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The Runaway

A Play in One Act by

Mike Willis

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The Runaway

by Mike Willis

CAST OF CHARACTERS

1W / 1M / 1 Teen

- BENJAMIN “BEN”:** *BEN, is in his late sixties or early seventies. Ben is a very successful screenwriter. Ben is disgusted with the world and life in general. A condition brought on by the death of his wife. He is gruff and outspoken and tends to drink whenever the urge hits him, which is often. Ben dresses in old jeans, flannel shirts and his beat up Los Angeles Laker’s ball cap, which he sometimes wears backwards. He needs a haircut and a shave.*
- MADELINE “MADDIE”:** *MADDIE, is an attractive woman 30 to 50 years old. She is a successful lawyer and Ben’s agent. She is also his daughter, a connection that would not be apparent to anyone who might see them interact. She is very professional and dresses appropriately.*
- AUGUSTUS “GUS”:** *GUS, is a clean-cut young man of nineteen. He is quite intelligent, but is struggling about what to do about His future. He still lives at home with His mother and sister whom he helps support by doing odd jobs. Gus, is friendly by nature and likes helping people. His wardrobe consists of jeans, sweatshirts and sneakers.*

TIME/SETTING

The present: The front yard of an old Airstream trailer or hunting shack in a remote portion of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

HISTORY

A winner of the Village Playhouse of Wauwatosa’s 30th One-Act Play Writing Festival, *The Runaway* premiered at Inspiration Studios in West Allis, WI on June 5th, 2015 directed by Scott Sorensen and with the following cast:

BET/BEN..... JESSIE BARR
MADDIE..... ELIZABETH HAVICAM
GUS..... PAUL ZARAGOZA

DIRECTOR’S NOTE

Alternative language choices along with flexible casting options can be found on the final page of the script. These language changes make the play suitable for most audiences. Minimal set requirements: the play can be played on a bare stage with props.

The Runaway

by Mike Willis

SCENE 1

SETTING:

The front yard of an old Airstream trailer or hunting shack in a remote wooded area of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. A picnic table and a couple of old webbed lawn chairs sit in the yard as well as a fire pit and an old charcoal grill. The following signs are posted around the property, Keep Out, No Trespassing, Beware of Dog and Posted.

AT RISE:

CLASSICAL MUSIC can be heard coming through the screen door of the trailer. MADDIE enters from SR, crosses to the screen door and knocks.

The MUSIC STOPS as MADDIE continues knocking.

BEN, *Off*

(From Inside) Go away! Can't ya read the goddamn signs?

MADDIE

Ben, it's Madeline. Now, open up or come out here.

BEN, *Off*

What the hell do you want? Go away, I'm busy.

MADDIE

Ben...

BEN, *Off*

If you don't leave now, I'll sic my dog on you.

MADDIE

You don't have a dog.

BEN, *Off*

Sure I do. Don't ya see the goddamn sign?

MADDIE

Yes, I see the sign, but you still don't have a dog.

BEN, *Off*

Bullshit! You better leave or I'm going to let Butch out of his cage. Here Butch.

Barking can be heard from inside the house.

MADDIE doesn't leave.

MADDIE

Ben, stop with the games, I'm not leaving until you come out here. We need to talk.

BEN enters from the house carrying a remote control. The barking continues. BEN holds up the remote control and pushes a button and the barking stops.

MADDIE, *Continued*

(Indicating the remote control) Butch?

BEN

Yep, he doesn't eat much and he doesn't get me up at 5 A.M. so he can piss or crap in my yard.

MADDIE

You know, I wasn't fooled by the Beware of Dog sign for a minute.

BEN

Why not? I can get a dog if I want one.

MADDIE

If you brought home a dog, he wouldn't last twenty-four hours before he would decide to run away.

BEN

Like you did?

MADDIE

Ben!

BEN

Sorry. Look, are you here as my daughter or as my lawyer, slash, agent?

MADDIE

Lawyer, slash, agent.

BEN

Figures.

MADDIE

Don't make this any harder than it has to be. (*Pointing to the picnic table*) Can we sit down?

BEN

Suit yourself. Make yourself comfortable while I take Butch back inside and put him in his cage. You want anything to drink?

MADDIE

No, thank you. I won't be staying long.

BEN

Ahhh. The subtle but effective way of saying, I don't want to be here, I just want to get this over with as quick as possible. Well, I hope you don't mind if I have one, I haven't had one since breakfast.

BEN exits inside and MADDIE sits at the picnic table and opens HER briefcase. BEN re-enters carrying a bottle of beer and crosses to the picnic table.

