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The Burning of the Old House

A Sweet Touch of Nostalgia in a One Act by

Jim Curran

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The Burning of the Old House

by Jim Curran

CHARACTERS:

UNCLE ED; *an elderly grandfather*

TOMMY; *his twelve-year-old grandson*

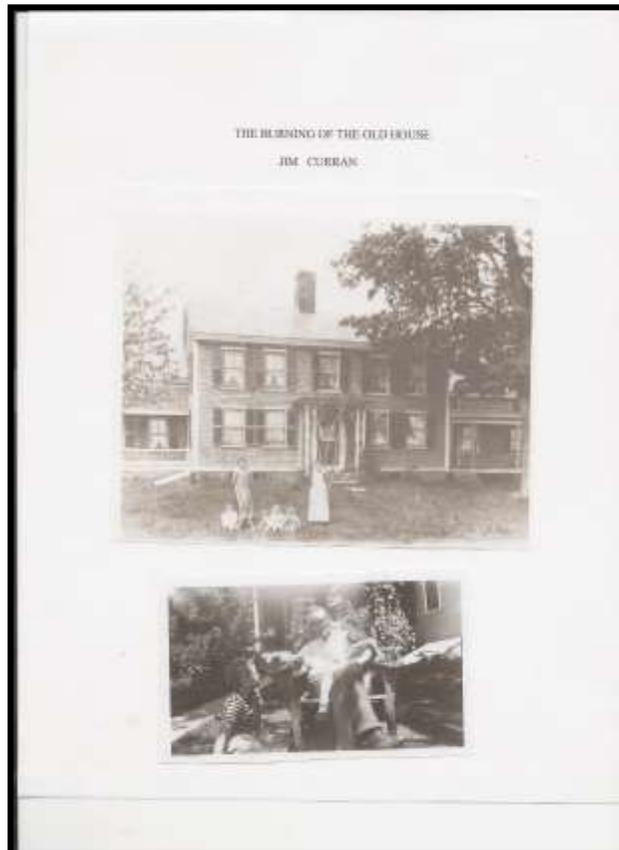
HANNAH Shumway; *a visiting cousin*

ALBERT Shumway; *her husband*

EMILY; *Tommy's mother*

SETTING:

The living room of a Massachusetts farm family in the mid-forties.



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(AT RISE: It is the living room of a Massachusetts family in the mid-forties; a couch and Morris chair separated by a coffee table along with a blue platform rocking chair are the primary furnishings in the room. On top of the coffee table is a vase of fresh daisies surrounded by family photos. Lace curtains cover tall windows and French doors lead to the dining room. An old man, UNCLE ED, sits in the rocker near the windows. He slowly rocks back and forth as a young boy, TOMMY, sits on the carpeted floor assembling an Erector set. The old man's hands seem chiseled onto the arms of the chair and his fingers are long and bony. From the exterior comes the SOUND OF A CAR SLOWING. UNCLE ED leans forward and brakes his slippered feet on the rug and with quivering fingers separates the curtains and peers outside.)

UNCLE ED

Folks is curious nowadays. *(Settles back into chair)* Jest can't help it, I guess. It's in their nature. Folks is mighty curious. You mind me, boy. You jest mind yer ol' Granddad. You jest mind my words.

TOMMY

Yes, Gramps.

(TOMMY continues to play with his Erector set.)

UNCLE ED

Go fetch me my pipe, boy...an' mindja...don't ferget my tobacco!

TOMMY

Yes, Gramps.

(TOMMY scampers through the French doors and returns with the pipe and tobacco can. He hands the items to his grandfather.)

TOMMY

Shall I light it for you...Gramps?

UNCLE ED

No, Tommy.

(UNCLE ED lights the pipe with shaky fingers and guides a match to the bowl. He puffs furiously.)

TOMMY

Better keep the smoke inside you, Gramps. Then Mom won't know I let you smoke. *(Pause)* I can get a cover for the pipe if you want...then there won't be no smell.

UNCLE ED

Don't bother, boy. *(Puffs on pipe)* Pick up your things and I'll tell you a story.

TOMMY

Wait a minute! *(Jumps up)* I wanna go get Penny and let her hear the story too!

(TOMMY quickly exits. UNCLE ED continues to enjoy his pipe. A few moments later TOMMY returns with his brown cocker spaniel named Penny.)

UNCLE ED

Come...Penny. *(Pats dog)* Come sit here by me.

(Penny and TOMMY sit at the OLD MAN's feet.)

TOMMY

Okay...you can begin now. Everyone's here.

UNCLE ED

You wanna hear 'bout the old house?

TOMMY

I don't care. *(Looks at dog)* Do you, Penny?

UNCLE ED

This happened 'long time ago...long 'fore you were bein' born. T'was back in 1929...three years afore yer Ma was married. T'was in March and t'was a cold night.....

TOMMY

(Interrupts) Was there snow on the ground, Gramps?

UNCLE ED

Yes...there was snow. It was deep out then...not like the snows we get these days. There musta been most thirty inches of snow on the ground that night. I remember my Pa tellin' me 'bout the blizzard of 1888. Now...THET...boy...was a real snowstorm. Why my Pa told me that when ol' 'Bush' Hickey went out ter water the stock...his beard froze right ter the lilac bushes.

