

Hank & Jesus

A play with songs by Janet Preus

Music and lyrics by Bryan Cumming and Janet Preus

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CHARACTERS

- HANK: 30's but looks like he could be older. Recently sober, a songwriter
- JESUS: (Spanish pronunciation) an old acquaintance. Hispanic appearance.
- BUSTER: owner of a combination bar, café and store. A Viet Nam vet
- MOM: Mother of Hank, Wesley, Michelle. Always lived in Swanville. In her 60's
- WESLEY: Hank's older brother, about 40
- MARY ROSE: Wesley's wife, about 40
- MICHELLE: Hank's younger sister, 20's
- HEATHER: Michelle's friend and the mother of an infant son

SETTING

The 1990's

Outstate Minnesota: A small city, and "Swanville," a small, rural Minnesota town.

SCENE 1:

Hank's apartment

The stage is dim. Hank is playing an out-of-tune guitar and singing bits and pieces of honkytonk-type songs. It's apparent that he's in the midst of writing them, and they aren't that good.

HANK

DREAMIN' BIG AND LIVIN' SMALL
IT'S JUST MY BOOTS THAT MAKE ME TALL.
EVERYTHING I DO, DON'T COUNT AT ALL.
I'M LIVIN' BIG ... no, wait. No, I don't.
I'M DREAMIN' BIG, AND LIVIN' SMALL.

(He puts that lyric sheet off to the side.)

Well, that needs work.

(He picks up another lyric sheet and starts singing another song.)

HANK

IF I HAD A WOMAN, SHE WOULD LEAVE ME.
IF I HAD A DOG, HE'D RUN AWAY.
IF I HAD A TRUCK, I'D PROBABLY SMASH IT UP.
THAT'S THE WAY MY LUCK IS GOIN' TODAY.

That ain't bad!

I'M AN UNLUCKY GUY
FORTUNE'S PASSED ME BY
I DON'T KNOW WHY I EVEN TRY.

Bridge doesn't say anything new, does it ...

IF I HAD A JOB, I'D GET FIRED.
IF I ASKED DIRECTIONS,

(pause)

Oh my god, no.

IF I ASKED DIRECTIONS, I'D GET LOST.

Cost... tossed ... Naw, it's gotta rhyme with "today."

Door knock as he sings. He either doesn't hear it or ignores it.

TOMORROW COULD BE BETTER

OR JUST MORE OF THE SAME.
NO USE GETTIN' MAD

I never get mad. ... Maybe I should ...

(Short pause, Hank quickly scribbles some new lyrics for the song, then tries them out)

TOMORROW COULD BE BETTER
OR JUST MORE OF THE SAME.
NO USE GETTING' MAD
I GOT NO ONE TO BLAME.

Ha! Yeah!

(He writes some more. He's getting kind of fired up about how this new song is going.)

That's good, that's good. All right. ... yeah ...

IF I HAD A JOB, I'D GET FIRED.

(More knocking. Hank finally notices the interruption.)

HANK

"Whaddaya want?"

(No answer, just more knocking.)

"I said whaddaya want!"

JESUS

Are you the one with a room available? There was a sign outside on the door.

HANK

(Glancing around his room)

Guess it depends on what you mean by "room." ... Yeah, I got a room.

JESUS

I wondered if you might let me in.

HANK

(Somewhat under his breath)

Jesus.

JESUS

Yes. I wondered if you might let me in.

The knocking resumes, very gently this time, but is quickly cut off by Hank.

HANK

Hey!... give me a minute.

(He goes to the door.)

Yeah, who is it?

JESUS

We knew each other quite a while ago, I believe.

HANK

I knew a lot a people, ya know. (pause) Where. Where did I know you.

JESUS

You were... we were just kids.

HANK

Oh. (pause) You mean back in Swanville?

JESUS

Yeah. Swanville.

HANK

Awe, crap! Rusty? Is that you?

JESUS

No, it's not Rusty.

HANK

Well, good.

(He unlocks in the door and finally the two are face to face.
Short pause while Hank studies him.)

What did you say your name was?

JESUS

Jesus.

He follows Hank into the room

HANK

Jesus.

JESUS

Yep.

HANK

You people. (beat) Jesus. What, like "HAY-soos". You look kinda Latino. You mind if I call you "Hay-soos."

JESUS

Hay-SOOS is fine. Lots of folks call me Hay-SOOS.

HANK

You one a' them migrant workers? We pick beets together? Play ball? What?

JESUS

Yeah. I was there ... picking beets.

HANK

Sorry. I can't remember shit. Fried my brains, I guess. You need a place to crash or somethin'? I mean, I don't have much, God knows, but you're welcome to it.

Hank picks up a pile of clothes or a duffel on the only comfortable chair and drops the duffel behind the couch.

JESUS

Thanks. This is just what I was hoping for, actually.

HANK

Man, you must be worse off than me, even. Sorry I was a little cranky. I got a lot of old friends that I ain't supposed to be seeing right now. Finally stayin' out 'a trouble and my so-called friends ... Well, I ain't seen the inside 'a the slammer for months! Ha!

JESUS

That's ok, I understand.

(Blows on his hands and rubs them, something to indicate he's cold.)

Chilly outside.

HANK

And inside. I'd turn the heat up, but it's extra. Here. That's not much of a jacket you got, if you don't mind me sayin'.

He puts his own jacket on Jesus.

JESUS

No, I'm fine, really.

HANK

I'm used to it in here.

JESUS

Not that bad for December, huh?

HANK

Here, you warm up a little. ... Hey, I know! 2nd base. It was 2nd base, wasn't it?

(Jesus just smiles at him.)

Yeah, it was. You were one crazy son-of-a-

JESUS

Maybe you're confusing me with someone else.

HANK

Yeah, sure. Whatever. You wanna beer? Wait a minute. I don't drink anymore. Ha! Old habits ...

JESUS

No thanks, I'm good.

HANK

Baseball. I loved the game. Hey, were you there when I got beamed? Dropped like a rock. My mom just freaked. (*laughing*) Maybe that's my problem, huh?

JESUS

I remember that.

HANK

Hey, that's it! You *were* there, weren't you?! You...you...yeah! You were the first person I saw when I woke up.

JESUS

It was a little scary.

HANK

First time I ever got knocked out and I really thought I'd practically come back to life. I figured I survived that for a reason. Wasn't baseball, though. Ha! I didn't even get to play that much.

JESUS

I didn't play much either.

HANK

I pretty much sucked. Wow, this is crazy. You're getting' to look a little more familiar.

JESUS

It's been a long time. I can see why you might not know me.

HANK

Want a Coke?

JESUS

Uh, sure. Thanks.

(Hank hands him the last coke in a six-pack.)

What was that song you were playing before I came in?

(He sings.)

TOMORROW COULD BE BETTER ...

He looks for help from Hank to get the lyric.

HANK

OR JUST MORE

(Jesus joins in.)

OF THE SAME.

HANK

NO USE GETTIN' MAD

HANK, JESUS

(Jesus sings harmony)

I'VE GOT NO ONE TO BLAME.

HANK

You heard that? You must've been out there a long time.

JESUS

A little while.

HANK

That's a new one I'm working on. Ya like it?

Hank picks up his guitar and starts noodling around on it.

JESUS

Oh, you're a songwriter. Yeah, I like it.

HANK

Yeah? You just may be the only one who does. God, I'd like to get just one song out there. Less than three minutes, you know that? Just one song and ...

JESUS

And what?

HANK

Maybe I'd be a little less of a joke.

JESUS

You gotta lot of good songs?

HANK

I got a lot of *songs*. *Good* songs, well ...

JESUS

You doing anything with them?

HANK

Ha! No, I ain't doin' anything with 'em. Went to Nashville once. I told myself, I said, "I'm goin' to the one place that treats songwriters with the respect they deserve."

JESUS

Well, what happened?

HANK

I don't know... I mean, really, I don't know. Some publishers, older guys, they seemed to like a couple of 'em. One of 'em said my songs were "authentic." But – well, I don't see any money pouring in. You been there?

JESUS

Oh, yes. I know Nashville! Pretty well, actually.

HANK

Oh, yeah? Honestly, I don't remember much about it. I guess I had a good time! Ha!

JESUS

There are thousands of good songs floating around Nashville that will never get cut. Don't feel too bad about that.

(He picks up some sheets of paper with hand-written lyrics on them.)

Do you mind?

(He reads a little of the one we heard at the beginning.)

"You can blame it on all those words spoke in anger." Not bad.

HANK

Well, I got the chorus on that one, or part of it, I think. But the verses. Here, listen to this.

(He picks up the guitar and plays and sings.)

WE CAN BLAME IT ON ALL THOSE WORDS SPOKE IN ANGER.
YOU CAN SAY I JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND.