BEN, *Continued*

So, what do you think of my humble homestead?

MADDIE

You have money. You don't have to live here.

BEN

Quite right, but Butch and I prefer it here. No people, no traffic, just the sweet ambiance of the woods. The rustling of gentle breezes through the trees, the friendly chirping of the insects... to say nothing of the added benefit that I can pee off my back porch without offending anyone.

MADDIE

What else could you want?

BEN

Can't think of a thing. So, my counselor, slash, agent... what brings you to the end of the earth?

MADDIE

I have been contacted by a studio along with some producers regarding the new screenplay that you have been working on and I just wanted to see where you were with it. They are quite anxious to read it.

BEN

Of course they are. But alas, said screenplay, she is no more.

MADDIE

What do you mean it is no more?

BEN

She died.

MADDIE

What do you mean it died? Dad...

BEN

She. The dearly departed screenplay was female. And what's with the Dad? Not, lawyer, slash, agent?

MADDIE

You were almost finished with it six months ago when we talked.

BEN

She got ill.

MADDIE

What do you mean, she got ill?

BEN

I'm afraid the aforementioned young screenplay came down with a terminal case of...
SUCKS.

MADDIE

You have got to be kidding.

BEN

Afraid not. Unavoidable really without your mother here to nurture her properly.

MADDIE

That's ridiculous. You've written other things since Mom died.

BEN

Nothing good.

MADDIE

Why don't you just give me the screenplay and I'll show it to the producers and we'll let them decide.

BEN

No can do. I buried her.

MADDIE

Buried, her?

BEN

Cremated, actually. It's cheap and good for the environment.

MADDIE

You burned your manuscript? But you still have it on your computer, right?

BEN

I had her on my computer and didn't like her there. So, I printed a copy off just to double check and still didn't like her. That's when I deleted her from my computer and cremated the manuscript in my charcoal crematorium over there.

BEN points to the old grill.

MADDIE

You didn't?

BEN

I did... held services for her and everything. Butch and I attended. He sat quietly while I said a few words over the dearly departed.

MADDIE

Why didn't you tell me?

BEN

It happened quite suddenly. I didn't want you to have to grab a flight out of LAX just to rush out here for the service. Besides, you didn't know her as well as I did.

MADDIE

I didn't get a chance to know her. You never even showed me the manuscript.

BEN

Well, she was never healthy. I tried to nurse her back to good health, but... alas, she died. Went peacefully as I sat by her side comforting myself with a cold Miller Lite.

MADDIE

You are a piece of work, you know that? The studios may have had a different opinion after reading it and went ahead and produced it anyway.

BEN

I'm sure they would have. But, she was shit.

MADDIE

You're an Academy Award winner, you've got clout, the studio may have thought differently.

BEN

Probably. They do know their shit... and continue to produce a lot of it. But, I reserve the right to not have them put any shit out there with my name on it.

MADDIE

So, what do you propose we do now?

BEN

Well, I don't know about you, but I'm going to finish my beer and then go get another one. Want anything?

MADDIE

No, I don't. I guess since there's no screenplay to discuss, our business here is finished. I best be getting back to L.A.

MADDIE closes her briefcase and prepares to leave. BEN starts toward the door, stops and turns.

BEN

Sorry if I disappointed you. I've lost my edge, Madeline.

BEN starts to open the door as MADDIE speaks.

MADDIE

You miss her that much, huh?

BEN

(Turning) More every day.

MADDIE

Me, too.

BEN

It was good to see you, Maddie. You take care.

BEN exits through the screen door.

MADDIE

(After BEN exits) You too, Dad.

MADDIE exits SR as the classical music resumes playing from inside the house and the LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 2

SETTING: *Same as Scene 1; the following day.*

AT RISE: *BEN is asleep in one of the lawn chairs. The ground around HIM is littered with beer bottles. GUS enters from SL and sees BEN passed out in the lawn chair. GUS starts to cross to BEN, but stops when HE notices all of the warning signs. Finally, not sure whether BEN is asleep or dead, GUS crosses to HIM and shakes HIM.*

GUS

(Shaking BEN) Hey Mister, you okay?

BEN

(Waking with a start) What the... *(To GUS)* Who the hell are you? What do you think you're doing, scaring the crap out of me like that? Can't you read the signs?

GUS

Of course I can read the signs. I'm not stupid. I thought maybe you were dead.

BEN

Well, as you can see, I'm not dead.

GUS

You smell like you could be dead. I just wanted to make sure.

BEN

So, now you're sure. Now, get the hell out of here before I sic my dog on you.

GUS

You don't have a dog.

BEN

I do so, his name is Butch.

GUS

(Calling) Butch! Here, Butch! *(To BEN)* See, no dog.

BEN

He's inside.

GUS

Then why isn't he answering me or charging out here to tear me limb from limb? The door is wide open.

BEN

Shit... he must have run off.

GUS

Yeah, right. I walk by here almost every day and I've never seen a dog here. I think you just put that sign up to keep people away.

BEN

Think you're pretty smart, don't you.

GUS

I'm not stupid.

BEN

That has yet to be determined.

GUS

So, you okay or not?

BEN

Of course I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be okay?

GUS

(Looking at the beer bottles) Looks like you had quite a night.

BEN

What? Those bottles? They were here when I bought the place. Red-neck yard ornaments, I happen to like 'em, so I'm fixing to install more.

GUS

If you say so.

BEN

Of course I say so. What did you say your name was?

GUS

I didn't.

BEN

Right, you didn't.

GUS

It's Augustus. My name is Augustus.

BEN

Augustus!?! What the hell kind of a name is that? What kind of person would do that to their kid?

GUS

I'm named after my grandfather. His name was Augustus.

BEN

Jesus, it happened more than once. How about I just call you Gus?

GUS

Fine, and what do I call you besides, ornery old man?

BEN

Call me Ben... it's short for Benjamin. I'm named after the guy on the hundred dollar bill.

BEN holds out his hand to shake hands. GUS hesitates.

BEN, *Continued*

Don't be a prick. I'm a drunk, not a leper.

GUS grabs BEN's hand and THEY shake.

GUS

Well, now that I can see that you're not dead, but only smell like it... I'll get off your property.

GUS starts to leave.

BEN

Wait, don't get your tit in a wringer.

GUS

What?

BEN

I guess I should thank you... for stopping to see that I wasn't dead, that is.

GUS

Forget it.

BEN

Where I come from most people would just walk by some old drunk wallowing in his own piss and puke and not give him a second glance.

GUS

Well, this isn't L.A., I guess we just haven't advanced to that level of ambivalence yet out here in the boonies.

BEN

Well said, my young Augustus. How did you know I was from Los Angeles?

GUS

My Mom told me some big shot Hollywood type bought this place.

BEN

Big shot Hollywood type... hmmm, I didn't always live in L.A. I grew up in rural Wisconsin.

GUS

You, grew up in Wisconsin?

BEN

Yep. Say, as a peace offering, would you like something to eat... some breakfast maybe?

GUS

It's one o'clock in the afternoon. I ate breakfast at seven this morning.

BEN

Time for lunch then. I'm hungry. You like Cheerios?

GUS

Cheerios?

BEN

Yeah, the breakfast of champions.

GUS

That's Wheaties.

BEN

Same thing. I'd offer you something else, but Cheerios is all I've got. Sit at the picnic table and I'll go get us some.

BEN starts to get up, but stumbles into the picnic table. GUS steadies BEN.

GUS

I don't care for any, but if you can just sit there without falling over I'll go get them. Where are they?

BEN

There's a box on the counter by the sink and some bowls in the dishrack.

I'll be right back

GUS

GUS exits through the door and BEN sits at the picnic table.

GUS, Continued
(From inside) Where's your milk?

BEN
Don't have any. Just bring me a bowl and the Cheerios. I'll need a spoon too.

GUS enters with a bowl and a box of Cheerios and crosses to BEN at the picnic table. BEN pours some Cheerios into the bowl and then grabs an open beer bottle off the table and proceeds to pour beer over HIS Cheerios.

GUS
You use beer on your Cheerios rather than milk?

BEN
Sure, milk doesn't get me drunk. You want a beer? I've got some more in the fridge.

GUS
I'm only nineteen.

BEN
So?

GUS
I can't drink. I'm not old enough.

BEN
Misstated, my young Augustus. You see, even infants *can* drink. First from their mother's breast or a bottle, then progressing to a sippy cup, later to a regular cup, glass, bottle or can. What you meant to say is that, as per the laws of our land, you cannot *legally* drink. One of the great ironies of our legal system Gus... is that a young man of nineteen cannot legally get drunk, but he can be required to lay down his life for his country. Now, if I were being asked to charge into a hail of bullets, I might appreciate a nice cold one to take the edge off first.

GUS
I can assume then that you were never in the service?

BEN
Never assume, Gus. Tet Offensive, Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam, 1968, Private Benjamin, U.S Army at your service.

BEN salutes GUS.

BEN, *Continued*

Private Benjamin... funny, I never caught that before.

GUS

What?