TOMMY

(Laughs) Is that why they called him 'Bush'?

UNCLE ED

No...no...boy! Thet's wrong. 'Bush' had a beard...he always had a beard. Thet's why they called him 'Bush'. He had a beard till his dyin' day.

TOMMY

Then what happened?

UNCLE ED

His house burned down. They was all asleep. We warned him 'bout livin' so far out in the woods...but he wouldn't pay no heed. By the time we got there...t'warn't nothin' left.

TOMMY

Did his beard burn up too, Gramps?

UNCLE ED

Why...a'course! A'course it burned up!.. Said he died...didn't I? (*Impatient*) Said he burned up...didn't I? I helped my Pa shovel out the family.

TOMMY

Shovel them out? What do you mean?

UNCLE ED

Where was I?

TOMMY

You were shoveling the family out somewhere.

UNCLE ED

Never mind that! Where was I afore that?

TOMMY

You were telling me about the blizzard of '88.

UNCLE ED

No...afore that?

TOMMY

You said you were going to tell me about the old house.

UNCLE ED

Yes...yes...that's right. It happened in 1929. In March. T'was the eighth of March exactly.

(UNCLE ED stops talking as a sound is heard outside. TOMMY rushes to the window.)

TOMMY

Someone just drove in the yard, Gramps. We got company! We got company!

(TOMMY and Penny exit quickly. A SCREEN DOOR IS HEARD OPENING AND CLOSING followed by FOOTSTEPS in the long hallway.)

TOMMY

(Rushing in) Guess who's here, Gramps?

(At that moment in walks HANNAH. She is a conservatively dressed middle-aged woman. Behind her enters her husband, ALBERT. HANNAH crosses directly to UNCLE ED and gives him a peck on his forehead.)

HANNAH

And how are you, Uncle Ed? *(Straightens an imagined wrinkle from her dress; pats a hair bun at the nape of her neck)* I was just telling ALBERT the other day that it's been ages/

ALBERT

/Feels nice to be back on the farm, Uncle Ed.

HANNAH

(Indignant) Albert! I'm talking! I was talking to Uncle Ed. Don't interrupt me. *(Whispers to UNCLE ED)* Honestly...that man! He's getting deaf, Uncle Ed. He didn't mean anything by it.

UNCLE ED

How have you been feeling, Hannah?

HANNAH

(Looks pained) Oh...you'll never know how much I've suffered, Uncle Ed. Why just last night I had one of my spells and never thought I'd live to see the light of day. And last week...I had to see the Doctor four times! That's twenty dollars right there! I just don't know why Albert puts up with me. I'll drive him to the poor house! *(ALBERT stands sheepishly beside her; HANNAH gestures for him to take a seat across the room.)* If I were him, Uncle Ed, I'd get me one of those hearing aids. Don't you think that would help?

UNCLE ED

Yes...that might be jest the thing ter do...but on the other hand...

HANNAH

(Triumphant) You see Albert?

ALBERT

What's that, dear?

(HANNAH's lips meet in a grim line and her rouge-less face becomes instantly red in anger.)

HANNAH

Oh...that man! It's so embarrassing, Uncle Ed. You don't know how I suffer because of that man. *(ALBERT looks away.)* Albert! I don't believe you heard a word Uncle Ed said. *(Lowers voice)* Deafness! It's so...so disgusting! *(Speaks loudly to ALBERT)* You pay attention to what Uncle Ed said. He said you should get a hearing aid...just like I've been telling you for months!

ALBERT

I'll see about it next week, dear.

HANNAH

You've said that for weeks, Albert. And you haven't done anything yet! *(Turns to UNCLE ED)* Every time we go visiting, Uncle Ed, it's always the same. Everyone tells him to get a hearing aid...but he just...won't...listen! He's going to drive me out of my mind. I can't do a thing with him. I think that my worrying about him causes my colon to get red. *(Lowers voice)* The Doctor says I have an inflamed colon, Uncle Ed, and the pain is something fierce! Nobody has EVER suffered as much as I have this past week.

UNCLE ED

Yer lookin' pretty well, Hannah.

HANNAH

(Smiles) That's because appearances are deceiving, Uncle Ed. Appearances are deceiving. I may look well on the outside...but inside *(Raises voice)* I'm a mess.

ALBERT

What's that, dear?

HANNAH

I said..."I'm a mess."

ALBERT

Oh.

HANNAH

(Turns to UNCLE ED) And...how have you been, Uncle Ed? *(Smiles sweetly)* It's really sinful that we haven't been up to visit you sooner but I've got myself all run down because of those bridge club meetings. I've had three last week, Uncle Ed. Just think of it! Three! Now...don't you ever go and join a bridge club...they keep you on the go from morning till night. *(Moves a chair to sit directly beside her UNCLE)* Where's Emily, Uncle Ed? I thought she'd be here.

UNCLE ED

Weren't she in the kitchen when you come in?

HANNAH

Why...no. Only little Tommy and that ferocious dog were there.

UNCLE ED

Must be she run up to the store in North Amherst then. She 'spectin you folks terday?

