing purposefully, Adaire more slowly; Tracy giving Eugene a strong hug) You look s' good standing there, Uncle Gene. How is it going? (moves to sit in porch swing)

Eugene

Well, I reckon my work is right well cut out for me.

Tracy

So, we're all together again on the front porch. All's right with the world, as Grimmy would say.

Maureen

I feel that way. I swear, I really do. I think we lost too much.

Adaire

Seems like we should have a watermelon.

Maureen

I can just taste it.

Virginia

Won't be long till we can unfold the legs on that old card table, spread a plastic tablecloth, slice right into a good ripe watermelon.

Eugene

I, for one, am glad they got seedless ones now. I think it's a real improve...

Maureen

Spoils all the fun! No fights! You remember that time...

Virginia

Yes, Maureen.

Maureen

Clifford popped one right down the front of you.

Virginia

Yes, Maureen.

Maureen

Slid right down there, right down between....

Virginia

Yes, Maureen.

Maureen

You had to reach down in there to get it out. It just slid around this-a-way and that-a-way.

Virginia

Yes, Maureen. That's a good 'un. How could we ever forget?

Adaire

Did you ever get it out, or did you just leave it, down there?

Virginia

Had to run down to the basement, jerk that halter off. That seed was just slip-slidin' away.

Maureen

And you had to reach down in there to get it out. It scooted around this-a-way and that-a-way. Your face was as red as that watermelon!

Adaire

You could'a salted it. You know, put some salt down there and grabbed it right out.

Eugene

Now why didn't I think of that at the time?

Virginia

I think Clifford did. He was all set to do that for me.

Maureen

Mother would not have cared for that.

Virginia

He never would ha' done it.

Maureen

Mother did not think that was funny. I don't know why she never wanted us to have any fun, like something was wrong if you were actually enjoying yourself!

Virginia

Well, I think she would have loved it if Clifford had slipped a little seed down her front.

Tracy

Uncle Gene, I think it's great that you're going to fix this place up. It really ought t' be lived in. I want to be able to come back to all my little girl places, and I want my little girls to play where I played.

Eugene

Hey Doll, you're the one with the big news, I understand.

Maureen

My problem child has big news? *Good* news?

Tracy

Mother—

Maureen

I can fancy what that good news might be. And I surely would never expect I'd be the first to know anything.

Aunt Ruby

Howdy! I'm so proud to be here! (entering, carrying her folding chair)

Eugene

Well howdy to you, Ruby.

Aunt Ruby

Eugene! Well, upon my honor! Gene. I didn't know you was in town already. Nobody tells me anything anymore. I don't know anything. Seems like nobody has the time to pick up the phone. Not to call me anyway.

Eugene

It's been a few days, Ruby. Things have been very fluid with me...

Aunt Ruby

What? Eugene, you don't sound like y'self. Always takes you a few days bein' home a'fore you sound like y'self.

Eugene

I've been dealing with a lot, Ruby. I've had to read things one day at a time.

Aunt Ruby

What? I don't get it. You young people live in a different world than I'm used to. You're all grown up and so busy, Law', I don't know. No time to shoot the breeze with us old timers. (Advancing, she catches her toe on the leg of a metal lawn chair.) Ah! Oooooooh!!!

All

Aunt Ruby! Ruby! (moving to assist)

Virginia

Here. (motioning to Adaire) Open up her chair. That's good. Now. Here. Ruby, sit down here.

Aunt Ruby

Oh! (into the chair with difficulty) I broke it again, I broke it again, I just know. I broke that dad-blame little toe again! It's always something!

Eugene

Just take it easy, Aunt Ruby. Sit down here for a minute.

Maureen

We'll have to see, Aunt Ruby.

Aunt Ruby

Foot! I was supposed to have it all taped up to its buddy toe. I can't get down there to do it! It's not easy bein' alone, you know. I's supposed to keep it taped together with its buddy-toe, and this would'a never happened—

Virginia

Well, Ruby, I can't believe you broke that thing again.

Aunt Ruby

Oh! It's just awful! Pretty soon I just won't be able to get around. You all will have to come and take care of me.

Tracy

Do you think you ought to have it looked at, Aunt Ruby?

Aunt Ruby

Oh, they'll just tell me to tape it to two buddy toes this time. There ain't nothing you can do about a broken little toe. It's one of those things got to take care of itself. Always. Always somethin'. Always somethin'. Just Leave me be. I'll be alright. No need to make a fuss.

Eugene

If you think you need to go to the Emergency Room—

Aunt Ruby

Law' mercy, no. No—I'll be alright. This is Tracy's big moment. And Gene, Gene, it's so good to see you standing there, oh, honey. Just a sight to behold.

Eugene

Well, Ruby, I am glad we can all be together.

Maureen

That's what it's all about, just being together. Just seems like we're never together anymore. Seasons come, seasons go. Here it is, another spring. Where does time go.

Aunt Ruby

Seems like they're racing by faster and faster to me. Faster and faster. I can't slow things down. The days go by faster and faster.

Maureen

Dogwood's a'poppin out. Pear tree blossoms are falling like snow. We ought to get together like this more, like we used to.

Tracy

Mother, it's impossible to track you down. You either leave your cell phone at home or in the car, or it's not turned on, or you're talking to somebody and just won't answer. Well, anyway, here we are. And I do have something I want to tell you all before it gets too late.

Virginia

It's never too late Tracy.

Tracy

Yes, Virginia. I know. And that's what I want to tell you is that I have decided to get married.

Aunt Ruby

Why, Tracy dear, I am so pleased, pleased as I can be— You and Louis have been so close to it so many times—

Maureen

Dear, I don't know what to say, I didn't think—

Tracy

Well, I want the wedding to be down home, in the country, down home. Way back in the Holler, well past Great-gramPaps', and on beyond, and down and around in that shaded lush of the river glen. You know, back there, behind and below. Up against those old, old woods—

Maureen

What? That old place? Well, what on earth for? Who'd ever want to get married back there? That's a dark place. I always heard there was an old graveyard back in there. That's an awful place.

Tracy

I don't think that at all. I never understood why you always talked that place down. It's our roots. It's where we come from, where great-grandmother lived—

Maureen

Well, it may be where we come from, but everything about where we come from is not necessarily s' good—

Tracy

It's absolutely beautiful back there. I already picked out the spot. It's the prettiest place, under a stand of hickory. Gets early morning sun.

Aunt Ruby

You're not getting married at that time o' day...

Tracy

I'm thinking early. It's like a perfect spot—

Maureen

That's the spookiest place. I can't believe a daughter of mine would ever want to get married in a place like that!

Aunt Ruby

Tracy, dear. Tracy. You know I think a church wedding is what we're supposed to do. You know? Somehow, I think the Lord wants us to bring these most important moments in our life to Him, and I think a church wedding gets a marriage started off in the right way, the way He wants—

Tracy

Aunt Ruby, I know how you feel, and I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I've made up my mind, and I'm going to get married down home.

Aunt Ruby

I'd be pleased to give you something, I mean, I'd be pleased and proud to make the whole thing possible for you. That would be my part, my contribution, and I would be glad to take care of all the expenses and see to it that—

Tracy

Ruby, you're not getting' it. I have made up my mind. My mind is made up.

Aunt Ruby

It wouldn't even matter to me, Tracy, I mean, I'd be pleased to make it something special, something very, very special, to see the two of you off to a good—

Tracy

Ruby, we're not going to get married in that church! I don't ever plan to set foot in that church of yours again!

Maureen

Tracy! Listen here! I think you owe Aunt Ruby—

Tracy

Shoot fire! I don't owe anybody anything! This is my wedding. My life. My plans. Don't you get it!

Aunt Ruby

I'm sure Louis's family would feel the same way—

Tracy

And for another thing, I'm not going to marry Louis.

Maureen

What are you saying?

Tracy

I'm not going to marry Louis. That's all.

Aunt Ruby

What?

Tracy

I'm going to marry Buddy Trotter.

Aunt Ruby

Who?

Tracy

I'm going to marry Bud Trotter.

Aunt Ruby

Bud Trotter? Who's that?

Tracy

Bud and I met when we were cube mates for a little bit out at the plant, and things, well, kinda clicked, and it's been working out fine between us—

Aunt Ruby

Oh? Out at the plant?

Tracy

Yeah, he's got a good job and makes good pay, and we figure we can manage to get a good house—

Maureen

And what about Louis? Does he know about this? Are you just leaving Louis out to dry? He's such a fine fella, and from such a good family, a real good family. Ya'll have come close so many times, so many times in these years. He's been very understanding, you know Tracy, and I think—

Tracy

Louis is a good man, Mother, and I know you think the world of him. I was foolish about him, but I'm glad that I figured some of this out before I made another wrong move. But you know, sometimes Louis is two sandwiches short of a picnic.

Virginia

What's important is that you make the right decision, that you're going to be happy. And it's real, real important that you try to make the right choice for the girls. They're growin' up fast, and they could use a Dad around.

Eugene

Tracy, you know I'll support you, I mean we all support you in whatever it is you decide and feel is best for you. It's ok to be happy, you know. You don't have to be miserable forever. It's not a sin to want to be happy.

Aunt Ruby

Oh. Oh. I don't think I can stand this anymore. This toe is driving me crazy. I think I better go on over to the Emergency Room and let them take a look at it. Eugene—

Eugene

I'll be glad to take you on over there, Ruby. I don't see any reason why not to go on over there and have them take a look. You've got good insurance, and I think you ought to use it and not think about it.

Virginia

Gene's right, Ruby. I'd get myself over there. Let them look at it, and then you'll know. I mean, if you can find out what's going on, why not? Why not let them look at it and tell you what they find out and then you'll know. That's what I'd do. That's what I think. And Gene'll be glad to drive you right over there and go in there with you.

Maureen

I'm a' going over there with Ruby. Ruby, I'll stay with you. There's no reason for me to stay here. I'll take you over there.

Eugene

Look, I've already got my keys out, and I'm going to take Ruby over there, and Maureen you come along too if you want to.

Aunt Ruby

Well, that'd be fine. That'd be fine. Don't let me forget my purse.

Maureen

I've got it right here. I've got it. I'm bringing it.

Eugene

Let's just go. Let's just go over there so we can get back. So we can get Ruby looked at, and then get you home, Ruby. (All three exit; Maureen escorting Ruby; Eugene carrying the gate, and also managing his toolbox.)

Adaire

Well, I hope Ruby is ok. Still can't believe she did that. She havin' any real trouble getting around? Sometimes it seems she's getting real unsteady. She's really a'showin' her age.