BEN

Private Benjamin, it was an old movie with Goldie Hawn in it. Now, she was hot. I might have stayed in the army if there were more privates like her in there.

GUS

(Rising) I should be going.

BEN

Antsy little do-gooder, aren't you?

GUS

What?

BEN

Ya stop to help, then ya pry my life story out of me... now, you can't wait to get your ass out of here.

GUS

Pry? I didn't pry anything, you...

BEN

Sure you did. How else would you know I'm a farm boy from Wisconsin who is now some big-shot Hollywood type living in L.A. and that I was in the army and I had the hots for Goldie Hawn?

GUS

You told me. I didn't ask.

BEN

Bullshit. So, what's your story?

GUS

My story?

BEN

Yes, I showed you mine, now you show me yours. What's a not so-ugly, semi-intelligent sounding nineteen year old male with a willingness to help drunks doing living out here on the brink of nothingness?

GUS

I'm helping to take care of my mother and my sister. What are you doing here?

BEN

Escaping.

GUS

Escaping from what?

BEN

Society.

GUS

You trying to tell me you came out here to get away from civilization?

BEN

Wrong. To escape civilization, one would need to establish a parameter where those he or she was attempting to escape from where themselves indeed civil. Just look at the news, Gus. The news is full of uncivil acts... lying, cheating, murders, racism... the world out there is full of that shit, and I'm running away from it.

GUS

You're a runaway.

BEN

(Laughing) Ha, that's it! A runaway.... I like that. You nailed it Gus, I'm running away from society in the hope of finding civilization.

GUS

Well, good luck with that.

BEN

I'm getting close, Gus. You stopping to make sure I wasn't dead, instead of dead drunk, now that was a civil act. A genuine concern for a fellow human being regardless of how bad he smelled.

GUS

That was nothing. Any one of your other neighbors would have done the same thing.

BEN

If that's so, then I've discovered a lost civilization. My running days are over and I'm going to plant my sorry drunken ass right here and revel in the pure civility of the north woods in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Now, what about you? What is your quest young Lancelot? What is your Holy Grail in life, Gus?

GUS

I'm just hoping to find enough work cutting firewood for the next year and a half so I can keep helping my Mom out with the bills until my little sister gets out of high school and either gets married or gets a job. Then, maybe I'll apply for a student loan and go to college or vocational school.

BEN

Working on a merit badge are we?

GUS

What?

BEN

The good son badge. Taking care of Mom and Sis before getting on with your own life.

GUS

You don't know anything about me, or my family.

BEN

I know your kind Augustus. The world's full of nineteen year old bull-shitters just like you. BS'ing themselves into believing they're needed at home so they don't have to leave the nest and get on with their lives.

GUS

You're full of shit.

BEN

Aren't we all, Gus. You can't bullshit an old bull-shitter like me. Two years from now, you'll still be cutting wood and Sis will have gotten herself knocked-up and run off with some loser and you won't want to leave Momma right now, because she's depressed over Sissy and if you leave, whatever will happen to....

GUS

Shut up! I don't know why I even stopped here.

BEN

Nor do I. But, you're here, so hand me the box of Cheerios.

GUS hands the box of Cheerios to Ben and starts to leave.

GUS

Well, enjoy your Cheerios and beer. And, if tomorrow I see you face down drunk in your yard, I'll be sure to keep on walking.

BEN

Jeez, don't be so damn touchy. I was just stating an observation, Gussie. You know what Moms really like? They like sons who make something out of themselves. They want to be able to say to their friends, there's my son Augustus, he's up at the University studying to be something. Take my word for it Gus... seeing her son making a difference in his life is more important to your mother than that hundred bucks you give her every week.

GUS

Two hundred.

BEN

Oh, excuse me, two hundred.

GUS

And, you don't know shit.

BEN

That's where you're wrong Gus. I definitely know shit. I write it. I am an expert in the written media of shit.

GUS

You're still drunk.

BEN

I certainly hope so. But, drunkenness aside, I still know crap when I see it and when I write it.

GUS

My Mom said you were a writer. What do you write?

BEN

Screenplays... at least I used to. Now, all I write is fertilizer.

GUS

Maybe if you sobered up, you'd write better.

BEN

Hah! Wrong. When I'm drunk I write better... not much, but ... I lost my purpose Gus. In order to be a good writer one needs to have a purpose... something or someone worth writing for.

GUS

And you don't have a purpose?

BEN

Not anymore. My purpose died. For forty-eight years she was my reason and my inspiration for writing.

GUS

Your wife?

BEN

Wife, muse... my purpose. Cancer robbed me of my purpose Gus. It is a take-all, heartless, son-of-a bitch, Augustus. It took my purpose and left behind a bitter drunken old manure spreader.

GUS

I'm sorry about your wife.

BEN

Me too. You know, you are one of the few people who have said that to me that I really believe, Augustus. You cut wood, huh?

GUS

Yeah. You have a problem with that?

BEN

Apart from the fact that you're wasting your life? Not at all, I have a deal for you.

GUS

What kind of a deal?

BEN

Have you seen that woods I have out back between my place and my pond?

GUS

Yeah, I've seen it.

BEN

I want it thinned so I can see the pond from my back porch.

GUS

What's in it for me?

BEN

You get to keep all of the firewood and sell it.

GUS

That's it?

BEN

No. I want you to check on me each time you stop by to see that I'm not face-down in my own feces and that I have enough beer for my Cheerios. If you'll do that, I may have a little bonus for you when you're done.

GUS

What kind of bonus?

BEN

I haven't decided yet. That's the thing about bonuses they're usually a surprise.

GUS

I'll think about it.

BEN

Think away, Gus.

GUS

I have to be going. I'll stop by tomorrow and let you know about thinning your woods.

BEN

(Handing GUS money) Here's a ten, bring me some more Cheerios, will you? I'm almost out.

GUS

What about some milk?

BEN

What for? You trying to ruin my love for Cheerios?

GUS

(Taking the money) I'll see you tomorrow.

BEN

Hasty mannyawna, Augustus.

GUS

Right.

*GUS exits and BEN pours more beer on HIS
Cheerios as the LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK.*

END OF SCENE

SCENE 3

SETTING: *Same; two months later.*

AT RISE: *The door to BEN's place is standing open and noise can be heard coming from within. GUS enters carrying a brown paper grocery bag full of boxes of Cheerios. He crosses to the doorway and calls out.*

GUS

(Calling) Ben! Ben, you in there? I brought you some Cheerios. Now, drag your ornery ol' ass out here, will ya?

Noise can be heard coming from inside, but no one comes out.

GUS, *Continued*

Hey Ben, don't make me come get you.... I don't particularly like the smell in there.

MADDIE enters from the shack.

GUS, *Continued*

Oh, I'm sorry... I was looking for Ben.

MADDIE

Ben's not here.

GUS

He's not? Where is he?

MADDIE

You must be Augustus.

MADDIE holds out HER hand to shake with GUS. GUS hesitates.

MADDIE, *Continued*

I'm Madeline, Ben's daughter.

GUS accepts the handshake from MADDIE.

GUS

Gus. Ben told me about you, he said you were also his lawyer and agent.

MADDIE

That's right. What else did he say? I'm sure he had more to say on the subject.

GUS

He said you could be a real ball-breaker.

MADDIE

Now, that I believe. That sounds like my Dad.

GUS

If it's any consolation, he did say that you were pretty and reminded him of his wife. Where's Ben? I brought him some Cheerios and I have some things I need to talk to him about.

MADDIE

(Pointing to the picnic table) Maybe we should sit down, Gus.

GUS

Why? Why do we need to sit down? Nothing has happened to Ben, has there?

MADDIE

That's what I need to talk to you about, Gus.

GUS

Where is he? I need to talk to him about my visit to the university.

This is Not the End of the Play

Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes

Continue to Next Page for
Alternative Language and Casting Choices

Alternative Language Choices

Scene #1

Page #1 Ben: Go Away! Can't ya read the signs?

Ben: What do you want?

Page #2 Ben: Yep, he doesn't eat much and he doesn't get me up at 5am so he can do his business in my yard.

Pages 5 and 6 Change the word shit to either crap or junk.

Scene #2

Ben: Who are you? What do you think you're doing scaring me half to death?
Can't you read the signs?

Ben: Don't be such a hard-case. (hard-case substituted for prick)

Ben: Wait! Don't get your undies in a bundle. (substituted for "tit in a wringer")

Bullshit can be changed to Bull

Shit can be changed to crap or junk

Bull-shitters can be changed to BS'ers

Son of a Bitch can be changed to SOB

Scene #3

Ass can be changed to butt or behind

Ball-breaker can be changed to slave driver

Alternative Casting Choices

The Characters Ben and Maddie can be played by either male or female actors. If a female actor is substituted for Ben the character name can be changed to Bet/ Betsy. If this casting change is made then apart from the apparent word changes such as Mom for Dad, Ben's line in scene two can be changed as follows:

Bet: Call me Bet... it's short for Betsy, after the woman who sewed the first flag.