Clinically Un-Depressed

A Play

By

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Cast of Characters:

Millard Anderson:	The grumpy old man of the neighborhood. He is a Vietnam veteran, gunsmith and avid gardener.
Cole Black:	A boy with a brain chemistry condition which will not allow him to be angry or sad. He appears as a 12-year-old and 17-year-old which might need two actors but can be done with one.
Linda Black:	Cole's mother. She spans the ages of a new mother to the mother of a 17-year-old. Linda is a generally nice person but is psychologically beaten down at the start of the play by her husband, Blake.
Blake Black:	Cole's father. He spans the ages of a new father to the father of a 17-year-old. A high-paid lawyer with anger issues. That changes as the play progress.
Jimmy Masters:	School bully of the 12-year-old Cole.
Sandy:	Counter clerk at Big Bite Burger and the girlfriend of the 17-year-old Cole.
Dean:	Thug who robs Cole
Jim Masters:	Jimmy's father
Mr. Thompson:	Big Bite Burger customer
Nancy Masters:	Jimmy's mother
Nurse:	Nurse in maternity ward (Male or female)

Mr./Mrs. Barns:	Owner of Big Bite Burger
Mr./Mrs. Reynolds:	Defending attorney
Amelia Anderson:	Millard's wife. Only appears at the very end of the play. Her age could be from a young woman to an older lady depending on how the director wants to portray her in the scene.
Mr. Brown:	Expecting father in waiting room.
Mrs. Latham:	Old woman in Cole's line at Big Bite Burger. This character is optional.

The Scenes

MILLARD'S FRONT PORCH: Millard is an older man who spends his days sitting on his porch yelling at kids. Around the porch are roses he is very proud of. On the porch is a chair for him to sit on and a stand to put his magazines. The ceiling of the porch is sky blue (this might not be important if the audience isn't at the right vantage point to see it.)

THE BLAKE'S KITCHEN: There is a sink and kitchen counter area, a pantry off to the side and a kitchen table with 4-6 chairs.

HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM: This can just be some chairs where the men sit and wait.

RESTAURANT: Big Bite Burger has a counter for taking orders and a seating area. There would be a menu above the counter for customers to look at.

SCHOOL YARD: This can be as simple as a brick wall or some other type of setting which would indicate it is a school.

DARK ALLEY: This can be done with lighting in an open area of the stage.

MASTER'S HOUSE: Table and chairs down stage.

LEGAL OFFICE: There should be a table and chairs which would

look appropriate in a room where lawyers would talk with clients.

HEAVEN: It would be preferred if this is raised area that looks down on the rest of the stage and would allow for a fog machine to give a cloud effect.

Time

This takes place over a 17-year period where a Vietnam veteran would be in his 60-80 range.

ACT ONE

Scene 1

Setting: (Only down stage lights are up.)

MILLARD

(MILLARD comes to the edge of the stage looking at the audience with the stage lights only on him. He addresses the audience directly.)

You like my suit?

(Waits for responses and maybe even walks out to ask an individual.)

It's my best one. I have some special plans tonight and I want to look extra good.

(He stops and happily contemplates what is coming and ends with excited shivers.)

Sorry, I've been looking forward to this day for a long time but that happens after the show. Right now, I want to talk to you about something else.

(If possible, picks out an individual and addresses them.)

You ever have a moment or experience that transformed your life?

(Waits for the response and responds appropriately with something like, "Yeah, me too" or "Well, I did.")

Met someone one day just out of the blue and life was better after that. Gave me a reason to live. You see, I wasn't a good guy. This smile you see on my face, this peaceful look; it's never had enough time to wear creases into my face. The wrinkles you see come from an unhappy look. The pattern of wrinkles, those natural creases that form from how you hold your eyes or how you hold your mouth for most of your life, those patterns in my face come from a look I have trouble making now. They're from the look of a man that doesn't have a good relationship with people or, in fact, a good relationship with life. I spent most of my life like that. Even in the good times I trained the skin of my face to make that look the easiest one to hold.

(He stops to reflect pleasantly for a moment.)

But that changed after meeting one person. That's what I'm here to tell you about and that's why you're sitting there right now.

(Jokingly)

Having someone looking this sharp tell the story is just an extra bonus for you. Feel free to leave a tip on the way out.

Okay, on with the story. You see, I was sitting on my front porch one day with that look I was telling you I always wore. You know, every neighborhood has that cranky old man whose only pleasure comes from yelling at kids. I didn't follow that stereotype; they modeled that stereotype after me. "Get off my grass you little hooligans!" Yeah, that's mine. But, anyways, I was sitting on my porch and...

(He stops to think)

Wait, I can't start there. I'd have to do a lot of explaining, you know, character build up and such. If you don't know the characters, the scene doesn't work.

(He thinks some more and looks at the audience apologetically.)

Sorry, I should have planned this better. Okay, where to start? Oh, I know.

(He backs up)

Setting: The lights come up on LINDA in the kitchen. There is a small kitchen with a table set for two. LINDA is sadly and reluctantly getting dinner ready by working at the kitchen counter or setting the table. She moves slowly without energy or enthusiasm.

BLAKE

(BLAKE BLACK walks in wearing a dress shirt and a tie loosened around his neck. Unenergetically he throws his jacket over a kitchen chair and flops in another chair without speaking to his wife. He takes the salt and pepper and start putting it liberally on the food.)

LINDA

(Timidly.)

Honey, you should try it first. I've put a lot of seasoning on it.

BLAKE

(He looks up but continues with the shakers.)

LINDA

(Sits down quietly and starts eating. She is obviously bothered by his lack of attentiveness.)

MILLARD

(MILLARD is just watching the scene from the side. He steps behind the table as the couple eats in silence.)

This is Blake and Linda Black. Blake is one of those high-paid prosecuting attorneys and an all-around butthead. He and Linda have been married for about four years, and I think the astute audience members can infer it isn't going well. Linda isn't perfect by any means but, as you see here, she at least tries. But...

(MILLARD smiles at the audience)

She's trying a little more than usual today. Up until today this is a pretty typical scene but something different is about to happen.

LINDA

Blake?

BLAKE

(Looks up irritated)

Haven't you ever heard that thing about a man only speaks something like five thousand words a day and a woman speaks over a million or some ridiculous number? I'm a lawyer! I speak way past my quota every day. I don't want to come home and be forced to make conversation. I want to eat a ***decent*** meal and relax in front of the TV. If you want conversation, see if there's a neighborhood book club or something.

LINDA

I don't ***want*** to have a conversation. We ***need*** to have a conversation.

BLAKE

(Slams his fork down)

Look! I know where this is going.

(In a mocking voice)

'Blake, sweetheart, I think we need to get help with our marriage.' You're right; we do need to have a conversation. I've been thinking too. This isn't working. Married life isn't what I'd hoped, and I think we'd both be happier away from each other. And I'll make sure you're taken care of. I mean, I won't screw you in the divorce like the guys I work with have done to their wives.

(BLAKE and LINDA pause as MILLARD speaks)

MILLARD

He's a stand-up guy, isn't he? Anybody got a guess what's coming next?

(At this point, if the audience is receptive MILLARD can field some answers.)

Let's find out.

LINDA

(Places her head in her hands and weeps. BLAKE does nothing in response. After she gets control back she calmly addresses him.)

If you'd said that yesterday, I'd have screamed in joy, danced to the bedroom and packed my bags.

BLAKE

Yesterday?

LINDA

I peed on the stick, Blake.

(Waits for the sentence to have meaning for him.)

BLAKE

(Only a confused looked)

LINDA

Blake, I'm pregnant!

MILLARD

(Excitedly jumps towards the audience and plays off the audience's previous answers.)

It gets better.

BLAKE

(Keeps the confused look, contemplates while moving his lips and head like his is doing some mental calculations.)

Is it mine?

LINDA

(Explodes in anger, stands and throws something at him)

How can you say that? You may be a jerk and the biggest mistake of my life but that doesn't mean I've cheated on you! That's the first thing that comes to your mind.

(BLAKE doesn't respond so she defeatedly falls back to her seat and they sit in silence for a bit.)

BLAKE

Look, we still have options and a lot of times the pregnancies end themselves anyway.

MILLARD

I think I'm feeling a bond growing between you guys and Blake. It warms my heart.

LINDA

(Gives BLAKE an appalled look)

BLAKE

(With a hopeful look)

Adoption?

LINDA

(Shakes her head)

BLAKE

What then? Oh, wait, I know.

(Back to mocking LINDA)

'This is just what we need, Blake. This will save our marriage.'

LINDA

(Calmly)

Blake, I know better than that. I've seen plenty of my friends fall into that trap. Let's just not make any decisions right now and see how we feel later.

(Pauses)

Look, I know you're way past your five thousand words. I'm exhausted. You go relax in front of the TV and I'll go to bed.

BLAKE

(Looks at her seriously for a moment)

Linda...

LINDA

(Holds up her hand to stop him, takes her plate to the sink and leaves the room.)

Scene 2

Setting: (The hospital waiting room is set up. Lights are out except for downstage.)

At Rise: (MILLARD walks out as the lights come up on him.)

MILLARD

So, that's Blake and Linda Black. As you can see, they need help. That's where I come in. Ha! Just kidding. Who knew whose life I was trying to make miserable while they were going through this? If I'd walked in right then I'd have probably given Linda a gun. But don't worry. They get help. The same person that helps me is the same person that helps them. I don't want to give any plot spoiler, but just so you can relax I'll tell you they do live happily ever after. But for the plot to move forward you'll have to see what happens to them next. But don't worry, Linda and Blake aren't dancing and singing love songs. Blake's still a jerk.

Setting: (BLAKE, JIM MASTERS and MR. BROWN are sitting in hospital waiting room. JIM MASTERS is pacing around nervously. MR. BROWN is sitting, nervously waiting. BLAKE is shuffling through some of his papers from a legal case and making notes.)

JIM MASTERS

How can you guys just sit there so calm? They kicked me out of the delivery room because I couldn't stand still and was getting in the way.

MR. BROWN

I'm not calm. I am trying to get calm. My stomach is in knots. If I get up and move around, what little breakfast I ate will be on the floor. They told me to wait out here.

JIM MASTERS

(Pulls out a flask and offers it to BROWN.)

Would this make it better or worse? It's the only thing getting me through today.

MR. BROWN

(Holds up his hand and turns his head.)

Worse. Just the thought of it...

JIM MASTERS

(Takes a drink and puts it back in his pocket.)

So... a boy or a girl?

MR. BROWN

(Smiles excitedly.)

A boy. It's my first. I'm gonna have a little guy to go fishing with.

JIM MASTERS

Mine's a boy too. Baseball. Mine's going to be a baseball player. I was this close to being in the minors but my son's going to have a head start. It's the majors for him.

(Turns to BLAKE.)

What about you? What are you having?

BLAKE

(Puts his pen down irritated and looks up.)

A distraction. They said it's going to be a boy.

MR. BROWN

They won't let you stay in there either?

BLAKE

It will be with me the rest of my life. I wanted to get a little work done while I still can. My wife can handle it without me.

(BROWN and MASTERS look at each other uncomfortably and BLAKE goes back to work.)

JIM MASTERS

(Takes another drink from his flask and turns to BROWN.)

Fishing, huh? That should be a good time with your son.

MR. BROWN

I'll have a pole in is hand as soon as he can hold it. Also, already bought him a car for us to start restoring.

JIM MASTERS

Already? It's going to be years before you two can do that.

MR. BROWN

(Shrugs.)

Yeah, I know. Just couldn't help myself. I just love the idea of restoring a car with my son like my dad did with me.

NURSE

(There's a baby's cry and MASTERS and BROWN look towards the door in anticipation. The nurse enters.)

Mr. Brown, you have a beautiful baby girl.

MR. BROWN

(Jumps up and hugs MASTERS.)

You hear that? I have a baby girl!

NURSE

Please follow me.

MR. BROWN

(Excitedly leaves with the nurse.)