HANNAH

No, Uncle Ed...why no. We can only stay a few minutes. My colon was feeling pretty good after dinner and when Albert asked if I wanted to go for a ride...I said yes...never in this world dreaming that we would be heading up this way. We can't stay long because I have to be home for supper. Mildred's all alone, you know. (*Looks to ALBERT*) What time is it now, Albert?

ALBERT

What's that...dear?

HANNAH

I said... (*Yells*) ...WHAT TIME IS IT?

(*ALBERT sighs and removes his watch from his vest pocket.*)

ALBERT

It's three-thirty, dear.

HANNAH

Oh...then we've got plenty of time to visit. (*Fans face with handkerchief*) Isn't it a lovely day, Uncle Ed?

UNCLE ED

Yes. Summers' comin' on.

HANNAH

I don't like the summer, Uncle Ed. It's so hot and it always gets my sinuses going, especially when the roses start blooming. That's when I get my sneezing attacks. You'd think that with all the medications there are about nowadays...there'd be something for my hay fever. My nose swells up like a balloon and my eyes are just filled up every minute of the day. I can't get any relief no matter what I do! I just have to sit on the porch all day and suffer. Of all the diseases there are in this world, Uncle Ed, I think hay fever is about the worst! Don't you agree?

UNCLE ED

Might be, HANNAH. That jest might be. (*Turns to TOMMY*) Tommy...you run over to the Kellys and call up the store ter see if yer Ma's there. If she ain't...you call up the Lehans.

TOMMY

Yes, Gramps.

(*TOMMY exits, his dog follows. HANNAH reaches and picks up a faded photograph on the coffee table.*)

HANNAH

Isn't this a picture of Big Aunt Mame?

UNCLE ED

Yes...that's her. Emily found that picture up in the attic the other day.

HANNAH

(Grimaces from some imagined pain; rises and hands photo to ALBERT) I always used to get her and Little Aunt Mame mixed up when I was a little girl. I used to think that Big Aunt Mame was called that because she was so fat and your wife was called Little Aunt Mame because she was so little. It wasn't till I was most grown up that I found out that Big Aunt Mame was called that because she was the oldest. *(Crosses herself religiously)* Lord rest both their souls. May The Lord be merciful to them. *(Returns to sit next to UNCLE ED; clears throat)* What...uh...what ever became of those rosary beads she used to have, Uncle Ed? The wooden ones, I mean...the ones she got at that shrine up in Canada.

UNCLE ED

I don't know. I don't remember.

HANNAH

You know the ones I mean, don't you?

UNCLE ED

Yes.

HANNAH

I was just telling Mildred about them the other day, Uncle Ed. *(Pause)* You know...she graduates from high school next Friday night, don't you?

UNCLE ED

(Surprised) She does? Emily didn't say nothin' bout...

HANNAH

She didn't? I thought for sure she'd remember. Oh...then please don't mention it to her. I wouldn't want her to think that I told you that for...well...for you to give her a present or something. Why...I wouldn't dream of it! It's just like I said before...Albert and I were out for a Sunday drive and on the spur of the moment he suggested we ride up here from Springfield and visit you folks. *(Sighs)* Mildred couldn't come, you know. Poor dear...she's home studying for her finals.

UNCLE ED

I'll give her a little somethin'...Hannah.

HANNAH

Oh...Uncle Ed! You shouldn't! You really shouldn't! I mean that! I really do! I mean that! Save it for yourself. You may need it someday.

UNCLE ED

You jest remind me of it later if I should forget.

HANNAH

I shan't, Uncle Ed. I shan't! Why...you'll spoil the child. Last fall...the last time we were up here you gave her a dollar bill and a pumpkin.

UNCLE ED

You gonna send her ter college?

HANNAH

(Frowns) I wish we could, Uncle Ed, but with my Doctor bills...I might even be needing another operation...and think of the expense then! *(Looks at ALBERT)* Uh...if she could get into one of those schools that teach about secretaries and things...we might be able to manage. But like it is now...with me not knowing from one day to the next whether I'm going to live or die...I just can't see our way clear to throw away a lot of money for her to go to college.

UNCLE ED

She might be able ter get into that commercial college uptown. T'is a small school but t'is a good school.

(HANNAH glances slyly at ALBERT; moistens her lips and moves closer to UNCLE ED.)

HANNAH

We've thought of that, Uncle Ed, but even if we were able to send her there...there wouldn't be any place for her to stay. We certainly wouldn't allow her to stay in a filthy dormitory...if they have one...and she certainly couldn't commute every day from Springfield...even if we allowed her to get a driving license. *(Casts a nervous glance to ALBERT who listens intently)* If...if...she lived around here...in some private home where we KNEW the people...it would be alright...but we certainly cannot allow her to commute forty miles every day. It's out of the question.

ALBERT

It's too far for a young girl to travel, Uncle Ed.

HANNAH

(Clears throat) If she lived HERE...it would be alright...but I...I...suppose that's out of the question. *(Pause; UNCLE ED remains silent, puffing on his pipe)* In the first place, Emily probably wouldn't hear of it. Mildred's quiet enough...you needn't worry about her running around with boys because we don't allow her to date. She'll have plenty of time for that when

HANNAH, *Continued*

she has a job. I never had any boy court me until I was out on my own and working for five years. Mildred doesn't eat much...not much more than a chicken.