GUESS I'M JUST NOT THE ONE FOR YOU
DA-DA-DA-DA SOMETHING SOMETHING ...

SO YOU GO YOUR WAY, I'LL GO MINE.
CARRYING PAIN IN OUR HEART.
SORRY BABY, THAT'S THE WAY.
THINGS FALL APART.

JESUS

Do that again, that chorus. Do you mind?

HANK

Oh ... sure.

Hank starts singing and Jesus joins in harmonizing, a little behind the beat because he isn't sure of all the words, except "Things fall apart."

SO YOU GO YOUR WAY, I'LL GO MINE.
CARRYING PAIN IN OUR HEART.
SORRY BABY, THAT'S THE WAY.
THINGS FALL APART.

HANK

Nice harmony, man. That's real nice.

JESUS

Were you married once?

HANK

Ha! Not me. I never stayed in one place long enough to get that serious. Or serious at all.

JESUS

I just thought ...

HANK

Oh, that song. Yeah. Not quite so authentic, huh.

JESUS

So, who'd you have to talk to?

HANK

Oh, I could always find someone to talk to. The world's full a' people to talk to.

JESUS

I guess it is. You ever perform? You should.

HANK

What, do a verse from this song and a chorus from that?

JESUS

Well, finish both of them, then.

HANK

It's not like I'm not tryin'. Seems as pointless as the rest of everything I do, but I can't seem to stop doing it. Ha! That's been my life, pretty much.

(He sings some of one song, and some of another – both equally bad.)

WHAT DID I DO TO DESERVE BEING SO BLUE.
I AIN'T DONE NOTHIN' FOR THE TROUBLE I HAD.

I even know that's bad. How 'bout this?

I NEVER THOUGHT I'D SEE YOU SITTING HERE.
YOU WERE WITH SOME GUY I DIDN'T KNOW.
DA-DA-DA-DA-DA
DA-DA-DA-DA
THINK I'LL JUST GO HAVE ANOTHER BEER.

ANOTHER BEER, ANOTHER BEER

Ok, not that one.

I LOOKED AT YOU, YOUR EYES MET MINE.
WE DANCED TO GARTH; I SPILLED YOUR WINE.
SO SURE I HAD IT RIGHT THIS TIME ...

But the hook, see? What's the hook?

NOW I'M FEELING USED.
NOW I'M REALLY SCREWED.

Ha! Even Nashville wouldn't put up with that rhyme!

JESUS

Or maybe it would.

(They both laugh.)

Can I help? They're your songs. I don't want to step on any of your creative work or anything.

HANK

(Hands him the guitar)

Sure, if you want. I need all the help I can get.

JESUS

(He takes the guitar and plays a little of Hank's song.)

IF I STILL HAD FRIENDS

HANK

WE'D BE DRINKIN'

MY BANK ACCOUNT I KNOW'D BE OVERDRAWN.

JESUS

LIFE SURE ISN'T FAIR ...

HANK

BUT I DON'T REALLY CARE.

HANK, JESUS

(Jesus sings harmony.)

THAT'S THE WAY MY LIFE HAS ALWAYS GONE.

HANK

(He writes down the new lyric)

Well, all right. ... all right. Ha!

JESUS

Say, have you eaten today? I'm about ready for something to eat.

HANK

Nah, I'm used to not eating so often.

(Looking around the room, presumably for something to

eat. He finds an open box of crackers and offers it to Jesus.)

Guess I need to get to the store.

JESUS

Oh, no, I didn't mean that. Let's go get a sandwich or something. My treat.

HANK

Really? Sounds great to me! What time is it anyway?

JESUS

About 7:00.

HANK

In the morning?

JESUS

No, it's evening.

HANK

Oh, man. I must've fallen asleep sometime.

JESUS

Here, take your jacket.

HANK

Nah, you need it.

JESUS

I'm fine now.

Hands him the jacket.

HANK

Well, I ain't gonna argue with you. Ha! Wait a minute ...

(He rummages around in a duffel bag on the floor and pulls out an old, but heavy sweater.)

Ha! Here ya go!

Hands it to Jesus, puts a beat-up cowboy hat on his head. Fade to Black as they exit.

SCENE 2:

Outside Buster's bar, store and café, later
the same night.

HANK

A bar? Are you serious? I'm gonna work in a bar. Helluva'n idea.

JESUS

You'd be working, not hanging out. He's got a little convenience store, too. And it
couldn't be more convenient, for you.

HANK

That's what I mean. ... I don't know.

JESUS

And you're good with people. The way you were chatting with the waitress over supper .
... she was smiling and having a good time waiting on you. People just like you; I can
tell. C'mon, just ask him.

HANK

I've never been good at keeping to a real schedule, ya know?

JESUS

That was then. This is now.

HANK

God knows I could use the money.

JESUS

Yes, He does. *(beat)* It looks like he's finishing up in there, and I think we're making him
nervous standing around out here.

Hank glances at Buster, inside the store, and
back at Jesus, then goes and tries the door.
Buster has either exited briefly or has his
back to the door.

HANK

It's locked.

He starts to leave.

JESUS

Well, knock! He's right there! Knock, and he'll open the door...

Hank knocks on the glass part of the door,
Buster looks up, comes over to the door and
opens it just a crack.

BUSTER

Sorry, store's closed.

HANK

(To Jesus) See! *(To Buster)* No, that's ok. I don't want a drink or nothin'. Well, I do, but.
(Turns to Jesus)

Aw, geez.

(Back to Buster. Jesus casually walks away.)

I just wondered ... if you, uh, needed any help. Ya know, have any jobs available...at the present time.

No response from Buster, who is looking past him to Jesus. Hank turns to Jesus, but Jesus is gone.

I'm just kind of looking for work...I guess. I live just down the street. I'm willing to help out with whatever you need...done.

BUSTER

You know, maybe I do. Come on in for a minute and we can talk. Who was that guy?

HANK

Says his name's Jesus.

BUSTER

Jesus

HANK

I just call him "HAY-soos."

BUSTER

What's your name?

HANK

Hank... uh, Trevor. My mom named me Trevor. Hardly anybody calls me that. Mostly I'm just Hank. Hank Dalton.

They shake hands.

BUSTER

Well, my mom named me Archibald, and that's why I'm Buster. Any experience in the bar business?

HANK

No, none. None at all.

(He's clearly uncomfortable saying this.)

Not the business, no.

BUSTER

Convenience store?

HANK

Nope. Uh, no. I guess-

BUSTER

Good! No bad habits to break.

They exit into the bar. Quick fade to black.

SCENE 3:

Hank's apartment. At rise, Hank is working on another song.

IF YOU WILL ONLY STAY

I WON'T CHEW GUM WHILE I'M EATING.
I WON'T LEAVE THE LID UP FOR YOU TO SIT DOWN ON.
IF YOU'LL ONLY STAY, I'LL CHANGE MY WAY.... S
YOU'LL SEE HOW MUCH BETTER I'LL DO

I WON'T HMMM-HMMM-HMM-SOMETHING
I WON'T GO OUT EVERY NIGHT.
IF YOU'LL ONLY STAY, I'LL CHANGE MY WAY ... S
YOU'LL SEE THAT I'LL GET IT RIGHT.

Jesus enters with a load of laundry to fold and joins in, harmonizing on the chorus.

IF YOU WILL ONLY STAY
IF YOU WILL ONLY STAY.
I'LL DO THE LAUNDRY AND PAY ALL THE BILLS
IF YOU ONLY WILL ... (Z)

HANK

Geez, man, you're a workin' fool.

JESUS

(Folding laundry.)

You've been working a lot at Buster's. You shouldn't have to do the laundry, too ... Trevor.

HANK

My name's Hank. *(beat)* My mom calls me "Trevor".

JESUS.

(Having a little fun teasing him)

Trevor. We all called you that back in Swanville. Nice name.

HANK

Oh, yeah.

JESUS

It is. I don't know any great songwriters named Trevor, though.

HANK

You got it.

Picks up his guitar and noodles around.

JESUS

(He holds up one sock.)

Now, where's the other one.

HANK

That happens to you, too, huh?

JESUS

Everything happens to me.

HANK

Sounds like my life, but I ain't complainin'. I'm still here. That's a damn miracle, anyway.

JESUS

Yes, I'd say it is.

HANK

You wouldn't believe some of the stuff that's happened.

JESUS

Yeah? Guess I could say the same thing.

HANK

Good thing my mom didn't know all of it.

THINK I'LL JUST GO HAVE ANOTHER BEER.

You don't drink do you?

JESUS

Not like you did. I like good wine now and then.

HANK

MAMA TOLD ME, YOU GOT TO BELIEVE.
I'LL NEVER GIVE UP ON YOU.
THAT'S WHAT SHE SAID
ON HER DYING BED.