JIM MASTERS

(Sits next to BLAKE.)

You have a name picked out?

BLAKE

(Doesn't look up from his papers.)

Nope.

JIM MASTERS

We're going to name mine after me. Jim. But we are already calling him Jimmy.

(Takes another drink.)

BLAKE

(Still focusing on his papers.)

I can hardly contain my excitement.

JIM MASTERS

(Sits uncomfortably due to BLAKE's sarcasm and takes another drink. There's a baby's cry and MASTERS looks at the door.)

NURSE

(Enters.)

Mr. Masters, it's a healthy boy. Follow me.

(MASTERS jumps up and leaves with the nurse. BLAKE just keeps at his work.)

NURSE

(Enters)

Mr. Black?

BLAKE

(Inconvenienced, he puts his papers away and then has a realization.)

There was no cry. Is everything all right?

NURSE

It's a boy and he appears healthy. He had some atypical responses to the birth, so the doctors are running some tests.

BLAKE

Atypical?

NURSE

Well, one was, he didn't cry. That happens sometimes and can be a sign that his lungs are not fully developed. But from what I saw he was breathing fine, so I don't think you have to worry.

BLAKE

What else?

NURSE

Well, this may sound strange, but... he smiled.

BLAKE

(Confused look)

NURSE

I've seen lots of babies born. I've seen a few that may look like they're smiling but it's usually just a reaction to gas or something like that. It isn't an actual smile. But I would swear your baby smiled. Not just once, but continually. The doctors wanted to run some quick neurological tests.

BLAKE

So, the doctors think something's wrong because it's smiling? That's insane.

NURSE

(Gives a reassuring smile)

They're just making sure. When there are things out of the ordinary the doctors want to verify your child is healthy.

Setting: (Lights to black)

Scene 3

Setting: (Only down stage lights are up.)

At Rise: (MILLARD walks out.)

MILLARD

There you have it. The boy never quit smiling. The brain is a very complex organ, and the doctors were taking guesses but as near as they figured the baby had the exact opposite condition which causes depression. There is a condition called Williams syndrome but that has a slew of issues that come with it, cardiovascular disease, developmental delays, learning disabilities, and on and on. Cole, oh, that's what they named him, Cole. Cole was perfectly normal, other than being unconditionally happy. Kinda funny to me that they named a kid who can't be unhappy, Cole Black.

(Pauses to consider the humor and moves on)

But think about a kid that's unconditionally happy. What would that be like? You're the lucky ones tonight because you don't have to guess. So, you got a kid like that growing up in a house with Blake Black. Blake isn't quite the nurturing type. You know, now his five thousand words had to be divided with his son also.

Setting: (Lights come up on the kitchen where LINDA is rushing around, sets a plate on the table and then sets a bottle next to the bouncy seat or car seat. MILLARD walks in to watch the scene)

BLAKE

(Walks in, throws his suit jacket over a chair and loosens his tie. He looks at LINDA rushing around. The seat can be facing away from the audience so there doesn't need to a fake looking doll.)

LINDA

Here's a bottle for Cole. There's your dinner on the table. Just give him one in about an hour. I should be home in a couple hours. He doesn't cry when he's hungry, so you just have to give him a bottle every so often, if he takes it, he's hungry, if he doesn't just wait a while. Diapers are over there. Check him often. Again, his butt could be blistered and bleeding, and he'd just smile at you.

BLAKE

(With a total look of horror.)

What? ... Where?... I mean, you want me to ... Where are you going?

LINDA

(Slows down and looks at BLAKE with disappointment)

Blake, I told you this. I joined a lady's book club.

(Looks at him hopefully)

Remember? You suggested I join one to save you your 5000 words. I told you it was tonight.

BLAKE

(Nods hesitantly)

But I figured you'd take it or get someone to watch it. I don't know how...

LINDA

(Interrupts)

First off, ***your*** son's name is Cole, not 'it'. Second, you need to be a father. Bye.

(Turns and leaves)

BLAKE

(Yells after her)

What do I do with it? I mean, him?

LINDA

(From off stage)

Play with him or read to him. Just be a dad to him for at least two hours. You can go back to being a jerk after I get back.

BLAKE

(Stands dumbfounded for a bit. Looks down at COLE)

You hear that? She called me a jerk? She may be smarter than I gave her credit for.

COLE

(A coo or a baby laugh)

BLAKE

(Actually smiles)

You think that's funny? You think I'm a jerk too?

COLE

(Again, a coo or a baby laugh)

BLAKE

(Walks to the table, picks up the plate and dumps it in the trash. To COLE)

Don't tell her, but I got something to eat on the way home. I can't stand her cooking.

COLE

(Again, a coo or a baby laugh)

BLAKE

Just our secret. Okay, I can be a dad for two hours. Let's see. Read! She said read to you.

(Jokingly)

I know how to read. We can do that.

COLE

(Again, a coo or a baby laugh)

BLAKE

At least you think I'm funny.

(Goes to a chair and picks up a Dr. Seuss "One Fish Two Fish")

One fish two fish, red fish blue fish.

(Stops and turns some pages quickly. Looks at the baby.)

What kind of crap is this? Do you care about some colored fish?

(Looks through some other books sitting near the chair. Picks up on up)

Black's Law Dictionary.

(Looks at COLE and pretends COLE spoke to him)

Well, I don't know, Cole. I guess we could be related to the guy who wrote this. We do have a lineage of lawyers in the family. Maybe you'll become one someday. But you'd have to quit smiling so much. Lawyers can't look happy. If they did, people would start liking them too much and that would be the downfall of western civilization.

COLE

(Again, a coo or a baby laugh)

BLAKE

See, like that. You have to stop doing that. You need to cry or at least pass gas, or something.

(Opens the book to a random page.)

Burden of Proof: In the law of evidence. The necessity or duty of affirmatively proving a fact or facts in dispute on an issue raised between the parties in a cause.

(Turns to another random page)

Formal logic: Determining an inference's or conclusion's validity or invalidity from two or more statements or premises. Classical or traditional system based on the theory of syllogism. Propose by the Greek philosopher Aristotle.

COLE

(Responds happily to the reading)

BLAKE

You like that? This dad thing may not be too hard after all.

Setting: (Lights fade to indicate the passing of time.)

LINDA

(Lights up in kitchen. LINDA comes in and smiles when she sees BLAKE reading to COLE. She checks the baby, smells and the look changes as she looks at his diaper.)

Blake! How long has he been dirty?! Didn't you check him?

(She turns to the kitchen and sees the bottles on the table)

You didn't feed him!? He has to be starving. What's wrong with you?

BLAKE

(Slams the book down and yells as he storms off stage.)

Obviously, I'm a failure as a father. Find someone else to watch it next time.

Setting: (Lights go down upstage and come up downstage as MILLARD comes on down stage.)

MILLARD

He did better than I expected. I'd give him a solid D+. That's pretty much how it went for many years. A few ups and a lot of downs.

(MILLARD laughs to himself)

Some of the downs are the parts I like best.

(Holds up his hand when he realizes it sounds bad).

No, that didn't sound right. I mean they were funny.

(Still realized this sounds bad)

Well, I think it's just better if you see what I am talking about.

Scene 4

Setting: (Lights come up on LINDA reading at the kitchen table. There's a loud bang from off stage and BLAKE storms on stage.)

LINDA

(Looks up from her book and smiles.)

BLAKE

(Yell's angrily from off stage and enters as he finishes.)

You think that's funny you little freak? You better get out of my sight or there's going to be a shallow grave in the backyard.

COLE

(From off stage)

Thanks for spending some time with me tonight, Dad. I had a great time.

BLAKE

(Turns to the door and holds out his hand)

Don't you dare come hug me. I'd rather snap your neck than give you a hug.

COLE

(From off stage and still very happy)

Love you. Good night. Love you too, Mom.

LINDA

(Smiles and calls out)

Love you too, Cole. See you in the morning.

BLAKE

Run you little twerp!!

(Turns and addresses LINDA very angrily)

You have to quit encouraging that behavior!

LINDA

(A lot of intensity but some humor in her tone)

You just feel threatened by Cole. You need to get over yourself and let it be. Why can't you appreciate him for what he is?

BLAKE

Because he's a little freak, that's why. A seven-year-old kid shouldn't be doing this.

LINDA

Why not?

BLAKE

It's not natural. And you're buying him books to encourage it just to make me angry. You need to stop that.

LINDA

(Smiles openly)

You're right about that. I'm having a great time watching you get angry. I'm keeping score by every fist hole you put in the

wall. We're running out of wall space in the living room, you two are going to have to start playing chess in the kitchen.

BLAKE

He's mocking me. He beat me in two moves just now and called it a fool's mate. He's calling me a fool, Linda. And you're promoting the behavior by getting him more chess books. The game before that he let me think I got him by taking his queen. But the only reason he did it was to get my bishop out of the way so he could put me in checkmate. A seven-year-old kid shouldn't be doing this.

LINDA

(She steps towards him and places her hand on his cheek.)

Poor, baby. Is your tiny ego hurt because your little boy kicks your butt in chess? If you ask me, that's exactly what you need.

BLAKE

(Tenses up, slaps her hand away and leans toward her but then turns and storms off)

(Lights go down upstage and come up downstage.)

MILLARD

(Walks on stage with a wide grin)

You understand what I mean? When I need to laugh, I just think about all the times Cole got the better of Blake. Cole wasn't being mean. He just could never figure out anger. His dad fascinated him, and Cole truly loved that egocentric twit. And to be fair, Blake wasn't always like that. You remember

him reading to Cole as a baby? Well, that was almost a daily thing. It was never age-appropriate stuff but by the time Cole was in school, the only subject he really had to study was math. Blake never did math with Cole, but Cole could recite the US Bill of Rights and explain all the constitutional amendments. That was about all the fatherly time Cole got. He tried to get his dad to coach little league, but that was too big of a waste of time for a high paid lawyer. So, this was the Black household for much of Cole's youth. But, if you watched carefully, I think you would have noticed a change in Blake. Cole was a paradox to him. No matter what Blake did, Cole smiled and told his dad he loved him. Over the years that worked its way into the chinks of Blake's stone exterior and one day there was just sand at Blake's feet where the stone exterior had crumbled.

(MILLARD walks off stage. A twelve-year-old COLE is sitting at the kitchen table playing with toy cars. LINDA is getting dinner ready. In typical BLAKE fashion, he walks in, throws his jacket over a chair and loosens his tie.)

BLAKE

(Looks up at LINDA)

Another new dress? How much did that cost me?

LINDA

(Slams something on counter and yells)

I am so sick and tired of this crap. I shouldn't have to justify every cent I spend. It's not like we're on food stamps and worrying about paying the mortgage. Your 401k is big enough to buy King Tut's treasures.

COLE

(Stops playing and watches with a big smile)

BLAKE

There's a reason it's that big. It's because I don't go buying every dress I see at Neiman Marcus or getting $100 manicures every week.

LINDA

Well maybe if you actually spent some of your money instead of counting it you would enjoy life a little and not be such an uptight moron.

(She storms off.)

BLAKE

(He paces angrily around as COLE watches on with interest)

COLE

Dad?

BLAKE

(With as much anger as he showed his wife.)

Look! Not right now! I don't have the energy for your crap, too.

COLE

(Oblivious to the anger.)

What's it like being angry?

BLAKE

(Throws his hands in the air)

What kind of stupid question is that?

(To himself but loud enough for COLE to hear.)

Leave it to me to have a kid too dumb to be angry.

COLE

(Unaffected by the insult but a little confused.)

Why do you think I'm stupid, Dad? Other than math, I'm in mostly honors classes. It seems to be an unsupportable statement.

BLAKE

(Looks at his son in angry disbelief and with sarcasm)

Well, maybe it's me that's stupid then?

COLE

(Doesn't catch the sarcasm and replies honestly)

No, that statement is unsupportable also. Look at the books you read to me. Dumb people don't read that type of stuff. You're really smart. That's why I was asking about being angry. You're very good at it, and I was hoping you could explain it to me.

