

The Weed Garden

A play in two acts

by John Scavone

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Characters (in order of appearance)

Kathy Slater, 45

Charlie Slater, her husband, 50

Buddy Slater, Charlie's brother, 43, recently deceased

Matt Slater, Charlie's and Kathy's son, 27

Setting: The eat-in kitchen, back porch and back yard of the Slater home in a Midwest town. A swinging door on one side of the kitchen leads to the living room and other parts of the house. Counter space and cabinetry line the upstage kitchen wall, with the sink more or less center, a window above. Opposite the swinging door is the house's back door with a screen door opening onto the porch. There is a second window between the door and upstage wall, logically above the stove, which perhaps has an additional counter and cabinets alongside. Table and chairs are downstage. Also present are a refrigerator, coffee maker and other small appliances, a small trash can. On the porch are a small bundle of fence pickets and Charlie's tool box. The back yard consists mainly of Kathy's garden, which should be full and lush. Upstage there is a fence with a few broken pickets. There should be lawn chairs or some other places to sit in the yard.

Time: Summer; the present.

The Weed Garden

Act I

At rise, there are a bible and pad of paper on the table, a pen on the floor under it. Coffee is made. Kathy is cutting flowers in the garden. Charlie enters the kitchen.

CHARLIE

Please, Lord, let there be coffee. Thank You, thank You.

He pours himself a cup. He looks out the window and sees Kathy, goes out on the porch. She starts at the screen door slam.

KATHY

Oh, it's you.

CHARLIE

Only me.

KATHY

Did you just get up? You look terrible.

CHARLIE

Thanks.

KATHY

What time did you go to bed?

CHARLIE

I don't know, three, four, something like that.

KATHY

And you slept in your clothes?

CHARLIE

Yeah, sort of, whatever sleep I got.

KATHY

Did you finish the eulogy?

CHARLIE

No, God, no.

KATHY

You're running out of time.

CHARLIE

I managed to make a little progress. It'll get done today, one way or another. Some food would help. We got anything for breakfast?

KATHY

There's cereal or whatever else you can find.

CHARLIE

Cereal, okay. I just thought since you're up early maybe you had gotten something ready.

KATHY

Just for myself.

CHARLIE

What are the flowers for?

KATHY

I'm putting together a bouquet to bring to the service. I might not get a chance to do it tomorrow.

CHARLIE

Won't they wilt by then?

KATHY

Not if I keep them in water.

CHARLIE

They're very nice, don't get me wrong, but I'd much rather get something, you know, bigger and fancier, from a real florist. It makes me look cheap bringing homegrown flowers to my own brother's funeral.

KATHY

Do you have any idea what a funeral arrangement costs?

CHARLIE

No, but we obviously can't afford it.

KATHY

Besides, this will be a nice gesture for Buddy. He always

loved my garden.

CHARLIE

I don't remember him exactly loving it.

KATHY

It represented Jeannie to him. They had their first kiss out here, I saw them through the window. A week later they eloped.

CHARLIE

They never did get married in church, before God.

KATHY

They loved each other as much as two people ever did. Rest her soul, Buddy used to come and pick flowers to bring to her grave. He was a sentimental man.

CHARLIE

And I'm not, is that it?

KATHY

The two of you were different.

CHARLIE

Right now, I'm hungry.

KATHY

We have eggs, if you feel like cooking.

CHARLIE

Not really.

(going inside)

Time was when you used to make breakfast for me every day.

He takes a box of cereal from a cupboard. He fixes a bowl, sits at the table, reads what he has written on the pad.

CHARLIE

Am I my brother's keeper? That was Cain's question to God. And even though God didn't say so, the answer is supposed to be yes. So now it's time to ask myself, was I my brother's keeper? And I have to answer with the truth—no, I wasn't. Not that I wouldn't have been there for him if he'd needed my help, just that Buddy didn't need anybody's help, ever. He pretty much had it all his own way.

*He crumples the sheet, throws it
at the trash can.*

Where'd that pen get to? I know I left it right here.

BUDDY

*(appearing at the upstage window, tosses
a pen, hits him with it)*

Try mine.

CHARLIE

Hey, what're you— Buddy!

*He crosses to the window as
Buddy disappears, looks outside.*

I gotta get this stupid thing done and get some sleep.

*He picks up Buddy's pen, sits
and begins writing.*

The truth is, Buddy Slater was a crumb.

*He crumples and throws that
sheet as Kathy enters with a
bunch of flowers, taking them to
the sink. She puts both pieces
of paper in the trash can, finds
the other pen.*

KATHY

You must have dropped this.

CHARLIE

Thanks, I was— wait, where'd this one come from?

KATHY

How's the eulogy going?

*She gets a vase from under the
sink, works trimming and
arranging the flowers.*

CHARLIE

No matter what I put down, I can't seem to say the right
things. I can't describe—

KATHY

How you really felt about him?

CHARLIE

I never gave a speech in my life. I sure never thought this would be the first time I'd have to do it. I always thought I'd go before he did.

KATHY

Such a tragedy, he was so young, had so much life ahead of him. Things like this just don't happen here, especially to a man like Buddy.

CHARLIE

Ecclesiastes eight: No man has authority to restrain the wind with the wind, or authority over the day of death.

KATHY

But the way it happened, there's no sense, no reason.

CHARLIE

That's how the world has gotten to be. We used to be able to count on our neighbors being God-fearing Christians. Now we don't know what they are.

KATHY

Buddy's death was random violence, anyone might have done it.

CHARLIE

That's exactly what I mean.

(writing)

Buddy dying like he did is hard to understand.

(crumples the sheet)

I have no idea how to do this. Boy, Buddy could write up a speech in ten minutes, and he'd have people clapping and shouting his name.

KATHY

He was blessed with a good many gifts. He was a lucky man.

CHARLIE

He was blessed, alright, from top to bottom. Everybody's favorite, including God's.

KATHY

You don't really believe that.

CHARLIE

Why shouldn't I? Things never fell into my lap the way they did into his. What? What are you shaking your head for?

KATHY

Nothing. I wasn't.

CHARLIE

Yes, you were, I saw you.

KATHY

I shook it just to shake it.

CHARLIE

I don't need this now, Kathryn, I'm trying to work.

KATHY

So work. What's stopping you?

CHARLIE

I don't know! I can't do this. Maybe later I'll be able to think straight, without distractions.

KATHY

That's just like you. You find some reason to put things off until it's too late to do anything about them, then say it's God's will and life just goes on as it always has, only worse.

CHARLIE

I don't always, and God's will isn't the problem. Instead of telling me what a loser I am—

KATHY

I'm not telling you any such thing.

CHARLIE

—how about helping me out a little?

Pause.

KATHY

Maybe you're trying too hard.

CHARLIE

I'm trying my best.

KATHY

What I mean is, don't think of it as giving a speech. Instead, think of what you would say to Buddy if he could still hear you. Then when the time comes, just say it, from the heart.

CHARLIE

From the heart. You could be right about that.

KATHY

I know I am.

(filling the vase with water)

This will do very nicely, I think. I should put them on the hall table, so I'm sure not to forget them tomorrow.

She exits. Charlie eats, leafs through the Bible. Buddy appears at the upstage window.

BUDDY

I doubt you'll find it in there.

CHARLIE

Buddy, it is you!

BUDDY

In the flesh. So to speak.

CHARLIE

What are you—? How—? You're supposed to be—

BUDDY

Dead? I still am.

CHARLIE

I'm dreaming, that's it, I'm asleep and having a nightmare. Wake up, Charlie, now!

BUDDY

You're as awake as you usually are, which isn't saying much. Concerning my eulogy, the words you want aren't in that book, believe me.

CHARLIE

You can find anything you need in this book.

BUDDY

True. For every thought you find in one part of the Bible, the opposite thought is written in another part.

CHARLIE

How would you know? You never read it.

BUDDY

You never read anything else. That's the main trouble with you, Charlie, you're afraid to expand your mind a little.

CHARLIE

I'm not afraid of anything.

BUDDY

All the same, what you really want to say about me isn't in there.

CHARLIE

What do I want to say?

BUDDY

I don't know. I assume a good Christian like you wants to tell the truth. And not just about me.

Buddy disappears as Kathy enters, talking on the phone.

KATHY

Are you sure? I don't mind picking you up. *(to Charlie)* It's Matty. *(into phone)* That's an awfully long cab ride, it'll be so expensive... Alright, sweetie, if that's what you'd rather do. Want to say hi to your father?... Alright, we'll see you then... Me, too, I can't wait... Alright, bye. *(ends call)* His flight's due in at two-thirty, he'll text me when they land. He said to say hi.

CHARLIE

No, he didn't.

KATHY

How do you know?

CHARLIE

I know.

KATHY

It'll be so good to see him, it's been so long. I wonder how he's changed.

CHARLIE

Not in the way that counts, I guarantee you.

KATHY

He can't change the way he is. I know you don't like it, but

I thought you'd at least accept it as a fact by now.

CHARLIE

I can't accept a deliberate sin! Leviticus twenty: If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable.

KATHY

I can't tell you how sick I am of a Bible quote for every situation.

CHARLIE

Yes, you can, you tell me all the time.

KATHY

Damn it, we don't live in the Stone Age anymore. We've learned to take people as they come, especially our children.

CHARLIE

Those words were written for all time. Maybe I'm not very smart, but that much I know. It's this whole attitude, nothing's wrong anymore, that's what's ruining everything around us. That's what killed Buddy, too. If people didn't think they could just— if he hadn't been such a— forget it, I don't know what I'm saying. Just leave me alone, would you?

KATHY

Alright, I'm sorry. This isn't the time to dredge up old arguments. I know it's an ordeal for you.

CHARLIE

You don't know the half of it.

KATHY

But if there's any good at all in Buddy's death, it's that it's bringing our son home after almost eight years. Buddy is giving you one last gift, a chance for you and Matty to mend fences. And you're going to do it.

CHARLIE

Like in the parable of the prodigal son. Only that son repented when he came home.

KATHY

Don't you want to fix things between you?

CHARLIE

The truth? That and bringing my brother back are two of the three things I'd like most.

KATHY

If you mean it, you'll prove it when Matty gets here.

CHARLIE

I'll try as best I can. But Matthew has to want it, too.

KATHY

He didn't say it in so many words, but I think he does. I think he realizes Buddy would want it that way. You know how close they were.

CHARLIE

We'll see.

KATHY

You'd better get going downtown, you're already late opening the store.

CHARLIE

I don't feel much like going today. I'm thinking I'll keep the place closed for the week.

KATHY

Charlie, we can't afford to keep it closed that long. Remember, the day camp ends August first. I'll be more than a month without a paycheck until school starts back up.

CHARLIE

When's the last time we had a summer vacation?

KATHY

What?

CHARLIE

I don't mean you not teaching, I mean when's the last time we did something when you weren't teaching? You know, took a trip or something. Did we ever?

KATHY

I don't remember it, if we did. It would be lovely to see something new, maybe go someplace exotic like Buddy and Jeannie used to.

CHARLIE

I feel like I need a trip somewhere, a chance to be alone and think it all through.

KATHY

Unfortunately, we just don't have the money for a real vacation.

CHARLIE

No, we never seem to.

KATHY

Maybe next year.

CHARLIE

Sure, wait 'til next year.

KATHY

I have errands to run. If you're not going to work today, we have another fence that needs mending out there. You've been saying you'll do it all summer.

CHARLIE

I'll get to it this afternoon, I promise. First I need to try working on this darn eulogy some more.

KATHY

Alright. And promise me you'll think some more about you and Matty, too. Will you do that?

CHARLIE

I will.

KATHY

I want a real effort out of you, I'm counting on it.

CHARLIE

I said I'll give it my best.

KATHY

I'll be home in a couple of hours.

She exits. Buddy appears at the side window.

BUDDY

I hope you mean it.

CHARLIE

Holy God, will you quit popping up like that?

BUDDY

Sorry, I haven't quite got the hang of things yet. But about Matt, you raised a decent man, Charlie. You should be proud.

CHARLIE

I raised him as a Christian. He threw that back in my face.

BUDDY

All he did was grow up and find his balls. I think that's really what chaps your fat ass.

CHARLIE

Do you have to talk like some bum on the street?

BUDDY

I forgot about your odd sense of propriety.

CHARLIE

It's not polite, that's all. People should be more polite.

BUDDY

(coming inside)

Chalk it up to all the years I spent in a locker room, that's how guys talk.

CHARLIE

Right, the big baseball hero, first one from around here to make the majors.

BUDDY

I wouldn't say hero. I only played five years in the show, hit a career two-sixty, appeared briefly in the All Star Game my rookie year. Pretty ordinary, if you ask me. They were some goddamn good times, though. Sorry.

CHARLIE

No one in this town thought it was ordinary. You know, for awhile I was almost kind of a hero myself. I couldn't go anywhere without someone asking how you did last night, or what I thought your chances were to win the pennant.

BUDDY

It was sweet while it lasted.

CHARLIE

You made enough to last your lifetime. A regular lifetime, I mean.

BUDDY

Yes, I did, if I was smart with it, which I was.

CHARLIE

You spent a pile of it making sure people would never forget. Buddy Slater Field had to have two diamonds, one for the little kids and a regulation size for the Babe Ruth League.

BUDDY

I just wanted to give something back, it was no big deal. And I didn't name it, the town did. Anyway, we were discussing you and Matt.

CHARLIE

What's between me and my son is none of your business.

BUDDY

I don't know, Charlie, I spent a lot of time talking with him when you wouldn't.

CHARLIE

When I wouldn't? He was the one who picked up and left.

BUDDY

What choice did you give him? It was either go or change how he was born.

CHARLIE

The Bible says—

BUDDY

I know, I know, it's a sin to be gay. But God didn't write the Bible, men did, ignorant men who were trying to explain something they didn't understand. So they said it was wrong and went out fishing.

CHARLIE

I don't make fun of what you believe, whatever it is.

BUDDY

I'm not making fun, honest. My point is that you were blessed to have a son. You chose not to see it that way.

CHARLIE

What do you know about it? You were never a father.

BUDDY

No, I wasn't, and that's the one thing I might have wished. Jeannie and I never got the chance.

CHARLIE

So don't tell me what to do about my kid. Even the great Buddy Slater doesn't know it all.

BUDDY

You're right, I don't. You should finish your cereal, it's getting soggy.

CHARLIE

I lost my appetite. Could you get out of here and leave me alone? I have to write this speech.

BUDDY

Eulogy, it's a particular kind of speech.

CHARLIE

I know what it is!

BUDDY

You're pretty jumpy this morning. Is there something else on your mind? You carrying some kind of weight?

CHARLIE

There's nothing on my mind! Just— gosh darn it, my brother just died!

BUDDY

Really?

CHARLIE

What's going on with me? Where did you come from?

BUDDY

Same place you did, only seven years later. Maybe that explains the difference between us.

CHARLIE

The difference between us is luck. You had it, I don't.

BUDDY

You've had your share.

CHARLIE

Not compared to you.

BUDDY

Start with Kathy. A mope like you getting a woman like her, that had to be luck.

CHARLIE

I had plenty to offer in my day.

BUDDY

Indeed, I stand corrected. Then there's Matt. I'd feel lucky to call him my son.

CHARLIE

And we're back to that. I told you, it's between him and me.

BUDDY

So you did.

(as Charlie goes outside)

Where are you going?

CHARLIE

I promised Kathy I'd fix the fence today.

BUDDY

(following him)

I thought you were going to write my eulogy.

CHARLIE

Not right now. I can't think.

He brings the tool box and new pickets to the broken area of the fence, begins prying off damaged pickets with a hammer.

BUDDY

What's to think about? Your brother was a swell guy, beloved by all. Hey, the coneflowers look great this year. I was a little worried they might not come back after last year. The peonies are gone already, that's too bad, I didn't get a chance to see them. They were Jeannie's favorite. It does leave a pretty bush after the blossoms die, doesn't it?

CHARLIE

You really did like this place.

BUDDY

Jeannie and I had our first kiss out here.

CHARLIE

Kathy said that.

BUDDY

She's got a special talent, your wife. I love the way she mixes wild flowers with the more traditional things. Jeannie and I tried to copy it, but neither one of us had much of a gift for real gardening.

CHARLIE

You mean there was a gift you didn't have?

BUDDY

C'mon, Charlie, I'm just another guy. Was.

CHARLIE

That's not true, and you know it. You came back here after baseball and turned a small fortune into a big one. I never even made the small one.

BUDDY

I used my name to sell a few cars, so what?

CHARLIE

You know, I might've played pro ball, too. I wasn't a bad catcher in high school.

BUDDY

You couldn't hit a curve ball. Besides, you never tried out for a higher level that I can remember.

CHARLIE

Never went to college like you, either.

BUDDY

Two years. I got my degree in night school, after my playing days.

CHARLIE

I went to work.

BUDDY

You were a darn good carpenter, a builder, that's pretty important.

CHARLIE

I really loved that work, too, making things with my hands, plotting it all out and then following the plan. A shame I had to give it up.

BUDDY

Accidents happen.

CHARLIE

That's the thanks I got for being a volunteer fireman. I told that stupid kid the ladder was at too steep an angle.

BUDDY

Could've been worse, you could've been on top of it when it came down.

CHARLIE

Instead it came down on top of me. I'll never forget lying in that hospital bed after the operation, wondering what I was going to do.

BUDDY

It was successful, you got your legs back.

CHARLIE

But not my life. I knew I couldn't do my work anymore, not eight hours a day, not like I used to.

BUDDY

But you didn't just quit, you found something else, opened your store. That took real guts, whether you know it or not. A lot of guys would just sit back and collect disability. I was proud of you for that.

CHARLIE

No kidding?

BUDDY

No kidding.

CHARLIE

Turned out I was pretty good at the hardware business, too, because I could coach the guys who came in. I know all the tools and how to use them, know the right hardware for the job, stuff like that.

BUDDY

Let me tell you something about baseball. The most important

guys are the coaches, the people you never hear about. I can credit practically my whole life to Mr. Kolongowski, who taught me how to play third base in high school.

CHARLIE

Unfortunately, the neighborhood hardware store is going the way of most things now. I can't compete with the big box stores. People don't care that I still have to make a living.

BUDDY

So you do something else.

CHARLIE

Something else, at fifty years old.

KATHY

(off) Charlie?

(entering the kitchen)

Charlie, I'm home.

Buddy exits.

CHARLIE

Kathy? She said two or three hours, didn't she? I'm out here!

KATHY

(coming outside)

Sorry I was longer than I thought I'd be. Did Matty call here by any chance?

CHARLIE

No. What time is it?

KATHY

Almost two forty-five. I guess they were delayed somehow. Did you eat lunch?

CHARLIE

I'm not very hungry. I didn't even finish my cereal this morning.

KATHY

I'm going to make a sandwich and wait to hear from him. Thanks for fixing the fence. I didn't mean to sound like I was ordering you to do it before.

CHARLIE

That's okay. Turns out I can't do it now, anyhow. I want to use screws instead of nails, I don't have any inch and a quarter. I'll have to bring some home from the store. Boy, the time really got away from me.

KATHY

What are you looking for?

CHARLIE

Nothing, just making sure.

Kathy goes inside, gets bread and cold cuts to make a sandwich. Charlie follows her in a moment later, leaving his tool box on the porch.

KATHY

Martin's dress department was mobbed. Seemed like every woman in town was buying a black dress, probably for Buddy's funeral. I was lucky to find something.

CHARLIE

What did you buy?

KATHY

I just told you, a black dress. Of all the things for a woman not to own, but I didn't have one. I can't wear something other than black to the funeral.

CHARLIE

No, I guess you can't. We should be able to afford that much.

KATHY

I'll find a place in the budget to cut down.

CHARLIE

I know you will. The coneflowers are looking good this year.

KATHY

What?

CHARLIE

I said the coneflowers are looking good.

KATHY

Charles Slater, what's gotten into you? You've never once complimented my garden.

CHARLIE

Well, I- it's just that Buddy- never mind. You were telling me about a dress.

KATHY

Are you alright?

CHARLIE

I haven't been such a good provider, have I?

KATHY

What are you talking about?

CHARLIE

All those months I was laid up, then putting all our money into opening the store and struggling while that got going.

KATHY

That was ages ago. Although I never will forget what Buddy did for us during that time. He stopped in almost every day you were in the hospital, with groceries or just to ask how we were doing. At least once he stole some bills right off the table and paid them for us. He tried to pretend he hadn't.

CHARLIE

I never knew any of that. Why didn't you ever tell me?

KATHY

Buddy swore me to secrecy. He said he didn't want you to feel you owed him anything.

CHARLIE

The rat. Still, it was a pretty rough couple of years for us, and it hasn't exactly been smooth sailing since.

KATHY

We're making do.

CHARLIE

The store is paying less and less all the time. If I sell three boxes of tacks and a can of spray paint, it's a good day.