

BLACK HOLLOW

A play by
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CHARACTERS

RUSTY BURGESS. 16. Intelligent, charismatic, but disturbed. Hyperactive and obsessive imagination. Estranged from the people around him, except for a select group of fellow outcasts, for whom he is the de facto leader.

NOAH BURGESS. 40's. A struggling but devoted father. His wife, Rusty's mother, was his world. After she died, Rusty became his world.

JESSIE HUGHES. 16. Awkward, shy, nerdy. A gamer. One of the outcasts in town. Loyal to his best friend Rusty.

FAYE ROBERTS. 16. Punky nerd, emo/goth-leaning. Bright and creative, but contemptuous of authority and control. Can't wait to get out of this town.

CHRISTINA PARKER. 40's. Fifth grade teacher. Grew up in Black Hollow, went to college in-state, and came back to be a teacher. Loves her students, loves her family, loves her town.

HOWARD PARKER. 40's. Commutes to the city, works in an office. He cares about his family but work often takes precedence, and he struggles to achieve a balance.

EVEY PARKER. 16. Popular girl, masking a secret weirdness that draws her to the outcasts. Thoughtful and kind. She has a strong sense of empathy and trusts her gut.

FRANK WADE. Late 50's. A military veteran. Owns the army surplus and camping supplies store and commands the town Militia. Libertarian-leaning, values self-reliance.

SUE WALTON. 45. Beloved Sheriff of 15 years, and was the youngest Black Hollow elected in a century. Hard-working, caring, but tough. Cares deeply about her town, and is motivated by duty.

SETTING

A small American town
Any day now

NOTES

In the PROLOGUE, all characters except for RUSTY make up BLACK HOLLOW that speaks to us. Lines can be handed out as each production sees fit.

The characters and the audience move through various states and perspectives.

PART ONE, the characters remember and experience the event simultaneously, which the passive voice should support.

PART TWO, the characters delve into the past, and the tense changes accordingly.

PART THREE, Rusty acts as our intermediary through a fourth wall as we see the characters move through their present and discover their future.

Air on the minimal with design. The focus should be on bodies and space, between each other, between moments in time.

This structure of the piece borrows heavily from music. Rhythm and pacing are important. There are moments of quiet among moments of chaos, and sometimes they create dissonance. Lean into that. Transitions, between scenes and between moments, are essential tools.

This play is about resilience as much as it is about grief. There is gravity, but levity also. Don't let it go too far in one direction.

PART TWO

Days after the shooting at Maple Hill.

RUSTY sits center, facing us. NOAH watches him.

NOAH

When they came looking for something to show on the news, there weren't a lot of photos to choose from. I sent them a shot from school picture day.

RUSTY messes up his hair and poses like on school picture day.

When you're raising children it's not as simple as. They're kids. They're growing. You don't know what you'll get at the end. And every child has their issues. I'm not saying. I just, it's not like there was something I could go back to and say "If I had just." Sometimes your best isn't good enough. To be honest, I didn't see much of myself in him. His mother died when he was younger. Cancer. I had to do everything on my own after that. It was hard, just us, but we made it work. He could be difficult though. I remember when he was really young...

A red light appears under RUSTY. He explores it with his hand, like dipping a toe into a pool.

You know how a kid will put their hand on a hot stove and they get hurt. They learn. This is hot. This is pain. Rusty...he wasn't one to take his hand away. Actually gave himself third degree burns that way.

RUSTY puts his hand all the way in and holds it there. He screams, but instead of his voice, we hear a high-pitched ringing.

They kept him in the hospital for observation. Him in one room his mother in the other. When they let him move around he'd just sit next to his mother and hold her hand. At that point she was barely conscious. But he'd just sit there for hours, his good hand holding hers, his other wrapped up in gauze resting on his lap. He slept sitting up like that. When I saw that I...I don't know. Something wasn't right about it. Didn't think much of it after that. He seemed to be doing better, for a while.

JESSIE enters.

JESSIE

My family moved to Black Hollow when I was little. Rusty was my neighbor. He was the first person to talk to me here.

Crickets. RUSTY comes up behind JESSIE.

RUSTY

Hey.

JESSIE

Woah!

RUSTY

Woah woah don't be scared.
What are you doing out here?

JESSIE

I'm just...hey wait what about you?

RUSTY

I like to come out here sometimes.
You just moved here right?

JESSIE

Uh, yeah.

RUSTY

I'm next door.

JESSIE

Oh!

RUSTY reaches his hand out.

RUSTY

Rusty.

JESSIE

Jessie.

They shake.

RUSTY

Are your parents getting a divorce?

JESSIE

Huh?

RUSTY

They're yelling a lot.

Yeah. JESSIE

Do they do that a lot? RUSTY

Pause.

Did your parents get a divorce? JESSIE

My Mom died. RUSTY

Oh. JESSIE

Pause.

Hey, wanna see something? RUSTY

What? JESSIE

Wait here a sec. RUSTY

Uh... JESSIE

RUSTY disappears. Crickets. JESSIE considers going back. RUSTY returns, his hands clasped together.

Come here. RUSTY
Come on.

JESSIE comes closer. RUSTY releases his hands, revealing a firefly.

Woah. JESSIE

I know where there are more. Follow me and you can catch one. RUSTY

RUSTY goes off.

JESSIE

That was the start of our adventures. We'd explore our tiny nothing town, finding hidden worlds. When we were, seven or eight I think, he took me out to this lake behind my house.

A blue pool of light appears.

RUSTY walks toward the edge of the light. JESSIE joins him.

It was winter and it was freezing, and so much snow. When you're a kid it's pure magic. For a little while every year the world changes, all the rules change. You can walk on water.

RUSTY

Let's go.

JESSIE

Are you sure?

RUSTY

Whaddya chicken?

JESSIE

It's not safe.

RUSTY

You don't like to walk on water?

JESSIE

What if it cracks?

RUSTY

You watch too many movies.

JESSIE

I've never seen a frozen lake. It never got this cold in California.

RUSTY

Mehhh California!

JESSIE

I liked California.

RUSTY

Yeah cause you never saw anything different.

JESSIE

It's warm there.

RUSTY
Ok, let's slow down. Let's look at it for a while.

They stare out onto the frozen lake.

JESSIE
It's so quiet.

RUSTY
Yeah.

Silence.

JESSIE
I'm cold.

RUSTY
Me too.

JESSIE
Are we going inside now?

RUSTY
Nope.

JESSIE
Rusty!

RUSTY
Are you kidding? I'm not a chicken. If you're a chicken you can go cluck-clucking back home.

JESSIE
Maybe I am a chicken.

RUSTY
Even the chicken crossed the road.

JESSIE
I'm not coming.

RUSTY
Ok, but I'm going.

JESSIE
But you'll get in trouble.

RUSTY
Uh-huh.

JESSIE
What if something bad happens?

RUSTY
I guess I'll die alone then.

JESSIE
Hey!

RUSTY
Everybody's gotta die sometime.
Unless you got somebody to pull you out.
Whaddya say?

JESSIE
I can't leave you alone.

RUSTY
You can. Or you can be my protector. Your choice.

JESSIE
But...

RUSTY
Let me know!

RUSTY walks into the pool of light.

JESSIE
I wanted to feel brave. We got to the dead center of the lake. That hush, and this pure white surrounding you, and you know this is the only time you ever get to stand here. In a little while all the snow will melt all the ice will melt and it'll be back to a lake and you have to wait a whole year to ever feel that way again. But the. The ice looks stronger than it really is. It cracked under me. I kind of heard Rusty shriek and then I was under and I don't really remember how long. I remember getting pulled out. And my Mom and Dad's faces.

RUSTY is curled up tight. NOAH just watches him from afar. RUSTY repeats the following, softly.

RUSTY
I don't know I don't know I don't know I don't know I don't know I don't know I don't know I don't know I don't know...

NOAH
When I found him he was just curled up in this tight little ball, tears streaming down his face. I felt guilty, I didn't know what to do for him.

Everyone was concentrated on Jessie, and I wanted to be with them. Not with him. It didn't have to happen. But that was Rusty, always going too far.

Blue light dissipates.

He got a reputation. People were always a little wary, even if they weren't clear in showing it. But time went by. Things were pretty ok until high school.

School bell, faintly, plays, followed by the sounds of a high school hall between classes that slowly dies through the following.

CHRISTINA

Maple Hill is a very special place. It houses every grade in one building, which encourages all the different ages to interact. It was an idea of our town's founder actually, so it goes back as far as Black Hollow does. I mean, you get a bunch of children together and try to make them learn, you're going to have a complicated experience. But it always felt like a safe, welcoming place to me.

JESSIE

It's school, so it sucks.

FAYE

There are two Maple Hills: the one on the website, and the degenerate underclass. Like me and Jessie. And Rusty.

JESSIE

We'd get picked on. Called names.

FAYE

Emo, hellspawn, dyke-

JESSIE

Faggot, pussy-

FAYE

This isn't as nice a place as they like to appear. There is one thing I like about it though. I have this spot, out through the woods, in the pines. There's this grove cut out perfectly and nobody knows about it. I'd run away there. After I got to know Jessie and Rusty, I decided I wanted to share it with them. So we went out there one weekend. Grabbed booze and rolled some j's and camped out. Rusty busted out this crazy story.

RUSTY stands. JESSIE drum-rolls. FAYE bangs on the ground, maybe a couple woo's and whoops. RUSTY silences the group, lights his face by flashlight.

RUSTY

Once, there was a devil who built a magic mirror. A mirror that distorted everything it reflected. When you looked into it, all the good inside you got smaller and smaller while everything ugly about you magnified. The devil carried this mirror all around the world, distorting everyone and everything. Even the most beautiful landscapes became like boiled spinach. Then he sought to take the mirror to heaven, he tried to make a fool of God. The higher he lifted the mirror, the heavier it became, and the more it shook. With heaven just within reach it plummeted to earth, shattering into a million pieces. The fall was so great that the pieces scattered all over the earth, finding their way into people's hearts and eyes. Their hearts became like ice and their eyes became just like the magic mirror, seeing only the bad and ugly in everything.

Light begins to expand again.

FAYE

Rusty was definitely dark.

RUSTY

They want to stamp us out. They hate us. You know it's true.

FAYE

They're bullies, Rusty. Just survive until we're out of this place.

RUSTY

You think this is something we can just escape? We graduate, and we go out and these are the people getting jobs with us and getting old and dying with us. And this is where it begins.

JESSIE

Where what begins?

RUSTY

The production. This school, this town. It churns out perfect model citizens to be fucking rocket fuel. It's a robot factory.

JESSIE

Robot Factory. That was one of his favorite phrases.

RUSTY

They program us. Every day. Through parenting, through education, through the media. Some of us are immune, and that threatens them.

JESSIE

The stuff they said on the news...I dunno, it wasn't like that at all.

FAYE

Freak Brigade. That's what the other kids called us, and the media ran with it. Like we were some cult.

JESSIE

We got harassed. Media hounding us after, everyone in town looking at us weird. Everybody else got this feeling of like being together, but then they were all ganging up on us like always.

FAYE

We're always on the outside.

JESSIE

Rusty was the only one who wasn't afraid.

FAYE

He was like our hero. Or I dunno, just knowing he was there, that there was someone on our side who could fight back. Someone who could scare them. A protector.

JESSIE

It felt good to listen to him. It made us feel powerful.

FAYE

Made things feel a little less impossible.

NOAH enters.

NOAH

As Rusty got older, he started having some odd ideas.

RUSTY

We should have a gun.

NOAH

What's that?

RUSTY

A gun. We should have a gun.

Beat.

NOAH
Never felt the need for one.

RUSTY
We have the right.

NOAH
Well sure.

RUSTY
You don't think we should protect ourselves.

NOAH
You don't feel safe?

RUSTY
No.

NOAH
Who's coming after us?

Off RUSTY.
Something I'm missing?

RUSTY
You're lost in it.

NOAH
Oh I'm lost in it? Lost in what? Enlighten me.

RUSTY
Lost in it. Don't worry. It's too late anyway.

NOAH
You know a lot of times it feels like we're speaking different languages.

RUSTY
We should have a gun.

NOAH
I don't feel the need for one.

RUSTY
Then I'll have one.

NOAH
Not in this house.

RUSTY

Then you deserve to die.

NOAH

Excuse me?

RUSTY

You can't look after yourself, you can't look after this family. There are things going on you have no understanding of. Things are falling apart and you won't prepare, you have no one else to blame but yourself.

NOAH

Russ, I think we need to calm down.

RUSTY has a panic attack, which does not surprise NOAH.

Hey. Rusty.

NOAH approaches cautiously. He does a rehearsed gesture, an elaborated deep breath. Rusty struggles to mimic the gesture. It starts to calm him down.

RUSTY

I-I got it.

NOAH

Ok.

RUSTY exits.