BLAKE

(He stops and looks at COLE like it is the first time he has ever seen him and gives a short laugh.)

Very good at being angry? Is that the way you see me?

COLE

Yeah. Aren't you? You spend a lot of time that way. It seems like a lot of work. I wish I could be angry like you. Watch, I've been practicing in front of the mirror.

(Stands, tenses his body and gives his best angry look. Then goes right back to smiling and sits down.)

When mom's not around I've been practicing yelling, too.

(Points his finger at Blake and yells)

I'd rather snap your neck than give you a hug you little freak!

(Laughs)

Sometimes I think I'm getting closer to being angry but then I end up laughing at myself because I just look ridiculous.

BLAKE

(Looks at COLE in disbelief)

You're practicing being angry?

COLE

(Shakes his head excitedly)

Yeah! I mean, it's got to be a great feeling if you're willing to spend so much time being that way. My brain's messed up so I don't have a choice, but you do, so it must be the way you want to be.

(Stands as an idea pops in his head.)

Maybe you can teach me.

BLAKE

What? Teach you? You think I have a choice?

COLE

Sure. I mean, like tonight, Mom looked great in that dress. You could have simply told her that, she would have smiled, and we could have eaten dinner and talked a little. But you didn't take the simple path. You picked the one that took a lot of work. I figure you had a reason for that. You're a lawyer, you're logical, so I have to draw the conclusion that you've chosen the best path. I mean, am I right? Couldn't you have said something different and you two wouldn't have been angry?

BLAKE

(Shoots an angry look at COLE, raises his finger ready to yell but words escape him. He pauses and paces as he contemplates his rebuttal. Then dumbfounded, collapses in a kitchen chair near his son.)

She did look nice tonight, didn't she?

COLE

I thought so.

BLAKE

You want to go dress shopping at Neiman Marcus' tomorrow? I think I have some making up to do.

COLE

(Shrugs but misses the contrast.)

Sure. But will you teach me how to be angry?

BLAKE

(Ruffles COLE's hair or gives him a pat on the arm and gives COLE maybe his first smile ever.)

Not a chance.

(Lights to black)

Scene 5

Setting: (Only down stage lights are up.)

MILLARD

(Comes down stage into the light.)

Anyone else have Goosebumps? Tissues are for sale at the concession stand. So, Blake was true to his word. Blake couldn't argue against Cole's logic so the boy he once referred to only as 'it' became the most influential person in his life.

Setting: (Lights come up on Kitchen scene. COLE is dressed in pajamas at the kitchen table leaning over a chessboard and moving a piece. There are a number of chess books, one being 'The Art of Sacrifice in Chess'.)

LINDA

(LINDA walks in wearing a robe and yawning)

Cole? What are you doing up this early on a Saturday morning?

(Looks at what he is doing.)

You playing chess by yourself?

COLE

(Still studying the board.)

I couldn't sleep. You bought me that book yesterday about sacrificing in chess. It's amazing to think about. I made you guys some coffee.

LINDA

Oh! Thanks.

(Heads to the coffee and pours herself a cup as she talks.)

A chess book is what keeps you up, huh? You're a weird one.

COLE

Come watch this, Mom. I've been replaying the game all morning.

LINDA

(Walks over with her coffee and sits down.)

COLE

This is about 12 moves into a very famous chess game they call the *Opera Game*. White moves his rook here and takes their knight. If you were playing the game, what would you do?

LINDA

(Looks at the board uncomfortably.)

Um ... Can't I take the rook?

COLE

Yeah, nothing protecting it. So, they trade pieces.

(Moves the piece.)

Now he moves his other rook over and they unpin their queen. Now white comes in and takes their rook. What would you do?

LINDA

Nothing protecting the bishop so, take it? Another trade?

COLE

So, the knight is the best one to take it with. Now white moves the queen up and puts them in check, but what's wrong?

LINDA

(Excited that she sees she can take the queen.)

Oh! The queen isn't protected. I would take the queen with the knight. I have the queen with no trade.

COLE

Yeah, you feel pretty good, don't you? I mean, anyone taking someone's queen without a trade this early in the game would feel they have the upper hand.

LINDA

Sure, I just took your most powerful piece. I should be able to control the game.

COLE

(Smiles at his mom.)

That's the beauty of the game white played. He brings his rook up and check mate. White sacrificed piece after piece just to get his opponent's pieces where he wanted so he could win.

LINDA

Hmmm... clever.

COLE

Yeah. I can't stop thinking about it. What do you think?

LINDA

(Laughs)

I feel like a pawn most of the time.

COLE

No, not like you're just a piece in the game but all your pieces are parts of you. Just like this game, when we're willing to give up pieces of us that we think are important, when we are willing to sacrifice and we do it right, we can win the game. Those pieces you sacrifice aren't what's important. Winning the game is important.

LINDA

Cole, you're twelve years old. Shouldn't you be watching cartoons instead of solving the mysteries of life?

BLAKE

(From off stage.)

Linda! Where's the dry cleaning I asked you to pick up?

LINDA

(Looks at COLE with a startled face. Yells to BLAKE.)

Sorry, I forgot to pick it up.

(Grimaces and waits for what she knows is coming.)

BLAKE

(Rushes in wearing slacks, an undershirt and carrying a newspaper he had been reading.)

You forgot! I …!

(Raises his hand with his index finger up. Looks at COLE who is watching him with fascination. Turns back to LINDA.)

I …!

(Turns to COLE again. Brings his hand down in a sweeping motion.)

I'll just pick them up on the way to the meeting. It isn't much out of the way so I shouldn't be too late.

(Searched for his cell phone.)

If I can find my phone I'll call Bob and let him know I'll be a little late.

(Sets the paper down and starts searching for his phone. Glances at the paper.)

Hey, they have a new roller coaster at the amusement park. You guys want to go after I get back from the meeting?

COLE

That would be cool.

BLAKE

Great. Now where did I put my phone? I need to call Bob.

(Walks out of earshot looking for his phone.)

LINDA

(Picks up The Art of Sacrifice and talks to COLE with a confused look.)

Did your dad read this last night?

COLE

(Misses the point.)

No, I was reading it.

LINDA

(Smiles as BLAKE gets back near them.)

Well, he won this game.

BLAKE

(Has the phone and is calling.)

Bob?

LINDA

(Walks up to BLAKE, smiles at him seductively, runs her finger under his chin and walks out of the room. Maybe even open her robe towards him with her back to the audience.)

BLAKE

(With a confused look, he watches LINDA walk toward the off-stage door.)

Bob, I will...

(Gets a shocked look when he realizes what LINDA was doing.)

... not be able to make it to the meeting. I have some … family matters to take care of.

(Drops the phone without hanging up and rushes off stage.)

COLE

(Comes over, picks up the phone, hangs it up and goes back to the chess game.)

(Lights fade)

Scene 6

Setting: (Only down stage lights are up.)

MILLARD

(Walks into the lights.)

The art of sacrifice. I think Blake is figuring it out. Well, I think we've done enough character development so onto the high light of the show, the part where you get to see me play the part of my old self.

(Turns to head behind the porch but stops)

Oh, but don't leave right after this. This may be the highlight, but the rest of the show is good. You don't want to miss it.

(Lights come up on porch.)

MILLARD

(Sitting on his front porch in a rocking chair reading Guns and Ammo. Holds his hand out to the people off stage.)

Just a minute, I need to tell them something.

(Turns to the audience)

I didn't want you thinking I always wore a suit while sitting on my porch being the grumpy old man. I always wore grumpy old man cloths but like I told you, I have special plans after the show. I'll do my best to get the grumpy face working but just pretend with the clothes.

(Waves off stage to let the other actors know it's okay now.)

(There is the sound of kids running and playing. COLE runs up to the side of the porch, turns and yells off stage.)

COLE

You're it!

MILLARD

(Jumps out of his chair, throws his magazine at them and yells.)

I told you hooligans to stay off my grass! I know who you are and I'm calling your parents!

(A boy's voice from off stage yells, "Quick, run! I heard the crazy old man has lots of guns and uses kids for target practice." There is the sound of the boys running away except for COLE. He stops and looks at MILLARD.)

MILLARD

What are you standing there for?! Get out of here!

COLE

(Starts to slowly walk toward MILLARD.)

MILLARD

I know you heard me. Your Blake Black's boy, aren't you?

COLE

Yes, sir.

MILLARD

I'm calling your dad.

(He turns and grabs his phone from the table beside his rocker.)

COLE

(Walks over and picks up the magazine and heads toward the stairs.)

MILLARD

(Still yelling.)

What are you doing? You better not try anything. I fought in Vietnam. I may be old, but I can still rip your arms off.

COLE

(Extends his arm with the magazine but MILLARD makes no move to take it, so he sets it beside him.)

Here. I just wanted to apologize for running through your yard. I'll just sit over here and wait for you to talk to my dad. He isn't home right now so, do you need his work number? It's …

MILLARD

(In an angry voice.)

I'm not going to call your dad. Just get the heck out of here and stay off my lawn.

COLE

(Stands)

Yes, sir. I'll make sure my friends leave you alone too.

(He starts to walk but picks up the magazine.)

They said you have lots of guns, is that true?

MILLARD

(Very defensive)

I was a gunsmith. What do you think? Of course I have lots of guns.

(Points his finger at COLE but speaks a little softer)

But I don't use kids for target practice.

(Realizing he was letting down his character he goes back to his angry voice and adds.)

But I might if you don't get the heck out of here.

COLE

Gunsmith? That's cool. I think guns are interesting. We were reading in school how the Winchester rifle changed the course of history.

MILLARD

(In a loud grumpy voice.)

Sure it did. Glad my tax dollars aren't being totally wasted in the schools. But did they tell you about the …

(MILLARD stands up and walks to the audience.)

That boy hit the one topic I couldn't resist talking about. We talked for over an hour about guns. I went in the house and brought out stacks of books and he just kept asking more and more questions. But then, I realized I'd let my guard down.

(Sits back down and turns to COLE)

I know you're making fun of me. You've had that stupid smile on your face the whole time. You think it's funny taking up my time. You think you're going to pull one over on me and then go laugh at me with your friends. Get you and your stupid smile off my porch.

COLE

(Stands to leave but stays in front of the chair.)

I'm not making fun of you, sir. Sorry my stupid smile bothers you but I can't help it. The doctors say I have something wrong with my brain. I'll leave you alone now, Mr. Anderson.

(COLE walks off the porch and off stage.)

(Lights slowly go down and then slowly come back up to represent the changing of the day. Off stage is the sound of running boys.)

COLE

(COLE yells off stage.)

I'll catch up with you guys.

(Comes on to stage with a different shirt for because it's the next day. He walks to the porch.)

Hello, Mr. Anderson.

MILLARD

What are you doing? Didn't you bug me enough yesterday?

COLE

(Ignores the comment)

I was just noticing the flowers you planted in front of your porch. You have a beautiful yard. What are these red ones?

MILLARD

(Stands and looks at the flowers.)

What do you mean? You recognize roses, don't you? Doesn't your dad buy them for your mom?

COLE

(Smiles)

He just did for the first time recently. He'd never done that before. That's why I was wondering what these are.

MILLARD

Never bought your mom flowers? Looks like I don't win the 'worst-husband-in-the-world-award' after all. At least I got my wife flowers sometimes.

COLE

(Looks at MILLARD and grins)

They have awards for that? Guess my dad gave up trying to win. He's been a lot nicer recently. He and I went dress shopping a little while ago and found Mom a really pretty dress. She's really pretty. These roses look different than the ones my dad gave her.

MILLARD

The roses from the florist are called Hybrid-tea. These are called Heritage.

(MILLARD stands and addresses the audience.)

He just did it again. I'm the grumpy old man that loves to work in his yard. I have two magazine subscriptions, 'Guns and Ammo' and 'Country Gardens'. He was two for two in finding what I loved to talk about. But I wasn't going to break that easy. I had a reputation to protect. Worked years building it so I wasn't going to just give it up.