ALBERT

She's a good girl, Uncle Ed.

HANNAH

(Glares at ALBERT) Of course we'd be glad to pay for her room and board here...and she's never had a sassy day in her life!! If...uh...if Mildred could stay here, there's plenty of room in the spare bedroom across from the linen closet. She wouldn't be any bother to you folks at all...she's been warned!! I mean...she'd be great company for little Tommy.

(SOUND: SCREEN DOOR OPENING AND CLOSING. TOMMY and his mother, EMILY, enter.)

EMILY

Why...Hannah! I'm sorry I wasn't here but I was 'cross to the Kellys getting a recipe. Tommy said we had company but he didn't say it was the Shumways.

(EMILY and HANNAH give one another a cousinly kiss.)

HANNAH

We never expected to come up here today...but while we were out riding...Albert decided on the spur of the moment to ride up here and surprise you. Seems the only time we folks get together these days is either at a wedding or a wake...and there's not too many weddings anymore.

EMILY

(Smiles sweetly) How's Mildred? Isn't it about time for her to be getting married?

HANNAH

(Blanches; almost chokes) Married? Why no, Emily. She's just graduating from high school next week. *(Pause)* Why...before I know it...she WILL be getting married. *(Fans face with handkerchief)* Doesn't time fly? It seems like only yesterday I was holding her in my arms and kissing her little nose. *(Clears throat)* I was just saying to Uncle Ed that I hoped he didn't think that just because she's graduating next week...that we expect a present from you folks...

EMILY

Why...Hannah...we would have thought no such thing.

HANNAH

You have plenty of worries of your own without giving Mildred a graduation present. *(Pause; clears throat once again)* Have you heard from your son Rick lately?

EMILY

I got a letter from him last Tuesday. From Hawaii. He'll be getting out of the Navy in August.

HANNAH

Isn't that nice! I suppose he'll be running off and getting married one of these days. What does he plan to do, Emily? Go to college?

EMILY

He doesn't say...but whatever it will be...he'll have my blessing.

HANNAH

He's twenty-two now, isn't he?

EMILY

Yes.

HANNAH

I remember when he graduated from high school. It was five years ago. I do believe it is five years to the very day of Mildred's graduation. He looked so proud when he walked across the stage to get his diploma. It was 9:34 on the dot when he shook the Mayor's hand. I remember looking at my watch at that very instant. (*Pause*) Emily...did he like those two handkerchiefs that Mildred gave him? They were imported Irish linen...you know. Mildred picked them out herself.

EMILY

I suppose he must have liked them Hannah. I really don't remember. He got so many presents...you know.

HANNAH

Yes. I remember. (*Sighs*) I suppose the name card must have fallen out from those handkerchiefs or something because Mildred never got a 'thank you' from him. It upset her all that summer. She was heartbroken...poor dear...kept rushing to meet the mailman every day on the front walk waiting for that 'thank you' note.

EMILY

I'm sorry, Hannah. I didn't know. Rick said he checked the list twice. I'm sorry. Mildred's name must have got overlooked.

HANNAH

It doesn't matter now in the least, Emily. That happened years ago. I just felt sorry for Mildred at the time but she's gotten over it. Now (*Pause*) Does Rick have her address now, I wonder? I know she would just love to hear from him...about how HE felt when HE graduated. He was so popular...you know.

EMILY

Well...popularity isn't everything, Hannah.

HANNAH

Oh, I know. (*Sighs*) Sometimes I wish my Mildred was more popular. When I was her age I was doing all sorts of devilish things. After supper some nights, I would tell my mother...Lord rest her soul...that I was going to the library to study...and...and...you know what I'd really do?

EMILY

No...what?

HANNAH

Well!! I suppose I shouldn't say this...it sounds like a confession...and I'd be mortified to death if Mildred should ever hear a word of it. (*Giggles*) But I'd go over to Lucy Wyman's house and we'd go down to the drugstore on Elm Street and have two hot fudge sundaes!

EMILY

You didn't!

HANNAH

Yes...I did! I really did! And sometimes – (*Lowers voice*) – sometimes two or three of the young men would ask if they could walk us to the corner of our street.

EMILY

Did you let them?

HANNAH

Oh...my...no! But we were great teasers. Emily. If Albert knew of half the things I did when I was a young girl I bet he'd divorce me! Mildred's just the opposite. She stays home night after night and just reads books. On Saturday night when we give her permission to go out for two hours...all she does is go over to that Dickinson boy's house and listen to 'The Hit Parade' on the radio. I get so mad at her sometimes I could just scream. And...Albert! He's getting to be just like her. The nights I have my bridge club meetings I have to practically throw him out of the house bodily. (*Sighs*) Next week though...after she's graduated...perhaps I can rest easier.

UNCLE ED

(*Loudly*) I told Hannah I'd give her a little somethin' later, Emily, for Mildred.

HANNAH

(*Sweetly to UNCLE ED*) Uncle Ed! Really! You shouldn't! (*Turns to EMILY*) Emily...do you remember what became of those rosary beads of Big Aunt Mame? The big wooden ones...like black croquet balls that she kept on her wall. She was my Godmother...you know. Lord knows the poor soul didn't have much when she died...but I always had my eyes set on those rosary beads. I thought that Mildred might like them, seeing how she is graduating from high school next Friday night. I'm sure that Big Aunt Mame would have wanted her to have them...for I was her Godchild...you know...her ONLY Godchild.