That's sick.

MY MAMA TOLD ME, "SON,
I'LL ALWAYS BE THERE FOR YOU"
Moms don't say that, do they? My mom wouldn't.

JESUS
Have you talked to your mom lately?

HANK
No.

Hank puts the guitar down.

JESUS
Why not?

HANK
Why'd she want to talk to me?

Jesus starts noodling on the guitar.

JESUS
You're her son.

HANK
So?

JESUS
Moms don't forget stuff like that. *(pause)* Why don't you call her up?

HANK
Ha! Just call her up!

(Pretends to be on the phone.)

Hi, Ma. This is Trevor. What are you doing for Christmas? How 'bout me and a friend just come on up and spend it with the whole fam-damily?

(No longer pretending to be on the phone.)

Never mind that I ain't talked to any of 'em since I don't know when. Never mind that I hardly remember what my little sister looks like since she grew up. I heard from Wesley – that's my big brother – a few months ago that she's dyed her hair black and pierced her nose or eyebrow or somethin'. Wesley and Mary Rose, well, I've never even seen their place.

JESUS
Been invited?

(Jesus plucks at the guitar. He doesn't play very well, and he puts it down again.)

HANK
Huh. Invited.

JESUS

Well?

HANK

Well, sort of. They weren't much interested in having me as a guest in their home, you know, unless I could guarantee I'd be sober.

JESUS

They say that?

HANK

Not exactly, but I know.

JESUS

Well, you are now. You could go home to your mom's for Christmas.

HANK

With that bunch a' yay-hoos?!

The talk about family is obviously creating some anxiety. He paces or fidgets.

JESUS

Who's a yay-hoo? Thought you hadn't been around them much for a while. Maybe they outgrew their yay-hoo-ism. Maybe they're only slightly yay-hoodinistic. Maybe they were never yay-hoos.

HANK

Will you quit?! I get the point.

JESUS

What'd you do last Christmas?

HANK

I have no idea. Oh, yes I do. I was at the halfway house. That was my second time there. I won the Canasta tournament and got a ...a... shaving kit, or some damn thing. That's about all I did in the county slammer is play canasta. Finally got really good at something. Ha!

JESUS

Your family play canasta?

HANK

Oh, give it up! You're getting to be a pain in the ass, ya know?

JESUS

Yeah, I guess I am. I realize you've flown the nest a long time ago.

HANK

Ha. I fell out. And couldn't fly. Never did get the hang of ... "flying." I always thought I could do one thing, though.

JESUS

Write a good song.

HANK

(Quietly)

I just wanted to do ... something. Just ... something.

(Snapping back)

That's all it takes, too, if it gets cut by somebody big. All it takes. Yeah, that's what I got and that's about it.

JESUS

Did anybody in your family think you could do it?

HANK

My family? I have no idea what they think, but I'd guess "no." Except maybe for one, but I don't know where he is, do I?

JESUS

You're dad. He was a musician.

HANK

That's what I hear. I never heard him play, 'cept way late at night. I'd wake up in my little bed upstairs next to Wesley and I thought it was angels.

YOUR CHEATIN' HEART ...

Angels .. ha! I had no idea. And then he was gone. ... And then he'd show up again. ... And then he was gone. (pause) And then he didn't show up again.

Lights fade on Jesus. Hank goes to the phone and dials. It takes him more than one try to get the number right.

Ma? This is Trevor....Ya!... Say, uh, what are you doing for Christmas? ... How 'bout me and a friend just come on up and spend it with the family."

(Pause. He's shaking, he's so nervous.)

Yeah?!

(He's visibly more relaxed, and pleasantly surprised.)

Ok...yeah, I'm ok... Doin' good! Oh, he's an old friend from when I was a kid. Yeah, just showed up. No, Mom, from Swanville. No, not Rusty!

(pause)

Been, oh, three months now since I left House of Hope.

(Hank pulls up a chair and sits.)

I'm workin'. No, it's fine, place called Buster's. It's just down the street. No, Ma, it's a store. Mostly. A little, uh, corner store. Yeah, I guess it is like Gert and Fred's. Wow, I'd forgotten all about them...They still have the store? She always thought I needed fattening up. ... I don't know. Fix whatever you want for dinner. ... Aw, Ma don't have lutefisk.

Lights begin to fade.

No, everybody doesn't need to try it once ... uh-huh ...

Blackout.

SCENE 4:

Hank's mother's house in Swanville on Christmas Eve. At rise, Hank is gathered with his family. Mary Rose wears a gaudy Christmas sweater. Hank's mother has mistletoe in her hair. Wes and Mom are off to the side. The family calls Jesus "HAY-soos" because that's the way Hank introduced him.

WESLEY

Who is this guy, anyway? (mocking) "Jesus?"

MOM

He's a friend, Wesley. Hank has a nice friend.

WESLEY

What, a migrant worker or something? Hank pick him up in the beet fields? I don't remember him.

MOM

Well, there was a lot of little migrant kids coming and going. I think he's a nice person.

WESLEY

No accent?

MOM

Plenty of 'em grew up here.

WESLEY

Well, at least he's not Rusty. Certainly a step up there.

MOM

That's right, he's not Rusty. And you be nice to him, too.

WESLEY

You're stickin' up for him. Seems weird.

MOM

Does he strike you as a bad influence?

WESLEY

Well, no.

MOM

He seems to have picked a good friend.

WESLEY

Or got picked.

MOM

Either way, I think it's a good thing.

(She leaves Wes and addresses the others.)

How about a little Christmas carol?

WESLEY

Trevor, you got a guitar, there. Let's see if you can crank out a Christmas carol.

(He sings)

HERE COMES SANNI CLAUS, HERE COMES SANNI CLAUS...

They all shut him up, either by teasing him because he's so bad or mimicking him.

MOM

Hey now, that's no Christmas carol. It's Christmas Eve. Let's sing a real Christmas carol.

Hank strums the chords for "Joy to the World." He gets through the first line or so.

Wait now... Ok. Everybody!

Nobody's paying attention.

Everybody! Start over, Trev.

HANK

JOY TO THE WORLD

They all join in at some point.

THE LORD IS COME.
LET EARTH RECEIVE HER KING.

They start to stumble around, trying to remember the words.

MARY ROSE

LET EVERY ONE.
No, c'mon!

WESLEY

LET EVERY...
What? What?

HANK

Aw c'mom. We *know* this!

MICHELLE

Apparently not.

MOM

LET EVERY HEART!

It's heart! I know it is! It's heart.

LET EVERY HEART

ALL, joining in

PREPARE HIM ROOM
AND HEAVEN AND NATURE SING
AND HEAVEN AND NATURE SING
AND HEAVEN, AND HEAVEN, AND NATURE SING.

MOM

Trevor! I didn't know you could still sing!

HANK

Mom, I told you I was a songwriter.

WESLEY

That don't mean he can sing!

Wesley and Mary Rose laugh.

MOM

HE RULES THE WORLD WITH TRUTH AND LIFE!
No, wait a minute.

MARY ROSE

Truth and life? That doesn't sound right, does it?

MOM

Well, what is it, then. Help me out here.

JESUS

Grace?

MOM

That's it! (*sings*)

WITH TRUTH AND GRACE

HANK

What does that mean? “Rules the world with grace”? That can’t be right.

JESUS

It means...maybe...that you didn’t have to do anything. You’re loved, and taken care of.

MICHELLE

Ah, a benevolent ruler.

JESUS

Well-

HANK

Grace it is!

He and Mom start the verse again. The others soon join in, although Michelle may just watch.

HE RULES THE WORLD WITH TRUTH AND GRACE
AND MAKES THE NATIONS PROVE.

Once again they lose the lyric.

LA LA LA LA (*etc... until the “heaven and nature sing” part*)
AND HEAVEN AND NATURE SING
AND HEAVEN AND NATURE SING
AND HEAVEN AND HEAVEN AND NATURE SING!

HANK

Hey, we’re good. Just like a choir, huh, Michelle?

MICHELLE

I haven’t heard that many choirs, but I’d say you’re stretching the point.

HANK

(Hank takes a bite out of a piece of lefse.)

Ma, is this... is this...

MOM

Lefse

HANK

Lefse? What’s in here?

MOM

Butter and brown sugar.

HANK

It's so good! Jesus, try this.

MARY ROSE

Miracle food!

(Stuffing a piece of lefse in her mouth)

Whaddaya think, Jesus?

JESUS

You put this much butter and brown sugar on anything and it's good!
(They both laugh)

HANK

Is this a Christmas thing?

MOM

We always had lefse, because our neighbor was Norwegian and she always gave us some.

WESLEY

Inga. Before your time, little brother.

HANK

No, I sorta remember her.

WESLEY

(Under his breath)

Miracle you remember anything.