(Turns to COLE)

This is two days in a row you've come by and wasted my time. Make sure you just keep on walking with your friends next time.

COLE

Sure thing, Mr. Anderson. Thanks for the information about the flowers. Oh, and thanks for letting me know about that husband award. Wonder if my dad is disappointed he may not win it?

MILLARD

Now you're just being a smart aleck!

COLE

(Shrugs, smiles and runs off)

(Lights slowly go down and then slowly come back up to represent the changing of the day. COLE walks up to the porch.)

COLE

(COLE comes on stage with a new shirt for the new day and walks to the porch)

Hello, Mr. Anderson.

MILLARD

Didn't I tell you to keep walking yesterday?

COLE

Yeah, and I will but I just had a quick question. I know it sounds dumb, but it was bugging me last night. Why's the ceiling of your porch painted light blue? That is the only place you do that.

MILLARD

(Looks up at the ceiling and gets a questioning look.)

I don't exactly know. Seems I heard it keeps insects and birds way because they think it's the sky, but I don't know if that's true. Think it's mostly tradition.

(Realized COLE did it again.)

Now get out of here. I have plans and don't have time for your stupid questions.

(Lights slowly go down and then slowly come back up to represent the changing of the day. COLE comes on stage with a new shirt for a new day and walks by the house.)

COLE

(COLE waves.)

Hello, Mr. Anderson.

(But keeps walking)

MILLARD

(Watches COLE walk away. It is clear he is perplexed. Finally, he calls out.)

Cole!

COLE

(Stops and looks)

MILLARD

I have a photo album of some guns I built. Thought you might be interested in seeing them.

COLE

Awesome!

(Goes to the porch and they look at some pictures.)

(Lights slowly go down and then slowly come back up to represent the passage of time. They are interrupted by a ball rolling in the yard.)

MILLARD

(Jumps up, grabs the ball and yells.)

I told you I'd keep it next time it came in my yard! It's mine now!

COLE

(Smiling and watching with fascination.)

MILLARD

(Still irritated by the ball)

Why are you looking at me with that stupid smile!?

COLE

I don't know. Guess anger fascinates me because I can't do it. I keep trying to be sad and angry, but I can't figure out how.

(COLE gets an idea.)

Hey, you seem pretty good at it, maybe you could teach me. How do you do it? Why are you angry?

MILLARD

(Taken off guard by the question.)

Why am I angry?

COLE

(Nods, smiles and waits for the reply)

MILLARD

(He thinks for a second, then with the emotions the events carry.)

I'll tell you why I'm angry. Do you have any idea what it's like growing up with an alcoholic father and getting beatings for no reason and then having him die so you had to quit school to help your mom keep the house from going to the bank? Or at eighteen years old, being drafted into the Army, sent to Vietnam and puking your guts out the first time you killed another human being? Or being in a convoy that was ambushed?

(More to himself than COLE as he relives the events in his mind.)

Everyone was killed but me. I woke up in a MASH unit after having five bullets removed from me. All my friends were dead and all I could do was replay the ambush over and over, wondering what I could have done to save them. Then I was

sent home, the boat dock was lined with protesters spitting at me and calling me a killer.

(Turns his attention back to COLE.)

You still want to know why I'm angry? I spent years wandering aimlessly, living out of trash cans because no one would hire me and, if they did, I couldn't keep the job because I was too strung out on drugs. Spent months in drug rehab units that failed me until one pretty young nurse named Amelia saw something in me and got me a job at her father's gun shop.

(Yells)

She died five years ago and left me alone.

(Collapses into his chair and looks away from COLE and speaks softer.)

I never saw the beauty she brought to my life until she was gone. I never lived up to what Amelia saw in me each and every day we were married. I walked all over an angel; never let her work again, never let her drive. I treated an angel like a stupid child. Yet, she loved me each and every day.

(MILLARD falls forward from the chair to his knees and sobs.)

She left me. Amelia left me. The only person who ever saw any value in me, left me.

COLE

(Misses MILLARD's emotional state.)

That sounds like a lot. I can ask my dad to start drinking and beating me, but I can't go to war for another six years. Maybe I can try drugs and eating out of trashcans.

MILLARD

(Very perplexed)

What? No! You don't want to be like me.

COLE

I'd like to be normal.

MILLARD

No you don't. That's the craziest talk I have ever heard.

COLE

(They both sit quietly for a bit as COLE thinks.)

I can't get married for a while either.

(COLE thinks some more)

But I don't understand that one as much. You were angry when she was alive and you're angry now that she's dead. There's no causality.

MILLARD

Causality?

COLE

Yeah, with only two options, married or not married, if you're angry in both situations there's no causality.

MILLARD

(Starts to say something but doesn't know what to say.)

COLE

(Struck with a thought.)

Was she angry when she was married to you?

MILLARD

(Confused by the way COLE is talking, just shakes his head no.)

COLE

So? Would she have been angry if you died first and left her?

MILLARD

(Stands and addresses the audience.)

BAM!!!! He hit me with the proverbial freight train. I held Amelia so under my thumb for our whole life together. She couldn't have lasted a week if I'd died. We didn't have friends or family. She wasn't on the checking account. She wasn't on the house deed. The only decent thing I ever did for her was to live longer than her.

COLE

(Stands)

Thanks. You've given me a lot to think about.

(Leaves)

MILLARD

As I watched that crazy kid walk away I made a choice. I was going to live to honor Amelia and if there is a heaven and the forces in charge see fit to let me be there, I was going to make her proud of me when I saw her next. That's what a twelve-year old boy who doesn't know anger can do. By all rights he should have run away each day, but he didn't. He stayed and changed my life.

(Jokingly)

And, for an encore...

COLE

(Steps back on stage.)

Mr. Anderson? I wanted to ask you something else. We're having spaghetti tonight. My mom makes really good spaghetti. Will you come eat with us? And can you bring your photo album of the guns you did? My dad would like to see it.

MILLARD

(To the audience)

"No" was coming out of my mouth but I stopped. I was turning over a new leaf because of that crazy kid and it seemed illogical to turn him down. So … I had dinner plans that night.

Scene 7

Setting: (LINDA is in the kitchen getting dinner ready. COLE walks in with MILLARD.)

MILLARD

(Holding his hat and photo album to his chest, looking very uncomfortable.)

LINDA

(Turns and is surprised to see MILLARD and COLE. LINDA has never actually met MILLARD, so she is just guesses this is him.)

Mr. Anderson?

COLE

I thought he would like your spaghetti, so I invited him to dinner.

LINDA

Oh?

(Doesn't want to sound rude)

Guess I'll set another plate. Mr. Anderson, please sit here.

(Directs MILLARD to a chair at the table.)

Cole, I need a hand in the pantry, can you come help me?

MILLARD

(Sits with the same discomfort he has had since walking in.)

COLE

(Follows his mom and when they are out of sight of MILLARD she leans and talks to him.)

LINDA

Cole, you can't just invite people over for dinner.

COLE

I can't? Don't we have enough food? I'll eat less if I have to.

LINDA

No, we have enough food. That isn't the issue.

COLE

(Waits quietly for her to explain.)

LINDA

It's just that … Well, people just don't … Cole, you need to …

(Gives up)

Just set another plate. Your dad will be home any minute.

MILLARD

(Addresses LINDA as he sits at the table.)

I want to thank you, Mrs. Black.

LINDA

Linda … just call me Linda. And you're welcome. Now that I think about it, we should have invited you over before. We aren't as neighborly as we should be.

BLAKE

(Walks in, starts to throw his jacket over the chair but sees MILLARD. So, he turns and hangs it on a peg and gives LINDA a questioning look.)

LINDA

Blake, we have a dinner guest tonight. You know Millard Anderson from down the street, right?

BLAKE

(Tries to hide his confusion)

Ah, yes. I've seen you but I don't know if we've talked before.

(Extends his hand.)

Welcome.

MILLARD

(Stands and shakes BLAKE's hand)

Thank you, Mr. Black.

BLAKE

Just Blake, Mr. Anderson.

MILLARD

(Smiles uncomfortably)

Just Millard.

(They all sit uncomfortably, except for COLE)

COLE

Mr. Anderson was a gunsmith. He has some cool pictures in his photo album, Dad. He killed people in Vietnam and his wife is dead.

MILLARD

(Looks around, panicked.)

LINDA

Cole!

(Turns to MILLARD)

I am so sorry, Millard. Cole has …

MILLARD

(Holds up his hand to stop her.)

It's okay. I think I'm getting the idea that Cole may be on the right track. Those are some significant events in my life and I should probably be more open about them instead of … well, you know.

(They all eat uncomfortably for a couple bites. Then he tries to joke.)

But, Amelia dying, that wasn't me.

(Pauses with an uncomfortably look.)

I'm sure there were times she wanted to kill me though.

(Uncomfortable laughs from the three of them. COLE just eats.)

COLE

(Opens the photo album.)

Dad, look at these. Mr. Anderson built some cool guns.

BLAKE

(Looks at the photos and flips some pages and looks closer. Looks at MILLARD questioningly.)

You built those? Did you do the engravings and the inlays?

MILLARD

(Smiles with some pride.)

Yeah, that was my favorite part. Building a gun is one thing but, to me, the guns looked plain without them so it's something I just started doing.

BLAKE

Magnificent! That's some beautiful work. And you can shoot them? I mean, they look more like art than a weapon.

MILLARD

Oh, yeah! I built some of the finest shooting guns ever made.

(Addresses everyone.)

You folks should come to the range with me some time and I'll let you shoot some of my favorites.

BLAKE

I'd like that.

(Addresses LINDA and COLE)

What do you think? Would you guys like to shoot some of his guns?

LINDA

I've never shot a gun before. That might be fun.

COLE

Sure, that'd be fun. Excuse me. I have to go to the bathroom.

(Runs off)

(They all sit uncomfortably for a bit.)

MILLARD

Cole's an interesting boy.

BLAKE

(Gives a big smile.)

He got to you, didn't he?

MILLARD

(With mild embarrassment.)

That would be an understatement. My reputation as the meanest man in the neighborhood is in jeopardy.

(Pauses)

If you don't mind me asking?

BLAKE

Please do.

MILLARD

Well, he is just so unassuming, almost naive. Yet …

BLAKE

(This dialog is directed to LINDA as much as much as MILLARD. Almost as an apology to how he used to be.)

Don't let him fool you. Play a chess game with him sometime. He may act like he doesn't understand people, but I believe he calculates his moves just like he does in chess.

(As BLAKE talks the metaphor takes on a stronger and stronger meaning. It was just something he started saying but it starts to fully form as he talks.)

When I play chess, I use my pieces to get my queen into a good striking position. If I lose my queen, I'm in trouble. To Cole, the queen's a distraction. If he uses it at all, it's to lure you into a false sense of confidence or as a sacrifice to get one of your pieces out of his way. The rest of his pieces perform a well-orchestrated dance. It's a thing of beauty.

MILLARD

(Listening intently)

I'd like to see that someday.

BLAKE

You're welcome any time. It's well worth experiencing.

(More to LINDA almost as an apology.)

In my life, anger was my queen. I used it to get what I wanted with brute force.

(Now switches focus solely to MILLARD.)

Cole was born without a queen and he has learned to use all his other pieces to play a game a grandmaster would be proud of. He sucks you into his trap and you've lost the game.

MILLARD

(Thinks on this.)

I think you may be right, except for one thing.

BLAKE

And that would be?

MILLARD

I assure you, he sucked me into that trap, but I didn't lose.

(Looks at LINDA.)

I got out of my house, visited people for the first time in countless years and got a wonderful meal from a beautiful woman. I've found some people to go shoot my guns with at the range. Cole may have played me every step of the way, but I won the match.

ACT TWO

Scene 1

Setting: (MILLARD stands and walks to the audience as the stage lights behind him fade and come up on him at the front of the stage.)