EMILY

Which ones do you mean? She had a lot of rosary beads.

HANNAH

I know, poor soul. If anyone's gone to heaven...she has. All she did all day long each day of her life was say rosaries for people. Lord knows she must have said a couple hundred for me the day I told her I was going to marry Albert! She wanted me to be a nun, you know. (*Clears throat*) Are you sure you don't you remember what happened to those rosary beads, Emily? They were the big black wooden ones that hung on the wall in her room under the crucifix. She got them up in Canada, I think.

EMILY

I know the ones you mean, Hannah...but I don't know what became of them.

(*HANNAH pouts and pats the bun on the nape of her neck.*)

HANNAH

Someone was just mentioning to me the other day that they thought Aunt Lena had given them to you.

EMILY

To ME? (*Surprised*) Not to...ME, Hannah! We didn't get a THING from Big Aunt Mame. Her sister Lena got all her belongings and...you know...Big Aunt Mame didn't have much money left after her hospital expenses and Aunt Lena had to pay for most of the funeral because she didn't believe in insurance. She used to give her money away to anyone who wanted or needed it...you remember...and to those who visited her a lot.

HANNAH

(*Avoids looking at EMILY*) But...I was sure you had those rosary beads, Emily, and I thought that Mildred would just love to have them seeing as how Big Aunt Mame was my Godmother. (*Pause*) You don't suppose they were worth anything, do you? I mean...as antiques?

EMILY

I don't know, Hannah. Why don't you ask Aunt Lena what happened to them. Maybe...if she's still got them...she'll give them to you...for Mildred.

HANNAH

Oh...I couldn't do that, Emily. You know Aunt Lena. She's so tight she squeaks. Besides...they're really not that important anyway. I just thought that...that...oh never mind. (*Smiles again sweetly*) How have you been feeling, Emily?

EMILY

Now that summer is almost here...I feel fine. Just fine. (*Pause*) You know...we're selling the farm in the fall, don't you?

HANNAH

(Gasps; thunderstruck) Whaaaaat? You're...you're...selling the farm in the fall? THIS fall?

EMILY

Why...yes. Didn't Dad tell you?

HANNAH

Why...no! *(Looks at ALBERT)* I didn't hear a word about it! *(Recovers composure)* When did you decide on doing a thing like that?

EMILY

(Smiles) It's been on our minds a long time. Dad isn't able to work it anymore and all we're doing now is renting it out. We'll buy a house in the city with a garden so Dad can keep busy. *(Pause)* If you hear of any buys, Hannah, please let us know. Now that Rick will be coming home from the Navy...he'll be wanting to live in the city with his friends. So if you hear of anything...please let us know.

HANNAH

Of course I will, Emily. This is quite a surprise...your selling the farm. We had no idea that you were even considering it.

EMILY

It's really too big a house for just the three of us...and Rick hates the country. Eight rooms are too much for me to take care of and the rooms are so big they collect dust in no time.

HANNAH

Couldn't you take in boarders...or roomers...or something? It seems such a shame to sell the old homestead.

EMILY

Why would we take in boarders? There's too much work in it and we don't need the money. When my husband Johnnie was killed in that bridge collapse, I got twenty thousand dollars and the farm is assessed at three times that and with the money we have in the bank...we'll make out alright.

HANNAH

It seems like such a sin that you're selling out...after all the years Uncle Ed has lived here and all the memories you have. *(Clears throat)* If it were my farm I know I could never sell it...knowing it was where I was brought into this world and where my mother died.

EMILY

We just have to face those things, Hannah. *(Crosses to UNCLE ED)* Would you like a glass of water, Dad?

(UNCLE ED nods and EMILY exits.)

HANNAH

(Calls after her) It's really quite a mystery, Emily, as to what happened to those rosary beads! I was so sure you had them and I wanted Mildred to have them. I know that Big Aunt Mame would have wanted the only daughter of her only Godchild to have them. I can't imagine what could have happened to them.

EMILY

(Entering with glass of water) Aunt Lena should know.

HANNAH

(Icily) I suppose she would! She's probably got them hidden away somewhere.

EMILY

She's her sister...her only living sister. No one has a better right to them.

HANNAH

I suppose so.

(HANNAH purses her lips. There is a long pause as she digests information.)

HANNAH

How are the Kanes?

(EMILY sits beside her father.)

EMILY

They're fine. Just fine. You know they had another baby...didn't you?

HANNAH

(Gasps) No! Not another one! Why...the last one isn't a year old yet...is it?

EMILY

Eleven months.

HANNAH

I thought so. My...youngsters start in a big way when they do get started these days, don't they? In my time I know I would have died if I had more than one baby a year. *(Turns to ALBERT)* You hear that, Albert?

ALBERT

(Quietly dozing; stirring) What's that, dear?

HANNAH

'Bout the Kanes. They just had another baby, Emily says. That makes two inside a year. Isn't that ever something? They got the makings of a generation started already.

ALBERT

That's nice.

HANNAH

When was it they got married, Emily? It wasn't too long ago...was it?

EMILY

It'll be three years in August.