Virginia

I don't know. I don't know. Sometimes I think she can get around just fine. I know she does get nervous. Other times I think she's tryin' to get attention. She always did have a funny way of bumping into things. I remember always how you'd be playing and hear some crash and Aunt Ruby'd yell out in pain. We'd run in there, and she'd a'just stood up into a cabinet door. She was always doing that. Like she'd forget the cabinet door was open or something. I don't know how many times. Seemed like all the time, just crash, groan, and a big yell, and you'd know it was Aunt Ruby again. It's something in her people I guess.

Tracy

Did you ever know anybody in her family? Does she have any brothers and sisters?

Virginia

You know, I don't really know. I guess I've never thought about it. I've never thought about Ruby even having a family. She always seemed to be a part of our family long as I can remember. Never was a time when there wasn't an Aunt Ruby.

Adaire

D'you know where her people come from?

Virginia

I always thought somewhere round Fagin's Gap, up on the mountain. I don't know where I heard that, but that's what I always heard. Or thought I heard. Or maybe I imagined that.

I don't know.

Adaire

We've all got our stories. Whole lot of stories in these hills n' hollers.

Tracy

Know what?

Virginia

What?

Tracy

Have you ever been up in the old attic?

Virginia

What attic?

Tracy

This attic. The attic in this old house.

Virginia

There isn't really any attic.

Tracy

Yes there is. I heard there is.

Virginia

Mother always said it was barely a crawl space up there; couldn't even stand up up-there.

Tracy

I know. We all know Grimmy said that. She always said that. But if you look from the outside, the way the roof goes, there's got to be more room up there than that. Gene said so. He's going to build a studio up there.

Adaire

A studio?

Virginia

Where he can record his stuff?

Tracy

Yeah. You know. Do some of his music things. His computer. All those little things he does.

Adaire

Has he ever been up there?

Tracy

No, I don't think so. Let's find out. Let's go up there.

Virginia

I don't know. I think it'd be too scary. There'll be spiders. Who knows what else. Something could get us.

Tracy

Aww. I say let's do it. I'm in the mood for discovery. Know what?

Virginia

What?

Tracy

Let's get some beer or wine.

Virginia

What? Are you crazy?

Tracy

Let's get some beer or wine. You know. That'll make us bold. An adventure. A true life adventure. We'll explore.

Virginia

You know, dear, it's been quite a piece since we were in high school, I just don't think—I don't know.

Adaire

I think it's a great idea. Let's do-ooo something. Make something happen.

Virginia

We could call Gene on his cell phone. He could pick us up something at the package store.

Tracy

Perfect. Let's call him. (places call). Gene? Gene, this is Tracy. Gin and Adaire and me are going to go up in the attic. The attic here. The attic here in the old homeplace; have you been up there yet? Oh, I think there is a big space up there. I agree with you. And I can't wait to find out. I've wondered about that since I was a little girl. No. I don't know why Mother always said there was nothing up there. There's got to be. Well, we're going to find out. Hey, Gene, could you pick us up some beer or wine? It was Adaire's idea. (Adaire nudges Virginia and mimes denial). How long do you think you're going to be there? Well, I'd get plenty of that in a hurry. I bet Mother's flipping her wig. No. No. That'd be too late. Well, I guess we could go pick

something up for ourselves. I'm sure we can manage that. OK, Gene. Hope everything goes ok. Sorry you got involved in all this. Yeah. I know. That's what you're here for. Anyway. OK. Tell Mom I'll call her in the morning. OK. OK. Bye.

Well, we'll have to take care of this for ourselves. OK? Gene doesn't know anything yet. They might be stuck in the Emergency Room all night long.

Virginia

OK. OK. Maybe we can just go ahead and get some.

Tracy

Ready? We ready?

Adaire

Hey. Do you know what to get?

Tracy

No.

Adaire

Have you two ever done this?

Tracy and Virginia

No.

Adaire

Do we know what we're doing?

All

NO!

Tracy

Well, this is where we are, and there is where we're going. Let's try out that package store on Industry Drive.

Virginia

Oh, that'd be good. Nobody'll see us there. (All exit.)

Curtain

Act Two

Staircase

Act Two Scene 1

[The trio is heard outside and nearing the package store.]

Adaire

Look, anyone who's going to see us here is not gonna want to be seen anymore than we do.

Virginia

I just know we're going to be seen. Somebody'll drive by...

Tracy

I'm feeling kinda queasy. Maybe we shouldn't.

Adaire

Look, we'll just go in. Pick out what we want. Pay for it, and git!

Tracy

Hey! What are we goin' t' get?

Adaire

Some wine maybe?

Virginia

No. I don't think we ought'a get any wine. We don't have a corkscrew.

Adaire

I'm sure they got cheap little corkscrews.

Virginia

Why, I don't even know how to use a corkscrew—do you?

Adaire

They have wine coolers. Twist off caps. That might taste good...

Virginia

Gene had some of that one time he was in. He sneaked it into the house.

Drank one bottle every evenin', out there on the swing. I took a little taste...

Adaire

Sounds pr'ty good! What about champagne?

Tracy

Well, I've got about three dollars to my name, so that dog ain't gonna hunt, honey.

Virginia

That's OK. OK. C'mon.

Tracy

Let's face the music....

Adaire

Let's go, let's go!

[They enter. Mattie seems to be attached to the counter; next to it is an old sofa on which Walter is sitting. The movements of the trio seem to be in slow motion.]

Virginia

H'lo.

(nodding to Mattie and Gus while Adaire and Tracy slink around [offstage] in search of what they do not know.)

Mattie

H'lo, ladies.

Virginia

Ya'll workin' hard tonight?

Mattie

(looking off) Aaah—we're hardly workin'.

Walter

Tol'able. (Slowly standing up.)

Virginia

Pretty slow, huh?

Mattie

'Bout as dead as it gets. Like the dad-blame graveyard shift.

Walter

(moving to buttonhole Virginia) Now you listen here, there ain't NOTHIN' IN this place that'll do you young ladies any good a'tall!

Gus

(entering with a box which he sets on the counter) Walter! (Walter hunches down as the oft-repeated ritual continues.) Walter! What are you doing?

(slowing his speech to a staccato) I have TOLD you NOT to DO it—

Gus and Walter (exaggerated, in unison)

But YOU did! (ending with shaking his head)

But I DID! (ending with childlike glee)

Gus

(to Virginia) I'm real sorry, Hon. Walter here just don't have much to occupy his self now that Liddy is gone. What is it now, eight-nine year? So we try to have him help us out a little bit around here. (turning to Walter) The main words in that sentence are HELP-US-OUT, Walter!

(His assumed role well-executed, Walter turns to make his way slowly, round-about, pretending to adjust a few items on a shelf or two, then setting his course to the sofa.)

Mattie

Aww, Gus, let 'im alone. He's just doin' what he does. (aside to Virginia)
He's always been like that. (back to Gus) Honey, he'll always be my older
brother (a true slip, quickly corrected). Brother! I mean. (chuckling fully) I
mean BRO-ther. I don't reckon there's any way he's a'gonna change!
(turning to Virginia) S' what can we do f'r ye?

Virginia

(a bit uneasily) Well, we're just a'lookin' for a little somethin'.

Mattie

Honey, do I know you?

Virginia

I don't think so.

Mattie

Where'd you all go to high school?

Virginia

Why, honey, I went right here to Denston-Begley.

Mattie

You look s' familiar to me. (squinting) I had a daughter graduate from there.
When did you graduate?

Virginia

Well, I come close to graduatin' in...

Mattie

I'll swan! You wouldn't be Georgia Rockwood, would ye?

Virginia

Well, no I wouldn't be, actually.

Mattie

Well. She an' my Vicky use t' run around quite a bit.

Gus

Mattie, what in this world are you talking about?

(Adaire approaches with stealth, and whispers to Virginia)

Virginia

(to Adaire) We could get ginger ale, club soda, that's it, club soda, and mix something with it. (as Adaire recedes) But only if it's not one of those girlie drinks.

Adaire

(from offstage) Well, I was feeling more of a Harvey's Bristol Cream mood myself, but whatever....

Mattie

Aaah—people are funny. I's thinkin' o' some o' the stuff Georgia use' t' get into.

Gus

(unadmittedly hard of hearing) Georgia who?

Mattie

Georgia Rockwood, Gus. Georgia Rockwood.

Gus

Who's she?

Mattie

She's a girl from out Piney way who use't' run around with Vicky. (Gus accedes.) People are funny.

Virginia

Boy, I'll tell ya', that's the truth.

Mattie

Georgia's a pretty girl, Law' mercy. I mean, she use t' be. I mean, an' you reminded me o' her.

Virginia

Well...

Gus

Georgia Rockwood? Oh, I remember her. She's always was a good lookin' girl. I mean, she use t'be. I 'member that old '58 Olds convertible she drove around. Bright red and creamy white—two-tone. That's really somethin'. Steel-spoke wheels. Hm-mmh-mmmh! Never lets a speck o' dust light on it.

Mattie

You know, Vicky works right out there at Deli City, if ya'll are lookin' for anythin' t' eat. Out there on Warpath Drive. Open all night.

Virginia

Well, we're...

Gus

Oh ye-ah. Go out there and out there and get on that superhighway and get y'self to Deli City. Get in that Caravan and drive on over there. Tell 'er we sent you. She'd be awful glad to see ya.

Virginia

That's mighty nice of you all, but you see, I don't think we actually ever...

Mattie

Poor girl. She got a real case o' poison ivy. Just about eatin' her up. She was on fire. Looked like her flesh's goin' to melt away. She's getting' around p'rtly good, considering the shape she's in.

Gus

I know she'd be glad to see ye'. S' you all are Rockwoods, some of Georgia's people?

Mattie

(raising her voice) Honey, she said no, no they weren't.

Virginia

Actu'lly no, we're just looking for somethin'....

Mattie

It'd tickle her to death.

(Adaire returns and whispers in Virginia's ear again.)

Virginia

Well, that's good. That's helpful.

(Adaire and Tracy return empty handed.)

Virginia

You know, I think we'd like t' get some Fuzzy Navels.

Mattie

Well, that'd be fine, Honey, there's cold 'uns over there in the walk-in.

Virginia

Actu'lly, I think we'd like to buy a case.

Mattie

A case!

Virginia

Yep, I think that's what we're going t'do!

Mattie

I reckon that'd be ok. Hey, Walter. Walter! WALTER!