MILLARD

It makes you wonder. I know I spent most of my life with anger being my go-to reaction to anything the least bit annoying. Like Blake, anger was my queen. But how many things in my life could have been better if I wasn't so quick to anger? Cole has shown me the answer to that question over and over. And the answer is: almost everything. You think about a kid like him going to public schools. Cole was noticeably different. And we all know how kids who are different are treated. To make it worse, Cole appeared to be an easy target. He wouldn't fight back. To fight back you have to be angry enough to retaliate. Cole couldn't even approach that threshold.

(MILLARD backs up as lights go dim on him and come up on brick wall. COLE stumbles backwards from behind the wall.)

JIMMY

(Steps from behind the wall and pushes COLE again.)

COLE

Hey, Jimmy. How'd you do on that math test? I had a tough time with it, but I ended up doing okay.

JIMMY

(Pushes COLE back and starts laughing, Jimmy addresses the other kids behind the wall.)

Look at that, guys. I can push him all day and he won't do anything back. In fact, I can do this …

(Punches COLE and COLE drops to the ground)

and he won't do a thing. What a wimp.

(Leans over to COLE who is starting to sit up and rub the side of his face.)

How did I do on the test?

(Pulls a waded paper out of his pocket)

I bombed it.

(There is a sound of a bell)

And now I want to go get my lunch so give me your money.

COLE

(Stands up.)

Yeah, I'm hungry, too. Sorry to hear about the test and sorry you don't have money for lunch. Don't worry though; I got enough on my account to cover you.

JIMMY

(Pushes COLE towards the door.)

Let's go, guys. The wimp's buying me lunch.

COLE

I think there's pizza today. I like the pizza.

(Turns to Jimmy)

Hey, if you need help with math let me know. I think I can explain it.

JIMMY

(Pushes COLE again)

(Lights fade to black.)

(Lights come up on MILLARD's porch.)

(COLE, with an obvious black eye, is walking home from school and passes MILLARD's house.)

MILLARD

(Excited to see COLE, and waves)

Hello, Cole.

COLE

(Turns and walks to the porch.)

Hello, Mr. Anderson.

MILLARD

(Sees the eye and gets a worried look.)

Cole! What happened?

COLE

(Nonchalantly.)

Jimmy, a kid from school, punched me.

MILLARD

(Stands and is irate.)

What? Let's go take care of this. Do you know where he lives? I'll deal with his parents and if they won't do anything then …

COLE

Take care of what?

MILLARD

Him punching you. We can't just let kids going around punching you. We'll …

COLE

(Thinks this is funny.)

What? We'll go yell at his parents, they'll yell at Jimmy, and things will be okay? We'll sit around a campfire, roasting marshmallows and sing songs afterwards?

(Thinks this is very funny.)

Is that how the world works, Mr. Anderson?

MILLARD

(Mockingly indignant)

Well ... It may. I know you won't start a fight but at least let me teach you to defend yourself. If I got anything out of the war it was the ability to fight. So, let me help you.

COLE

(Excited.)

I'd love for you to teach me. But I really couldn't see myself hitting anybody.

MILLARD

(Somewhat exasperated.)

Well, I guess I can teach you some stuff that doesn't involve hitting. Maybe I can save you a black eye or two. But you can't just let people do that to you, Cole. You, especially you, have to learn to stand up for yourself. You're a nice kid, people see that and you're a target.

COLE

I know that. My dad and I have had this talk. But the thing is, Mr. Anderson, things work out. I've watched normal people try to solve their problems by fighting back, and I really can't think of a time I've seen either side win.

MILLARD

(Realizes he can't defend his point.)

I'll let you handle it your way.

COLE

But you're going to still show me some stuff, right?

MILLARD

(Smiles)

Sure. I can at least teach you some blocks. So, put your arms in front of you like this. Blocking is small, quick movements. Use your opponent's weight against him.

(Shows some defensive blocks.)

(Lights fade to black.)

Scene 2

Setting: (Lights come up on COLE and JIMMY.)

JIMMY

Cole?

COLE

(Turns to face Jimmy)

Hey, Jimmy.

(Looks at Jimmy's eye)

Wow, what happened to your eye?

(Jokingly adds)

Looks like mine now. We have something in common.

JIMMY

(Meekly)

It's my dad. He found out about me failing the math test.

(Laughs a little under his breath)

Funny thing is, I don't think he even cares about the grade. Just think he wants a reason to be angry.

COLE

(Grins widely)

Sounds like how my Dad used to be. He changed though. Maybe yours will too.

JIMMY

(Shakes his head doubtfully)

Nah, he's only getting worse. Got himself in trouble and now …

(Stops when he realized he is about to tell something he shouldn't)

Hey, you said you could help me with math?

COLE

Sure, wanna do it right now? I'm heading home. You can eat dinner with us if you want. I think we're having meatloaf tonight. That's my favorite.

(They walk away and into the kitchen)

COLE

Hey, mom! This is Jimmy. He's the one I was telling you about that punched me.

JIMMY

(Gets a horrified look on his face.)

COLE

(Doesn't notice and keeps on going)

He has a black eye too because his dad punched him because he failed a math test, so I'm going to help him with math and Jimmy is going to stay for dinner.

(Starts leading the horrified JIMMY to the table to start studying. Then turns to his mom.)

Oh, and can we have a snack?

LINDA

(Smiling as politely as she can under the circumstances.)

Sure, why don't you come help me?

(Takes COLE to the pantry.)

What are you doing? That's the boy that hit you.

COLE

(Looks at her blankly waiting for her to get to the relevant point)

LINDA

(Frustrated she changes tactics.)

Look, you can't keep bringing people over to eat without asking me.

COLE

(Confused)

Why? We're having meatloaf, aren't we? The world needs to experience your meatloaf. It's not fair to just keep it our secret.

LINDA

(Shakes her head as she gives up reaches out and lovingly bops him on the head.)

Let's get the snack.

(The boys study at the kitchen table for a short time and BLAKE comes in.)

LINDA

(Looking irritated takes BLAKE to the pantry.)

So, Cole's been helping a kid from school with math and invited him over for dinner without even checking with me.

BLAKE

First off, you look radiant today.

LINDA

(Gives a shy schoolgirl shrug at the complement.)

BLAKE

Second, is that out of character for that crazy kid?

LINDA

No, it's not but the boy he brought over is the one who gave him a black eye yesterday. It's all I can do to stop myself from grabbing the kid by the neck and slamming his head against the sharp corner of the table again and again and …

BLAKE

(Stops her with a smile.)

My guess, Cole's method will end up working better. I challenge you to find a time when he, and everyone else, hasn't come out better. He's smart and even if he can't be angry it's like he can hone in on what's causing others to be angry and the time bomb is defused.

LINDA

(Walks to BLAKE and gives him a hug then backs up, looks at JIMMY and asks hopefully.)

Maybe just once on a softer surface?

BLAKE

Let's see if Cole's way works first. If it doesn't, I'll hold the boy's arms so he can't stop you.

LINDA

(Extends her hand to shake.)

It's a deal!

(Turns to the table.)

Cole! It's time for dinner. Can you help me set the table?

COLE

(COLE stands to help his mom but turns to his dad first.)

Hi, Dad. Hey, this is my friend, Jimmy Masters.

BLAKE

(BLAKE sits at the table with JIMMY.)

Hello, Jimmy. Jimmy Masters. That name sounds familiar.

JIMMY

That's my dad's name too, sir. But he goes by Jim.

BLAKE

(Gives a worried look indicating that this makes a lot of things clear.)

Oh, your dad is Jim Masters.

(Forces a change to a smile.)

Do you know you and Cole share a birthday? I was in the waiting room with your dad when you were born.

COLE

Hey, we're like twins.

JIMMY

Cool.

BLAKE

Say, you and Cole do look like twins with the black eyes. How'd you get yours?

JIMMY

(Hesitantly starts off)

I was riding my bike and …

COLE

I thought you said your dad hit you because you failed your math test?

(Turns to his dad)

I'm helping him with math. He's already doing better. His dad won't hit him again for failing math.

(As if he's struck with a thought he turns to the embarrassed JIMMY.)

Do we need to work on other subjects?

BLAKE

(Jumps into save JIMMY.)

That's great you want to help Jimmy. Why don't you two sit down and I'll finish helping your mom get dinner ready.

(The boys sit and BLAKE heads to the pantry.)

BLAKE

(Calls out)

Linda, where's the salt?

LINDA

(Confused)

It's on the table.

BLAKE

No, the other salt.

LINDA

What other salt? We only have one.

BLAKE

(Somewhat exasperated and giving a subtle order.)

Come help me look.

LINDA

(Walks over but still confused.)

What are you talking about?

BLAKE

I'm prosecuting Jimmy's dad. He has some serious drunk driving charges against him. His dad's out on bail right now

but he doesn't stand a chance. I've got enough to put him away.

LINDA

(Looks around the corner at JIMMY and then to BLAKE.)

You're going to take the poor kid's father away from him?

BLAKE

What? You just wanted to slam his head against the corner of the table a few minutes ago. Look what his dad did to him. He's a drunk. Jimmy's better off without him.

LINDA

I know I was angry at him for hitting Cole. But look at them now.

(She looks at BLAKE pleadingly)

You can't send that boy's father away. You were right earlier, Cole's way is better. You have to find a Cole-way to get that father back to his family and make him a father.

BLAKE

That's not my job! That's the other side's job.

LINDA

Well then, switch sides. I won't live with a man who's sending children's parents to jail if there's another way.

COLE

(Calls from the table)

You guys find that other kind of salt yet. It's taking a while.

LINDA

(Leans around the corner.)

We're looking, honey. We'll be right there.

(Turns back to BLAKE)

Look, if the system isn't out to fix problems, then the system is wrong. That's your job, fix the system.

BLAKE

(Tries to respond but LINDA storms off)

LINDA

(Calms herself before she gets to the table.)

We couldn't find the other kind of salt, so we'll have to make do.

JIMMY

That's okay, Mrs. Black. We only have one kind of salt at home, so I'm used to it.

BLAKE

(Sits down.)

So, Jimmy, tell me about yourself. What do you like to do?

JIMMY

(Squirms uncomfortably.)

Guess video games and stuff.

BLAKE

Stuff, huh? I hear stuff is popular now. When I was a kid stuff wasn't that popular. We built a tree house, played cops and robbers, but stuff wasn't much of a thing.

JIMMY

(Smiles at this.)

I like baseball.

COLE

Me too. Been trying to get in little league but that hasn't happened yet. Dad always says …

BLAKE

(Interrupts.)

Baseball, huh? I remember your dad talking about how he used to play baseball.

JIMMY

He used to play and was pretty good. But he doesn't play no more. Doesn't do much anymore.

BLAKE

That's too bad. Looks like both your dads need to get out and do more.

LINDA

(Reaches over and takes BLAKE's hand.)

(Lights fade to black)

(Lights come up on MILLARD down stage.)

MILLARD

(With enters with an amused smile.)

Other kind of salt? Guess maybe there were looking for some of that newfangled sea salt. With Cole having the ex-biggest bully as his best friend no one picked on him anymore.

(Smiles and shakes his head)

Makes you wonder what would have happened if Cole had acted like I would have and hit Jimmy back. I've done that plenty of times.

(Looks down at the floor sadly)

I never had a best friend.

(After a moment of reflecting MILLARD straightens up and cheerfully announces)

But now I do.

(Fade to black.)

Scene 3

Setting: (Lights come up on JIM and NANCY MASTERS are sitting at a table. JIM has his elbows on the table with his head in his hands and a bottle of alcohol by him. NANCY has a box of tissues by her and is wiping her eyes.)

JIM MASTERS

CPS? The school called CPS?

NANCY MASTERS

(Not at all sympathetic.)

And this is going to look just great to the judge with your latest drunk driving charges. They can lock your worthless butt up forever as far as I'm concerned but if you cause them to take Jimmy away from me, I'll … I'll ...

JIM MASTERS

(Slams his hand on the table and yells.)

You'll do what!?

NANCY MASTERS

(Slams her hands on the table and stands.)

I'll leave! And why wait? I should have done it years ago.

(Storms off stage.)

JIM MASTERS

(Dumbfounded that she has left. Sits for a moment thinking about it then pours

(himself a drink. He holds the glass up and looks at as he swirls it around and then starts talking to it.)

You know, I am starting to think you may not be the solution to my problems but maybe the cause of my problems. Years ago, Nancy and I used to take you out and dance. We had a good time. But the threesome we had started causing a problem. She didn't like the way you and I were together. When we added Jimmy to the mix she really started having an issue with you and me.

(Smiles as he remembers.)

Jimmy. Man, how I looked forward to my days of baseball, teaching him to ride a bike. I had dreams of me and him going on camping trips together, of him and me drifting on a boat the lake and fishing. But those never happened. You became more important than those dreams.

(Sets the glass down and pushes it away and puts his head in his hands and cries.)

I hit Jimmy. Instead of doing all those things with him, I ignored him and then hit him.

(Calms down and looks at the glass of liquor.)

Well, buddy, I think it is long past time for our relationship to end. I just hope it’s not too late.

(Walks away from the table. Stops. Thinks. Turns around, rushed to the table and takes a drink. Looks at the bottle and breaks down crying. If possible, he could throw the bottle.)

(Lights go down as the table is cleared off.)

(JIM puts on a suit jacket and sits back at the table. His lawyer, REYNOLDS, walks it.)

(Lights come back up.)

REYNOLDS

(REYNOLDS looks through some papers and then at MASTERS unsympathetically.)

Here we are again, Jim. This is what? Your third time for drunk driving?

(REYNOLDS looks back at the case file.)

And, as an added bonus, looks like we get to deal with the school questioning your son's black eye. You want to explain that to me?

JIM MASTERS

(Shakes his head no.)

There's no good explaining to do.

(Pauses and thinks.)

She left me. Nancy took Jimmy out of school and went to her parents out East. She won't even talk to me.

(They both pause and look at each other.)

I'm gonna quit drinking.

REYNOLDS

Sounds familiar. Didn't you say that last time?

JIM MASTERS

Probably, but it is different this time. I'll do what it takes. I can't lose my family. I can't continue to be the man I have become.

REYNOLDS

(Looks at MASTERS and tries to size up his sincerity. Gives a sigh.)

Well, that may be true but we're very limited in our options. Having Black coming after you baring his teeth doesn't help. I don't think he sleeps well at night unless he knows he's destroyed someone's life that day.

I think we can get your jail time to six months, keep the probation down but you'll have a felony conviction. Think that is the best we can hope for from my history with Black.

JIM MASTERS

(Shoulders lower, he sinks into the chair.)

Six months. Lose my job. Lose the house. Nancy wouldn't have a reason to even come back. Be surprised if there's anyone waiting for me when I get out.

REYNOLDS

Look, Jim we can take this to trial if you want, that's your right, but I think we need to see what kind of deal we can negotiate. Ok? I have Black meeting us here to see what kind of deal he's willing to give.

JIM MASTERS

What? I can't face him again. I'm still shaking from last time.

REYNOLDS

Like I said, we can go to trial if you want but I strongly suggest we give this a shot. Try to make him see you as a human being instead of 'The Defendant.'

(Knock on the door.)

There he is now. I can send him away if you want but I suggest you … we try to work something out with him.

JIM MASTERS

(Nods)

Let's see what happens.

REYNOLDS

(Opens the door.)

Come in, Black. I think we can get this over with and move on.

(Jokingly)

If you work with me, I'll bake you some cookies.

BLAKE

(Gives REYNOLDS a cold stare and doesn't smile. Sits in a chair across from MASTERS and stares at him.)

JIM MASTERS

(Looks very nervous and wipes his forehead with his hand.)

BLAKE

You're a drunk.

REYNOLDS

Black! Can't you back off just once and try to be a human? You …

JIM MASTERS

(Interrupts.)

It's okay, Reynolds. I have it coming.

(Turns to BLAKE.)

Yes sir, I am. You'd think I'd of learned from watching what it did to my dad but I didn't. His beatings …

BLAKE

Beatings? You want me to see you as a victim?

JIM MASTERS

(Goes from being nervous to angry.)

A victim? No! I made choices in my life and I can't take 'em back.

REYNOLDS

(Tries to stop JIM from talking.)

Jim!

JIM MASTERS

(Holds up his hand to his lawyer to stop them.)

I'm only a victim of my choices. As many times as I've tried to stop drinking and failed, I am still only a victim of myself.

BLAKE

(Harshly)

What about your family? You going to try and make me feel sorry for you and how your choices broke your life? What about your family?

JIM MASTERS

(Angrily stands and raises his hand but sees REYNOLDS stand and sits back down.)

No, don't feel sorry for me.

REYNOLDS

(REYNOLDS is upset because he/she has totally lost control of the negotiation.)

Jim!

JIM MASTERS

(Ignores REYNOLDS)

You can hold me responsible for the wrong I've done to them.

BLAKE

I'll do that. That's exactly what I'll be doing. I'll be holding you responsible.

(BLAKE stands, paces for a bit.)

You never did get into baseball with your son, did you?

JIM MASTERS

What?

BLAKE

Baseball. You remember? We were in the waiting room together when our sons were born. You said he was going to be a baseball player. Did that ever happen?

JIM MASTERS

(Very confused as he/she tries to remember back.)

That was you there? Seems like forever ago. Just a foggy memory.

BLAKE

But you never got into baseball with your son?

JIM MASTERS

No. I kept meaning to over the years, but things come up.

BLAKE

Yeah, my son wants to play but things keep coming up. Hard to fit it into my schedule, you know?

(Paces some more).

You said you tried to quit drinking many times. You ever get help?

JIM MASTERS

No, I try quitting for a while and go back to it. It's stronger than me. But I have to change. I need help. I have to get my family back.

BLAKE

Would you consider AA? Think you could stop drinking?

JIM MASTERS

Sir, I think I am past the point of having options. I have to find a way to change. I need help. I need help.

BLAKE

(Turns to REYNOLDS.)

Here's the deal, Mr. Masters be charged with a misdemeanor, one-year probation provided he attends AA and supervised community service through coaching little league. I'll be the supervision. My son wants to play, I wanted to get involved but have no idea how to play baseball. I'll be assistant coach on the team with our sons.

(Turns and opens the door and looks back.)

Any objection to this or can we call the matter closed?

REYNOLDS

(Exchanges a bewildered look with MASTERS then tries to look in control with BLAKE.)

We find that reasonable. We can close the matter.

BLAKE

(Starts to leave but turns back.)

Oh, and white chocolate Macadamia nut but without coconut.

REYNOLDS

(Very confused.)

What?

BLAKE

You said you'd bake me cookies if I worked with you. I don't want just any cookies.

(Leaves with a hard shutting of the door. As REYNOLDS and MASTERS look at each other to try to figure out what happened.)

JIM MASTERS

You must make some great cookies.

BLAKE

(BLAKE sticks his head back in the door.)

Hey, you guys want to come over for dinner?

(Lights fade)

Scene 4

Setting: (Downstage lights come up on MILLARD. BLAKE, LINDA, JIM and NANCY are sitting at the BLAKE'S kitchen table.)

MILLARD

Dinner at the Blacks.

(Smiles reminiscently.)

Those were good times and they lasted for many years.

(Walks to the table as the lights come up on it.)

That was a wonderful dinner, Linda. Let me clear the table.

JIM MASTERS

I'll give you a hand.

BLAKE

What's the game tonight? Gin, spades, canasta?

LINDA

(Lighthearted bantering.)

I don't know if I want to play cards. You cheat too much.

BLAKE

Cheat? You're just envious of my advanced skill level.

LINDA

I guess cheating's a skill. No one can get the hands you get without cheating.

JIM MASTERS

I'm with Linda on this, Blake. No one is that lucky. You're a cheat.

BLAKE

(Laughs)

Well, what then?

NANCY MASTERS

You guys figure out what you want to play. Linda and I were going to plan a birthday party for Jimmy and Cole.

MILLARD

Hey, that sounds more fun than hanging out with you bozos. Please tell me we're talking about one of those big inflatable, water slide, jumpy house things. I keep seeing those and want a reason to rent one.

LINDA

We were going to have it our back yard. We don't have room for that.

NANCY MASTERS

And that's not in the budget Linda and I were looking at.

MILLARD

Yard? Budget? I have both.

LINDA

(Laughs at Milliard)

You're going to put a water slide and a dozen kids in your yard? The yard you spent years kicking kids off of?

MILLARD

Sure. I'll go get a shovel right now and dig a mud pit for the end of the slide. Would that make you happy? Now let's get serious. Burgers and hot dogs, or we going to be sophisticated? Maybe cater some French cuisine.

LINDA

You crack me up, Millard. French cuisine. We would like kids to actually come.

NANCY MASTERS

Yeah, you bring that out at this party and we won't be able to get anyone to the end of school party we were planning next month.

MILLARD

Next month? We don't want to rent that big balloon thing two months in a row. Any idea where I could buy one? I'm sure there are some other reasons to bring it out, so it doesn't make sense to rent it over and over.

NANCY MASTERS

Do you know what that will do to your lawn? You're so proud of it.

MILLARD

That grass just reminds me of what a butt I was for so many years. I would love to be able to sit on the porch every

morning with my cup of coffee and look at a mud pit in my yard and remember the kids screaming and yelling and playing. Forget about the grass. Let's get me a mud pit.

Scene 5

Setting: (Lights down upstage and come up downstage. MILLARD stands and walks into the lights.)

MILLARD

Time goes fast. Seems like we were planning parties for twelve-year-olds one year and planning graduation parties the next. The only way you could convince me the time passed is how badly they wore the balloon house out and the beautiful, permanent mud pit in my yard. God, I loved those years.

(Walks to his porch as the lights come up on it.)

Used to wait for Cole to walk home from school. He was always interested in what I wanted to talk about or teach him.

COLE

(Seventeen years old COLE walks up to the porch.)

Hi, Mr. Anderson. How's your day been?

MILLARD

Was okay until you showed up. You here to waste my time?

COLE

(Walks up and hugs MILLARD)

You bet I am. Chess?

MILLARD

Not in a million years. I want to win at something. Let's work on your fighting. You're looking soft.

COLE

Again? Really? I'm still hurting from last time. I think you broke some ribs. An old coot like you shouldn't be able to hit that hard.

MILLARD

We'll take it easy. Weapons today. Disarming specifically.

COLE

(Shrugs)

That sounds less painful. What kind of weapons?

MILLARD

Guns, of course. Not many people carrying around swords these days.

(Pulls a gun out of his jacket.)

COLE

(Looks at him in mock horror)

MILLARD

What? I have a license and you can't be too careful nowadays.

(Hands the gun to COLE.)

COLE

(Examines the gun and laughs.)

What? You going to use it as a club if someone attacks you? It doesn't even have a firing pin.

MILLARD

Perfect for what we need. You verified it's safe so point it at me.

COLE

(Lifts the gun towards MILLARD but before COLE can react MILLARD has the gun, and it is pointing at COLE.)

Hey, I wasn't ready. Give me that.

MILLARD

(Hands the gun back.)

You ready? You're robbing me and pointing the gun at me.

COLE

Yeah, I'm ready this time.

(Lifts the gun.)

Now, give me your money.

MILLARD

(Glances over COLE's shoulder, COLE follows MILLARD's glance and finds the gun pointed at him again.)

COLE

Hey, that wasn't fair. You distracted me.

MILLARD

(Sarcastically)

I'm so sorry Mr. Thief. Here's your gun again.

(Hands the gun back)

Please continue robbing me. Come on, Cole. Distraction is part of the technique. People naturally follow other people's eyes. You use that to get the advantage. Let's go slow. Point the gun.