HANNAH

They're a nice young couple. They don't bother anyone, do they?

EMILY

No. They're wonderful neighbors. They've been just wonderful to us. They have folks in sometime...but they never bother anyone.

HANNAH

(Taken aback) You mean...you mean...they have...parties?

EMILY

Sometimes...but they're nice parties. They don't disturb anyone. They live a quarter mile away down the road and we don't hear any noise up here at all. Except of course in the summer...when the sound travels.

HANNAH

(Indignant) Well!! You'd think it would bother the children. Why...neighbors down near us...the Kelloggs...they used to have parties going on from night till morning at least three nights a week and their six children grew up into little ruffians. Last spring...the youngest one...the one with the black mop of hair that's not properly combed...well...he came over to my flowerbed and picked three of my purple daffodils. I had to march him right over to his mother and all she did was scold him. If he was MY child...he wouldn't have been able to sit down for a month! Honestly Emily, the children these days are holy terrors! You have to park yourself at the window constantly and watch to see they don't get into any mischief.

(HANNAH fans her face with her handkerchief.)

HANNAH, *Continued*

I suppose the Kanes have three or four parties a week?

EMILY

(Laughs) Why no...only an occasional Saturday night party. We're all farm people, you know, and most of us have to be up before dawn. Of course...they didn't have any parties when she was in the family way.

HANNAH

Well...I should HOPE not!

TOMMY

(Impatient at being ignored for so long) What happened to the old house, Gramps?

(EVERYONE except ALBERT who has dozed off again, looks at a startled UNCLE ED.)

HANNAH

(SWEETLY) What house are you talking about, Tommy dear?

TOMMY

Our house, of course, our old house. Gramps was going to tell me a story about it.

HANNAH

(Turns to UNCLE ED) Do you have a picture of the old house, Uncle Ed? Mildred would just love to see what a grand old house you lived in then and I would love to have one for old time's sake. *(To EMILY)* We used to have such fun here in the old days, didn't we, Emily? I'll never forget what happened. The fire happened just before you were married...didn't it?

EMILY

A little while before, Hannah...two or three years...I think.

HANNAH

I'll never forget it, Tommy. It was in every paper from here to New York City.

TOMMY

About Mom's wedding?

HANNAH

(Laughing) No...no...Tommy. About the house. I remember it very well. Albert's sister was *(Spelling)* p-r-e-g-n-a-n-t at the time and the very next day she drove up here from Framingham. I warned her not to...but she insisted. She wouldn't listen to me. The way some people live their lives is a disgrace, Emily! If I had my way—

TOMMY

(Interrupts) Tell me about it, Gramps. Tell me what really happened.

UNCLE ED

(Looks at others apprehensively then slowly begins) T'was back in 1929, boy. Yer Ma weren't home at the time. T'was in March and t'was a mighty cold nights—

HANNAH

(Interrupts TOMMY) I've forgotten, Uncle Ed. Was there much snow on the ground?

UNCLE ED

T'was most thirty inches.

HANNAH

Those were the days. I was just telling Albert the other day that the winters today aren't anything like they were back then. The air was healthier then too...don't you think? There weren't so many of those diseases floating around. Isn't that right, Uncle Ed?

UNCLE ED

Yes.

HANNAH

I remember in our days we had to walk three and a half miles to school each morning and three and a half miles home back in the afternoon. There weren't any school buses then to pick us up and drop us at our doors. Tommy...you should be mighty thankful you don't have to walk to school like your Ma and I did.

TOMMY

(Ignores her) Tell me about the house...Gramps.

UNCLE ED

Well...t'was a dark night out, boy, and the wind was roarin' 'bout and around like it was mad 'cause it couldn't get inside the house. Yer Uncle George...now...you never seen him...he died back in 1936...two years afore the big hurricane. Well...then...yer Uncle George was out that night in his car. He got home somewhere 'round midnight...

HANNAH

A disgraceful hour for a boy that age to be out.

EMILY

(Assertive) He was twenty years old, Hannah. And he worked hard every day on the farm. A boy that age has a right to be out anytime he wants with anyone he wants and do anything he wants.

HANNAH

(Pats the bun on her neck) Well...if he was my boy...or if I had a boy of twenty...I'd make him toe the mark...or else he wouldn't stay in my house for long! Mildred has NEVER been out later than ten o'clock in her life...

TOMMY

(To HANNAH whose mouth opens aghast) Shhhhhushhh! Go on, Gramps.

UNCLE ED

(Pause) George come in when he did come in that night and put his car in the garage—

HANNAH

(Interrupts) Didn't he have a grey Chrysler coupe, Uncle Ed?

UNCLE ED

He did. T'was a Chrysler. We've always had Chryslers in our family. Like 'em...never give no trouble. Well...the garage was attached to the house out in the back. *(Pause)* Tommy boy, we had ourselves a real big house then. There was twenty-two rooms and they was big rooms. If my brother Pat didn't live on the other side...we just wouldn't been able ter manage. Yer Gramma couldn't take care of all those rooms by herself.

HANNAH

I never could understand why your brother moved right afterward to Connecticut, Uncle Ed. I always thought you and he had a fight or something.