Walter

(startled) WHAT!

Mattie

Go back in the back and git these girls a case of FUZ-ZY NAVELS.

Walter

What?

Mattie

FUZ-ZY NAVELS, Walter. You know what they are. FUZZY NAVELS.

Aww, shucks. I'll just go back 'ere with ye. Ok, let's go, Walter.

Walter

Oh. (They depart.)

Gus

You'all go on over to Deli City now. Vicky'll be plain tickled to see ye'.
Shit, she'll probably make up a bunch o' sandwiches an' give 'em to ya'.
Rockwood's like family t'us, y'know.

Virginia

Well...

Gus

(Sees Mattie and Walter returning; Mattie is carrying the case) Oh, and hey,
don't mind Mattie. She'll spend twenty minutes talking with the checkout
woman, if no one's behind her.

Mattie

Well, here's yer Fuz-zy-Navels. Whew. I'll tell ya'... Don't know what I'd
do without Walter (who proceeds directly to sofa).

Gus

(loudly, still in confidence) Mattie can spend at least an hour talking about
nothin', nothin' at all so long as you'll keep talking.

Virginia

Ohhh, that's fine. Just fine. (paying in cash) Well, I reckon we'll all be getting' along.

(Aداire picks up the case, and she and Tracy rustle out.)

Mattie

Oh? Y' just got here. What's your hurry?

Virginia

(aware of the precipitousness of further dialogue) Well, we got a a little bit of a treasure hunt.

Mattie

(counting out money) A treasure hunt? Here's y'r change, honey. Wellll, I'll be!

Gus

What's that? (with a start and obvious pleasure) A treasure hunt! Whadya mean treasure-hunt?

Virginia

Oh, well, not really. We're just going to take a look up in the old attic down home. Nobody's been up there in years. Actu'lly, we're not sure anybody's ever been up there.

Gus

You are! Where 'bouts is down home?

Virginia

Oh, west of here. Down t'ward the river bridge.

Gus

T'ward the Holler?

Virginia

No, we're still in town, not as far as the Holler. Our people's from down that way though. (trying to wrap up the conversation and leave)

Gus

Hey, listen here, if you all find somethin'... (taking over) I don't usually do this, but let me show you somethin'. Walter. Walter! Could ye go back in the office and bring out my projectile box? (Walter arises with clear familiarity of mission; departs; and rather promptly will return.) You know, ever since I was a little boy, I been collecting these here Indian projectile points. Y'know. Used t' tromp all over these hills, mostly out near Indian Springs. Pap knew just where to look. Like he could smell 'em. We'd be groundhog huntin'—well, that was what we said. And we did! We did get right many groundhog, let me tell ya. But honestly, I think Pap was a lot more excited about picking up arrowheads—I mean, projectile points—any day.

(Walter returns; with great delight, Gus unlocks the lid and opens his display.)

Virginia

Well, upon my honor! I never seen so many arrowheads. Some o' these are huge! (genuinely skeptical) Are you sure all o' these are real?

Gus

(with indignation) Ohhh! Yes, ma'am! I absolutely-positively gar-an-tee ever' single one o' these! Hey, listen, I picked up ever last one of 'em by myself! I mean, Pap and I did find a lot of them together. But, oh, honey, listen. I could tell you a story with pert near ever' one. We used t' just call 'em arrowheads, you know. But that's not it anymore. These here are projec-tile points, and this is a migh-ty fine collection! Made this box myself, out of old oak.

Virginia

Well it is, it is, mighty fine! I can see that! I'll bet these are really worth somethin'. Whooh!

Gus

Ohhh, yes! Y' got to know the right people though. Like you say, there's a whole lotta of' em is fakes. Just makes ya sick when that happens. Just damn near spoils ever' thing. I'm linked up, you know. I've got my own Web site. I mean, there's several of us'ns put this Web site together. My boy Jack. We get a lotta hits!

Virginia

Welllll.

Gus

Sure. Hey, I'll give you our Web address. Email. But listen, hey, there's more. You want to see my Civil War Minie Balls?

Mattie

Gus! These girls 've got more t'do than look at your ol' sqwushed bullets, for lansake.

Gus

(irritated with this ritual) Mattie, I don't know how many times I told you them is not just "sqwushed bullets"—those are the REAL thang! They've been f'rd! An' I've got others. Listen. Pristine condition! Prissstine!

Virginia

(trying to agree with Mattie without offending Gus) Well, you know, we had better get on down the road. Who knows, there might be somethin' down there at the old home place we could clean out and make ourself a little dough!

Gus

Well, hey! If you find anything, you just let me know. Even carnival glass is still big. Antiques is down, but carnival glass and milk glass, you know, still real strong for some reason. (proceeding enthusiastically) But these bullets, these are not antiques, these are genuine collector's items. Hell, these are

museum pieces! You just wouldn't believe what I've got. I've got a Pritchett, a Gardner, a clean-out. I even got a real Captain Minie! (with glee) You sure you don't want t' see 'em now? Why, if you came over't the house, I could show you a lot more!

Mattie

(picking up on things) I could show you my plates!

Virginia

(thrown off in confusion) Well, I thought you had a real pretty smile!

Mattie

No, no (laughing). Lord, I don't mean m' teeth! I mean plates, dinner plates!

Gus

She's got a whole collection. Pret' well covers all the walls. I built shelves. I don't think we could fit in another plate in that house!

Virginia

Well, maybe sometime, y'know, we could come back. But I'd say we'd better get goin' now. We could come back sometime maybe and you could show us all your stuff. Who knows! Maybe we'll find somethin' we'd want t' show you! Somethin' you can put up on your Web site!

Mattie

Well, I'll tell you one thing, if you find any old plates up there, you just bring 'em right in, an' I'll be glad to take a look. Some of 'em's real valuable, I'll tell you right now. You better believe.

Virginia

(Virginia is edging with clear deliberateness to leave; she does not break her motion even as Gus pursues.)

Gus

Hey, I'm real good at networking. My boy Jack. He's about the best Web site developer you've ever heard tell of! Web-MASTER, that's what he calls himself. That's what he is out at the plant. And they call it a job! We'll do a search and get y' some good links if'n you think y' got somethin' worth anything. (Virginia has nearly exited.) Well, hey, it was sure good meetin' y'all. Just tell Vicky what you want, and she'll fix it right up f'r ye. They got the best sandwiches over there. Believe you me. And that salad bar? Oo-oo-wee! Just get on the superhighway, drive down that way past the plant entrance, on past the Holler, and then turn left. Watch that traffic though, it's a sight in this world!

Mattie

Gus! You got to let these girls go! There on a real adventure!

Virginia

Well, we sure do appreciate y'r help.

Gus

Nice talkin' t'ye... You'all have a good time, OK? And be careful, OK?

Mattie

Y'all come back now, y'here. We're just like family here.

Virginia

We 'preciate it. We'll be back.

Mattie

That'd be fine, fine.

Virginia

Bye-bye.

Mattie

(mournful) Bye-bye.

Gus

(fatherly, following nearly to the door) You all do be careful now, y'hear.

Virginia

Oh, we will. We will. Don't worry. We will.

(The trio exit with Adaire carrying the case.)

Gus

(walking back to the counter, pausing in front of Walter for an instant) Aaah,
SHOOT!

Mattie

(instantly returning to the mood at the start of the scene) Well, what in this
world is the matter with you, Gus?

Gus

Shoot-f'r! I forgot to give 'er my dad-blame email address...

(Scene ends all in darkness.)

Act Two Scene 2

(offstage)

Virginia

Careful Trace. Did you finish off that second bottle already? You don't want to fall. Here. Set your foot here. Wait. Let me help you. I'll put your foot in the right place. Let me put it...there. There. That's good. You can put your weight on it now.

Tracy

If I can peek into this little hole, maybe we can find out. Maybe we won't have to go in.

Adaire

I think we should get out the back door.

Tracy

I can't see. We'll have to pry this plank off.

Virginia

Look, I'll slip this crowbar under the edge there while you pull... There... Move it a little bit to the left, now. Pull.

Adaire

OK. OK. It's peeling back. Almost.

Tracy

That thing's gonna split wide open.

Virginia

Just a little bit; there, yes. I think. I think we got it. There! OK! We did it!

Adaire

Great! Great. Can you see anything?

Tracy

I see some steps, going up. It's a real staircase.

Virginia

OK. OK. Let's go. Can you grab that case, Adaire? Or grab a couple a' bottles.

Adaire

OK, I'll go first. (switches on camp-lantern and leads the way)

Virginia

Hey, shine that light over here. Right. Here. Yes! I think... Yes, there's a switch. (flips on light)

Adaire

Well, would you look at that!

(They enter.)

Virginia

Ooooh!

Tracy

I can't believe it!

Adaire

Why, there's a whole lotta space up here!

Virginia

Oooh! Looky here! It's that little dresser I used when I was little!

Tracy

I can't believe this!

Virginia

Oooh! There's the mirror right there leaning up against the wall. It's still got my band picture stuck under the edge. There I am with my glockenspiel!

Tracy

Look at this old radio.

Virginia

That's mahogany. Just as stout as it ever was. That's old timey, way back yonder.

Adaire

(reading from labeling) 1936 Philco floor model radio.

Virginia

That was Uncle Lloyd's. I sure thought that thing disappeared a long time ago. Before he died. I wondered what had ever happened to it.

Adaire

WSM, WSB, WLS, WNOX. South America, Moscow, Berlin. You think they really listened to these faraway places? Madrid, Paris, Java. Java?

Virginia

Gene used to play with that thing all the time when he was little. Just seemed to cast a spell, that big dial. Those buttons.

Adaire

Shoot yeah. I can see everybody down in the Holler sittin' around listening to Java on the short wave.

Tracy

What's in that box?

Adaire

(digging) Baby clothes. Baby shoes. Here's a rattler.

Virginia

Those shoes look like Gene's, I think. This old metal lunchbox was mine. Let's see. Yeah. Yeah. 'Lll, gollee; it still has the Thermos; yep, the whole thing. Pretty much good as new. I wondered what happened. I remember it just disappeared. I had no idea Mother would.... Well, it musta been her. You know. She must've holed all this stuff away. But, no, she couldn't have done it without, well, Dad, must've... She couldn't have gotten that dresser up here by herself? Who else would'a helped her? But then, could it have been HIM? I can't believe that he would, I mean, I can't figure why he'd do this on his own. It's too weird. Must've been Mother. But she must've got him to put all this up here for her. Still. Hard to believe that...

Adaire

Would you look at this? That's a complete Roy Rogers outfit, still in its box.

Virginia

What? That was must 'a been Gene's! Had to be. He absolutely was in seventh heaven when he wore that. Mother never let him actually play in it. He could only put it on, like some sort of religious experience. He was so funny the way he would prance and act bow-legged. He'd pull out his six-shooters.

Tracy

I've seen those pictures.

Virginia

Mother would almost never let him buy caps for his guns. Never did let him have a BB-gun. "You could put your eye out," she'd always say. I can hear her now. Just like it was yesterday.

Adaire

Looks like it's all there, yeah, I think everything's in there.

Virginia

Lookit. (looking toward Adaire's discovery) Incredible!

Tracy

This old stack o' quilts over here.

Virginia

(choosing one to model) How many times we would make a different world out 'a them. I remember coming down the basement way, wearin' this quilt. I was The Queen. Oo-oh, let me tell you. I had a branch from the old mimosa tree, that was my sceptor. I think I had a grapefruit for my orb.

Adaire

You orb? I see. This little tea set?

Virginia

Oo-oh! That was mine!

Tracy

Would you look at that! Is that your dollhouse too, Gin?

Virginia

Why, what a perfect little dollhouse! No, I've never seen it before. Ha!
Would you take a look at that. It's very well made. Look, it's even got
shutters that open and close. Gutters! What a little jewel box! I have no idea
where that came from! It was none of ours...

Adaire

Here's a box full of old papers. (opening a little box inside it) This is full of
old keys.

Virginia

Well, I swanee, I wonder what they might open up. Here's some music
books—"Teaching Little Fingers to Play"

Tracy

I think that'n was used by all of us.

Adaire

Letters and pictures.

Tracy

Y'know, this is just like Christmas. Opening all these things. Finding out
what's inside.

Virginia

Yeah. Kinda, it is. But not really.

Adaire

There's a Bible in here with all kinds a' old cards and letters tucked-in.

Tracy

I remember this one—"Bandshell and Beach at Beautiful Daytona Beach, Florida." Hmm, address on the back looks like Grimmy's handwriting. Starts to Ruby, but the address is scratched out. I wonder...

Virginia

Here's a picture of Dad and the Packard when it was brand new! You know he promised that car to Mother when she was pregnant with Maureen, Tracy. I think the deal was that she was supposed to be a boy, and this Packard was going to be her reward. I think Dad was sure that if he'd keep his end of the bargain, Mother would keep hers, and he'd have his boy. Well, she got her chariot anyway. For the noble lady. Her majesty. And Dad got Gene next time at bat.

Adaire

There's a note here about you, Tracy. Must be your Grimmy. Says "Tracy and Tyrone are the only ones who seem to want to come around here anymore." That must've been when you and Tyrone were still little.

Tracy

Here's a Plum Grove church choir picture. Granddad and Grimmy should both be in that one.

Adaire

What is this? A picture of you and that guy you used to go out with Gin, what was his name, Blarney? I mean, Barney.

Virginia

Couldn't be. I don't believe it! I remember that day. I felt all blown up like a red ripe tomato. Why would that be here? And anyway, that was another life, sweetie. When I was young and impressionable.

Adaire

Apparently not impressionable enough. When I discovered guys, I knew right off the bat—pardon the pun—that that was the only way for me. [sarcastically rhapsodic] The Truth, The Light. Remember what the Savior said. No man cometh into the Lord but in ME. I'd have taken a football player over a cheerleader any day!

Tracy

Adaire! You're so bad. I don't even know what that means, but if lightning strikes this old house, we're all in trouble, so please, just cool it while we're ahead. Anyway, I want to see what Virginia found. C'mon Virg. Tell us what it is. [walking over] Wellll, I'll be. Amazing.

Adaire

What? What? Don't make me get up. What is it?

Virginia

It's a....a.....uh.....Dad's kidney stone! It's a kidney stone in an old glass test tube.

Adaire

My dad had a kidney stone once. Fortunately, he had enough class not to keep it around as a souvenir. And after watching him moan on the floor like a cat in heat, I understand why. God, it was awful. Worst pain a man can have, according to him.

Tracy

Yeah, like the male equivalent of childbirth.

Adaire

Well, aren't we the lucky ones. Women hardly ever get stones.

Virginia

(to Adaire) And you're off the hook on that pesky procreation thing, no?

Tracy

Oooh. This cedar chest looks like a casket. Lookit, there's a whole bunch of pictures here—I think it's Aunt Ruby! Who is this man she's with? Not Uncle Lloyd. Virginia?

Virginia

Well, Tracy, I've heard there might a' been another man.

Tracy

What!

Virginia

Yeah. Before Uncle Lloyd, I think there might a' been another man. I never heard tell his name.

Tracy

What was the story?

Virginia

I don't know for sure. I heard a little bit from Mother, but she didn't want to talk about it. Ruby was married once to a man, but it turned out he was already married to another woman, somewhere in Nebraska. No, it was Iowa. I'm not sure.

Adaire

Iowa? (shows Virginia the picture)

Tracy

Oh my God, what was that all about? I'm dyin' to find out! I mean she always acts like she's better 'n anybody else, and nothin' you ever do is good enough for Aunt Ruby no matter what you do.

Virginia

Well, I do have to admit she is always keepin' her eye out for what's wrong. She can always give ya' a hundred reasons for not-doing anything and not one good reason for doing anything.

Adaire

Without even knowing anything about whatever it is.

Tracy

Everything's got to be right and proper, as if all our lives were always s'posed to be like stories in a Sunday School quarterly.

Virginia

Well, there can be no flaws. That's for sure. Everything's got to be done just right. Specially weddings and funerals.

Tracy

Tell me about it! She's been absolutely obsessed all these years about my wedding. The Wedding! The Wedding!

Adaire

So nosy, picky, picky! And down, so much of the time, always down, down, down.

Virginia

Always insisted we do chores at her house, like we was her own children. Honestly, her stuff was so set in place I think if you rolled her house downhill, everything would mostly stay put. Really, sometimes it was like she had ice in her veins. Fussier'n an old mule.

Tracy

You know, sometimes I think that's one reason—only one, mind ya'—that I've never felt like going through with getting married again. You know, at my age and everything. I know it might be a good thing for the girls if I did, but sometimes, I don't know. You guys feelin' alright? I'm feelin' kinda lightheaded... And now I find out Aunt Ruby's life is full of secrets. Tell me all the gorey details!

Virginia

Don't really know anymore than I already told you.

Adaire

What's this picture? Looks like Aunt Ruby. That's pretty bird on her shoulder.

Virginia

Yeah. That's Aunt Ruby and Uncle Lloyd, and yep, looky there, Uncle Lloyd's got Polly on his shoulder.

Tracy

What?

Virginia

Uncle Lloyd's got Polly the parrot on his shoulder. They had Polly, I think, was kind of like a child for them. So sad, the way that turned out.

Adaire

Hey! Would you look at this. It's a wedding dress.

Virginia

Well, Law' have mercy. What a piece of work that is.

Tracy

Oh! Let me see. (she takes it in her hands and holds it up) Looks like it's so fragile, like it could just fall into shreds.

Virginia

Careful Trace. Really does look like it could go to pieces. Maybe you should lay it back in...

Tracy

Ooooooh! Wonder where it came from... (She holds it up to herself)

Virginia

Well, I don't have the slightest idea at all. Not a one of 'em I know had a church wedding. Mother and Dad got married in a storefront chapel just over the state line. They run away, you know.

Tracy

Hey, it looks about my size; you think I could put it on?

Virginia

No! That thing's about to fall apart! Trace. I'd put it back if I was you.

Adaire

I don't like it. Gives me the creeps. I don't get a good feeling, Trace. Just put it back, I'd say.

Tracy

Oo-oh, I don't know. (she begins to sway a little, as if to a dance; closes her eyes) Maybe I'll wear this for the wedding. Who do you think it belonged to? Who's dress was it do you think? It looks so old. Do you think it was Aunt Ruby's? Did she marry Bigamy Bill in it? Whoa. I don't think I'm feeling so good...(staggers as if to fall)

Virginia

Tracy! Tracy, calm down dear. I think you need to sit down.

Adaire

(joining Virginia in helping Tracy to sit; still clinging to the dress) How much has she had to drink, Virg?

Virginia

How much have you had to drink, Trace? Tracy. Tracy! Listen to me. How much did you have to drink?

Tracy

Oh, I don't know. (She begins to sob, more and more pathetically.) I think I drank half a bottle.

Adaire

(laughing slightly) Half a bottle!

Tracy

Boy, I'm not feeling so well. What's wrong with me. That Fuzzy Navel sure ain't agreeing with me.

Virginia

Tracy, you've got to calm down, dear. Half a Fuzzy Navel could'nt do this to you. So take it down. You been feeling anything lately? A bug coming on? Your time of the month?

Tracy

(continuing to sob, heaving slightly) No, no, I don't know! I don't know. It's that dress. That wedding dress. I'm don't know what to do. I just don't know.

Virginia

(brushing back Tracy's hair) Tracy, we're right here. We're right here with you, and we're not goin' anywhere. We don't know what's goin' on with you. What is it? What do you think it might be, Hon?

Adaire

Trace, a-half a-Fuzzy Navel couldn't possibly cause you to feel this way,
Trace. Have you never had a swallow of alcohol before?

Tracy

I shouldn't have been drinking. You hear that old mockingbird out there?
That thing'll prob'ly go on all night long.

Adaire

I think they're amazing.

Virginia

Well, that singin' on and on gets to me on a hot night when I can't get to
sleep anyway.

Adaire

Tracy! You really haven't had enough to drink to cause any problems,
really. Trust me, babe, you haven't had as much alcohol as a good dose of
cough syrip!

Tracy

Oh my God, how much did I drink?

Adaire

(holding up Tracy's bottle) It looks over a little a half a bottle.

Tracy

I hear talk. Like it was my fault Harold left. You know, I think a lot of people blame me. Can you believe it? How can they do that? My husband vanishes without a trace, no note, no warning, no word. He just disappeared and left me with these little girls! Here I am. Alone. And people blame me! Over five years later, I can still feel their stares on the back of my neck. Oooo-oh! Just makes me sick.

Adaire

I know you feel humiliated. You must feel scared, in your circumstances, with those girls to raise.

Tracy

Aren't you scared all the time?

Virginia

No-ho-oh-oh!

Tracy

Lately, I've assumed that everybody is scared all the time.

Adaire

What I say is, more wine! More wine!

Virginia

So who has been sayin' stuff?

Tracy

Oh, I don't know. I don't know anybody in particular. I can feel it. Mother never gives me a break. Yak-yak-yak-yak-yak. That's all she does. (making a hand gesture at her mouth) Yak-yak-yak-yak-yak.

Virginia

Well, you know Trace, Maureen was not very well equipped to deal with anything that didn't appear normal. She's like Mother; you'll never please her, unh-uh, no matter what you try to do. It'll never be good enough.

Tracy

I know. I am still to this day almost incapable of knowing my own needs apart from hers. It is still very difficult to feel completely alright, that I am OK. But I still. I mean, Bud and I— we only— I mean, we hadn't really been planning on getting married. It was great the way it was. I mean, it was great, just great. Do I get a life of my own before I die?

Virginia

So how is Bud? I mean, I've heard tell that he's kind of high strung and all.

Tracy

Bud? Hey, he'd do back flips for me. He's such a good friend. He's very gentle with me.

Adaire

Trace, I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but I'd love it if he'd wring out my mop.

Tracy

But wait, wait. Yes. It's great the way it is. Sometimes I think I just want to keep it this way. I just don't know if I want to get married.

Virginia

Tracy, what do you want? I mean, if you could have exactly what you wanted?

Tracy

I want to be free. Free of all this. I want to get out from under this cloud. But why do I have to be married to be myself? Why is that just assumed? I know the girls could use a father, but should I marry Bud just to make everything look normal?

Adaire

I was always the trouble in my family. I didn't exactly know why. Not to begin with, anyway. Was my place—to cause trouble. I never really noticed how everybody else was using me to cover for themselves so much of the time. I wasn't ever sure what it was they were all afraid of, when they'd point at me. So I knew what my place was, and I accepted that was the way it was.

Tracy

I feel completely lost. I don't know what to do.

Adaire

Look, this is somethin' it takes awhile for all of it to hit you. How long has it been?

Tracy

It'll be six years next month.

Virginia

Listen, Tracy. I will support you no matter what. Absolutely. You can bet on that. I've done worse. A lot worse, I guess, in a lot of people's eyes. I've lost a few friends. Some of 'em tried to get me.

Adaire

I believe in doing unto others, John 3:16. (common laughter)

I don't think shouldabeen-couldabeen anymore. I'm not worried anymore about living under the penalty of, well, the penalties.

Virginia

I got over it. Well, something like that. For so long I felt hideous. Just hideously deformed.

Adaire

Oh no. There she goes again.

Virginia

I am NOT obsessive-compulsive.

Adaire

As you are constantly reminding me...

Virginia

Adaire! Cut me a little slack! I mean, I got over apologizing for who I am. Shit. I had more than one deacon, more than one co-worker—whew! Boy, let me tell you—who, just because they couldn't manage their own lives, seemed to need to control ME! You don't wanna know. You'd be surprised who I had have to talk about, if I was the talking kind.

Tracy

So what really happened with you and Edgar?

Virginia

I don't know, Trace. That might not do you any good. He was, you might say, something of a dangerous personality. I think he would have been the shortest, swiftest path to my demise.

Tracy

I have all this energy! I dream about a new beginning, a true beginning. I want to feel the future in my hands. Hold it. Draw it close to me, close to my

face, close to my belly. I want to feel alive. I want to be free. Sometimes I think I might like one of those new houses out in Watauga Meadows.

Virginia

You mean that? That's pretty much a bedroom community.

Adaire

Sounds good to me.

Tracy

You had a church wedding? How did you swing that?

Virginia

Yes. Law', Honey, I was determined to have a train. I know I didn't need one, but I was absolutely determined to have a train.

Adaire

Sheez.

Tracy

You have the little plastic Mister and Missus? You know, on the cake.

Virginia

What a lucky couple...

Tracy

Oh, I don't know. I'm a little past the rose petal stage, truth be told.

Adaire

Well, we could make extravagant plans, Tracy. We could have it in the Strand Theater. I could be the doorman. I will wear brand new overalls. We could have an exotic dancer.

Virginia

Adaire!

Tracy

I'll wear brand new jeans, and get some broad suspenders. Look here! Here's a pair of old earrings. Aren't they wonderful? Gold loops and rose crystals, filigree. These really look old! (holding them up, modeling them). But I'd want it outside, down home, back in the country.

Virginia

You could put me in charge of the music.

Tracy

Of course!

Virginia

I'll rehearse the choir in the back yard.

Tracy

We'll have the trio. Everybody who wants to come—there'll be legions, of course—w'll have to bring a...wooden nickel. That'll get you on the grounds.

Adaire

We could have dancers come out, like sweet little wood nymphs, in two lines in the center, meet, face, then pair off again and rejoin the circle. To the beat of Inky Dinky. The whole idea is something like Drop the Handkerchief.

Virginia

Oh, the trio could stand in the middle. I'd sing my solo there!

Tracy

And then everybody could bounce up and down, and then we could all go jump in the pond! (sharing a common laugh) So, what was the story about Polly, Gin.

Virginia

What?

Tracy

Aunt Ruby and Uncle Lloyd's parrot. You said it was sad, the story about her. Up in the attic, looking at that picture.

Virginia.

Oh. Yeah, I get ya'.

Tracy

You said the story about Polly was sad.

Virginia.

I got it.

Tracy

Or was you meanin' that it was sad that Aunt Ruby and Uncle Lloyd never had children?

Virginia

I got it, I got it. Oh, well, Polly lived nineteen years.

Adaire

What happened to 'er?

Virginia

Well, Lloyd got 'er some seed an' I never checked it. They were drivin' out to California for the last time. Y'now we fed 'er sunflower seeds and I never checked. They got the seed about three weeks before. I never checked it. When they came back, Lloyd said, 'Somethin''s the matter with Polly. She can't eat.' And when we got t' checkin', the seeds didn't have a kernel in 'em.

Tracy

The seeds had dried up?

Virginia

There wadn't no kernels in 'em. They's round like that but they were still dried up. We starved 'er! We'd starved 'er! She'd hulled 'em, y'know. It's untellin', I guess she'd be alivin' yet if we'd... But she was too, too far gone when we found 'er to, to get 'er back up.

Tracy

Well, that's a shame. Do you think she'd still be alive now if you'd...

Virginia

Ee-ah. I believe she would, if, but, uh, we'd never checked. Y'know. Mother always kept parakeets, an' we'd never thought about, 'cause we'd never bought no seeds that had been, that hadn't been filled out, and, uh, there wasn't a kernel in 'em!—nary a seed.

Adaire

That is sad. (absent-mindedly having picked up a baton, and lightly tapping it in a drumming motion)

Tracy

I can't think anymore.

Virginia

I'm with you. I think this is enough of this for now. Y'know, I can't figure it. If Mother put all these things up here, who helped her? And why was it such a big secret? I can remember very well asking about this space, and she

was always so plain about it. "Ahh, there's nothing up there. Not enough room to stand up. Just a little space. And it's dirty up there." Why? It really does make me angry. We could have had a lotta fun up here! This could have been a great playroom!

Tracy

Somethin' is missin'. I don't want to marry Louis. I'm not sure I want to marry Bud. You know, sometimes I feel itchy all over. Itchy and squirmy. The more I scratch, the more it itches. Like after a real bad Florida sunburn, and you're peelin' all over. Nothing you can do but try to find yourself a good long back-scratcher.

Virginia

Sometimes I feel worn down, like an old wall of red bricks. Like a split rail fence a'fallin' over. And then I think, ohhhh! This is just like Mother! And I can't stand it!

Adaire

Too bad. So sad. What do I know? (removing a harmonica from a box). You know, I always thought I could play a harmonica. This must be one o' Gene's old ones. Gene could teach me now.

Tracy

I can't think. I need a shower or a bath. Adaire, what is that?

Adaire

Oh, an old baton.

Virginia

That would have been Maureen's. That was your mother's.

Tracy

(accepting the baton from Adaire) Well, so this is the mighty Warrior's. You know, I remember Mom in that picture. You know, that classic? The perfect pose. With her head-dress and fringe. Good gosh, she couldn't have been more than fifteen!

Virginia

I remember when that picture was taken—like it was yesterday

Tracy

It's so weird up here. The way everything's laid out. Like a chapel, almost. Some sort of shrine. It's givin' me the heebie-jeebies—a strange feeling I don't really like that much. (All stand and begin moving toward staircase.)

Virginia

I'm with you. Time for this band to march along. The rest of this stuff will wait for another day.

Adaire

OK. Let's do it. (She twirls the baton expertly, gives it a little toss with finesse, and catches it with perfect execution, and a bit of a prance.) OK?

Virginia

Hey!

Adaire

Let's move. (leading the way)

Tracy

Know what? I'd really like to take these earrings. You think that'd be alright?

Virginia

OK by me, Tracy. I don't think Gene would mind. And your mom? Well, let's not tell her about it!

(Tracy returns to grab the earrings.)

Adaire

OK. Now, let's go! Let's go.

(Tracy switches on the camp-lantern. Adaire turns on flashlight and leads, followed by Virginia who flips the ceiling light off, then Tracy, and all exit.)

CURTAIN

Act Three

Front Porch Light

Act Three

(The scene opens on the front porch with light illuminated; windows of the house are dark. It is an unplanned gathering. On a small table covered with a plastic picnic cloth rests a pitcher of iced-tea, sugarbowl, and glasses.

Maureen is in the swing. Virginia is sitting on the steps; Adaire is twirling the baton again—tossing and catching; Tracy is doing sit-ups; she stands, then spies her opportunity and races to intercept the baton with a perfect preemptive catch.)

Adaire

It tickles you to death to win, didn't it Trace? (laughing, as she and Tracy make their way, Adaire to steps, Tracy to folding chair)

Tracy

Not always. Just most of the time. Well, yes, always. That's the way I was raised, Adaire. That's the way I was raised. Got to be perfect! Perfect!

Virginia

Don't leave that lay out there in the yard. Maureen'll have a fit if you leave it a' layin' there like that.

Maureen

(ignoring Virginia's remark) I'll swan. Eugene! Where do you be? (walks to front screen door and listens to his inaudible response) What can I say that would make you want to change your mind?

Eugene

(in the house) OK, OK, I'll do it directly, and then you can tell me what you think.

Bud

(entering up the aisle) Well, hello everybody. This is the place, I reckon.

Tracy

Bud! (running to give him a warm but defined hug, then turning to the porch) Mom, this is Bud Trotter. Bud, this is my Mom, Maureen.

Bud

Well, hello, Miz Townsend. (Bud moves to shake her hand, looks and finds no invitation)

Maureen

Hello.

Tracy

(moving along through this still moment) Bud, this is my Aunt Virginia.

Bud

Hello Virginia (Virginia too reads things and does not move.)

Virginia

Good to meet ya'

Tracy

And this is Adaire (unmoving)

Bud and Adaire

Hi.

Tracy

Well, Bud, what about some iced tea?

Bud

That'd be fine.

Tracy

Would you like some sugar in it?

Bud

Just give me what you've got. That'll be fine.

Tracy

Tell me how you like it, Bud, tell me what you really want?

Bud

Oh, well, OK, actually I do like a good heap o' sugar.

Eugene

(entering in t-shirt and work clothes, sweating, glancing back over his shoulder) We're getting' there. Wait a minute. That doesn't look right. It'll pass I guess. Oooheee. I tell you, this is turnin' out to be a real job! (moving toward the iced-tea).

Tracy

Uncle Gene. Uncle Gene! I'd like to introduce you to Bud, and Bud to you. Bud, this is my Uncle Gene.

Eugene

Well, hello Bud. Better not shake hands till I can clean up. Hey, why don't you step into the shed over there and grab yourself a chair. I'm a mess.

Bud

Oh no. That's ok. I'm fine as can be. I've been sittin' all day.

Eugene

Well (as he gets his tea), Tracy has mentioned you two workin' together out at the plant. So, you like it out there, huh?

Louis

(entering) Howdy ev'rybody! I hear this is the place for a good old barbequed hamburger with homegrown tomaters and onions?

Maureen

Well, Louis! You've got the right place, but I'm afraid it's not the right time.

Tracy

Louis. Louis! My Lord, Louis. (She gives him a quick, awkward, impulsive hug.)

Louis

(choosing only Eugene to address) Hey, Gene. How is it with you?

Eugene

Able to eat. Not able to work, 'cept on this old place! It's never going to be finished.

Louis

Aaa-, this old place will outlast all of us. They don't build 'em this way no more, nope, not anymore. Well, hey-hey, Virginia, how are ya'? (saying nothing to Adaire, and noticing Bud without comment, as the air thickens)

Virginia

Louis...

Eugene

(moving to cover the tensions) Grab yourself a chair, Louis. You know where they are...

Louis

Well, I reckon I can sit for a little spell...

Tracy

Louis... Louis, this is my good friend, Bud Trotter. (no movement to shake hands)

Bud

Hello, Louis. I've heard a good bit about you.

Louis

Is that so—oh, well, have you now...

Virginia

Oh! You know, Adaire, I think you should take a look at that cornbread. An' I think the pressure cooker's prob'ly cooled off by now... (They exit quickly into the house, and Maureen attempts to get little on the swing)

Louis

Tracy, I know about your plans. I know about Bud. Gatlinburg. And I know about Atlanta, and I come by to tell you that I hope you'll reconsider, if we could just have a little time...

Bud

Fair enough. We ain't goin' nowhere.

Tracy

What? How could you possibly... Mom! This is completely unacceptable. I simply won't have this! I won't have it! You never respected my dignity. I was allowed none.

Maureen

Of all the nerve! You have never spoken to me this way!

Tracy

Just to and from therapy.

Maureen

That's a strange attachment you have for those little roadtrips to hell!

Tracy

We sat side by side in that hell we were in! Only I KNEW IT AND YOU DIDN'T! YOU STILL DON'T! YOU'RE DELUSIONAL!

Maureen

Tracy Noelle. This has been my first time seeing an actual act of infidelity in my life, and if I don't see another one, that'd be fine.

Tracy

You were spying on me? How dare you! How could you do this?

Maureen

You tell me. I'm tired of protecting you from yourself.

Tracy

Ooooh, MOTHER! You are quite posi-tive-ly off your rocker! I am NOT married to Louis, Mother!

Maureen

Tracy! What you really should know is, you're not going to get away with this, this marriage to Bud Trotter, or whatever you want to call it!

Tracy

Well, you ARE the expert, Mother. It surely was a sunny day in hell when you and Dad got married.

Maureen

You have no idea what you're up against.

Tracy

What are you talking about?

Maureen

Tracy, my dear, your attitude has got to change.

Tracy

Mother, you really have flipped your wig.

Maureen

A lot of things have got to change. That's why I called Louis, and that's why Louis came.

Tracy

And that's why you've been following me? Logging my phone calls?

Maureen

Well, you must've hit the button on your cell phone, Tracy, without knowin' it. I got an earful that night. You've got to do what's acceptable in God's sight, Tracy. Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it, Proverbs 22:6. And no matter how old you get, I am still your mother, Tracy! I will always be your mother.

Tracy

How well I know it! And how very much you sound exactly like Grimmy!
Well, try this one out, Mother. (Virginia walks back out onto the porch, with Adaire and Eugene also coming, each of them peeking over one of Virginia's shoulders.)

Tracy

So listen to this: I'm not going to marry anybody. (silence sudden and total)
I'm not going to be marrying anybody. That's it (crying), and that's all.

Maureen

Well, that fills the bill. You can keep on living in sin then, and burn in hell for it, for all I know. (moving to the little table) A little more iced tea anyone. Louis?

Bud

Tracy, I... I didn't know. I, I don't know what to say. (moving to comfort her, but she brushes him off, gently) I am completely willing to live with, well, whatever you decide, Sweetie...

Aunt Ruby

(entering with her walker in full gear) Howdy, how'day! Ev-ry-bod-y, I'm s'proud to be 'here! (walking to Bud) Well, young fella', whaddy know?

Bud

Call me Tracy. I didn't mean... Ahgggh, call me, OK? (exiting) Call me! Will you just please call me, dammit!

(All are frozen in silence.)

Aunt Ruby

(full speed ahead) Well, that was tacky enough. Lord, people, I've been out and about, and a'tryin' to reach you. Is this family night? Lord, let me tell you, we're havin' a festival in Lovedale! Over there at the Renaissance Center, we have everything you can think of going on. Knights in shining armor. Rummage sale. You would not believe the things that are going on. A dance tonight. What a traffic jam. Oooh, children, you wou'd't have believed it.

Louis

Tracy, I can't believe you're acting this way. (thinking of a consoling remark) You know, Tracy, I was willing to step in when Harold left. You was in such a fix...

Tracy

Willing to step in? (enraged) YOU was WILLING to STEP IN? Like your own little Red Cross disaster unit? Was that it, Louis?

Louis

You gotta come to your senses, Trace, before...

Tracy

My senses? I don't know where you come up with that. That's good, Louis. That's helpful. Come to my senses! I guess that's exactly what I'm doing here! I mean, the very idea. Well spoken, Louis, and forever hold your peace. Keep your Relationships for Dummies book. And see what, see what is NOT going to happen to me again! Never again!

Louis

It's almost impossible for me to say anything at this point, considering my situation. I thought it might make things right for the girls. Why could I not know this about you and Bud? I mean, I don't recognize you anymore. I thought we had more than that...

Tracy

Well, there you go. You thought wrong, Louis. You thought wrong. I am not a mission for the United Way.

Aunt Ruby

Well, uh, am I an old lady or a fool? Somebody's gonna have to get me a chair; I can't make it with this walker...

Eugene

Sit here, Aunt Ruby.

Aunt Ruby

(struggling) I'm a'llinin' and I'm a'wantin' to...

Eugene

So what is it Ruby? What'd you find out today? What is it that's wrong with you?

Aunt Ruby

Aaah. Doctor Thomas said it was a pinched nerve.

Tracy

(emphatically) Good-bye Louis. (pausing, then exiting)

Aunt Ruby

(noting Louis's exit) That's a keen one.

Maureen

I think I'm goin' to pieces!

Tracy

Then, GO TO PIECES, MOTHER! You know, I don't care what you think anymore, because what you think is irrelevant! I don't need your permission to live my life! There is no competition between us. We've got nothing to compete about!

Maureen

Ruby! Aunt Ruby, do you know what our little girl here... Tell her, Tracy!
Tell her!

Aunt Ruby

What? What is it?

Maureen

Miss Tracy is not a'going to be marrying Louis. Miss Tracy is not even going to be marrying, well, anybody, I guess. Miss Tracy's going to keep on being something of a popular girl about town, I s'pose.

Tracy

(throws a pillow off her chair at Maureen) Mother!

Aunt Ruby

Well, well, well, that Maureen, always loved to tell on people.
We'll see what we can do. Maybe I can help out. Tracy may turn out to find herself to be one of those lucky couples yet.

Tracy

Well, kiss my hiney, Aunt Ruby.

Aunt Ruby

Well, wh-a-a-a-t? That doesn't sound too good.

Tracy

I said (enunciating), kiss my hind end, Aunt Ruby!

Aunt Ruby

Oooh, well. That doesn't sound like the Tracy I know. That's filthy. That's a filthy way to be a'talkin'.

Tracy

I'll take that—with your other opinions, of which there are so many—all under advisement, Aunt Ruby.

Aunt Ruby

Tracy, Lord have mercy, child, you know, I can't stand for any of you young'uns to be in such a fix, and what a fix you are in. Since Harold left n' all. You know, all we can do is to go down on our knees and look up to our Heavenly Father in prayer. Only He can...

Tracy

Oh good grief, Ruby, don't.

Aunt Ruby

I always expected that you would want to please God, Honey. I know Maureen always raised you children to live lives that would please and honor God, and with those twin girls you got to raise, and Harold's done gone and left you all alone, and, I don't know why...

Tracy

Ruby, please, don't.

Aunt Ruby

Our heavenly gaze will affect our earthly days!

Tracy

Ruby, stop it! Stop it! Judge not! Sheez. You've got tunnel hearing, Aunt Ruby. You're just not getting it!

Aunt Ruby

You've got to depend upon God only, Tracy. I mean, I thank and praise God for all He has done.

Tracy

Aunt Ruby, please! Snap out of it!

Aunt Ruby

Helen would never believe she had grandchildren like this! I know who I have believ-ed, and am persuaded that He is able, He will cleanse...

Tracy

Right! I accept who I am, and I don't need any-body's permission to be who I am!

Aunt Ruby

That's what they all, say, Honey, but the Lord will forgive anything, if you'll fall on your knees...

Tracy

I am not falling on my knees! Forgive me! Forgive me of what? What have I done? And stop calling me honey! I always hated that! You better watch it.

Aunt Ruby

Just get right down on your knees...

Tracy

I feel like (and moving without thinking to act out her words) SLAPPIN' THE FIRE OUTTA YOU! (slaps her)

Maureen

Ahhhhh! I'm going to pieces, going to pieces! (exits out the sidewalk, out the gate)

(Ruby stands before Tracy, without using the walker, and with great deliberation, slaps Tracy; and they are at a stand-off; the minute like an hour.)

Tracy

Your secrets are out. You have been found out. I found you out. We all found you out! Your great secret. The lies.

Aunt Ruby

Well, I'm sure I don't have any idea what you are talking about. Eugene?

Eugene

We've put a few things together, Ruby.

Aunt Ruby

Well, well, children.

Virginia

We found pictures of you and your first husband, Ruby.

Aunt Ruby

Well, I don't know what you think you've got...

Virginia

They was in the attic.

Aunt Ruby

In the attic? Well. Well...

Virginia

He was your husband, wasn't he?

Aunt Ruby

You don't understand.

Tracy

Don't understand what?

Aunt Ruby

You don't. You know, somehow... You just don't understand.

Eugene

So why don't you tell us, Ruby, so we'll know what is the actual truth.

Aunt Ruby

Ooooh! Ooooh. I's s' young. I was , well, I was completely innocent. There wasn't anything I could do about what I didn't know about. How could I? I never'd had any reason to suspect. I never had any misgivings about Roy. Not a'tall. I didn't know what to do. Why, I's young! I didn't ever think about things like that happening. There was no way I could'a figured he was already married (losing her composure a bit). To a woman back in Ioway.

Virginia

Now, Aunt Ruby, you don't have to do this, I mean, say anything that you don't want...

Tracy

Oh, sush, Virginia! The devil you say. There've been too many lies. Too big. Too long. Nobody would ever give us any answers. We couldn't get them to tell us nothin'! I just hate it!

Aunt Ruby

Well, I guess, I feel, I've been around for such a long time, such a long time.

Tracy

Yeah, well anyway. Maybe too long! (and with sarcasm) We will, as you say, trust in the Lord and His mysterious ways.

Eugene

Tracy!

Tracy

There's no more time t' waste! Look at us! We're grown-ups. Grown-ups! Upon my honor, we're getting old and gray! What are we messin' around for? I want it straight turkey.

Aunt Ruby

Well, I don't know. I just... You know, Hershell always used to say that there are things that shouldn't be talked about. I mean, what do you know? I mean, what all do you think you know?

Tracy

So that's what families are for? To preserve a particular pack of lies? Sometimes I feel like we're living in the twilight zone, people walking around sleepwalking, walking around like trees afraid of dropping a leaf. It was always like I could only show my perfect little self. Only if I was this preened, presented, perfect little self did I have any right to exist.

Aunt Ruby

Just like grand-dad always used to say, there are things families should keep quiet about. You know, we'll understand it better by and by. That day is a'coming when we'll tell the story how it all begun, and we'll understand it better by and by.

Virginia

Ruby, what are you trying to guard against?

Tracy

I am tired of all the blood-pact lies swirling round this family! "All is well" in this household. All is always well. Always the hell well. Just serene. And we know very damn well that's not so. I want to know! I am a grown woman!

Aunt Ruby

I don't like that language, child... I mean, you know I'm not used to that kind of language, Tracy. And if you're a grown woman—for a grown woman, you should know, you should know, too much truth can get you hurt!

Tracy

What? Do you think I am afraid of the truth? Then just kill me, Aunt Ruby. Do you think I am afraid of what people say about me? I am not guilty of anything! And I don't want to understand it better by and by, Aunt Ruby. I want to know what you know—and I want to know now, not another day!

Aunt Ruby

We were trying to make things easier for you. Life was so hard back yonder, in those days. We wanted to make things easier for you young'uns.

Eugene

Well, that may be true, Ruby, but it hasn't worked out that way. Just look around. You know, I don't think we're really here to make things *easy* for each other. We're here to make things *possible* for each other..

Aunt Ruby

Well, what I face is an empty house, every day, empty chairs, an empty bed. No one cares. No one ever comes by. I feel like I just don't matter much anymore.

Virginia

Ruby, that isn't so, and you know it.

Aunt Ruby

For the last several years I don't go nowhere. By now, the shape I'm in, I don't want to go nowhere. I don't want t' go, someway.

Eugene

Are you cold, Aunt Ruby? You want to go inside? You want some water?

Ruby

I was very well pleased, like the Lord picked him out and sent him to me. Oh, we would carry on. We had our high flyin' days—I mean, for those days. He wasn't raised anything, but I thought he was a mighty fine man and I could make him a good Baptist. Believe you me, I got a kick out of being with him. But then I got kicked out of the Promised Land, before I ever got there.

Tracy

You were just a girl living down there in the Holler when all that happened?

Ruby

No, no. We lived right here, in Lovedale. I was fleshy all the time then. Kept ten-eleven boarders 'bout all the time. Never made a big lot o' money.

Virginia

Well, you use to, you used to dance a lot didn't you?

Ruby

Ee-ah. Can't get up now, if I's down.

Tracy

So how did you find out?

Aunt Ruby

Oh, the law finally caught up with 'im. Took him back to Ioway. Mama talked with the law. I don't know what happened to 'im. It was like a dream. You wake up, you remember. But you can't make that dream come back. You only dream it once, and it's gone, forever, no matter how much you want to dream it again—you can't do it.

Tracy

So you got over him?

Aunt Ruby

Well, I learned not to dream so much. Life is not so generous.

Adaire

(out of the blue) I think it is.

Aunt Ruby

(stunned that Adaire would speak) What?

Adaire

I think life is generous. I think life is very, very generous. I think a lot of dreams waste away because we don't feed them.

Aunt Ruby

Wasn't much to go around when I was your age. A lotta my dreams dropped away like rose petals. Bouquet thrown away.

Tracy

Well, I'm still tending my garden!

Aunt Ruby

(unintentionally sarcastic) I'm so happy for you. (words sinking in) You just don't know how hard things used to be.

Virginia

No, she doesn't, Ruby. How could she? That world we knew when I was little doesn't exist anymore.

Aunt Ruby

I don't think I can live in such a world, in your world. Things just happenin' too fast. Too many people going crazy, thinking crazy things, doing crazy things. Too many people don't know how much they need Jesus.

Eugene

Ruby, there are plenty of people who know they need Jesus, and they're still crazy. So there's a whole lot of moving going on down here in mysterious ways.

Tracy

It's your god-almightiness, Aunt Ruby. In this family, everything gets wrapped up in a plain brown wrapper and shipped to Jesus. I don't need another subscription to Daily Devotions; Grimmy got me one when I was

twelve years old, and I still get it month after month. I don't know how to turn it off.

Aunt Ruby

Oo-oh, I'm just too tired, too, too tired.

Tracy

I don't care how tired you are, Aunt Ruby, but just because you can't manage your own life, what makes you think you the right to judge mine?

Aunt Ruby

Aaaahhhhh! (a deep moan, almost alarming)

Tracy

Aunt. Aunt! You're not even my real aunt!

Aunt Ruby

But I am. (sudden stillness) Ohhhh (an even deeper moan). Children, I am, I really am your aunt. (solid silence)

Eugene

Ruby? What are you saying, Ruby—do you know what you are saying?

Virginia

Ruby? What is it you mean?

Aunt Ruby

Ohh, it was all so long ago, so very, very long ago. Those people are mostly dead now. Sometimes it feels like I'm the only one left!

Tracy

So, out with it.

Aunt Ruby

It was such, such a mess. I never thought, well, we never thought—Helen and me—that there was any reason to get into all that down there. It was so long ago.

Eugene

Ruby, what is it you have to tell us? We're all here, we're together, and we're ready to listen. We are all grown. I think it might do you good—I know it'll do us good—just to tell us what it is.

Aunt Ruby

Oh Lordy. Your mother and I were blood sisters. We had the same dad; we didn't have the same mother.

Virginia

Well I'll be! Oh, Ruby! Bless your heart.

Aunt Ruby

Times I thought I could die, I thought I could die. But then it wasn't really me. It was Helen that was in such bad shape. Your mother had such trouble

over it. I don't think she could look in the mirror without seeing herself, well as cursed, and blessed at the same time. It was too much for her. It was a mess, what a mess.

Virginia

So Grandpaw, our grandpaw was your father? By another woman? I can't believe...

Aunt Ruby

No. No.

Tracy

So, if it wasn't Great-grampaw, it was another man. Who was it?

Aunt Ruby

Your real grampaw, and your great-grandpaw (nodding to Tracy), my father, was, a preacher. A circuit-ridin' preacher.

Virginia

Well heavenly days...

Tracy

I'd say! That pretty much rips the veil, dudn't it? The Holy of Holies laid bare. Or should I just say laid?

Virginia

Tracy Irene! Just listen to your self.

Eugene

Tell us his name, Ruby. You must know. I really think it's time we found out. So, who was it, Ruby?

Aunt Ruby

Archer Clayman. You're all descendents of Archer Clayman. (a gasp from Virginia.) Reverend Archer Clayman.

Virginia

Preacher Clayman! You've got to be kiddin'! I can't believe...

Adaire

Who was Archer Clayman?

Tracy

Yeah. Who WAS he?

Eugene

He's the man the old river-bridge is named after. You've seen that sign a thousand times, Tracy. On the way to the Holler.

Aunt Ruby

As I said, in those days we still had to have circuit-ridin' preachers—weren't enough preachers t' go around.

Tracy

So he was making HIS rounds, I reckon.

Aunt Ruby

He was very-well liked, and respected, in all those parts. Them was diff'rent days alright. A striking man, Mama said. She said he was a sixteenth Cherokee—a blue-eyed Indian.

Eugene

Well, you seeing a lot of blue eyes lookin' at ya right now!

Adaire

Seems like Running Bear loved Little White Dove, Little White Doves.

Virginia

Adaire! This is not a time to be very funny.

Eugene

Ah, Ruby, Ruby. I wished we could have known this sooner. Really, we was old enough to know this when Mother and Dad were still alive. When your mother was still alive! We could have known her! We could have known our great-aunt. And that'll never be possible now.

Tracy

Well I guess I'll sort've have to completely revise my sense of who I am—again!

Eugene

This is not easy for any of us. None of this is easy for anybody. It's like a... like a huge black cloud that's been hangin' over us all for so long, weighing us all down.

Aunt Ruby

People didn't know any better. I think everybody was doing the best they could, you know. What could we do? Your mother and I grew up in it.

Tracy

You know, a lot of puzzle parts are beginning to fit together in my mind...

Aunt Ruby

I guess you can't really hide secrets forever. Somehow. Seems like they want to come out, on their own.

Virginia

Well, I can see why Mother was always so obsessed about our reputation. She could be so adamant, about anything, anything at all. You never knew why. Even things that were natural for kids, natural for teenagers, when we were growing up. She'd go crazy sometimes.

Aunt Ruby

It was all she could do to keep going, you know, after she found out. In so many ways, she never got out of it; never got better.

Tracy

Even us grandkids. We'd try to do everything we could to make Grimmy happy. Nothing ever seemed to be enough.

Eugene

Everybody was supposed to make sure everything looked good. My job, as beloved son, was to make her feel good. I devoted all my life, believe it or not, to trying to keep Mother from going to pieces. When I was little, I used to take out her bobby pins and comb out her hair. I tried to conquer the world for her. But I never could redeem her. And when that became clear, and when her little hero chose to leave home, she began to die. You wonder why I had to go?

Aunt Ruby

Well, it's not been so easy on me. Let me tell you. I feel jittery.

Virginia

We're listening. We're all right here. (reaching to take her hand for awhile)

Aunt Ruby

Your mother and I had the same grandfather and grandmother.

Virginia

Wait, wait Ruby, I thought you said...

Aunt Ruby

Our grandmother had two daughters. One sister was Helen's mother, and the other was my mother.

Tracy

This is getting real confusing.

Aunt Ruby

Helen's mother found herself pregnant after her new husband left for the World War One. He left for France, and he never came back.

Eugene

Now where did these people live? Down in the Holler? I've never gotten it all straightened out.

Aunt Ruby

No, this was down about Soddy-Daisy, toward Bean Station. Anyway, just a short while after her husband left for the war, your great-grandmother lost the baby she had by him. She was very, very young. But then, it wasn't too long till she was pregnant again, and that child, that child she gave birth to—your mother. But not long after than she died; we never did know what caused it, and your mother was taken as a baby and raised by her aunt, her mother's sister. This sister also got pregnant, and she got married, about six months after she delivered the baby. That baby was me. The man my mother

married was a mighty, mighty good man, I'll tell you—the man I called my Daddy. But he was not my real Daddy. My real Daddy was your mother's Daddy. Archer Clayman.

Tracy

Whooaaaaa.

Virginia

So if I got it right, you and Mother had the same grandmother. She had two daughters, who each had a daughter by the same man—a man neither of them was married to? And that's the whole truth about Mother and you? And that's where we all come from?

Aunt Ruby

It seems so far away. I don't see it so clear anymore. It seems to be fading away, little by little, day by day.

Tracy

And that's all the more reason we need to know, Aunt Ruby. We need to know these things! There's even health issues we ought to know about, I mean...

Aunt Ruby

When Helen died, it actually was a relief, a release.

Eugene

I think we all felt a little like that, Ruby. I knew I could never live a truthful life, my own life, until she died, and I no longer had to live the lies she required or me. So what about our grandfather then, our real grandfather, the legendary Preacher Clayman, our grandfather? What ever happened to him?

Aunt Ruby

We never knew for sure. Last I knew, he left for Alaska. Opened up trading post or something. He prob'ly didn't have nothin', couldn't send nothin' anyway, I mean, when you think about it. Everything was such a mess. All my mother ever spoke about him was very tender-hearted—sweet—never had a harsh word for him. I don't expect he ever was able to send anything. I know he was held in such high regard that them down that way named that bridge after him. It was finished before you was born, Virginia. I think he was lost at sea while he was still fairly young.

Tracy

Tender-hearted? Sweet? Just hold on a second. How can you be so forgiving about all that down there, and then, and still be so sure of yourself about me and my situation, here and now?

Aunt Ruby

Tracy, I've lived too long. You haven't seen all I've seen! There's a lot I could tell. I think you could learn a lot from what I have...

Tracy

So keep talking, Aunt Ruby—Aunt...Ruby—but please, remember, I do want the right to make my own mistakes, if that's what I'm doing, and when

I think about all this, I'm not sure I am making a mistake! Why is it always true that children will be best in a marriage, specially if it's not a good one?

Aunt Ruby

Well, look at Helen, look her life. You were her masterpiece, you young'uns. You were her great accomplishment. You still are! All of ye. She seemed to break, after you grew up, Gene. Her baby. Her only son. She had such hopes for you. Wanted you to be a preacher, you know. Reckon she thought that would balance things out, fix things up.

Eugene

Yes, Ruby. I know. Before I was six I was convinced I was called to the pulpit. You remember that very well. It was all so very cute. Yes. There's not a day of my life I haven't lived without dealing with that. But Mother was not capable of loving me when I committed my crime of growing up. She never could love me for who I turned out to be. I guess my harmonica never quite measured up. And she hated Texas. Never knew why I had to be so far away.

Aunt Ruby

I never really figured out what it was with Helen. I always seemed to be alright with things. O'course, I had my mother, my real mother always was with me. But with Helen, not even having a real mother to rely on, and all. And my mother, well, she had it hard enough without trying to take on Helen. People worked hard all the time in those days. Helen got passed around. Guess she never did get to be a little girl. Other times, I think she

stayed a little girl. Not sure which it was, or maybe it was both. We'd go up in the attic, her and me, just like we always did, till she got too up in years.

Adaire

You know, I never really got all those dolls of hers. They was too much. They seemed so spooky to me, like they were possessed.

Aunt Ruby

Guess she was trying to make them perfect, sewing all those clothes, arranging everything just right. Just like she'd done with all of you when you was young'uns. Hershell made her a dollhouse after they married—a real fine dollhouse, like a jewel-box really.

Tracy

That dollhouse! In the attic?

Aunt Ruby

Yes. That'd be the one. She didn't want any of you all a'playin' with it. That was not made for anybody to mess with. She would make everything perfect in it. Sit and look at it, seemed like hours. Never was enough, holding on to all those things. Nothing was ever enough. Poor Helen. People were so cruel to her.

Virginia

People knew?

Aunt Ruby

Yes. They knew. We never knew how they knew. My daddy, I mean, the man I called my daddy, would never tell. Naturally. But some of his people, well, they never approved of him marrying my mother, I mean, not like that and all. There was talk. You know how people was in them days.

Tracy

Them days! I'm talking about how people are now!

Aunt Ruby

Hershell broke his back trying to make her happy. He would have done anything for her. He would literally 've moved mountains for Helen. She did posi-tively adore that dollhouse. She was such a pretty girl, Helen. Law' mercy! When Hershell and her first moved to the Holler, oowweeee! Just look at them pictures! She glowed! S'pretty! She was a real knockout! Look at those pictures with you, Virginia! You always was her perfect little girl.

Virginia

Yes, Ruby, you're right about that. I was mother's perfect little doll, with a ribbon in my hair. The only problem was, I had to grow up..

Tracy

It's not so much what-all went on down there in that Holler. Life gets complicated. But what's caused the real trouble is the lying. All those big old lies have consequences. At this point in life, we deserve to know enough to make up our own minds. We can't make adult decisions on the basis of what's been kept from us, like we were still little kids. And there's a lot I

want to know about those days back there. And I'd appreciate a little bit of understanding here for my situation.

Aunt Ruby

(on high horse) Well, some things never change, Tracy. Some things will never, never change! (immediately catching herself) But I reckon it's not the end of the world, you know, Tracy. You know that?

Tracy

It's the same stuff—over and over and over again! Listen, I'm willing to take responsibility for myself! That's all I've been trying to say. Just don't judge me! Just let the Good Lord judge me!

Aunt Ruby

It's always something.

Eugene

Tracy's right. How can you work out your own salvation like St. Paul says if there's original sins you don't even know about?

Aunt Ruby

Yes, we've got to be serious about sin, Gene.

Eugene

And we've got to be even more serious about forgiveness. We've really got to let ourselves BE forgiven, and live that way.

Virginia

Well, we have to go from here. We'll all have to go from here. But we do have a whole lot to talk about, that's for sure. We've got to stay with this. We've got to. I always felt I was starving inside. Somehow I always felt it was a sin being born. It's the only way I ever saw myself.

Eugene

I was always looking for what wasn't there, rather than seeing what was right in front of me.

Tracy

Sometimes we may not even know what the truth is. But we can surely practice not lying. We can try not to lie anymore. Aunt Ruby (pulling out the earrings), do you know whose these are? (shows them)

Aunt Ruby

Land sakes! Yes. Where'd you find those, up in the attic?

Tracy

Yes.

Aunt Ruby

In with the wedding dress?

Tracy

Yes.

Aunt Ruby

Oh, those are real antiques. Let me see 'em.

Tracy

So, what's their story?

Aunt Ruby

Oh, I don't know (again, catching herself). Yeah, those are mine.

Tracy

Aha! And what about the wedding dress.

Aunt Ruby

Well, that (pausing, checking, then conceding), that'd be mine too. That was for my first marriage, which, well, I guess there's a lot I could tell you about.

Tracy

And the earrings.

Aunt Ruby

Those were what I wore with that dress a long, long time ago. They came from, well, the man I married.

Virginia

You mean, the man who...

Aunt Ruby

The man I loved. (starting to cry) Why don't you take them, Tracy.

Tracy

Well, Aunt Ruby, I don't know. I thought they were beautiful. They look like real gold, pure gold—that filigree. (putting them on)

Aunt Ruby

You keep 'em. That'd be fine. I don't have much to give you. It's time, it's past time to let some of these things go.

Adaire

I'll agree with that. We have to keep moving. One footstep after another.

Tracy

I know we'll get through it all somehow.

Virginia

Yes, we will. One way or another. We always get through it.

Aunt Ruby

Yes, yes, we do, young'uns. We'll get through..

Eugene

Well, frankly, I'm dyin' to find out how. I don't know if I'm a'comin' or I'm a' goin, but I came home to live, not just sit.

Virginia

That's good, Gene. We're a'countin' on you to get that remodeling done.

Eugene

Hey, I don't know about you, but I'm gettin' eat up. You all want to come inside? (steps inside screen door, flips on light that shines through windows; others start to make their way in; returning to door, Gene continues) There's still a little a' that iced tea, or, hey, I can offer you some fresh buttermilk.

(Gene opens door for Ruby, assisted by Virginia, followed by Tracy. Adaire picks up baton, tries to twirl; drops it; tries again; drops it; goes inside.)

CURTAIN

(all in darkness)