(Slowly demonstrates)

My first step is to look somewhere to distract him, then, in one motion, step to the side, out of the range of the gun, grab the barrel of the gun with one hand and pry it against the thumb with the other hand. The thumb is your opponent's weakest spot. If you twist the gun against it, your opponent can't stop you and can easily take control of the gun. Now you try.

COLE

(COLE tries it once and does it just like an expert.)

That's pretty awesome, Mr. Anderson. Now answer a question for me. I take the gun and then what?

MILLARD

(Thinks for a minute and then sits down.)

I lost count of the number of times I did exactly what I've shown you and I know what I did every time.

(Looks at COLE pleadingly.)

Whatever you do, don't do that. The nightmares never leave.

COLE

(Places his hand on MILLARD's shoulder.)

That was a different time, a different situation and you were a different person.

MILLARD

That may be true but that will never make it right. War is nothing but legalized murder and I took part in it.

(Looks up at COLE.)

Watching you grow up over all these years, Cole. Wish I'd have known then all you've taught me. I could've made so many different choices in life.

COLE

(Sits and examines MILLARD.)

Don't give me any credit, Mr. Anderson. The thing is, you have a choice. I don't. If my brain was normal, I'm sure I would've made the same choices you did. And all those choices you made, they lead to me siting right now on the porch with someone I truly care about. I'm not totally sure there's such a thing as right and wrong choices. Look at Jimmy and his dad. Would they have the relationship they have now if his dad made all the 'right' choices earlier in Jimmy's life?

MILLARD

(Tries to smile.)

I'm sure there are a lot of people whose path's I crossed in the war wish I'd made some different choices. Sure, their wives or kids wish I'd made a different choice.

COLE

(Attempts to not be COLE for this one instance so he can understand but he can't.)

I don't know Mr. Anderson. I'll never experience what haunts you and never understand why it haunts you.

(Lights fade from the porch and come up on MILLARD as he comes to the down stage.)

MILLARD

Heavy stuff, isn't it? Choices? Right? Wrong? Is there a difference? Whew! …

(Looks out and tentatively smiles)

I can't answer that, but I can tell you I was blessed with watching a life where all the choices sure seemed to be right. It was a fun life to watch and to watch the world bow to him.

Scene 6

Setting: (Lights up upstage on the kitchen with COLE and BLAKE standing talking to each other.)

Scene Note: (There is flexibility in this scene depending on availability of actors for bit parts. This scene can be done only with MR. THOMPON or add MRS. LATHAM and more people to Cole's line. The point is, people are there because Cole has built a relationship with them.)

BLAKE

The Big Bite Burger? Why would you want to work there? You're so much smarter than that, Cole. Millard could get you a job at the range repairing guns. Or my law firm needs research assistants. 'Would you like fries with that' doesn't begin to reach your potential.

COLE

I don't know, Dad. I like the idea. I mean, look at all the people I would get to meet? You know I like to meet people. It isn't a career; it's a summer job.

BLAKE

Son, I gave up pretending I could make better choices than you a long time ago. If you feel Big Bite Burger is your calling, well, give 'em fries.

COLE

Thanks, Dad. And I'll be able to get you a discount.

(Lights go down on the Kitchen scene and come up on the restaurant scene.)

(COLE walks from the Black's Kitchen and to the restaurant counter and puts on a Big Bite Burger apron and hat as he goes. When he gets there SANDY looks at COLE with distain. COLE just smiles and goes to the people in his line with MRS. LATHAM and MR. THOMPSON waiting behind him.)

COLE

Mrs. Latham, I told you, you need to stop showing up here. People are starting to figure out we have something going on.

MRS. LATHAM

Let them talk, Cole. Just let them talk. A love like ours can't hidden.

COLE

You're right. We only live once. Elope tonight?

MRS. LATHAM

Not tonight. The finale of Dancing with the Stars in on.

COLE

(Laughs)

You've just broken my heart, Mrs. Latham.

MRS. LATHAM

(Laughs back)

Cole, thanks for making an old lady feel special. You're one of a kind.

COLE

Thank you, Mrs. Latham. What can I get you today?

MRS. LATHAM

Just a chicken sandwich and a chocolate shake.

COLE

You got it. You're number is 75. Have a great day and let me know when you are ready to elope.

MRS. LATHAM

I will, Cole. I will.

(Turns and goes to a table. MR. THOMPON comes up to the counter.)

COLE

The usual, Mr. Thompson?

MR. THOMPSON

No, Cole. I'm feeling feisty today, put some jalapenos on the burger.

COLE

You sure? Last time you did that Mrs. Thompson came in the next day and threatened me if I ever let you do that again. Said she couldn't sleep all night because the smell was so bad.

MR. THOMPSON

(Looks mildly embarrassed but not angry.)

Yeah, you're right. The usual.

COLE

You want some fries with that?

MR. THOMPSON

Small.

COLE

So, how's the farm going?

MR. THOMPSON

Slow. Hard to compete with those corporate farms. But I guess I'll keep going until I can't anymore. Then I may need you to put a good word in for me here.

SANDY

(Continues to scowl and act bored.)

COLE

I'm sure it won't come to that, but if I can help you let me know. I've got Tuesday off this week. Jimmy and I can come help harvest again if you want.

(He looks at SANDY next to him.)

Hey, Sandy. If you don't work Tuesday, you can come too.

SANDY

I'll make sure I work that day.

COLE

(Shrugs)

Your loss. You're order number #76 Mr. Thompson. It should be right out. See you Tuesday.

MR. THOMPSON

(Starts to leave but turns back to COLE.)

Oh, you still working on guns?

COLE

Yours was the Glock 40, right?

MR. THOMPSON

Yeah, it’s giving me some trouble.

COLE

Most likely the issue with your Glock is …

(There is a tap on COLEs shoulder, and he turns to look.)

Hey, Mr./Mrs. Barns. What can I do for you?

BARNS

We need to have a quick talk.

COLE

Sure. Mr. Thompson, just drop the gun off and I’ll get it taken care of.

(Turns to SANDY)

Can you handle this while I am gone?

MR. THOMPSON

(Goes and sits at a table and waits.)

SANDY

(Looks at COLE distastefully and then at the empty line. Sarcastically)

Yeah, I think I got this under control.

(Sits on the counter.)

COLE

Great. Thanks.

(Follows BARNS to a table or off to the side.)

What's up, Mr./Mrs. Barns?

BARNS

Look, Cole. If we're going to compete with the fast-food chain restaurant next door, we must do two things: be cheaper and be faster. You can't have these conversations in line. Get the order and get to the next customer. You're doing a great job, I like having you here, but you need to speed up your order taking.

COLE

I don't mean to question you Mr./Mrs. Barns, but if people want a quick, cheap burger, why come here in the first place? The burgers next door are much better.

BARNS

(Eyes pop open wide and her head goes back.)

What!

COLE

(Continues right on)

Seems like you'd want to be different than the place next door, not the same.

BARNS

(Irritated but controlling herself.)

Look, Cole, that's a beautiful and idealistic vision, but it's not a good business model. So, just get back to the register and take orders. Have your conversations after work.

COLE

I can't do that, Mr./Mrs. Barns. Even if I wanted, I couldn't do that.

BARNS

Cole, those are the conditions to work here. If you can't do that then you can't work here.

COLE

(Smiles and extends his hand.)

I want you to know how much I enjoyed working here. Guess I'll be seeing you around.

(Takes his Big Bite Burger hat and apron off, hands them to Barns and walks back to the counter where it is just SANDY sitting on the counter.)

Hey, Sandy.

SANDY

(Sees MR./MRS. BARNS and jumps off the counter.)

COLE

Sorry to do this to you but you're going to have to handle the shift alone. I won't be working here anymore.

SANDY

(Sarcastically)

It just won't be the same without you. What will I ever do?

COLE

Ha! You crack me up. I'm gonna miss working with you.

(Walks out to MR. THOMPSON.)

I have some free time now Mr. Thompson. I can stop by tomorrow; we can get your Glock working right and I can help you around the farm.

MR. THOMPSON

Thanks, Cole.

COLE

(Starts to leave but then stops and turns back towards SANDY.)

Oh, I just remembered. I'll be competing in a chess tournament Saturday. There's a chance I could win the regionals, which will set me up for nationals. You wanna come?

MR. THOMPSON

(Mouths 'Chess tournament' in disbelief that COLE would ask a girl to that. Then watches the scene transpire.)

SANDY

(Continuing the sarcasm)

Gee whiz, Beaver! A chess tournament! That sounds swell. But shucks, I have a date with, Trent, the quarterback.

COLE

(Walks closer, leans against the counter and plays right back at her.)

Tough choice; quarterback or future national chess champion. Hate to be in your shoes with a choice like that.

SANDY

I know, right. What's a girl to do? Oh, I know, not go with the loser.

COLE

Great, tournament starts at one. And don't be so hard on Trent. I know he isn't that smart, but I think 'loser' is pretty harsh.

SANDY

Ewww, wait until Trent hears you said he's stupid. Even Jimmy can't protect you.

COLE

What? Wait? You think I'm the loser? Preposterous.

(Looks at MR. THOMPSON in mock disbelief.)

MR. THOMPSON

(Watches on to see how this goes.)

SANDY

Let's see; chess team, debate team, no fashion sense, continuous creepy smile, hangs out with a weird old man, doesn't go to football games or parties. Yeah, loser.

COLE

(Still playing)

Wow! This changes everything. Loser?

(Paces to MR. THOMPSON.)

Loser?

MR. THOMPSON

(Doesn't know how to respond.)

COLE

(Rushes back to the counter and very dramatically.)

Sandy, you have to help me. I can't be a loser. Should I cut my hair different or wear some different clothes? Quit debate and forfeit the scholarships? Would you do me a big favor? Go shopping with me. I need an image consultant. Would you do that?

SANDY

(Tries to keep her degrading attitude and hold back a laugh but fails and smiles but quickly puts her old face back on.)

Ha!

COLE

Wow!

SANDY

(Defensively)

What?

COLE

Your eyes! They light up like the morning sun when you laugh. Stunning.

MR. THOMPSON

(Impressed with COLE's ability to turn this around.)

SANDY

(Smiles shyly not knowing how to take the complement.)

COLE

(Stops the mocking and is very sincere.)

So, what do you think? Image consultant? You have great style. You always look beautiful.

SANDY

(Smiles a real smile)

COLE

See! There's those eyes again.

SANDY

I might be able to help.

COLE

(Turns to MR. THOMPSON.)

MR. THOMPSON

(Thumbs up to COLE.)

COLE

(Turns back to SANDY.)

Saturday?

SANDY

Saturday.

COLE

Chess tournament?

SANDY

Not a chance.

COLE

Movie?

SANDY

Movie.

COLE

Dinner?

SANDY

Dinner.

COLE

Parking?

MR. THOMPSON

(Head goes into his hands.)

SANDY

(Laughs hysterically grabs something off the counter and throws it at him.)

Get out of here you weirdo. Pick me up at 5 on Saturday!

COLE

(Smiles and runs off.)

(Lights go down in the restaurant and come up downstage.)

MILLARD

(Walks in laughing)

They make a cute couple. But are you feeling sorry for Cole for being let go from Big Bite Burger? Well, don't. People like Mr. Thompson came in more for Cole than the food and they started going to the fast-food place next door. Mr./Mrs. Barns is a businessperson and he/she started thinking about what Cole had said about competing with them. Barns called Cole in for a talk.

(Lights come up on the restaurant and MR./MRS. BARNS is talking to COLE.)

BARNS

I was hurt when you told me our burgers weren't as good as the ones next door. Well, I went over there. You're right. I've been trying to compete on price with a major chain and I am losing the game. I think I need to quit knowing and start listening.

COLE

(Sits and smiles.)

BARNS

(Has to prompt COLE to start.)

So, start talking.