UNCLE ED

No. T'weren't no fight, Hannah. Pat was the youngest and guess he thought he'd branch out inter Connecticut with his family and grow tobacco down there. He thought the tobacco would grow bigger down there.

TOMMY

Does it, Gramps?

UNCLE ED

Bigger leaf, that's all. Broadleaf brings a higher price. T'is a different kinda tobacco...and not like the kind we grow up in these parts.

ALBERT

(Leans forward; has been listening intently) What kind do you grow up here, Uncle Ed?

HANNAH

Havana!! It was Havana, wasn't it, Uncle Ed? *(UNCLE ED nods; HANNAH angrily turns towards ALBERT.)* If you were listening to Uncle Ed, Albert...you'd know better than to ask such a foolish question. Honestly!!

(HANNAH continues to glare at ALBERT then pauses and turns her attention back to UNCLE ED.)

HANNAH, *Continued*

What's Havana used for, Uncle Ed? I've forgotten.

UNCLE ED

Cigar wrapper mostly. *(Coughs)* Pat was livin' with his family on the other side of the big house. They had ten rooms and we had twelve. We had two hired men livin' with us and they lived upstairs on the third floor 'neath the roof. Pat had only his children, Harold and Mae, livin' with him...an a'course his wife.

HANNAH

(Laughs heartily) Will you EVER forget the time Emily...that Mae brought the horse buns to Mister Reed?

EMILY

(Laughs) It was his birthday...and that Mae! She was a devil! She got herself a cardboard box and filled it with horse buns...wrapped the box in pretty Christmas paper...tied a ribbon on it...and brought it to school and placed it on Mister Reed's desk.

TOMMY

Who was Mister Reed?

HANNAH

He was the Principal, Tommy. Mae nearly got expelled for doing that! And Emily...do you remember when we had the funeral? *(Bursts into giggles)* You remember that, Uncle Ed? *(He shakes his head)* Well...that really was something! Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and just go into stitches thinking about it! Poor Albert comes rushing into my room thinking I've had one of my spells. *(Pause)* That Mae! The things she could think of. I remember the day well. It was Easter Sunday and we were up here to visit you folks. The grownups were all in the parlor talking and we kids were outside playing hide and seek. And then that Mae...all of a sudden she gets that idea about the funeral. I swear...sometimes I wonder if she wasn't possessed! She got her brother Harold to be the preacher because he was so serious looking.

EMILY

(Laughs) I remember. Mae went inside to get her brand new Easter doll and she found some old box somewhere. Harold put on your father's long black coat and with that tall black hat he always wore...he looked like a real preacher. I was a mourner and George and Mae and you were mourners too.

HANNAH

No, Emily...you're wrong. I was one of the bearers with my brother Ned. Remember how we walked all the way out to the middle of the tobacco lot and then George dug a hole about two feet deep and then put the doll down inside and then all of us pretended to cry...really cry...as if the doll were a real person. Mae brought one of her mother's Easter lilies and threw it into the grave and then we all said the 'Our Father.' Then...will you ever forget Harold when he opened the prayer book and began to read the burial service. He began to really cry in the middle and Mae had to finish it for him. Then we all went back to the house and George and Ned covered the box with dirt. Mae left the box out there for three days and then on the fourth day...she went out to fetch the doll and couldn't remember where it was buried.

EMILY

(Laughs) The men had harrowed the ground to get it ready for planting.

HANNAH

Mae got quite a spanking for losing her Easter doll! *(Pause)* I don't suppose they ever found it, did they?

EMILY

No one ever looked again.

HANNAH

It's probably still there! (*Turns to EMILY*) Another thing that Mae did was rub itching powder all over the seats of the teachers' toilets at school! (*Laughs*) That Mae! She was a living devil! (*Giggles*) Remember when 'the Wiggler' came home late one Saturday night drunk as a loon...

TOMMY

"Who was the Wiggler?"

EMILY

He was a cousin, Tommy.

TOMMY

Why did they call him the 'Wiggler'?

EMILY

He had some disease and he shook all the time.

HANNAH

(*Frowns; impatient with TOMMY*) I remember him and 'Stumpy' Joe coming home one night...

TOMMY

Who's 'Stumpy Joe'?

HANNAH

(*Glares with annoyance*) Please...Tommy! Don't interrupt! Haven't you been taught any manners?

EMILY

(*Softly to TOMMY*) Stumpy Joe was a neighbor, Tommy. He had a wooden leg.

HANNAH

(*Clears throat*) Well...anyway...they came home one night and fell asleep in the back stable. The 'Wiggler' was groaning and he was very sick. Mae heard them come home and she woke up Harold and George and they went out to the barn and tiptoed into the next stall.

EMILY

(*Laughs*) I remember. Mae whispered in a low voice "your time has come...your time has come...your time has come." The 'Wiggler' fell to his knees and began to pray as fast as he could to save his soul. (*Laughs*) He sure was mad the next day when he found out the Angel of the Lord was Mae! (*Pause*) We sure did have a lot of fun when we were young, didn't we, Hannah?

HANNAH

I should say so...especially at the reunions. The children today don't have half the fun we had. We made our own fun happen. We never had radios or comic books and look how well we turned out! *(Pause)* I sometimes wonder what will become of this generation if something isn't done. If only parents would bring up their children as Albert and I have brought up Mildred...we wouldn't be having the troubles we're having today. Why...if my Mildred ever so much as interrupted me when I was talking *(Looks at TOMMY)* or sassed me...she wouldn't dare do it a second time. She wouldn't DARE...for she'd know what would happen to her.