MICHELLE

I heard. The evil person who introduced us to lutefisk.

MOM

Michelle! She's a lovely human being. Or was.

MICHELLE

Geez, Mom, I'm kidding.

JESUS

Lutefisk?

HANK

Mom, you didn't.

MOM

Oh, everybody relax. It's not like we're so tradition-bound or something.

HANK

I remember Inga. She took me to Sunday School. Hey, Jesus, you must have known her. Inga knew everybody. What ever happened to her?

MICHELLE

What do you think? She was old, she died.

MOM

Michelle!

MICHELLE

What? She did, right?

MOM

Well, yes, but it sounds so insensitive. You didn't know her. She was very nice to us. Especially when ... we needed her.

MICHELLE

When Dad took off. Don't remember him, either.

HANK

Sorry, Ma. She was a friend, wasn't she?

MOM

Sure was. Yes, she sure was. Well, let's eat! Wesley get some chairs, will you?

Everyone moves towards the table, or the kitchen. Mary Rose sits.

Wait now everyone. Just a minute. Let's join hands and pray.

They awkwardly try to figure out what to do. Wesley indicates that Mary Rose should stand up.

WESLEY

I don't think we've ever done this, Ma.

MOM

We have so.

WESLEY

When?

MOM

Well...at your baptism.

WESLEY

I don't remember that.

MOM

Well, you wouldn't. You were a baby.

WESLEY

A baby? Who baptizes babies?

The effort of getting everybody together at the table unravels. Mary Rose sits down.

MOM

Lutherans, Methodists –

JESUS

Lots of people, actually.

WESLEY

So I am, what ? Methodist?

Mom looks puzzled. She's not absolutely sure.

Lutheran?

MICHELLE

Inga. Norwegian. Lutheran. Am I right, here?

WESLEY

I'm a Lutheran?

MOM

Only you can answer that, Wesley. You were baptized a Lutheran. I think.

WESLEY

(Looking at Mary Rose) Learn something new every day.

MARY ROSE

Don't you just. At least I know I was raised Catholic. Something to go on, you might say. What are you, Jesus? Bet you're Catholic, too.

JESUS

Well, in one sense of the word, I am, certainly.

MARY ROSE

We Catholics gotta stick together here. Looks like we're outnumbered.

JESUS

Oh, I think we'll be ok.

MARY ROSE

(Teasing. It's her way to make Jesus feel at home.)

Ha! I know 'em better than you do.

MOM

All right, now, everybody....

MICHELLE

Who cares! Let's do this ecumenical prayer thing.

HANK

A what?

MICHELLE

Never mind.

Everyone is holding hands except that Wesley and Hank have ended up next to each other, and won't. Mom steps between them, and they take her hands.

MOM

Dear God, we thank You for bringing us all back together at last, and for this Christmas together, and especially for Trevor coming home, and bringing his friend, too. It's really
(She gets choked up and a little rattled by her emotions.)

Really ... great... Amen.

They mumble amen's and starts to sit down.

Wait a minute! Wait a minute! Not so fast.

(They all sit down anyway.)

We're all going to tell what we're thankful for.

MICHELLE

Isn't that Thanksgiving, Mom?

MOM

We weren't together at Thanksgiving, honey. We've got a lot more to be thankful for now, anyway. Jesus, would you like to start us off?

JESUS

Sure. I'm thankful for all of *you*, and lefse.

(A little laugh from everyone)

And especially for Hank for bringing me here to be with you. He's a great friend.

MARY ROSE

I'm thankful for my sweetie

(Gives Wesley a peck on the cheek)

Who I know got me exactly what I wanted this year. Right, Wes?

WESLEY

How did you know? (*Joking with her*) I'm thankful I'm finally getting' a decent meal!

He laughs, Mary Rose good-naturedly scolds him. Everyone understands it's a joke.

MOM

Michelle?

MICHELLE

(Trying to think up a smart remark.)

I'm.... thankful... for... finally getting' to see what my brother looks like.

This gets a good-natured laugh, too. She gives Hank a hefty nudge with her shoulder, or socks his arm.

HANK

(Starts out full voice, confidently...)

Well, I'm thankful... (softer) I'm thankful...

(Turns to Mom, fighting his emotions.)

I'm thankful I'm sober, Ma.

MOM

I'm thankful, too, son. We're all thankful.

Quick fade to black.

SCENE 5:

Later that night in Mom's living room. Michelle is strumming the only four chords she knows on Hank's guitar. Hank enters, pulls out a flask, which Michelle sees, but he doesn't know it. She turns around, concerned, so she doesn't know that all he does is look at it. He sits down next to her.

HANK

You're getting' it, you're getting' it.

MICHELLE

I suck, but I'm not stupid. I will get it.

HANK

You're a lot smarter than me, and I learned to play it.

MICHELLE

Oh, yeah. I'm so smart. That's why I'm still in this little town working at the public library. I just go in to work every day and put away books. That's how smart I am.

HANK

Play that again. C'mon. You play, and I'll sing.

MICHELLE

I don't think so!

HANK

Three chords; that's all I need.

Michelle gives him a "look."

Hey, it's country! It's not complicated.

Michelle strums three chords. It's clear she's at a very rudimentary level, but it's enough for Hank to sing.

HANK

GIVE ME ONE MORE CHANCE,
I SWEAR IT WILL BE THE LAST.
JUST ONE MORE
TO MAKE UP FOR THE PAST ...

Hey, here's one new chord. Try this:

He teaches her one more chord, so she now plays four chords in sequence.

That's good. Just keep doing that.

Michelle strums the same four chords. Hank sings. It is clearly about her.

SOME PEOPLE SAY SHE'S ORDINARY
OR QUIRKY, EVEN STRANGE.
THERE ARE THINGS YOU DON'T KNOW, BUT I DO.
AND THERE'S NOTHING ABOUT HER I'D CHANGE.

MICHELLE

That's beautiful.

HANK

Needs another verse.

SHE'S SMART, AND SHE'S PRETTY ...
(pause while he thinks.)

MICHELLE

HER LIFE'S REALLY SHITTY.

They laugh.

HANK

No, I got it.

HER HEAD IS SHAPED LIKE A CONE.

Michelle really cracks up.

SOME PEOPLE THINK THAT IT'S STRANGE.
I THINK IT MAKES HER SPECIAL.
AND THERE'S NOTHING ABOUT HER I'D CHANGE.

You don't have to stay here, you know. You can go back to school.

MICHELLE

(Real emotion is uncomfortable. She over-reacts.)

I'm broke, ok? And I'm not asking Mom for money – if you want to know.

HANK

There's scholarships and stuff ... isn't there? Hey! You want to come and live with me?

I'm not that far from the U! You can just go part-time and – I mean, if you want to. I don't have much, but it's all yours.

MICHELLE

You are as nice as everybody says. That's your problem.

HANK

(He's a bit stung.)

Oh. My problem.

MICHELLE

You ... go along, you know? You don't like telling people, "no." There I go with my big mouth again. Sorry. It's a good problem to have. You are nice.

HANK

And you're a pretty good kid, too.

MICHELLE

Well we're just two wonderful people, aren't we?

HANK

So, what do you think?

MICHELLE

About what? Oh, yeah. Mom. I don't know. She gets lonely, I think. Or maybe it was just being sad. She missed you! She'll give Wesley so much crap, but she never said a bad word about you. Not once. We fought a lot, but you walked on water, I swear.

HANK

That's just cuz I was gone, and you're a girl. Don't all girls fight with their moms?

MICHELLE

Now that you're "back", so to speak, maybe she'd be ok with it. With me leaving. But what about Jesus?

HANK

Oh, we'll manage. I think he just needed a place to hang out for a while. He'll be ok.

MICHELLE

Thanks, Trev – I'll think about it. I will. What about you?

HANK

What do you mean?

MICHELLE

Well, what's next? You know, what do *you* want to do?

HANK

Me? I'd like to finish this dang song. Or any song.

MICHELLE

What are you going to do with it then?

HANK

I'll sing it, start to finish.

MICHELLE

For whom?

HANK

You mind telling me your point? I know you have one.

MICHELLE

I'll make a deal with you. I'll go back to school. ... I'll go back to school if you get a gig in that bar where you work.

He gives her 'a look'

Singing *your* songs. Yeah, Buster's. I heard about Buster's.

JESUS

(Enters just in time to hear her proposal.)

That sounds like a good deal.

HANK

That sounds harder than it sounds.

MICHELLE

That's my offer.

JESUS

You're on.

HANK

Hey, whose deal is this?

MICHELLE

Trevor?

HANK

How much time do I got?

MICHELLE

Next semester. I suppose a couple of weeks?

JESUS

No problem. Goodnight!

Jesus exits.

MICHELLE

Cripes. Now we're gonna have to tell Mom. On Christmas Day.

Michelle exits. Hank pulls a flask out of his pocket and considers it. He soon puts it back in his pocket and exits.

Quick fade to black.

SCENE 6:

Christmas morning, Mom's house.
Mom is off, in the kitchen. Michelle is
lounging in a corner reading a book. Jesus is
plunking out the Beatles' Birthday Song and
getting into singing it, a la McCartney.
Michelle may sing a little back up with a
bemused smile, behind her book.

Hank enters with a plate of Julekake (a
frosted Norwegian Christmas bread.)

HANK

Look at that ... Julekake! I even know that. M-m-m-m. (*looking heavenward*) Thank you,
Inga.

MICHELLE

(Laying on the Norwegian accent)

“Julekake ... kake ...mmm”

(Drops the accent.)

It's awesome. (*beat*) Even if it means “shit” in Spanish.

MOM

Michelle!

MICHELLE

I didn't write the language – or invent the slang. Whatever it is. Jule- kake. Christmas ...
shit, am I right, Jesus?

JESUS

As far as I know. But I think it tastes heavenly.

They both take another bite of their
Julekake, repeating “m-m-m” and “Jule
...kake!” with the accent, joking in a
pleasant, teasing way. Neither one wants to
make Mom feel bad, she ends up laughing.
Hank steals the other piece, stuffs it in his
mouth and talks with his mouth full.

HANK

What smells so good?

MOM

Turkey!

She exits.

HANK

Already?

MICHELLE

(Without looking up)

She's been up since five.

HANK

(Looking out the window.)

Wow, look at that snow! It's really coming down.

JESUS

Looks just like a Christmas card!

MICHELLE

Oh, it would be like this. Bet Heather won't make it now She's alone – on Christmas – with a little baby.

Mom enters.

MOM

Oh, no.

MICHELLE

You said I could invite her.

MOM

Not Heather. The sugar.

HANK

What?

MOM

Did somebody use up all the brown sugar on the lefse?

MICHELLE

There wasn't that much left.

MOM

(*sigh*) I'm going to need some for the sweet potatoes.

MICHELLE

Mom, they're *sweet* potatoes. Really?

MOM

You all love 'em that way.

HANK

Do you want me to go pick some up?

MOM

Would you, dear?

JESUS

I can go. You stay here with the family.

HANK

Na, I'll just run out. You maybe don't remember your way around.

MOM

And get a pint of whipping cream, too, if they're not sold out.

(She gets her keys from a shelf or table nearby.)

Here, take my car.

HANK

I can walk. It's not far.

MOM

(Hands him her keys)

There's a 25 below wind chill. I don't think so.

JESUS

(About Hank leaving)

Are you sure?

HANK

I'll be right back.

Hank exits. Michelle crosses to Mom.

MICHELLE

Mom, I was thinking-

MOM

(With a stack of plates)

Here sweetie, I'll get the silverware.

(She exits then calls back to Michelle when she's off)

I think there's some Christmas napkins on the shelf out there.

Michelle puts the plates down and crosses back to her Mom, who just re-entered.

MICHELLE

Mom, we have time to set the table.

MOM

I just like to get things ready ahead because some things just have to be last minute, like making the gravy and heating up the rolls-

MICHELLE

I'll help.

MOM

I know. You're so good about helping.

MICHELLE

But what if I wasn't here?

MOM

(This stops her)

What? Where are you going?

MICHELLE

To school, maybe. I'm thinking of going to school. To the U.

Just then Wesley and Mary Rose show up. There's a bit of the usual hoopla with taking off boots, hanging coats, etc. They're wearing hats, scarves, gloves, too.

WESLEY

Snowing like son of a gun out there. Holy cripes. We almost got stuck twice.

MARY ROSE

Good thing we don't have far to drive.

MICHELLE

Maybe easier to walk?

MARY ROSE

With a 25 below wind chill? I don't think so.

MOM

Now what were you saying, Michelle?

MICHELLE

We can talk about it later, Mom.

MOM

No, I'd really like to know what you're thinking.

WESLEY

We'd all like to know what Michelle is thinking. And where's Trevor? He should shovel the driveway.

JESUS

I can do that.

He exits.

MICHELLE

No, it's ok. Later, Mom.

MOM

Michelle says she's thinking of going to school. To the U.

MICHELLE

Mom!

MOM

What? He's your brother.

MARY ROSE

Really. Now, how is that gonna work? It's expensive to live in the city.

MICHELLE

Trevor invited me to stay with him.

MARY ROSE

Aha.

WESLEY

So, his idea, then? Here we go ... screwing things up again. Where is he, anyway?

MICHELLE

He's just trying to help. You know how he is.

WESLEY

Oh, yeah. I know how he is.

MARY ROSE

Don't we just.

MOM

(To Mary Rose) Now, just hold on. (To Michelle) Just tell me what's going on.

MICHELLE

Nothing's going on. Trevor asked me to think about it and I did. Why is this so bad?

MOM

It's not so bad, dear, it's just that-

WESLEY

So, it was his idea, right? (*mocking tone*) He had an actual idea? How is this going to work, Michelle? You and Mom have been doing ok here. So, how is this going to work?

Jesus enters.

JESUS

Anybody know where I'd find a shovel?

Everybody ignores him.

WESLEY

Pretty sure Trevor has no idea.

Jesus looks puzzled by the response.

MICHELLE

So, I should just work at the library stacking books all my life – at minimum wage –and taking care of mom when she's old so you and Mary Rose can take your 401K and buy a cabin on Prairie Lake and watch the sunset while I go help out with bingo night at the Senior Citizen's Center? Is that it, huh?

MOM

Oh, now, honey-

WESLEY

You can leave Mary Rose out of this!

MICHELLE

Right. So you leave her out of this, too.

JESUS

You know, this isn't exactly my problem, but-

MARY ROSE

No, it isn't! Wesley, what the hell are you thinking? Set this little girl straight!

MICHELLE

Little girl? I'm 24 year old! And I'm still home with my mommy! Why? Because you and your hubby don't want to have to look after her house, and help with her bills, and ... and ... just ... just **be** there for her.

MOM

Excuse me. I'm here, you know. You don't need to talk about me in the third person.

MICHELLE

Sorry, Mom.

MARY ROSE

Wesley! I don't believe this!

JESUS

Really, this isn't a big problem. Everything's cool ...

WESLEY

I'm talking to Michelle. She needs some straightening around. No disrespect, Mom – or you, Jesus. Not your deal.

MICHELLE

I need straightening around? I can't believe you said that! I have been Miss Straight and Narrow! My big night out is watching Saturday Night Live with a bowl of popcorn on my lap!

MARY ROSE

Well, what's wrong with that? I love popcorn. Not as fond of the show ever since Jane Curtain left, but-

WESLEY

Will you ... just ... Let me handle this, ok?

MARY ROSE

Sure, sweetie ... good luck. I think I'll make some eggnog – and yes, *(to Jesus)* I'm gonna spike it! C'mon, Jesus. Forget the driveway. Let's drink.

Mary Rose and Jesus exits into the kitchen.

MICHELLE

Mom, let's just talk about this.

WESLEY

You are not thinking rationally. You don't know what Trevor's really like.

MICHELLE

Nothing has happened! And maybe he's changed! Will you let me talk to Mom?

WESLEY

Good God! Women! I'm getting an egg nog.

Doorbell or door knock. Wesley keeps storming toward the kitchen.

Come in!

Wesley exits into the kitchen just as Jesus enters from there. Jesus answers the door. It's a young woman carrying an infant seat, which holds a sleeping baby.

MOM

Heather! What are you doing out with that baby? It's so cold!

HEATHER

Shhh! I just got him to sleep.

MOM

Oops! (*whispering*) Sorry!

All the lines from this point are in exaggerated stage whispers unless otherwise indicated.

HEATHER

A car ride always works. I had to do something. He was so overtired. (*to Michelle*) Can you watch him for a minute?

MICHELLE

Oh, sure. Where are you going?

HEATHER

Got a present for you! I'm so excited!

She heads back outside, just as Wesley enters carrying a large mug. Mary Rose enters shortly after, also with a large mug.

WESLEY

(In a big, loud voice)

Well, what the heck? Somebody deliver the baby Jesus?

JESUS

Shhh! He's sleeping!

WESLEY

(Stage whisper)

Mary and Joseph head to the casino? Shouldn't there be some shepherds, or something, to look after him?

He thinks this is pretty funny. Mary Rose thinks it's hilarious and can't keep from laughing. Heather returns and hands a covered basket to Jesus, while she takes off her coat.

HEATHER

Do you mind?

JESUS

Oh ... sure.

He takes the basket and in no time is sniffing and rubbing his eyes.

Um, what's in here?

HEATHER

You'll see!

MICHELLE

Oh, geez, what did you do, Heather?

HEATHER

You're my best friend in the whole world!

MICHELLE

(Michelle peaks under the cover ... surprised gasp.)

Oh, just look at him!

(She lifts the kitten out of the basket and cuddles him.)

He's purring already!

JESUS

Oh, no. Ohhh no.

He finally lets go with a huge sneeze that he's been trying to contain. The baby starts to stir, and Heather hurries to calm him. Everybody else, except Jesus, runs to ooh and ah over the kitten. Jesus looks around

for a place farthest away from it and starts wheezing.

MOM

Jesus, are you ok?

JESUS

(He chokes this out.)

Cats. I'm really allergic. Maybe I better go find Hank. (*wheezing*) A little fresh air ...

More sneezes, stifled. He grabs a coat and hat and exits. He can't get out of there fast enough, but he doesn't want to call too much attention, either.

MARY ROSE

(Too loud)

Where is Hank anyway?

They all shush her.

MOM

Oh, my gosh! I forgot to put the sweet potatoes in! And the turkey! It's gonna look like a frying chicken if I don't get it outa the oven!

She exits.

MARY ROSE

Somebody wanna tell me where Hank is?

MICHELLE

The store.

MARY ROSE

He could've gone to Fargo and back for the time he's been gone.

Just then, Hank shows up, all bundled up. He's a little too happy. The question on everyone's mind is, "Has he been drinking?" We don't know, either.

HANK

Hey, everybody!

ALL

Shhhh!

HEATHER

Sleeping baby!

HANK

Oh!

(Looks in the infant seat.)

He's cute!

MICHELLE

What the heck? Were you walking?

HANK

Where's Jesus?

MARY ROSE

Looking for you. Didn't you see him?

MICHELLE

Obviously not.

HANK

But I came through the alley. S'pose-

HANK, MARY ROSE

He went out the front.

Mom enters.

MOM

Where'd you put the car, Trevor. I didn't see it in the driveway.

HANK

Well, see, that's why I took the shortcut up the alley.

WESLEY

Where's Mom's car, Trevor.

HANK

On the corner, by Ken's Hardware. *(beat)* In a snowbank.

MARY ROSE

Well, what's it doing there?

MICHELLE

Oh, my God.

HEATHER

He's gonna want to eat and he'll scream his head off. *(to Michelle)* How about I just take him in your room?

MICHELLE

Oh, yeah, sure!

Heather gets the baby and starts off.

Thanks, my friend. Love my little kitty cat!

HEATHER

Sorry about Jee- ... uh, Hay-soos, is it? Hope he's going to be ok. With his breathing and all.

HANK

(Out loud) What's wrong with Jesus?

MOM WESLEY, MARY ROSE

(Out loud) Cats!

MICHELLE

Shhh!

HEATHER

(Quietly) Merry Christmas!

Heather exits to Michelle's bedroom, off.

MOM

(stage whisper) He's allergic.

HANK

So, he's outside?

Jesus enters.

JESUS

Hank, is that your mother's car by the hardware store? It looks like it's stuck -

He sneezes and Michelle exits to her room with the cat.

HANK

Aw, now you're catching a cold.

MOM, MARY ROSE, JESUS

It's the cat.

HANK

We don't have a cat.

WESLEY

Actually, now you do.

MOM

We can get the car later, dear.

HANK

I don't know, Mom.

WESLEY

What do you mean, "I don't know, Mom?"

HANK

Well, um-

JESUS

Not sure it's driveable.

WESLEY

You are shittin' me!

(Mary Rose and Wesley talk at the same time.)

MARY ROSE
Wes just got that damn thing fixed.
New body work and everything! We
could've bought that new living room
set I saw at Slumberland!

WESLEY
You did not wreck Mom's car! Tell me
You didn't wreck her car! You IDIOT!
Trevor, you are still a hopeless idiot!

WESLEY

C'mon, Rosie. Let's just go deal with the car now.

JESUS

The car's not going anywhere, trust me.

HANK

Hey, Wes, can you grab the brown sugar off the front seat there? ... and the whipping cream?

JESUS

(He means about the car)

What happened, anyway?

HANK

(He thinks it's about the brown sugar and whipping cream)

I forgot them in the car.

Michelle enters – without the cat.

JESUS

No, the car?

MICHELLE

Totalled, right? Ice, snow ... *(quietly)* Shit happens.

MOM

Oh, you don't need to go now! We're having dinner and everything! *(to Hank)* You brought the brown sugar, didn't you?

(To Wesley. She's really hurt by their leaving.)

Wes, please. It's Christmas!

Wesley and Mary Rose finish putting on their coats, etc.

MICHELLE

(Looking at Jesus)

And somebody's birthday, too.

MARY ROSE

(Also looking at Jesus)

On Christmas? Too bad. Bet you never got a decent birthday party either.

WESLEY

It's not my fault, Mom. He just screws up! That's who he is! C'mon, Rosie, we better get this done before dark.

Wesley and Mary Rose exit.

JESUS

I'll see if I can help them.

HANK

Aw, Mom, I'm sorry. I've been enough trouble, God knows.

JESUS

Yee-up.

Jesus exits to get his coat, boots, etc.

MOM

Oh, Trevor, that car was (*half whispering, just to him*) a piece a' shit, if you want to know. Wesley held it together with Band-aids. Mary Rose just likes to make a fuss if she thinks Wes is spending money on something other than her. (*to everyone*) Well, I guess we might as well just relax for a while-

MICHELLE

Mom, how 'bout we just go and eat that turkey.

MOM

Now? Without Wes and Mary Rose?

HANK

In the kitchen! Just like suppers after school!

MOM

The sweet potatoes ...

MICHELLE

We'll have them later with the leftover turkey. It'll be great.

JESUS

With the brown sugar.

MICHELLE

If Wes ever comes back.

MOM

Well, ok, then.

(Mom leads them off, into the kitchen, but turns back.)

I gotta grab the Christmas napkins.

The others exit. She says to herself ...

God knows when I'll ever use them the way things go around here. Nobody cares about the (beat) *God. Damn. Turkey.* anyway. All I could think about was the *God. Damn. Turkey. Dinner* and we can't even pull that off. Jesus!

JESUS

(He pokes his head back in, all bundled up to go out.)

Yes? Did you need me for something?

MOM

(Something has changed in Mom. She's done smoothing everything over.)

No, I think I got this handled.

(She shoves past Jesus and leans out the door.)

Wesley! Wesley! Andrew! Dalton! (*beat*) You get back in here this minute! (*two beats*)

Mary Rose I did not give birth to you and you can do whatever the hell you want!

(*Hollering*) Wesley!

Wesley enters.

WESLEY

What is it?

MOM

(She is really angry, but it's mixed with tears. These three speeches go to the heart of the one thing that truly matters to her – her family.)

You are going nowhere. It is Christmas, and I have a turkey dinner and I have thought about nothing else since Trevor called and said he was coming home. I have all three of my children under my leaky little roof at last and **you** are not going to ruin it. You are going to sit at my table and be pleasant and you are not going to question another thing that Michelle decides for herself and you are going to tell your brother that it's good to have him home.

WESLEY

Mom, all I said was-

MOM

I heard everything you said – and that Mary Rose said – and it's just not ok with me. Do you have any idea what it took for Trevor to call me up? To face you and Mary Rose? He's never even seen the inside of your house, for heaven's sake!

WESLEY

You always babied him – that's his problem.

MOM

Oh, no. I didn't kick your butt enough, and that's your problem.

WESLEY

And I'm not so sure he's sober, Mom.

MOM

What if you were in his shoes, Wes? Would you have faced up to what you've done? Would you hold your head up and admit that being sober is a good thing? It's not going to happen overnight. Would you bring home a friend you barely knew just because there

was just no place for him to go on Christmas? No, I raised him right, Wesley. I just couldn't save him from everything, could I? (*pause*) Now, let's go eat some turkey.
(She finally spots the napkins, grabs them and looks back at Wesley.)

With or without the sweet potatoes!

She exits into the kitchen. Wesley opens the door and calls outside.

WESLEY

Rosie? Rosie! Shut off the car and come on back in here.

Heather enters from Michelle's bedroom – without the baby – and looks a little bewildered.

HEATHER

Uh, I was going to see if I could help ... He's still sleeping ...

Wesley gestures to the kitchen. Heather nods "yes" and exits that direction.

WESLEY

(Without turning around to look at him.)

Jesus? ... Hey, bud, uh ... happy birthday.

Quick fade to black.

SCENE 7:

A few weeks later. Hank is alone in his apartment working on a song.

HANK

YOU WERE MY FRIEND WHEN I DIDN'T HAVE ONE.
I ALWAYS FIGURED YOU'D STAY.
YOU'VE BEEN THE FRIEND THAT I COULD DEPEND ON.
TO TAKE MY PAIN AWAY.

He keeps playing – strumming loud and aggressively. Michelle enters.

MICHELLE

Hi. How's it coming?

HANK

Fine.

(It isn't. This is sarcastic.)

Just great.

MICHELLE

Ok. ... Where's Jesus.

HANK

I don't know. ... He left.

MICHELLE

He left? What do you mean, "He left?"

HANK

HE. LEFT. He is not here. I came home from work and no Jesus. Gone. I finally have a gig to play my own songs, after how many years of writin' and writin' and not getting anywhere, and I have my first real, paying gig and my new best friend left.

MICHELLE

Oh. *(beat)* Well ... that's ok. I mean, you're ready, right?

HANK

It would be nice if my best friend cared enough to stick around and see my show, don't you think?

MICHELLE

Maybe he'll be back for it.

HANK

I dunno. It's weird. I was trying to finish this song, and he starting telling me all this stuff

about saying what I really felt, and ya-da-ya-da-ya-da. Getting real preachy, ya know?
Pissed me off.

MICHELLE

Ah.

HANK

What do you mean, “Ah,” like what is it you get but I don’t? That kind of “ah.”

MICHELLE

Nothing, Trev. But maybe he’s got a point. I mean, some of your songs kind of sound like every other country song out there.

HANK

Hey, that’s what gets cut in Nashville. That’s what they want. I think I know more about this than you.

MICHELLE

Well, don’t ask for an opinion, then.

(She gathers up some books and starts for the door.)

I gotta get to class.

(She notices a photo in a frame and picks it up.)

Where’d you get this?

HANK

At home. At Christmas.

MICHELLE

Is that Dad?

HANK

Yup. You never saw it?

MICHELLE

Looks like you. And that guitar ...

HANK

Yup.

MICHELLE

He wasn’t there for you and Wesley, either, was he?

HANK

No, but I got a guitar ... and a little sister.

MICHELLE

And I got class. Bye.

She exits.

HANK

Bye.

(Hank picks up his guitar but puts it right back down and picks up the photo of his dad and sings to it, a cappella.)

I DON'T BLAME YOU ANYMORE
I WAS TOO YOUNG TO UNDERSTAND
YOU DIDN'T MEET MY EXPECTATIONS.
YOU SURE COULD HAVE BEEN A BETTER MAN

SO, YOU GO YOUR WAY, I GO MINE
PAIN STILL IN MY HEART.
SORRY, DAD, BUT THAT'S THE WAY
THINGS FALL APART.

(He puts the photo down and reaches into his jacket hanging on a peg or hall tree and pulls out the flask we saw in Scene 5. He sets it on the table in front of him, picks up his guitar again and starts to sing to the flask. This is aggressive, in Hank's way. The song becomes more and more of a struggle to get through it. Is this why his songs are so cliché?)

THERE WHEN I NEEDED YOU, THERE WHEN I NEEDED TO
JUST GET THROUGH THE NIGHT.
I ALWAYS KNEW I COULD COUNT ON YOU
TO MAKE ME FEEL ALL RIGHT.

YOU WERE MY FRIEND WHEN I DIDN'T HAVE ONE.
I ALWAYS THOUGHT YOU'D STAY.
YOU'VE BEEN THE FRIEND I COULD DEPEND ON.
TO TAKE ALL THE PAIN AWAY.

Jesus enters, but is he really there, or is he just very present in Hank's thoughts? Hank continues singing with intensity, but is not able to finish it. They don't ever look at each other.

THERE WHEN I NEEDED YOU, THERE WHEN I NEEDED TO
JUST GET THROUGH THE NIGHT.
I ALWAYS KNEW I COULD COUNT ON YOU ...

Finally, he just stops playing and slumps over his guitar.

JESUS

What do you want to say, Hank? What do you want people to know about you? What do you believe in? What's real ... to you?

Hank strums a chord or two, but without any enthusiasm.

Say what you want to say, not what you think people want to hear.

HANK

Who am I kidding? This is crap. It's all crap and I'm dreaming.

He puts the guitar down.

JESUS

It's not crap.

HANK

Ok, it's not crap. But it's not good enough. Nothing is good enough.

JESUS

Somebody told you that?

HANK

I know. I just know. There isn't one thing I've tried that I've finished – much less done right.

JESUS

Well, I guess it's time, then. What if you could come back? (*beat*) Start over. You know, new day and all?

HANK

(Hank is thinking, struggling and fighting rage and tears.)

What do you know about it? What do you know about trying to get someplace? What do you know about anything? And who are you anyway? You come in here and act like you need me. Yeah, you needed *me*! And you needed a friend, and I thought you were my friend and then you just leave. I am not ok! Again! At least when I was drunk I *thought* I was doing ok!

Jesus and Hank cross to the guitar at the same time.

JESUS

Let's give this song just one more try.

Hank takes the guitar, still without recognizing that Jesus is there. Sighs, wipes his eyes, strums a chord.

HANK

What the hell.

(Hank plays and sings.)

AS A BOY UP IN MY ROOM IT FELT JUST LIKE A DREAM
TO HEAR MY DADDY SINGING DOWN THE STAIRS.
"YOUR CHEATIN' HEART,"

(pause)

DA-DA-DA -DA
THEN MOM AND

(He stops himself before he says "Dad.")

THEN MOM CAME UP TO SAY OUR BEDTIME PRAYERS.

I LOVE COUNTRY - WELL, YOU DO, TOO

No, I got it, I got it. That's backwards.

YOU LOVED COUNTRY - WELL I DO, TOO.
GOTTA GIVE THE CREDIT ALL TO YOU.

Aw, damn ...

SOMETHING SOMETHING SOMETHING ... WHERE DID YOU GO?
THERE'S A LOT ABOUT ME YOU DON'T KNOW.

A BETTER MAN, A BETTER MAN
SOMETHING DA-DA-DA-DA ...

That's it! That's it! That's it! That's it!

DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-

Aw, hell, yeah!

A BETTER MAN, A BETTER MAN
I KNOW THAT I AM

Well, not that ...

A BETTER MAN, A BETTER MAN
YOU CAN BET I'LL BE A BETTER MAN!

SCENE 8:

Buster's on the night of Hank's big debut.

BUSTER

(Addressing the audience as his customers)

Just a few minutes left on that meat raffle, everybody. Get your tickets from anyone of the lovely ladies in orange Buster's t-shirts. Donated by Service Food, so you know that's good steaks right there. In just a few minutes, Hank Dalton's gonna sing a few songs for you ...

(Talking to someone presumably behind the bar.)

What? We're out of Bud Light? Holy cripes.

Buster exits. Hank is off to the side. He takes out his flask and looks at it. Michelle rushes over to him.

MICHELLE

What the hell are you doing?

Hank takes the cap off and tips it over to show there's nothing in it.

MICHELLE

What?

HANK

There's never been anything in it.

MICHELLE

Then ... why?

HANK

I dunno. Cuz I could. I liked the feel of it in my pocket. Liked lookin' at it. Real silver. Sterling! It was Rusty's, but I'm guessing he stole it. See, he owed me money. I'm gonna sell it and get a new guitar case. I'm gonna need it on the road.

Hank's family and Heather show up, looking for a place to sit.

Hey, there's Mom!

Michelle joins Mom and Heather as Wesley and Mary Rose approach Hank. They're carrying a large hat box.

Hey, Wes, thanks for coming.

WESLEY

Wouldn't 'a missed it, little brother.

MARY ROSE

We got you something, Trevor. I picked it out!

Hank opens up the box and at first just looks at it – a beautiful, new Stetson.

Hope it fits. ... Do you like it? I think it's sexy. Wes said-

WESLEY

(Wes cuts her off.)

Rosie ... maybe not now, huh?

HANK

(He finally takes it out of the box.)

I don't know what to say.

WESLEY

Don't say nothin'. Just put it on!

HANK

Wow, thanks. Thank you - both of you.

(He puts it on, and it looks great, of course.)

WESLEY

If you're going to be a country star, you gotta look the part.

They shake hands, then Mary Rose throws her arms around Hank – while they're still shaking hands. It's awkward, but sweet. They join the rest of the family, who are taking seats in the audience as Buster enters and rushes over to Hank.

BUSTER

Now, I don't want you to get nervous, but there's a buddy of mine here who can maybe get you in to WE Fest. His name's Rod. He's head of production.

HANK

No shit?

BUSTER

Yeah, no shit! We were in 'Nam together. If he likes you, you know ...

HANK

He'll like me. Don't you worry. I got this.

Hank walks "on stage" and addresses the audience briefly. Just as Hank begins, we catch a glimpse of Jesus standing nearby. He may have brought more musicians with him. Hank doesn't see him/them.

HANK

Thanks for coming tonight, everybody.

BETTER MAN

(rubato)

AS A BOY UP IN MY ROOM IT FELT JUST LIKE A DREAM
TO HEAR MY DADDY SINGING DOWN THE STAIRS.
"YOUR CHEATIN' HEART," WHAT DID IT MEAN?
THEN MOM CAME UP TO SAY OUR BEDTIME PRAYERS.

Jesus/other musicians join(s) in at the a tempo. Hank is surprised – and pleased.

(a tempo)

YOU LOVED COUNTRY - WELL I DO, TOO.
GOTTA GIVE THE CREDIT ALL TO YOU.
BUT I'LL WONDER ALL MY LIFE, "WHERE DID YOU GO?"
THERE'S A LOT ABOUT ME YOU DON'T KNOW.

I HAVE BLUE EYES; MY HANDS ARE SMALL.
I PLAYED YOUR GUITAR, AND I PLAYED BALL
THEN I'D SIT AND WONDER, WHERE'D YOU GO?
THERE'S A LOT ABOUT ME YOU DON'T KNOW.

A BETTER MAN, A BETTER MAN
YOU'D KNOW IT IF YOU'D BEEN A BETTER MAN

I LIKE FISHING, AND I LIKE BARS
I LIKE RHUBARB PIE AND RACIN' CARS
I'LL WONDER ALL MY LIFE, "WHERE DID YOU GO?"
THERE'S A LOT ABOUT ME YOU DON'T KNOW.

I DON'T BLAME YOU ANYMORE
I WAS TOO YOUNG TO UNDERSTAND
YOU DIDN'T MEET MY EXPECTATIONS.
AND I INTEND TO BE A BETTER MAN

A BETTER MAN, A BETTER MAN
I KNOW WHO I AM
A BETTER MAN, A BETTER MAN
YOU CAN BET I'LL BE A BETTER MAN.

C'mon, now everybody. Sing along with me.

A BETTER MAN

C'mon, let's hear ya!

A BETTER MAN

I KNOW WHO I AM.

A BETTER MAN, A BETTER MAN.

YOU CAN BET I'LL BE A BETTER MAN!

Quick fade to black.

Lights up quickly for bows. **The show can end at this point**, or at the end of the bows, the audience either comes up on stage, or into the lobby to end the show by joining in on the party. It also gives Hank a chance to sing the rest of his songs – completed!)

HANK

Thank you! I had a great time! Thanks to Buster for letting me sing for you tonight, and we're not quittin' yet! Come on up here ... come on! We're going to finish off the night with a few more songs, so come on up!

BAD LUCK

IF I HAD A WOMAN, SHE WOULD LEAVE ME
IF I HAD A DOG, HE'D RUN AWAY.
IF I HAD A TRUCK, I'D PROBABLY SMASH IT UP
THAT'S THE WAY MY LUCK IS GOIN' TODAY.

IF I HAD A JOB, I'D GET FIRED.
IF I HAD A GIG, I WOULDN'T GET PAID.
PLAYIN' MY GUITAR, WON'T TAKE ME VERY FAR.
THAT'S THE WAY MY LUCK IS GOIN' TODAY.

TOMORROW COULD BE BETTER
OR JUST MORE OF THE SAME.
NOT EXPECTING MUCH,
'CAUSE BAD LUCK IS MY NAME.

Take it, Jesus!

The music stops momentarily. Jesus doesn't have the chops to do a decent guitar solo lick, so he looks a little flustered and then does a vocal version of one, which isn't bad!

IF I STILL HAD FRIENDS, WE'D BE DRINKIN'.
MY BANK ACCOUNT I KNOW'D BE OVERDRAWN
LIFE SURE ISN'T FAIR, But I don't really care!
THAT'S THE WAY MY LIFE HAS ALWAYS GONE.

TOMORROW COULD BE BETTER
OR JUST MORE OF THE SAME.
NOT EXPECTING MUCH,
'CAUSE BAD LUCK IS MY NAME.
OH!

Hank and Jesus both do a vocalized "guitar" lick in harmony, then ask the audience to join in on singing the lick with them.

THINGS FALL APART

(This should be done more up-tempo than the version earlier in the play.)

BLAME IT ON ALL THOSE WORDS SPOKE IN ANGER
YOU CAN SAY I JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND
GUESS I DIDN'T MEET YOUR EXPECTATIONS.
MAYBE ALL YOU NEED'S A BETTER MAN.

SO YOU GO YOUR WAY, AND I'LL GO MINE
CARRYING PAIN IN OUR HEART
SORRY BABY, THAT'S THE WAY
THINGS FALL APART.

DIDN'T KNOW THE RULES I HAD TO FOLLOW,
DIDN'T GO ACCORDING TO YOUR PLAN
HOPE YOU CAN GET PAST THE DISAPPOINTMENT.
HOPE SOMEDAY YOU FIND A BETTER MAN.

I CAN ONLY BE
JUST WHO I AM
YOU CAN KEEP LOOKIN', IF YOU WANT TO.
BUT I WONDER IF YOU'LL FIND
JUST WHAT YOU HAD IN MIND

(Instrumental on the verse)

SO YOU GO YOUR WAY, AND I'LL GO MINE
CARRYING PAIN IN OUR HEART
SORRY BABY, THAT'S THE WAY
THINGS FALL APART.

*(Repeat chorus: first two lines instrumental, then Hank ad libs tempo on
the last two lines)*

SORRY BABY, THAT'S THE WAY
THINGS FALL APART.

HANK

Originally, I wrote this next song for my little sister. She tells me she's been working on it, too, so I'd love to have her come up here and sing with me.

Michelle hesitates, but of course everybody encourages her, so she does.

HANK

SOME PEOPLE SAY SHE'S ORDINARY
OR QUIRKY... EVEN STRANGE.
THERE ARE THINGS YOU DON'TKNOW, BUT I DO.
AND THERE'S NOTHING ABOUT HER I WOULD CHANGE.

MICHELLE

SOME PEOPLE SAY HE'S SUCH A PROBLEM.
HE'S GONNA LET YOU DOWN.
THERE ARE THINGS YOU DON'T KNOW,
BUT I DO.
KINDA COOL THAT HE'S FINALLY AROUND.

HANK, MICHELLE (duet)

GOT A SISTER ...
GOT A BROTHER ...
I'M FEELIN' PRETTY LUCKY THAT I DO.
YOU'RE NOT EVERYBODY'S CHOICE, BUT YOU'RE MINE.
AND I'M FINE GETTIN' STUCK WITH YOU.

HANK

WE GET ALONG, BUT WE'RE SO DIFFERENT.
SOME PEOPLE THINK IT'S STRANGE.

HANK, MICHELLE

IT JUST SHOWS THEY DON'T KNOW,
BUT I DO.

MICHELLE
AND THERE'S NOTHING ABOUT HIM,

HANK
AND THERE'S NOTHING ABOUT HER

HANK, MICHELLE
YEAH, S/HE MAY NOT BE PERFECT,
BUT THERE'S NOTHING AT ALL I WOULD CHANGE.

HANK
Just have to do one waltz, so get up and dance, if you're so inclined.

IF YOU WILL ONLY STAY
(Jesus sings backup and Hank should encourage the
audience to sing along.)

I WON'T CHEW GUM WHILE I'M EATING.
I WON'T LEAVE THE LID UP FOR YOU TO SIT DOWN ON.
IF YOU'LL ONLY STAY, I'LL CHANGE MY WAY.... S
YOU'LL SEE HOW MUCH BETTER I'LL DO

I WON'T REQUIRE YOU WATCH NASCAR
I WON'T GO OUT EVERY NIGHT.
IF YOU'LL ONLY STAY.
I'LL CHANGE MY WAY ... S
YOU'LL SEE THAT I'LL GET IT RIGHT.

IF YOU WILL ONLY STAY
IF YOU WILL ONLY STAY.
I'LL DO THE LAUNDRY AND PAY ALL THE BILLS
IF YOU ONLY WILL ... (Z)

THIS AIN'T THE FIRST THAT I'VE HEARD IT. -
BUT I REALLY MEAN IT THIS TIME
IF YOU'LL ONLY STAY
I'LL CHANGE MY WAYS ... S
I JUST NEED TO KNOW YOU'RE STILL MINE.

IF YOU WILL ONLY STAY
IF YOU WILL ONLY STAY.
I'LL DO THE LAUNDRY AND PAY ALL THE BILLS
IF YOU ONLY WILL.
IF YOU ONLY WILL.

(If there are additional musicians, they can continue to jam as long as you like – without or without Hank and Jesus, but they should quit while the most audience members are still there. Buster serves the Bud Light.)

-END-