COLE

I don't know, Mr./Mrs. Barns. You're a smart person and I think you have a fine place. If you really want my ideas, I only have a couple. When I was off, I got to go with my friend Jimmy to help Mr. Thompson out at his farm. That was a lot of fun and he fed us great. Mrs. Thompson would make us hamburgers with their tomatoes and lettuce, and the meat was from one of his neighbor's cows. Get this, Mrs. Thompson makes her own buns. I've never seen that before. Next door has nothing on Mrs. Thompson. Mr. Thompson wants to sell more produce so I'll bet he would work out a great deal. Same with his neighbor selling beef. I'm sure he would love to get his beef sold here.

BARNS

(Nods with a big smile)

Hmm … Buy local, I like that. I'll give him and his neighbor a call. What else?

COLE

Well, it isn't that hard. People like to be noticed. They like to be talked to, remembered. Seems like if the first thing the cashier did was learn the customer's name, something about them and then try to remember them when they came back, seems like that and some good food would get people coming in here.

BARNS

Hmmm, I think that's a good idea too and easy to do. It's done.

(Lights go down on the Restaurant and come up downstage.)

Scene 7

Setting: (MILLARD is addressing the audience.)

MILLARD

Well, that's all it took. Big Bite Burger took off and opened a second location. Cole, even as a young man, was Mr./Mrs. Barns go to man for ideas. Cole and Sandy became a couple. She had a lot of adjusting to Cole's ways but like everyone else infected by Cole, she learned his way was better.

(Laughs and shakes his head.)

I always like the dark alley story Sandy tells. It starts off just like you'd expect a dark alley story to start off. They are late so they take a short cut though a dark alley.

(As MILLARD is talking the scene starts unfolding behind him so he steps out of the way. The alley can be done just with area lights.)

DEAN

(Has a gun pointed at COLE.)

Give me your wallet and purse and anything else of value.

COLE

(Unfazed by a gun being pointed at him but instead remarks on it.)

Hey, a Remington 1911 R1. Nice gun. Can I see it?

DEAN

(Raises the gun higher at COLE's chest.)

Yeah, I'll give you a great view.

COLE

(Looks over at SANDY and DEAN follows COLE's glance only to have the gun stripped from his hands and briefly pointed at him. Then COLE examines the gun after removing the clip.)

Man, you need to clean this better. It's too nice of a gun to let it stay in this shape.

(Puts the clip back in and hands it back to DEAN. Then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out his wallet.)

So? The whole wallet or can I just give you the cash?

DEAN

(Looks at the gun confused.)

COLE

(Takes DEAN's hand with the gun and pushes it up.)

Got to hold it up. Not really a robbery if it is pointed at the ground. That would be just a guy asking for a hand when he's down. Not many people willing to just help a stranger so I get the gun.

(Turns to SANDY)

How much cash you have? I only have $40. It hardly seems worth the effort.

SANDY

(She starts casually rummaging through her purse and calling out items.)

Lipstick, pen, pencil, nail file. Oh, here's a five.

(Hand it forward without looking as she continues to go through her purse.)

Oh, here's a Milky Way I was saving.

(Looks up)

You a Milky Way fan? Cole isn't. He says a candy bar should have nuts.

COLE

(Looking at the thug with genuine interest)

Don't you think?

(Puts his hand to his mouth to prevent SANDY from hearing.)

Please agree with me. She thinks I'm strange because I only like candy bars with nuts.

DEAN

(Watches in disbelief.)

COLE

Sorry, looks like $45 is all we can do.

SANDY

And a Milky Way.

COLE

(Looks at DEAN.)

You really don't want that, do you? I mean, go buy a Snicker's on the way home. You don't have to feel obligated to take it.

DEAN

(Still has the gun haphazardly raise and hesitantly takes the money and the candy bar with the other hand.)

COLE

(Looks at SANDY.)

Guess that blows our dinner plans. Wanna see what my Mom's making?

SANDY

Any chance it's her meatloaf? I would rather eat that than go out to dinner anyways.

COLE

No, Wednesday is meatloaf day. Think she mentioned something about trying to make stuffed pork chops. She's experimenting more lately.

SANDY

Looks like an evening with your folks. This is turning out pretty good.

COLE

(Realized DEAN is still standing there with the gun still up, watching them discuss dinner plans.)

You hungry? My mom's a pretty good cook. We can clean your gun at my house, too.

DEAN

What?

COLE

Dinner, clean your gun. You play chess? We could play a game if you want.

SANDY

Cole, don't do that. That's just rude.

(Turns to DEAN.)

He likes to show off with how good he is at chess. Don't give him that satisfaction.

COLE

Okay, no chess, but dinner?

DEAN

What? No! I can't go to your house for dinner.

SANDY

You already had dinner?

DEAN

(In a confused state)

No?

COLE

It's a free meal then. It'll make that $45 last longer. So, come on.

DEAN

I can't.

COLE

(Takes the gun again and points it at DEAN.)

I'm not asking now, I'm telling.

DEAN

(Backs up in fear.)

Okay! Okay!

COLE

Great.

(They all start walking)

You like mashed potatoes? If she's making pork chops she'll have mashed potatoes.

DEAN

Sure?

SANDY

Why get his hopes up? You don't even know if she's making the stuffed pork chops.

COLE

(To the DEAN)

Just ignore Debbie Downer here. I'm almost certain Mom's making pork chops, and by almost certain I mean I have no idea.

(Puts the gun in the back of his pants.)

SANDY

(Gives COLE an affectionate punch in the shoulder as they walk off stage.)

(Lights come up on the kitchen where BLAKE is helping LINDA with dinner but there is some friskiness involved. The three walk in and interrupt.)

COLE

Hey, Mom & Dad.

(LINDA and BLAKE turn.)

LINDA

(Straightens here dress when she realized they had an audience.)

Oh, Hi, Sandy.

(Goes and gives her a hug.)

How many tonight?

COLE

Just the three of us.

BLAKE

I thought you two had a date tonight?

COLE

Yeah, we did but we got robbed on the way, so I don't have any money. Oh, that reminds me, this is …

(Realized he doesn't know DEAN's name.)

DEAN

(Not sure how to act.)

Dean.

COLE

This is Dean. Dean, this is my beautiful mother, Linda.

LINDA

Nice to meet you, Dean.

(Waves or shakes his hand.)

COLE

This is my Dad, Blake. He's a prosecuting attorney.

DEAN

(Gets a panicked look and wishes he wasn't there.)

COLE

(Before BLAKE can respond.)

Oh, Dad! Dean has a really nice Remington.

(Pulls out the gun and hands it to his dad.)

We're going to clean it after dinner.

DEAN

(Looks around in a panic, ready to react to what happens next. But is surprised when nothing happens.)

LINDA

Well, we didn't plan on all of you, so I'll have to get some more pork chops ready.

COLE

(Points at SANDY)

Ha! Pork chops, I told you.

SANDY

(Scowls at COLE.)

I'll give you a hand, Mrs. Black.

BLAKE

We have some time so let's clean that gun now.

(All three sit at the kitchen table.)

So, Dean, other than armed robbery, what do you do for a living?

DEAN

(Looks around hopelessly.)

COLE

Dad! You're starting to sound like me.

(Turns to DEAN.)

Do you have a job?

DEAN

(Shakes his head.)

COLE

We have openings at Big Bite Burger if you want.

DEAN

(Hesitantly)

Sure?

COLE

We don't allow moonlighting, so you'd have to give up your other job. But we pay well, so you'll probably do okay without the second income. Would that be okay?

DEAN

(Finally starts to get his feet under him.)

This is crazy. You're offering me a job after I tried to rob you?

COLE

You didn't try, you did. You have my money, so it was a successful robbery.

DEAN

(Reaches in his pocket and pulls the money out.)

Here!

COLE

(Holds up his hands.)

Hey, you earned that money. You needed it bad enough to risk your life, your freedom, so it's yours. Are we going to clean the gun or not?

(Lights go down on the kitchen and come up downstage.)

Scene 8

Setting: (MILLARD is addressing the audience.)

MILLARD

Yeah, that's how things worked with Cole. If you had a gun, he'd disarm you, if you were angry, he'd disarm you. Because Cole responded differently, everything he touched became different and better.

(Meekly walks towards the front of the stage and softly addresses them.)

Well, we're getting towards the end of the show, and I sure have enjoyed it. You guys heard part of my story back there. War does strange things to a man. Back then, I would start forming a friendship with someone and the next thing I knew I'd be putting pressure on a wound and screaming for a medic while I watched my new friend's life fade away in front of me.

(Shrugs)

So, I did the only thing I could to stay sane. I quit forming bonds with people. Even when I got married, I kept that distance because I didn't want that pain again. But, when she did leave me, I felt a different pain. Regret. I had the sweetest, most beautiful woman right here with me and I never lived a life with her. She looked past all my faults and loved this stupid old man.

(Looks up excitedly)

But that changed. I ended up being one of the most beloved people in the neighborhood. I quit regretting not doing it before because all those mistakes I made before then made all the days after shine extra bright. You can't love with the

ferocity I loved those last years your whole life. Most people have to pace themselves. Well, I knew my life didn't have many years left so I didn't have to pace myself. I saved it all for the end and formed countless beautiful friendships. And tonight, here with you, I've felt a friendship growing.

(Questions the audience)

Do you feel it? I mean, can I consider you my friends?

(Waits for the response.)

Thanks. Well, friends the show is coming to the end. There's only one more scene and I'm in it. But I don't have a speaking role, so you're about done hearing from me. It's been wonderful.

(A casket is brought out and the lights come up on it and down everywhere else. MILLARD walks behind the casket, opens it and looks in.)

It looks like I'm sleeping.

(Looks out to the audience.)

But I feel like I've just woken up. Bye, friends.

(Closes the casket and leaves the stage.)

(The entire cast comes out with chairs and sits in front of the audience so that the audience is actually part of the mourners.)

COLE

(Off to one side of the casket, pacing and acting somewhat erratic.)

LINDA

(Off to the other side of the casket with BLAKE and SANDY, worriedly watching COLE.)

Blake, I'm very worried about him.

BLAKE

Me too. He's never experienced anything like this before.

SANDY

He loved Millard so much.

BLAKE

This is probably the first time he has ever felt loss and the pain that comes with it.

LINDA

Look at him. I think he's going to lose it.

(Turns to BLAKE pleadingly)

Please help him.

BLAKE

(Insecurely walks over to COLE and places his hand on COLE's shoulder. COLE turns and embraces his dad.)

It'll be okay, Cole. We'll get through this together.

COLE

Dad, I've spent my whole life responding to situations inappropriately.

BLAKE

I wouldn't use the word, 'inappropriately.' You've always responded in your way, and it's served you well.

COLE

But today of all days I want to respond normally, and I don't think I can. I'm so confused. I'm over here trying so hard not to be me.

(Turns his dad to the audience.)

Look at all those people out there for him. They expect something and I can't give it to them. Dad, I CAN'T DO IT!

BLAKE

Son! Those people are your friends too, and they know you and love you. They know you're different. You do what you feel is right and everything will be fine. They *will* understand.

COLE

Are you sure, Dad?

BLAKE

Absolutely positive.

COLE

(Gives his dad a long embrace.)

Thanks, Dad. I don't know what I'd do without you.

(Turns and runs to the podium.
Handsprings, cartwheels or whatever.
Yells out to the audience.)

Everybody! This has to be one of the happiest days of my life. One of the greatest men I've ever known is doing the one thing that has been the most important thing on his mind for a

long time. He talked to me for hours about this time. He has the date with his wife that he has been dreaming about for years, and I can't contain myself. I want to dance. Funeral director, do you have some funeral dance music?

(The music starts COLE pulls SANDY up to dance. The rest of the cast goes up and dances. After a bit the music softens, and everybody leaves the stage but COLE. In a fog at an elevated level, a spotlight shines on MILLARD. His wife, AMILIA, exits the fog, approaches him with her hands extended. They embrace and dance to the music.)

(Lights to black.)