TOMMY

What happened to the old house, Gramps?

(UNCLE ED looks at everyone, assuming he will be interrupted again.)

UNCLE ED

(Cautiously) Well...George come home when he did and put his car into the garage. Gramma heard him come in ter get a drink of water from the pump at the kitchen sink and then he come upstairs and went ter bed. Pretty soon... 'bout a half hour later...she heard a poundin' at the front door. She woke me up and I went down and there on the front stoop stood old Mister Kane from down yonder. He was outa breath and kept pantin' "yer garage is on fire...yer garage is on fire...yer garage is on fire." I called to yer Gramma and she woke up yer Ma and George and the hired hands. Mister Kane went on the other side of the house and woke up Pat and his family. Pat rung up the fire department on his telephone and in a little while they come. There warn't no fire hydrants then like we got today Tommy...they used the brook... 'cross the road over yonder. *(Points out window)* The fire spread slow...that's cause we had a slate roof. George musta had a short or somethin' in his car, they said, for the fire started in the garage and spread to the woodshed and from there into the kitchen. Mister Kane saw the flames from his house and rushed over. The two women, Pat's wife and your Gramma, were cryin' and screamin' and goin' most crazy. They began carryin' out stuff and layin' it on the front lawn. We made a mistake in not havin' anyone watch over things for someone in the crowd that gathered stole your Gramma's weddin' silver and some dresses. The chicken coop caught some of the sparks and went up in a blaze of glory. Some of the chickens got caught in the wired in yard and got cooked in there with the juice bubblin' outa them. There weren't much fire ter the outside of the house for the slate kept the flames inside...but everythin' that couldn't be carried out got burned or damaged. We had the most damage done ter our side but Pat got purty well burned out too. We only got five thousand dollars from the insurance company and it cost me most twenty-five thousand dollars ter rebuild this here house.

HANNAH

It's worth quite a bit more than that today isn't it, Uncle Ed?

EMILY

Quite a bit, Hannah...quite a bit. No one really knows how bad a fire is until they've lived through one themselves. It cost Dad a lot of money to rebuild and he had to do it all himself for Pat and his family moved to Connecticut. *(Pause)* Folks say that Dad has a lot of money...

HANNAH

(Indignant) Why...Emily! I've never said any such thing!

EMILY

I don't mean you in particular, Hannah. I just mean folks and relatives in general. They don't figure that the bad news we've had had outnumbered the good years by a rightly margin. In the hurricane of 1938 for instance we lost every shed we had and they were filled with tobacco too. It took a lot of money and help from the neighbors to rebuild those sheds. Don't let anyone tell you that farming is not a hard job. It's a drudging occupation.

UNCLE ED

(To TOMMY) You know those shutters and all that wood we got piled up behind the barn, Tommy?

TOMMY

Yes.

UNCLE ED

Those come from the old house and all that lumber piled up in the back pasture come from there too.

TOMMY

What are you going to do with it now, Gramps?

UNCLE ED

Jest leave it set there now, I guess. Too late fer me to do anythin' with it now.

HANNAH

(Looks at her wrist watch) Good Lord! It's most five o'clock! We must be going!

EMILY

Stay and have a bite to eat with us.

HANNAH

Oh...no, really. I thank you kindly...but we mustn't. *(To ALBERT)* Wake up, Albert!! *(Whispers to EMILY)* You see what I have to put up with? That Albert is the deafest man a girl ever married. *(Loudly to ALBERT)* ALBERT! We're leaving now. WAKE UP!!

ALBERT

(Meekly) What time is it, dear?

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HANNAH

It's time to leave, Albert. It's most five o'clock. Come, now...we must be on our way. We've had a lovely visit, Emily, (*Sweetly*) but we must love and leave you now. Do try to get down and visit us sometime.

EMILY

We'll try...but it's hard, you know, with Dad and everything. But we'll drive down sometime and surprise you. I promise you. But...do stay and have a cup of tea and a sandwich. I hate for anyone to leave without having a little something to eat.

UNCLE ED

Stay Hannah.

TOMMY

Goodbye, cousin Hannah.

EMILY

Please stay...just for a cup of tea?

HANNAH

No...really Emily...we'd love to...but we just can't! I told Albert that we could only stay for a minute or two. Mildred's home all alone, poor dear, and I've got to be there to get her a proper supper or Heaven only knows what she'll eat. She didn't know for sure where we were going and I don't want her worrying about us too much. It's not good for a child her age to be upset about anything. (*Stands and smooths skirt*) I just can't believe that she'll be graduating from high school next Friday night. It seems like a dream!

UNCLE ED

(*Looks to EMILY*) Go in the other room and bring me my wallet and an envelope.
(*EMILY exits*)

HANNAH

Now, Uncle Ed, you know that's not necessary. Mildred isn't expecting anything.

(*EMILY returns with wallet. UNCLE ED fumbles inside and retrieves a wrinkled bill. HANNAH strains to see the amount.*)

This is Not the End of the Play
Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes