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The Mitchells
A Humorous Account on Coming Out
by
G. Bruce Smith

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The Mitchells
by G. Bruce Smith

CHARACTERS

SEAN: Mid 20’s; Phi Beta Kappa at Columbia, editor of the university newspaper and winner of the fifth-grade St. Louis Spelling Bee Contest. His parents do not know (just yet) that he is gay.

JENNA: 30’s; Sean’s book publisher who got him an interview with Diane Sawyer on a segment called “To Be Young, Gifted and Gay.”

JEFF: 20’s; Sean’s friend.

PEARL: Late 30s; another friend; a little twisted but in a good way.

MARGARET: Sean’s mother. Minnesota born; once reigned as “Paul Bunyan’s Sweetheart.”

BEN: Sean’s father. Oh, yah—A Minnesotan like his wife.

BILLY: A disheveled drunk Sean meets in jail.

LOUISE: 40ish; Margaret’s friend from high school; runner-up in the “Paul Bunyan’s Sweetheart” contest. (Can be played by same actor that plays JENNA)

GUARD: In the jailhouse. (Can be played by same actor that plays JEFF or PEARL)

SETTING

A Jailhouse
The Living Room of an Apartment in Los Angeles
A Home in St. Louis, Missouri

PRODUCTION NOTES

The stage is split into three areas each representing one of the three settings. Each area should be minimally represented. A porch swing or two chairs next to one another is located off the area representing the home in St. Louis.

ETC

Though the play may be defined in time by references to popular culture and character experiences, the situation and humor transcend such restraints and can easily be updated to “the present”. If you prefer to set the play in “the present”, please contact the publisher and your request will be forwarded to the playwright to assist with the necessary changes.
The Mitchells
By G. Bruce Smith

(The stage, still dark: the Soggy Bottom Boys’ “He’s in the Jailhouse Now” is heard playing. AT RISE: the stage remains dark except for shadows cast by the jail bars. SEAN, mid-20s, is lying on the floor, asleep in the shadows. Suddenly, SEAN bolts upright with a start. He gets into running position, center stage, running in place, fast and furiously. His address is also fast-paced, and the opening scene should be fast-paced, as well.)

SEAN
So here I am, running like a maniac, as if I’m in some bad melodrama, racing down the concourse at LAX, needing to stop them before they get on the plane, wondering what the hell am I doing. Me. Sean Mitchell. Phi Beta Kappa at Columbia, editor of the university newspaper, winner of the fifth-grade St. Louis Spelling Bee Contest, for God’s sakes! What am I thinking? I just bought a plane ticket to Fresno – Jesus, Fresno! – just so I could get past security.

(SEAN stops.)

SEAN, Continued
Wait a minute, wait a minute. Let’s go back. New York City, three months ago. (Resumes running) I’m jogging in Central Park. I like to run.

(SFX: CELL PHONE RINGS. SEAN stops, pulls out a phone headset from his pocket, puts it on.)

SEAN, Continued
Jenna? What? (Beat) No shit!

(SPOT ON JENNA, late 30’s, upstage right, also wearing a phone headset.)

JENNA
That’s right, “Primetime”!

SEAN
Diane Sawyer?!

JENNA
She wants you to be on a segment she’s doing on young gay artists and writers. She’s calling it (Dramatic) “To Be Young, Gifted and Gay.”

SEAN
What?

JENNA
Yes, you heard me, darling Sean.
SEAN
Why me?

JENNA
The book, silly! I’ve been circulating galleys all over New York.

SEAN
But, it’s not coming out till next spring!

JENNA

SEAN
Oh.

JENNA
She’ll be taping in about a month and it will air the day after Christmas.

SEAN
My God! I’m supposed to go home for Christmas!

JENNA
And…?

SEAN
To my parents’ house in…well, another part of the country.

JENNA
You’re a good boy, Sean.

SEAN
No, you don’t understand! My parents don’t know I’m gay!

JENNA
They will soon enough. Promos start airing a week before Christmas.

SEAN
Wait a minute!

JENNA
Kisses, Sean. Oh, and Sean, don’t run so much. It can’t possibly be good for your health.

(LIGHTS DOWN on JENNA. SEAN resumes running. He dials his cell phone. Spot on JEFF, mid-20s, attractive, upstage left, also wearing a cell phone headset.)
Jeff, I’m fucked.

JEFF
I was just gonna call you. I got tickets to the Mets game tonight.

SEAN
Did you hear me? I’m gonna be on “Primetime.”

JEFF
Cool.

SEAN
I’m gonna be outed on national television.

JEFF
Big revelation.

SEAN
My parents don’t know. They’ll freak. I can’t do this. I’ve got to cancel.

JEFF
Okay.

SEAN
I can’t cancel. It’s Diane Sawyer, for Chrissakes!

JEFF
Okay.

SEAN
Are you listening? Jeff, are you listening?

JEFF
The game starts at 7:30. Don’t be late.

(LIGHTS OUT on JEFF. SEAN stops, dials phone. Spot up on PEARL, late 30s, upstage right, also wearing a cell-phone headset.)

SEAN
Pearl, I have this opportunity to go on national television, Diane Sawyer is doing a segment on young, gifted gay artists and –

PEARL
Why am I wearing this headset?
SEAN
Pearl, stop with the non sequiturs for just two minutes! Listen to me.

PEARL
I have no choice. I’m wearing this stupid headset and you’re talking to me.

SEAN
So, I’m gonna be outed on national television. My parents will…God knows what they’ll do.

(SEAN resumes running.)

PEARL
You have parents? I thought they were dead.

You think everybody’s dead.

SEAN
Yes, we are all the walking dead. But I thought your parents were the sleeping dead. The dead-dead.

PEARL
Pearl!

SEAN
You never talk about them. Besides, parents know.

That I’m gay? Not mine.

PEARL
Well, then, tell them.

SEAN
I can’t.

PEARL
Then let them find out by watching TV. Ask Diane Sawyer to introduce her piece by turning to the camera and saying, “Ma and Pa Mitchell, have we got a surprise for you tonight!”

SEAN
This is not helpful, Pearl.

PEARL
What are you afraid of, Sean?

(SEAN stops running.)
SEAN
I’m not afraid! I just…I don’t know.

PEARL
Why am I wearing this headset? Who put this headset on me?

(LIGHTS OUT on PEARL. A beat as SEAN ponders PEARL’S question about being afraid. He takes the headset off.)

SEAN
So, where was I? Oh, yes, running down the concourse at LAX (starts running again). I’ve since moved to L.A., it’s less than a month before Christmas, and I have to reach them—Mom, Dad, you can’t get on that plane, not before, not before…and then I see them, they’re about to board, this is my last chance, and then it slows down and I cry out, Moooooooooom, Daaaaaaaaaad. . . (Tight spot on MARGARET & BEN MITCHELL, upstage left, who turn their heads in slow motion) and I yell, I’m ga – I’m ga – ga – g – going to miss you!

(MARGARET & BEN exchange looks, not quite sure what to make of this, and then smile broadly and wave goodbye. LIGHTS FADE on MARGARET & BEN. SEAN leans over, resting his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath, as if he’s just run the marathon.)

SEAN
On my way out of LAX, I chase down a nun, you know, one of those nuns who collects money, and tell her to take my ticket, take it, dammit, go to Fresno. You need a break. She freaks and runs screaming through the United Airlines terminal – and I’m arrested for disturbing the peace.

(LIGHTS FADE on NUN. SEAN is still in his breath-catching pose, his legs apart. BILLY, a fellow cellmate and disheveled drunk, crawls out of the dark and pokes his head between SEAN’s legs.)

BILLY
You gotta cigarette?

(SEAN jumps and screams.)

SEAN
Jesus Christ, you scared the shit out of me! Who the hell are you?

BILLY
I’m a drunk. Ain’t you?

SEAN
What? No, I’m not a drunk. Where the hell did you come from? I didn’t see you when they threw me in here.
I guess you was sleepin’ when I came in.

I don’t believe this.

You musta been havin’ a bad dream ‘cause you was hollerin’ real loud.

Yeah, it’s a nightmare. Only it’s real. At least I think so. Are you real? Where are you from?

Born and bred in Manchester, New Hampshire.

You sound like you’re from the South.

All drunks sound like they’re from the south. It’s the lingua franca of drunks.

Lingua franca?

Yup. It means –

I know what it means. Oh, this is brilliant. Spending the night in jail with…with…

Billy’s the name.

Yeah, well, I’m getting out of here soon. They said it was just an overnight thing.

If you ain’t in here cuz you’s a drunk, I reckon they musta gotten you fer exposin’ them there private parts o’ yers.

No, of course not! (Beat) I’m in for disturbing the peace. I got a little crazy, you know, which isn’t really like me.

Disturbin’ the peace. I cain’t see you in no barroom brawl.
SEAN
I can kick ass.

BILLY
Yup, you done kicked some mean ass. What was her name? Sister Mary Josephine?

SEAN
What? Oh Jesus, how did you know?

BILLY
Like I said, you was talkin’ real loud in your sleep. Pickin’ on a holy sister o’ God, now that’s low.

SEAN
I did not pick on her. I was just trying to give her my plane ticket.

BILLY
You just told me you kicked her ass.

SEAN
I didn’t say I kicked her ass. I said I can kick ass. Nobody specific, just generic ass.

BILLY
Maybe you just gave that poor sister o’ God one of them looks.

SEAN
One of them looks?

BILLY
Yup, the kind that guys like you give. One of them raised eyebrow thangs. The kinda look that could freeze the pecker off an NFL linebacker.

SEAN
I don’t know what you’re talking about.

BILLY
Well now, I heard you say somethin’ about hidin’ your ho-mo-sex-u-al-ity from someone.

SEAN
That’s none of your concern.

BILLY
Don’t make no difference to me.

SEAN
And so what if I’m gay. Have you got a problem with that?
BILLY
Like I said, it don’t make no difference to me.

SEAN
And yeah, I was about to shout it out to my parents, in front of about a million people in the United Airlines terminal, that I’m a big fag. Mom and Dad, and I’ve been trying to tell you this for the past week, hell, maybe most of my life, dropping major clues, but you’re both too dense to get it!

BILLY
Yup. Folks can be like that. My Mama thought I’d amount to somethin’ someday. I kept tryin’ to tell her I was gonna be as big a loser as she was.

SEAN
You cannot imagine what it was like for me, growing up in Missouri with a bunch of ignorant, provincial boors.

BILLY
You from Missouri, huh? Well, then, you’s a puke.

A what?

SEAN
That’s right, a puke. Them early Californians used to call them immigrants from Missouri pukes. Guess Missouri upchucked you out here, too.

BILLY
I’m no puke. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. I’m nothing like the pukes…I mean, Philistines that I grew up with. People in my boring little neighborhood in St. Louis live for the high school football games. To them, culture is the community theater production of “The Odd Couple.” And every girl I knew in high school had Farrah Faucett hairdos – in the 90s!

BILLY
Well, now, I reckon the boys wasn’t lookin’ at the hairdos. ‘Cept maybe you.

SEAN
And my parents fit right in. I couldn’t wait to get out of high school, to get away. In New York, I came alive. My friends were smart and school was exciting and people were open-minded and they understood good writing and the arts and they didn’t give a shit about Jay Leno or pop-culture bullshit. And we were gay and bi and straight and it didn’t matter the way it matters – believe me it matters – in the Midwest.

BILLY
So what’s the big deal?
SEAN
The big deal is…the big deal is that I’m going on national TV the day after Christmas in a big
time gay way.

BILLY
Gay way. That has a nice ring to it. Gay-way, gay-way, gay-way. Try sayin’ it fast. Like toy-
boat, toy-boat –

SEAN
Did you hear what I said? I’m going to be on Primetime! ABC! National TV! A Diane
Sawyer one-hour special called, “To Be Young, Gifted & Gay.”

BILLY
Well, butter my butt and call me a biscuit.

SEAN
Promos start airing in three weeks and I haven’t even told my parents. So here I am, in jail,
one of the nation’s young, gifted and gay, and I haven’t even come out to my parents! Yeah,
sure, everybody says, ah c’mon, this is the 21st century, no big deal coming out. That’s
bullshit. Particularly if you come from the great American heartland.

BILLY
They don’t cotton much to homo-sexuals in the South neither.

SEAN
You’ve got to help me! I need to figure out a way to tell them!

BILLY
You’s talkin’ like a damn fool.

SEAN
If I’m going to be stuck with you overnight, you’ve got to do this for me!

BILLY
Awright now, don’t get your tits all caught in a ringer. You said yer folks was out visitin’
you?

SEAN
They flew out last week for Thanksgiving, their first trip to L.A.

BILLY
Well, how come you didn’t tell ‘em then?

SEAN
I tried. In fact, I had it all planned. I was going to be creative about it, kind of lead them to the
realization. But with subtlety.
BILLY

Tell me ‘bout it.

(LIGHTS FADE on BILLY. SEAN crosses to a chair in his L.A. apartment living room, next to PEARL. They sit stiffly; waiting.)

SEAN

Where the heck are they?

PEARL

Maybe they were riding the Matterhorn and their roller coaster car flew off the tracks. Maybe Disneyland loaded real bullets into the guns of the Pirates of the Caribbean and they shot your parents. Maybe Mickey Mouse murdered—

SEAN

Stop it, Pearl. That’s not funny.

PEARL


SEAN

Look, they’ll be here any minute. I just want to go over the plan one more time. I’ll start and I’ll do “Will and Grace.”

PEARL

Yes.

SEAN

And you’ll do. . .

PEARL

“The Robin’s Nest.”

SEAN

“The Bird Cage!” Geez, Pearl! This is crucial!

PEARL

I was kidding.

SEAN

You know there’s nobody in the world that knows when you are kidding.

PEARL

SEAN
I get it! Look, Pearl, I really appreciate that you’re helping me out. You’re absolutely the weirdest friend that I’ve ever had, but I’m so glad you moved to L.A. with me.

PEARL
I often ask myself why I did.

SEAN
Okay, so back to our game of charades. I’ll finish with “YMCA.” That’ll be three big clues.

(Knock on door.)

MARGARET (Offstage)
Seannie, honey, we’re home!

(SEAN looks like a deer caught in the headlights, but recovers quickly.)

SEAN
Wish me luck.

PEARL
Luck.

SEAN crosses to door and opens it. BEN & MARGARET MITCHELL, SEAN’s parents, enter, wearing Mickey Mouse ears and carrying Disneyland bags filled with merchandise. Immediately upon entering, they burst into song.

MARGARET & BEN, Singing
It’s a small world after all, it’s a small world after all,
It’s a small world after all, it’s a small, small world.

(They laugh.)

MARGARET
Look what we got you! This is for you Sean (Pulls out a Pluto Christmas tree ornament from the bag). He was your favorite, wasn’t he, Seannie. Remember, your bedtime prayers? God bless Mommy, Daddy, Puto – you always dropped the “L” – Granma, Granpa, Granny, Poppy, Seannie, Puto – you always mentioned Puto twice – all my friends, all good people, night-night, Amen.

BEN
And for you, Pearl…

MARGARET
The Little Mermaid Crazy Curls.

(BEN hands PEARL the gift.)
BEN
We weren’t quite sure what you’d like, but we figured you could relate to a woman with a fishtail.

PEARL
What I always wanted.

MARGARET
We had the best time in the Magic Kingdom! And your father was naughty. He flirted with Minnie Mouse.

BEN
She’s one hot mouse!

MARGARET
And, oh goodness, the pirates in that one ride looked so real I thought they might kidnap and ravish me!

BEN
Shiver me timbers!

(MARGARET laughs.)

MARGARET
Ben, you kill me sometimes, you just kill me!

BEN
I’m no killer, Margaret. But I thought Mickey Mouse cast you a murderous look.

MARGARET
It was lustful, Ben, lustful!

BEN
No wonder. He was making eyes at the sexiest woman in the place.

MARGARET
Aw geez, Ben…

BEN
We went on all the roller coasters…

MARGARET
We screamed so loud everyone thought the Matterhorn cars had jumped the tracks!

(SEAN and PEARL exchange glances.)
BEN
But the best part was a very special stop we made on our drive back.

(BEN winks conspiratorially at MARGARET. SEAN does not notice the exchange.)

MARGARET
We visited the Richard Nixon Library!

SEAN
I don’t believe it! Of all the things to see in Southern California, you have to go to the Nixon Library!

BEN
Well, now, son, he was our president.

SEAN
He was a paranoid, lying, dirty son-of-a-you-know-what! Look what he did in Vietnam, in Cambodia! Dad, how could you? How could a Vietnam vet visit the shrine of a warmongering pig like Nixon?

BEN
Then, I guess you wouldn’t approve of our plans tomorrow. We’re driving to the Ronald Reagan Library.

(SEAN is aghast.)

SEAN
You’ve got to be joking! Reagan was even worse than Nixon!

MARGARET
Honey, Republicans are people, too.

SEAN
(Taking a deep breath) I’ll tell you what, let’s talk about something else. Can I get you guys some iced tea?

MARGARET
Thank you, honey, we’re fine.

SEAN
Pearl?

PEARL
Iced tea causes the ozone hole in the Antarctic to grow bigger. Bloody Marys, on the other hand, are known to make infertile Zulu women pregnant.

(She exits. Awkward silence.)
BEN
Uh, son? This Pearl friend of yours is a nice girl. And she’s got great, well, I think you young people call it booty. But, son, she’s...she’s...

MARGARET
What your father is trying to say is that she’s...well...

BEN
Loony.

SEAN
Don’t worry, we’re just friends.

MARGARET
Well, are you dating anyone yet, honey? L.A. seems to have lots of pretty girls.

SEAN
You know I just moved here, and I’ve been busy with the magazine and pitching script ideas.

MARGARET
But man does not live by magazine editing and script tossing alone.

SEAN
Pitching, Mom. Pitching screenplay ideas.

(PEARL enters, carrying a Bloody Mary.)

PEARL
So are we going to play that dumb game?

(SEAN shoots PEARL a dirty look.)

MARGARET
What game? I love games!

SEAN
I thought maybe it would be nice to...play...charades or something.

MARGARET
That sounds fun, doesn’t it, Ben?

BEN
You betcha.

(SEAN stands, looking a little nervous.)
Okay, I’ll start. Pearl’s just gonna watch this first round, isn’t that right, Pearl?

I dunno. Right now I’m picking up signals from hippos in the Zambezi River.

Excuse me, Mom and Dad, just for a minute.

(SEAN grabs PEARL and pulls her aside where his parents can’t hear him.)

Remember, I’m starting with “Will and Grace.” Then it’s your turn.

Maybe it’s three-toed sloths in the Colombian Amazon.

(SEAN & PEARL return to their places. BEN and MARGARET eagerly devote their attention to SEAN.)

This is a –

(SEAN makes the sign of a square, representing a TV show.)

A box!

Margaret, Margaret, what was the name of that boxing movie? “Angry Bull?”

Ooh, ooh, “Raging Bull!” (To SEAN) “Raging Bull!”

(Exasperated) This (makes sign of a square again) is a television show!

Margaret, I don’t think “Raging Bull” was made into a TV show.

You’re right, Ben.

It’s not “Raging Bull.” Now pay attention. I’m going to tell you how many words are in the title.
(SEAN holds up three fingers.)

BEN


SEAN

Forget the damn bull! This has nothing to do with bulls, or cows, or boxers!

MARGARET

But maybe a little rage, honey?

(SEAN takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. He holds up one finger.)

BEN

One…

MARGARET

…Day at a Time! No, too many words.

SEAN

First word!

BEN

Oh that’s right, Margaret, he’s going to act out the first word.

Good.

(SEAN pulls at his earlobe.)

BEN

Earlobe? Margaret, do you know any TV show that starts with earlobe?

MARGARET

Can’t say I do. But you know, we don’t watch the History Channel.

SEAN

Sounds like! Sounds like! When I pull my earlobe, it means sounds like!

MARGARET

Of course, we forgot. It’s been ages since we played this game. Go on, Seannie.

(SEAN pantomimes pouring liquid into a glass and, in an exaggerated manner, takes a pill and swallows it. With each of the following incorrect guesses, SEAN shakes his head no.)

BEN

Water. No, glass. Milk? Whiskey?
(SEAN panto"mimes “pill” again.)

MARGARET

Vitamin! Sounds like vitamin!

(BEN & MARGARET turn to each other, ignoring SEAN.)

BEN

Hitamin, Jitamin, Ritamin…

MARGARET

Bitamin, Kitamin…

SEAN is shaking his head furiously.

SEAN

It’s not vitamin!

MARGARET

Well, what else do you swallow like that? Anything else wouldn’t be good for you, honey.

SEAN

Forget it! Forget the first word!

(SEAN holds up three fingers.)

BEN

Third word.

(SEAN nods gratefully. He panto"mimes a Fred Astaire dance.)

MARGARET

Fred Astaire!

(SEAN nods hopefully, indicating through gestures his Mom is on the right track.)

BEN

Margaret, I think he looks more like Ginger Rogers.

MARGARET

But Ben, he’s not wearing a dress.

BEN

You have a point there, Margaret.
MARGARET
(To SEAN) Dancing? Dancers? Movie stars?

(SEAN exaggerates his moves in hopes of looking more graceful.)

BEN
Transvestite?

(SEAN looks appalled, then shifts to a new tactic.)

SEAN
Let me try this a different way.

(SEAN holds up three fingers and pulls at his earlobe.)

MARGARET
Third word.

BEN
Sounds like...

(SEAN nods, pleased. With his forefinger about a foot from his face, he traces the outline of his face and then points to it.)

MARGARET
Sean! Sounds like Sean!

(SEAN is shaking his head, no, no, no. But BEN & MARGARET have turned to each other and are off and running.)

BEN
Bawn, Hawn, Nawn...

MARGARET
Honey, start with “Z” and work backwards

BEN
Zawn...

MARGARET
Is it zawn, Sean?

(SEAN shakes his head no. He is almost defeated.)

BEN
Yawn, Sean?
MARGARET
Wawn, Sean?

BEN
Maybe it’s something Chinese. Like won-ton.

MARGARET
I know! “The Fortune Cookie!”

SEAN
I give up.

(SEAN sinks into his chair.)

MARGARET
Seannie, we’re sorry. We’ll try real hard, won’t we, Ben?

(BEN nods in agreement.)

PEARL
Forget it. It’s my turn.

(PEARL drains the last of her Bloody Mary and stands up. She pantomimes “Movie.”)

BEN
Movie.

(PEARL nods, then holds up two fingers.)

MARGARET
Two words.

(PEARL nods, then holds up two fingers again.)

BEN
Second word.

(PEARL nods. She does a bad pantomime of a bird in a cage.)

MARGARET
Birdcage!

BEN
“The Birdcage!”

(PEARL nods again and sits down. SEAN is incredulous. MARGARET & BEN are very pleased.)
PEARL

Not a bad effort.

MARGARET

Are you sure “The Birdcage” was a movie, Ben?

BEN

Yah, sure it was. You know, that one with Burt Lancaster and he was a prisoner and raised birds in his cell.

MARGARET

Oh, yah, now I remember.

(LIGHTS FADE on MARGARET, BEN & PEARL. Clutching his head, SEAN moves slowly back to the jail area. LIGHTS UP on JAIL and BILLY.)

BILLY

I loved that movie.

SEAN

What movie?

BILLY

That bird-man movie with that there Burt Lancaster fella. Made me cry.

SEAN

Who cares about the goddamn movie? Don’t you see my point?

BILLY

I reckon I do. It’s always a good thang to play games. Ev’r once in a while my Mama would play a little poker with me. It was right after she gave me my allowance, about two times a year, and she’d win that little bit o’ money right back from me. ‘Course, I ain’t so sure that playin’ a game is the right way to tell yer folks you’s a ho-mo-sex-u-al.

SEAN

That was just to put the idea in their heads. So when I told them it wouldn’t be such a shock.

BILLY

I don’t git it. How can you talk about yer proclivities with that there Diane Sawyer woman but you cain’t with yer folks?

SEAN

It’s different. Diane Sawyer is a journalist. I felt comfortable with her, a fellow journalist, even if she is from television. She did fine with the interview.

BILLY

I git it. Yer folks is just some pukes.
SEAN
Stop using that word. They’re not…It’s just that they’re so…ignorant. I mean, I hate to say it, but they really are. Neither of them went past high school, and by the time I was 12, I knew more about the world than they did.

BILLY
I can just see you, one of them little squirts wearin’ big eyeglasses, your lips all pinched and recitin’ the capitals of all the countries of the world. In alphabetical order. And all the other kids were gaggin’ behind your back.

SEAN
Okay, so I might have been a little bit of a nerd in elementary school. But my parents didn’t help things at all. I could tell you stories.

BILLY
I know you could.

SEAN
Like the time my father was invited to my third-grade class as part of Career Day. I guess the teacher thought it would be fascinating for a bunch of eight-year-olds to hear from a hardware store owner.

(TIGHT SPOT on BEN MITCHELL. This is the first in a series of mini-flashbacks. BEN is clearly uncomfortable with public speaking. Throughout the following monologue, BEN fishes in his pocket or from a paper bag.)

BEN
This, class, is a screw. There are all kinds of screws. There must be millions of screws in the world. People screw all the time. (Holding up) This is a bolt. It’s a lot like a screw only…different. (Holding up) Now, class, there are also nuts, which screw onto bolts or screws. (Feels in his pocket) There are lots of other kinds of nuts. (Holding up) A push nut, a speed nut, and an acorn nut. Now, don’t get confused. Just because this is called an acorn nut doesn’t mean you can eat it. No siree, you don’t want to put these nuts in your mouth. Oh, yeah, (Holding up another one) this here is a lug nut. Must have been invented by some big lug. (Laughs at his own bad joke.) Okay, enough with the funny stuff. (As he feels in his pocket) Now what’s this? (Holding up) This is a rigid conduit nipple. (Flustered, he realizes what he’s said and jams the nipple into his pocket) Well, I guess you don’t have to learn about rigid nipples now, isn’t that right Seannie? Sean… Sean, where are you going?

(SPOUT OUT on BEN.)

SEAN
Or how about the time we celebrated Chinese New Year? And my mom decided to dress for the part.

(SPOUT on MARGARET, wearing a traditional Chinese headdress.)
MARGARET
Isn’t this beautiful, Sean? It makes me feel like a Chinese porcupine. No, wait that’s not right. Oh, yes, concubine. Makes me feel like a Chinese concubine. (Beat) What’s a concubine? Well, Seannie, it’s, well…it’s a very good friend of somebody’s husband. A very, very good friend.

(SPOT out on MARGARET.)

BILLY
Yer folks don’t seem too bad. I liked that part about the rigid nipple thang.

SEAN
My God, can’t you see how embarrassed I was?

BILLY
You know what they say about embarrassment – it’s just a step away from shame.

(A beat; this makes SEAN uncomfortable. He begins to pace.)

SEAN
I wish I could run. I can’t run in here.

BILLY
What you runnin’ from?

SEAN
Nothing. What do you mean by that?

BILLY
It’s like you’s scared o’ somethin’.

SEAN
I’m not scared.

BILLY
You scared o’ spiders?

(SEAN stops pacing.)

SEAN
Spiders.

BILLY
Yup. Reminds me of Li’l Luke, boy who lived one trailer over from my Mama and me. He was so scared ‘o’ spiders that his Mama had to check his bed for him ev’r night ‘fore he’d climb into it. One night while he was sleepin’ his Mama came to look in on ‘im and lightly
brushed her lips on ‘is cheek. Li’l Luke woke up in a terror, sure that it was a spider that had crawled right over his face. Well, don’t you know, before his Mama had a chance to turn on the light, the boy just up and died.

(Beat; SEAN is expecting more.)

SEAN

That’s it? Where’s the punch line?!

BILLY

Seems to me life is the punch line.

(SEAN ponders that briefly.)

SEAN

I suppose this is some horseshit homily that makes no sense to anyone outside the South.

(SEAN starts pacing again.)

SEAN, Continued

I need to run.

BILLY

Never could figure out why people run. You ever seen a jogger that looks happy?

SEAN

It’s not about happiness. It’s about being healthy, being fit. It’s about being clued into the world around you.

BILLY

Say what?

SEAN

Yes, that’s it. When you run, you’re clued into the world around you.

BILLY

Don’t pee down my back and tell me it’s rainin’.

SEAN

No, no, I mean it. I’ve always been clued into the people around me. Which is more than I can say for my parents.

BILLY

I feel another o’ yer damn stories comin’ on. You sure you ain’t got a cigarette? Or how ‘bout some Jack Daniels.
Now that I think about it, they should have known I was gay since I was like, a kid. Not that I was obvious, or anything. I wasn’t a sissy. I played baseball, dated a couple girls. But still, even when I was real little, there were signs.

(LIGHTS FADE on BILLY. SEAN crosses to a box, pulls out a toy fire engine and some toy soldiers. He gets down on his knees and becomes his 5-year-old self, playing with the fire engine and soldiers. MARGARET enters and kneels down across from him. The scene should be played only with a spot on the two of them.)

MARGARET

Whatcha doin’ Seannie?

SEAN

Playing.

MARGARET

Whatcha playing?

SEAN

Soldiers and firemen.

MARGARET

And what are they doing?

SEAN

The soldiers are chasing the firemen.

MARGARET

Why are the soldiers chasing the firemen?

SEAN

Cause firemen are hot.

MARGARET

That’s an interesting way of putting it.

SEAN

Soldiers are hot, too.

MARGARET

I see. (She doesn’t.) Why are soldiers hot?

SEAN

Same reason firemen are hot.
MARGARET
Hmm. Well, maybe you’ll get to go to a fire station, like on a field trip with your kindergarten class.

SEAN
Yeah.

MARGARET
Gosh, Seannie, it’s hard to believe you’re such a big boy now you’re in kindergarten.

SEAN
Jeffrey’s bigger.

MARGARET
Jeffrey? Is that a boy in your class?

SEAN
He’s got a bigger wee-wee.

MARGARET
Oh. Well, sweetheart, I can’t imagine it’s much bigger.

SEAN
I think firemen have bigger wee-wees than soldiers.

MARGARET
It is true that firemen have big hoses. Well, now, Sean, Halloween is coming up and maybe you’d like to be a fireman this year.

SEAN
Maybe.

MARGARET
Or maybe you’d like to be something else?

SEAN
Maybe…maybe…an angel.

MARGARET
An angel. Well, now, that’s…different.

SEAN
I like their wings.

MARGARET
Oh.
I can be a fireman angel.

A fireman angel. That’s very...imaginative.

Can you make me into a fireman angel?

Of course I can, Seannie.

With a soldier’s gun.

A fireman angel with a soldier’s gun?

I won’t shoot anyone with it.

No, of course you won’t. And I’ll make sure you’re the best darn fireman angel with a...gun...in the whole neighborhood.

And...a magic wand.

A magic wand?

Yeah, like angels have.

You mean, like fairies have?

Yeah, like a fairy.

Hmmm. So you want to be a fireman angel with a gun and a fairy wand?

Uh-huh.
(Beat. MARGARET is getting a little worried.)

MARGARET
Sean, honey, can I ask you a question?
(SEAN nods yes.)

MARGARET, Continued
Why do you want to be a fireman angel with a gun and a fairy wand?
(SEAN shrugs his shoulders.)

MARGARET, Continued
Sean, sweetie, can I ask you another question?

SEAN
Uh-huh.

MARGARET
Are you happy?

(LIGHTS FADE on MARGARET. SEAN crosses to jailhouse; stands for a moment, pondering his mother’s last line. LIGHTS UP on BILLY.)

BILLY
I ain’t never heard a no kid want to be no fireman angel with a gun and a damn fairy wand. That’s real peculiar.

SEAN
It’s like my Mama said. My mother. It’s like my mother said. I was…creative.

BILLY
You was a sissy boy.

SEAN
I was not a sissy.

BILLY
Well, you sure was puttin’ up some pretty big signposts. Guess your Mama was just as dumb as you said she was.

SEAN
(A little defensively) I didn’t exactly say she was…that word…the d-word.

BILLY
Yes you did, and yes she must be.
SEAN
That’s a pretty strong word.

BILLY
Hell, at least your Mama did what you wanted at Halloween. My Mama cut two holes in a garbage bag for my legs, tied the top up ‘round my neck and told me to go trick-or-treat like the trash I was.

SEAN
I guess you were pretty poor.

BILLY
We was so poor our dogs had to lean against the fence to bark. But it weren’t all so bad. The South’s got music that jes’ ‘bout breaks yer heart, an’ sultry nights, and biscuits and gravy like you ain’t never tasted. Sometimes I get an urge to get sober just long enough to up and head on home.

SEAN
*(Smiling)* I thought you were from New Hampshire.

BILLY
Now, if you believe that, you believe Rhett Butler’s gonna come on back to Scarlett O’Hara.

*(SEAN smiles.)*

SEAN
You never talk about your father.

BILLY
I never knowed my daddy. But I cain’t say that I blame ‘im for leavin’ my Mama. Hell, why do you think I’m a drunk? I had to live with ‘er.

SEAN
Did your mother ever talk about your dad?

BILLY
Said he drank a lot. Big surprise. Said when the two of ‘em was sober, they had a good time. Said she even ‘membered one time she and my daddy went fishin’ and took me with ‘em. Hell, I don’t remember it.

SEAN
It must have been tough for you.

BILLY
They ain’t no use in whinin’. Somethin’ *you* might think about.
SEAN
(Whiny) I’m not whiny. Just because I had a fat her at home doesn’t mean…Let me put it this way. (Dramatic pause) My parents are of Norwegian descent. (Nods knowingly)

BILLY
What the hell you talkin’ about?

SEAN
That’s right. My parents are originally from Minnesota. And their ancestors were Norwegian.

BILLY
Norwegians, huh? Now that’s scary.

SEAN
I don’t think you understand the weight of this. First of all, my folks speak Minnesotan. Oh yah, you betcha!

BILLY
Shameful.

SEAN
But more than that, it’s what they don’t say. It’s what they’re thinking when they’re not saying anything at all. About the only time my father would open up a little was when we went to ball games together. There was this one time. . .

(LIGHTS UP on two chairs, which are the front seats of an automobile. SEAN, who is seven years old in this scene, sits on the one seat and puts on a St. Louis Cardinals cap. BEN sits on the other, the driver’s seat, and drives. He also has on a Cards cap. The two sit in silence for a long pause. As BEN speaks, he slips more and more into Minnesotan mode.)

BEN
Looks like it’s gonna rain. It’ll be pretty darn hot, but it could rain. The highs are supposed to get into the high 80’s, but with rain, see. You know what that means. It’ll be humid. (Pause) That’s what the radio said. ‘Course, the radio doesn’t always get it right. Radio said the Cards would win the World Series last year. Not that I’m complaining, not one bit, no siree. It was a great season, a great series. Heck yah, 1985 will go down in history as the greatest National League playoffs in a decade! Isn’t that right, son?

(SEAN nods yes.)

BEN, Continued
You bet! What a team! Willie McGee, Vince Coleman, Ozzie Smith. This is a legendary team, Sean. And we’re here to see it, right here in St. Louis, gateway to the west. (Beat) Oh yah, baseball’s the greatest sport ever invented by mankind. You understand that, dontcha? You might be just seven years old, yah, okay, almost seven and a half, but this is your second season as a bonafide Little Leaguer and a diehard Redbirds fan. Isn’t that so? And I’ll betcha
BEN, Continued

this season you’re gonna get to first base. (Beat) Now see, you still got lots to learn about baseball. First off, you gotta learn how to hit the ball. (Beat) And there’s somethin’ else you gotta learn – there’s good and there’s evil in baseball. I know, you think I’m soundin’ an awful lot like a Catholic, and Lutherans don’t much go for that stuff. Not that there’s anything wrong with Catholics, no siree. Heck, we got some on our block, you even play with Pete and Mary’s kids, don’tcha? How many have they got now? Seven, eight, nine? Enough for their own baseball team, yah? (He chuckles) Anyway, like I was sayin’, there is good and there is evil in baseball. You betcha! The Cardinals are at the top of all that’s good in this world. Why do you think they call them the Saint Louis Cardinals? And then you have to dig real, real deep into the muck to get to the evil (Dramatic pause) – the New York Yankees. Now, son, before I die I’d like to see the Yankees and the Cards in the World Series. But truth be told, those yellow-bellied Yankees are chicken when it comes to the Cards. You betcha! ‘Cause they know that good triumphs over evil. (Pause) Then again, maybe it’s only in baseball that good beats out evil. (Beat) I used to think ice fishin’ was good. In fact, I used to think it was kind of a religious experience, sittin’ there in the quiet cold with my father and grandfather, waiting to see if some poor, crazy fish under that frozen pond would find his way to our little hole and go for the bait. But see, I started having nightmares about that hole in the ice. I’d be peerin’ down into that hole and feelin’ like there was something evil down there in the black water, something lurking just below the surface, and it scared the bejesus out of me. (Beat) I had that nightmare a lot in Vietnam. Darnedest thing to be sweatin’ in a jungle and dreamin’ about ice fishin’. (Beat) I guess it kinda made sense. It was all kinda murky there in Nam. ‘Cause, see, we saw things that, well…not very good things. (Pause) All of us guys kinda wondered what we were doing there, what we were supposed to be fighting for. (Beat) But I guess you can’t be a patriot and a good soldier if you ask these kinda questions out loud. So we uh…we uh…just kept those questions to ourselves… (Beat) When I got back to the States, I never went ice fishin’ again. (Pause) Ah geez, I missed the turnoff. I’ll tell you what, that’s what happens when ya talk too much. So, I think I’ll be quiet now for a bit.

(LIGHTS FADE SLOWLY on BEN. BEN exits. SPOT on SEAN, who does not move from his chair as he reflects on this memory. SEAN slowly removes his baseball cap and crosses slowly to jail and BILLY.)

SEAN

I’d forgotten…that, you know, he uh…

BILLY

You forgot he was a Vietnam vet.

SEAN

No. I just don’t remember him ever talking about it. Not like that, anyway.

BILLY

I reckon there are some things men don’t talk about.

SEAN

Maybe you’re right.
BILLY
I reckon your Daddy never did take you ice fishin’.

(SEAN shakes his head no.)

BILLY, Continued
Sometimes, somethin’ so bad happens that you never do the thang you love, ever again.

SEAN
(Getting uncomfortable with this conversation) That sounds a bit dramatic.

BILLY
Why? Because it’s real?

SEAN
Real! Oh, come on.

BILLY
Di’n’t they learn you nothin’ in college?

SEAN
Of course. I went to a damn good school.

BILLY
I guess they didn’t teach you about people.

SEAN
I went to an Ivy League school for your information.

BILLY
Well you can just butter my butt again.

SEAN
I was Phi Beta Kappa at Columbia.

BILLY
That ain’t no Ivy League school. I ain’t that dumb. Columbia’s some kind of trade school.

SEAN
Whatever.

BILLY
Whatchoo do at Columbia, anyway?

SEAN
I majored in journalism and English.
BILLY
You a writer?

SEAN
Yes, I’m a writer.

BILLY
Guess you ain’t published no books.

SEAN
Actually, I have. My first book is due out next spring.

BILLY
Ya don’t say. You write ‘bout your Mama and Daddy?

SEAN
What’s there to write?

BILLY
Maybe more’n you think.

(A beat, as SEAN ponders what BILLY has said.)

SEAN
Actually, one time I did write about my mother. (Starts to recall the time) I guess I was about 10 and was the editor of my elementary school newspaper…

(LIGHTS FADE on jailhouse. SEAN crosses to living room area, picks up a reporter’s notebook and pen and sits on a chair. MARGARET enters, excited.)

MARGARET
Louise will be here any minute, now. She’s going to be tickled pink that you’re writing a newspaper article on the 1969 Paul Bunyan Sweetheart Beauty Contest, Hackensack’s most famous event! And here it is, 20 years later, and Louise and your old mother are going to return to our hometown to be honored. The mayor and everybody’s going to be there! I’m so excited I could stand up and pee!

SEAN
Mom!

MARGARET
Sorry, honey.

SEAN
You told me you’d give me some history of this contest.
(MARGARET begins to slip into Minnesotan, which gets more pronounced as she goes along.)

MARGARET

So I did, Sean. So I did. Okey-dokey. The Paul Bunyan Sweetheart Festival and Beauty Contest was started in 1952 by a man who thought that little Hackensack, population 200 something at the time, should have its place in the sun. It just wasn’t right that Brainerd to the south, home of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox, should get all the glory and all the tourists.

SEAN

But Paul Bunyan isn’t real.

MARGARET

Well, now, that’s true, but it doesn’t really matter in Minnesota. It’s not like we have many celebrities, ya know?

SEAN

So, they made up a girlfriend for Paul Bunyan?

MARGARET

You betcha. But not just any sweetheart. They built a statue of this broad and she stands 17 feet tall and she’s got an ample bosom. She’s what you’d call robust. Don’t you remember seeing her on our last trip home?

SEAN

Mom, I was like three years old.

MARGARET

So you were. Anyway, they had a contest to name the sweetheart and some lady came up with Lucette Diana Kensack, though to tell you the truth I thought it should have been Hannah Kensack or initials H-A Kensack. Get it? Sure you do. And then, see, every year they pick a queen and an attendant.

SEAN

So, you guys won in 1969?

MARGARET

You bet!

(Offstage voice of LOUISE is heard. She speaks pronounced Minnesotan. MARGARET remains seated, calling to one another as they would have done in their teens.)

LOUISE. Off

MAR-GIE?!
LOU-ISE?!

MARGARET

MAR-GIE!

MARGARET

LOU-ISE!

MARGARET

Margie, Margie, Margie!

LOUISE, Off

Louise, Louise, Louise!

LOUISE, Off

(MARGARET jumps up from her chair, throws open the front door, and LOUISE, 40, enters. She and MARGARET join hands and jump up and down, hugging, screaming with excitement.)

LOUISE

Margie, Margie, Mar-GIE!

MARGARET

Louise, Louise, Lou-ISE!

LOUISE

Ah, geez, you’re as pretty as ya always were, Margie!

MARGARET

Heck no! It’s you who’s the most beautiful woman in all of northern Minnesota. Look at you! Look at your hair!

LOUISE

I got it done in the Twin Cities. Someone told me about a French man who does hair.

MARGARET

Yah? A Frenchman. That’s exotic!

LOUISE

Yah. Turns out he was from Toronto.

MARGARET

Yah?

LOUISE

Yah.
MARGARET
Ah geez, I guess Toronto doesn’t really count as French.

LOUISE
Well, they speak French in Canada.

MARGARET
That’s right, they do. Now, come on in, Louise. Remember my boy, Sean?

(SEAN stands up and extends his hand to LOUISE. LOUISE grabs his hand and pulls him close, crushing him in a big bear hug.)

LOUISE
How’d you get to be so darn big?

MARGARET
Well, now, I guess he grew.

LOUISE
Well, now, I guess you’re right.

(The two laugh as if they’ve come up with the cleverest joke.)

MARGARET
Sit down, Louise. Can I getcha somethin’? Some milk, maybe?

LOUISE
No, thank you, Margie. I stopped and had buffet at the Holiday Inn just down the road.

MARGARET
Oh yah, the Holiday Inn has a real good buffet, but geez, Louise, I wanted to feed you myself. I got a real good lime Jello chillin’ in the fridge.

LOUISE
Oh Margie, you shouldn’t have. Maybe in a little bit, okay?

MARGARET
Sure thing. So, how’s Frank and the kids?

LOUISE
They’re good Margie.

MARGARET
Good. And your cousin, down in Springfield?

LOUISE
Super.
MARGARET
I’m sure glad you drove down to Springfield so you could pick me up on your way back to
Minnesota.

SEAN
Mom. . .

MARGARET
Oh yah, that’s right. Louise, little Sean’s doing a write-up in his school newspaper about the
20th anniversary of our reign as Paul Bunyan’s sweetheart and attendant.

LOUISE
Yah?

MARGARET
Yah, that’s right. And so he wants to ask us some questions.

LOUISE
Well, you go right ahead and ask away!

SEAN
So, what did you guys have to do to in this contest?

LOUISE
Well, now, we had to write an essay on why we wanted to be Lucette Diana Kensack.

MARGARET
Only you said…

LOUISE
That though I wanted to be Paul Bunyan’s sweetheart for a year, my heart really belonged to
Sven Svensen.

MARGARET
I thought you said it was Nils Nilson.

Yah?

LOUISE
Yah, you did. Sven Svensen came later.

MARGARET
No. That was you, Margie. You had the crush on Nils Nilson.
MARGARET
No, Louise. I had the hots for Lars Larsen.

LOUISE
Yah? No.

MARGARET
Yah, Lars Larsen. But you know what happened to him?

LOUISE
No, Margie, I didn’t hear. Livin’ in Duluth, I just don’t hear much anymore.

MARGARET
He ran away with Nils Nilson.

LOUISE
No. Yah?

MARGARET
Oh yah. They moved to Chicago.

LOUISE
Ah, geez. They were cute, weren’t they?

MARGARET
Heck yah! Not as cute as Sven Svensen.

LOUISE
You always did like my boyfriend.

MARGARET
If I didn’t know you better, I’d say you were insinuating something, Louise.

LOUISE
Well, now, you were awful friendly with him.

MARGARET
Louise!

SEAN
So, what was your essay about, Mom?

MARGARET
I wrote that Paul Bunyan’s sweetheart would want the Vietnam War to end.

LOUISE
Yah, some people thought your mother was a hippie.
MARGARET
Turns out some of the judges thought the same way about the war as I did, even in little Hackensack.

LOUISE
Your mother also organized a teach-in on the Vietnam War.

But only five people came.

LOUISE
And she wrote a letter to the editor of the paper, sayin’ how it didn’t seem right that we should be killin’ women and children and why the heck were we sendin’ our boys to Vietnam anyway? Oh yah, and you wore that leather vest with fringe.

MARGARET
Oh yah, that was cute.

LOUISE
Sven thought it was cute, too.

MARGARET
Are we back to that, Louise?

SEAN
So did you guys do like a swimsuit competition?

LOUISE
You betcha!

MARGARET
It was the first year they did a swimsuit competition. It was 1969, and it was getting radical and all, even in little Hackensack.

LOUISE
Your mother was wearing a black swimsuit. Yah, the judges liked that black swimsuit.

MARGARET
And what about you, then? You and your pretty pink suit?

LOUISE
It was pretty, but it wasn’t sexy.

MARGARET
And mine was?
LOUISE
Let’s just say Sven thought it was.

SEAN
Okay, so what else did you have to do?

MARGARET
Oh, you know, the usual. Evening gown competition; short interviews.

LOUISE
And don’t forget the talent show.

MARGARET
Louise performed “The Sound of Music.”

LOUISE
Your mother sang “Age of Aquarius.” I told ya she was a hippie.

MARGARET
Well, now, Louise, at least I made some interesting choices.

LOUISE
Are ya saying I’m a bore?

MARGARET
Heck no.

LOUISE
Just because you wore a black swimsuit and sang that song from that naked show doesn’t make you better.

MARGARET
Louise!

SEAN
How many girls were in the contest?

LOUISE
Oh, geez, let me think. About 12?

MARGARET
I think you’re right. There was you…

LOUISE
And you…
MARGARET
That makes two. And Anna Heldegaard…

LOUISE
That makes three…

MARGARET
And Emma Lundquist…

LOUISE
Makes four…

SEAN
Okay, Mom, that’s fine. I’ll put down 12. So, finally, they announced the winners?

LOUISE
Oh yah, that was a tense moment.

MARGARET
There were five of us finalists. No Emma Lundquist or Anna Heldegaard, though.

LOUISE
So, they announce the fourth runner-up…Gina Pedersen.

MARGARET
And then the third runner-up…Lillian Gustafson.

LOUISE
Our hearts were beating real fast by then.

MARGARET
Real fast.

LOUISE
And then the second runner-up…Maria Lopez.

MARGARET
Oh yah, Maria, I’d forgotten about her.

LOUISE
And then it came time to announce the queen and her attendant.

MARGARET
I wanted Louise to win.

LOUISE
No, you didn’t. I wanted you to win.
SEAN

And then?

LOUISE

Well, you know, it happened so fast. They said my name first which of course meant your mother won, and they just kind of pulled me to the side and threw a little bouquet at me. And then they pushed your mother right into the spotlight, you know, put a crown on her head, which I have to say Margie, kept slippin’ all over. And then began a year of real excitement for your mother. She cut the ribbon at the opening of the first K-Mart in Hackensack, and rode in the Fourth of July parade, you know, things like that. (With lips quivering) And they just forgot about me.

(LOUISE bursts into tears.)

MARGARET

Ah geez, Louise.

LOUISE

And Sven Svensen thought your Mom was better than apple pie, so he left me, but by then your Mom had met your Dad, and she was real happy.

MARGARET

But you met Frank!

LOUISE

Oh yah, that’s peachy keen. Frank moves me to Duluth while you go to a real big city like St. Louis! And it’s all because you got to be Paul Bunyan’s sweetheart!

MARGARET

Oh geez, Louise. I hate to see you like this. Now, remember, you rode in the parade with me, too.

LOUISE

Yah, sure I got to ride in the parade, scrunched down in the seat of that convertible, while you got to ride above the seat where everyone could see you.

MARGARET

And Frank’s a fine man.

LOUISE

Yah, if he’ll still have me!

MARGARET

What do you mean, Louise?
LOUISE
It means that soon I won’t be the same woman I was 20 years ago. Or even now.

MARGARET
Louise, what are you saying, honey?

LOUISE
I’m saying that I have breast cancer!

(MARGARET, stunned, takes the weeping LOUISE in her arms.)

LOUISE, Continued
(Amidst sobs) They told me a few days ago, Margie, just before I came down here. They’re gonna do surgery. I told them they’d have to wait until I got back from our Paul Bunyan sweetheart reunion.

MARGARET
Ah, geez, Louise.

LOUISE
I’m so scared, Margie. And I’m scared Frank isn’t going to love me anymore.

MARGARET
Now, listen to me, Louise. (MARGARET straightens her up and hands her some tissue paper.) You remember my cousin, Peggy?

LOUISE
You don’t have a cousin named Peggy.

(MARGARET stares real hard at LOUISE and makes just the slightest move with her head toward SEAN.)

MARGARET
My cousin Peggy.

(LOUISE gets it.)

MARGARET
Oh yah, now I remember.

LOUISE
Well, the same thing happened to her seven years ago. And she had the same thoughts and worries as you do. But when the time came, and the doctors had to do the major surgery, well, her husband was right at her side. Before, during and long after the operation, he was there. And their…intimacy…didn’t change either. In fact, it got better. And like I said, that was seven years ago, and Peggy’s doing just fine.
LOUISE
Oh, Margie, why didn’t you ever tell me?

MARGARET
No reason to tell you until now.

LOUISE
(Wiping the last of her tears) I’m sorry Margie.

MARGARET
There’s not a thing to be sorry about. And don’t you forget, anytime you need me I’m on the next plane to Duluth. And I’m always just a phone call away.

LOUISE
The doctors say they’re pretty sure they caught it early.

MARGARET
That’s good, Louise. Nowadays, it’s not such a scary thing.

LOUISE
(Remembers SEAN and turns to him) Sorry to you, too, Sean.

MARGARET
Sean’s a smart boy. It’s good for him to learn about all kinds of things.

SEAN
(To LOUISE) Don’t worry, I won’t print the stuff about your…you know.

LOUISE
Thank you, Sean.

MARGARET
Now, Louise, I have a confession to make. I thought you would win the Paul Bunyan Sweetheart Contest because you were so pretty and sweet, but I really wanted to be Lucette Diana Kensack.

LOUISE
You thought I would win? Really?

MARGARET
Heck yah! And truth be told, I was a little jealous of you because you had that nice boyfriend and all.

LOUISE
No. Yah?
MARGARET

Yah.

LOUISE

Oh, Margie, you’re the best friend anyone could have.

MARGARET

No, you’re the best friend in the whole world.

(They hug. LIGHTS OUT on MARGARET and LOUISE as LIGHTS UP on jailhouse. SEAN crosses slowly and thoughtfully to jailhouse and BILLY.

SEAN

Cousin Peggy…

BILLY

Think, boy, think…

SEAN

I don’t remember a cousin Peggy.

(Beat, as the reality sinks in.)

SEAN, Continued

My God, there is no cousin Peggy. It was my mother who had…Jesus, she never told me. She never told me.

(SEAN begins to pace.)

SEAN, Continued

I wish I could run. I need to run. I can’t be penned up like this much longer!

BILLY

What you runnin’ away from, boy?

SEAN

Nothing! Why do you keep asking me that question?

BILLY

Seems to me like you’re runnin’.

SEAN

Why didn’t my mother tell me?

BILLY

What are you scared of?
SEAN
I’m not scared of anything. What should I be scared of?

BILLY
I don’t know, you tell me!

(SEAN’s pacing gets faster.)

SEAN
Nothing. Nothing at all!

BILLY
Maybe you better think about it, boy!

SEAN
Don’t call me boy.

(SEAN starts a slow run in place.)

BILLY
What – you don’t wanna admit that your folks are more than just a couple cartoons?

SEAN
I don’t need to hear this from you.

BILLY
That they’re not just some pukes!

SEAN
Stop it!

BILLY
You ‘fraid the minute they become human—

SEAN
I said, stop it!

(SEAN’s pace picks up.)

BILLY
The minute they become human, it’s harder fer you—

SEAN
You don’t know anything – !

BILLY
It’s harder fer you to admit you’re ‘shamed o’ them!
(SEAN stops running in place.)

SEAN
YES, THAT’S RIGHT, I’M ASHAMED OF THEM! BUT I’M MORE ASHAMED OF MYSELF!

(SEAN pauses as if his own words are sinking in.)

SEAN, Continued
I’m ashamed of myself…

(SEAN sinks to the ground, slowly.)

SEAN, Continued
Funny thing…I guess you can’t really feel ashamed of someone else unless you’re ashamed of yourself.

BILLY
(Gently) I reckon you’re right.

SEAN
In some strange way, I had to make my parents into Midwestern bumpkins to level the playing field. You see, they’re straight and I’m…not. Deep down, I’m afraid that when they find out I’m a homo, they’ll be ashamed of me. Does that make any sense?

BILLY
I believe you’re startin’ to make sense.

SEAN
A schoolyard taunt, an overheard comment, it’s enough to make young gay boys carry shame with them a long time. Quietly…ever so quietly.

BILLY
Tell me ‘bout it.

SEAN
I think I knew I was gay when I was about 13. The feelings I had for other boys terrified me – and thrilled me. In junior high, there was this boy, David Parnell, one grade ahead of me, and he was what you would call a sissy. In fact, he was one matchstick away from being a flaming princess. He scared me more than the bullies in the schoolyard. I swore I was never going to be like him. I was going to play baseball and date girls and be one of the boys. One day a circle of fuckhead kids surrounded him, taunting him, calling him Juicy Fruity. “You fruity, aren’t you, Davey? Just like a little girl, isn’t that right, Davey?” Of course, nobody, including me, came to David’s rescue. Then, a week later, the night before my 14th birthday, it was one of those hot and steamy Missouri nights. I had gone to bed, but couldn’t sleep from the heat and excitement of my birthday. I overheard my parents speaking on the porch, in a nice, low
SEAN, *Continued*

hum that mixed with the singing of the crickets. I sneaked downstairs, just to be close to the sound of their voices…

*(LIGHTS DOWN on jailhouse. LIGHTS UP on MARGARET & BEN, sitting on the porch swing, holding hands in the moonlight, listening to the drone of early summer crickets. SEAN crosses behind them and hides in the shadows. His parents have slipped into Minnesotan.)*

**MARGARET**

It’s a beautiful night, isn’t it Ben?

**BEN**

A little hot and humid, but it’s pretty darn nice.

*(Silence.)*

**MARGARET**

Ben, if you could do it all over again, would you do anything differently?

**BEN**

Heck yah, I would have married Gina Pedersen.

No. Yah?

**BEN**

Yah.

*(MARGARET punches him gently.)*

**MARGARET**

Gina’s 300 pounds if she’s an ounce!

**BEN**

See, I wouldn’t have to worry about losing her to some other man. When you’re married to a beautiful woman, you got to worry about things like that, see.

**MARGARET**

Aw, geez, Ben.

*(Silence.)*

**BEN**

What about you? Would you change anything?

**(Beat) Maybe that one thing, you know, Ben. For you, mostly.**
BEN
It’s part of who you are, Margaret. I wouldn’t want it any other way.

(MARGARET squeezes BEN’s hand. Silence.)

MARGARET
Can you believe little Seannie’s going to be 14 tomorrow?

BEN
He’s gettin’ to be a big boy.

MARGARET
Heck yah!

(Silence.)

BEN
Sometimes, I worry about the boy.

MARGARET
Yah?

BEN
Sometimes I think he’s gonna grow up fruity. I don’t want the boy to be fruity.

MARGARET
Aw, geez, Ben, no, he’s not fruity. He’s just…creative.

BEN
Well, see, look what happens to some of those creative types. Like Virginia Woolf.

MARGARET
Aw geez, Ben, don’t say that.

(Silence.)

MARGARET
It sure is a beautiful night.

BEN
You betcha.

(LIGHTS FADE on BEN & MARGARET. SEAN crosses to jailhouse and BILLY.)

BILLY
I thought you said yer folks was dumb. How’d they know about Virginia Woolf?
I made them read her biography.

You know who the stupid one is here?

What are you talking about?

Tell me what you know about that Virginia Woolf woman.

Obviously, my father was alluding to her affairs with women.

Uh-huh, I guess that’s real obvious. What else do you know about Virginia Woolf?

That she was a brilliant writer…

(Facetiously) Somethin’ that would scare your Daddy and your Mama.

She killed herself. But why would my father…?

You musta fell out o’ the dumb tree and hit ev’r branch on the way down! What does fruity mean?

You’re a fag.

What else does it mean?

(A beat, as the light goes on for SEAN.)

Oh my God—Crazy.

Hallelujah! Go tell it on the mountain! Let the light shine in!
SEAN
My Dad was worried that…

BILLY
You was gonna turn out to be crazier’n a run over dawg! He knowed you was real smart, just like that Woolf woman. Though I still think you’s too dumb to be crazy.

SEAN
So all this time…I thought that they thought…! You’re right, I am the dumb one. (Beat) Billy, do you have a pen and some paper?

BILLY
Well, now, let me take a look-see.

(BILLY fumbles around in his pockets and produces a small pad and pen, which he hands to SEAN.)

SEAN
Thank you, Billy. I’m going to write a letter to my parents, right now, while all this is fresh.

BILLY
You do that. You just write yourself a real good letter.

(LIGHTS FADE on BILLY; SPOT on SEAN.)

SEAN
(As he writes) Dear Mom and Dad. This might come as a surprise to you, but I’m sitting in jail as I write this. Don’t worry, it’s nothing serious, and it’s just an overnight stay. But there’s a funny thing about being in jail. You have time to think. That’s about all you have time to do. That, and talk to crazy old drunks. (Beat, as SEAN ponders this. LIGHTS UP on BEN & MARGARET, sitting together, reading SEAN’s letter.) Well, maybe he’s not so crazy after all. Speaking of crazy, I’m not, okay? So, don’t worry about it. I’m not the least bit like Virginia Woolf – or Sylvia Plath, for that matter. By the way, did you read the Plath book of poems I recommended?

(BEN & MARGARET exchange guilty looks and shake their heads no.)

SEAN, Continued
Anyway, I’ve been thinking about both of you. In fact, I’ve been telling Billy – that’s the guy I was talking about, my cellmate – all about you, and he told me this spider story that didn’t really make much sense at first. But, as Billy would say, I reckon it was about turning on the light on both the scary and the good stuff and figuring out that if you’d just take a hard look at the scary stuff, you’d also see that there are people there who’ll get you through it. People who love you. (Beat.) Once I figured that out, it became a lot less difficult to tell you what I’m about to tell you. I’m gay. That’s right. Fruity as in gay, not fruity as in crazy. And I’m okay with it and I hope you are, too. It has nothing to do with the way you raised me, it’s just the way I am.
(Beat, as MARGARET & BEN react to this news.)

SEAN, Continued
Oh, and something else. Remember the book I wrote? It’s going to be published next spring. It even landed me a spot on a segment of “Primetime” that will air the day after Christmas. You’ll get to see little Seannie interviewed by Diane Sawyer. I can’t wait to see you at Christmas. There’s a lot to tell you in person. But for right now, I just want you to know, the Mitchells ain’t no pukes. No siree! You make me proud to be your son. You betcha! Love, Sean.

(LIGHTS DOWN on BEN & MARGARET. LIGHTS UP on jail cell.)

SEAN
Billy! Billy, I finished the letter! I’m going to mail it as soon as I get out of here!

(SEAN looks around the cell, but BILLY is nowhere to be found.)

SEAN, Continued
Billy, where the hell are you?

(SOUND of jail door clanking open. GUARD enters.)

GUARD
Time to go.

SEAN
Where’s my cellmate?

GUARD
What cellmate?

SEAN
Billy, the dru – the guy who was in here!

GUARD
Besides disturbing the peace, were you doing drugs?

SEAN
No!

GUARD
Listen, buddy, you’ve been in here all alone. All night.

(SEAN is stunned.)
SEAN

That can’t be. I was talking to him…

GUARD

Are you ready to get out of here or not?

(Still stunned, SEAN nods his head ‘yes’ almost imperceptibly.)

GUARD

Well, let’s go then.

(GUARD takes a few steps, but SEAN does not follow. He’s looking back at his cell.)

SEAN

(Quietly, as if trying one more time to conjure him) Billy…

GUARD

Come on!

(SEAN looks at the GUARD, takes one more look around his cell, and follows slowly behind GUARD. They both exit. LIGHTS DOWN on jailhouse. CHRISTMAS MUSIC PLAYS. LIGHTS UP on MITCHELLS’ living room. On the coffee table are two rather large piles of OUT and ADVOCATE magazines and at each corner is a glass of white wine. The room is decorated for Christmas, including a tree, all very traditional except for the blown-up condoms that have been tied up in festive bunches and placed throughout the room. BEN & MARGARET are sitting on the couch. BEN is stiff and MARGARET is fiddling, smoothing her dress, checking her watch, straightening the piles of magazines that are already stacked very neatly.)

MARGARET

What?

BEN

I didn’t say anything.

MARGARET

I thought you said…something.

BEN

Something?

MARGARET

Not the word “something.” Something else. Some other word besides “something.”

BEN

No.
MARGARET
Oh. (A beat) Well, feel free to say something if you want.

BEN
I just might do that.

MARGARET
They should be here any minute now. Sean called an hour ago from the airport car rental agency.

BEN
An hour and ten minutes ago.

MARGARET
We’re well prepared, aren’t we Ben?

BEN
We’ve done our homework.

MARGARET
Like the California white wine. Young men…like Sean…prefer California white wines.

BEN
That’s right, Margaret.

MARGARET
Promise me again, that we’ll do everything we can to make them comfortable in our house. It’s Christmas Eve, and I want Sean and his…friend…to feel at home.

BEN
Yes, Margaret, I promise. Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.

MARGARET
Oh, Ben, you kill me sometimes, you just kill me.

(MARGARET laughs hard. As she is laughing, SEAN & JEFF approach the main door to the house from the outside. There is a KNOCK ON DOOR.)

SEAN, Off
Mom! Dad! We’re here!

(BEN and MARGARET stand up in unison. They look at each other in terror.)

BEN
I’ll get it.
MARGARET

I’ll come with you.

(MARGARET and BEN clasp hands and walk stiffly to the door together.)

BEN

I’ll open it.

MARGARET

Yes, Ben, you should open the door.

(Still clasping hands, BEN takes a deep breath and opens the door. SEAN and JEFF enter. Each carries a traveling bag. Nervous, SEAN tries to hug first his mother, then his father, but the two are so tightly joined he ends up doing his best to hug them both.)

SEAN

Group hug! Mom, Dad, this is Jeff.

(JEFF extends his hand to BEN, who stands frozen.)

JEFF

How do you do, Mr. Mitchell?

(BEN stiffly puts out his left hand because his right hand is in MARGARET’s grip. BEN nods his head vigorously as he shakes JEFF’s hand but says nothing. JEFF is a bit puzzled, but gamely covers it with a smile.)

JEFF, Continued

And you must be Mrs. Mitchell. Margaret Mitchell. (In falsetto Southern accent) “As God is my witness, I shall never be hungry again.”

SEAN

Jeff, you kill me, you just kill me!

MARGARET

You won’t be hungry for long, I promise. I’ve made a nice big dinner.

JEFF

Oh. No, I’m not hungry. That was, you know, “Gone with the Wind.” Margaret Mitchell, who wrote…Scarlett O’Hara is starving…on the plantation…?

MARGARET

Oh, good heavens, I didn’t write that! I’m from Minnesota and I think the other Margaret Mitchell is from the South somewhere.

(SEAN has moved into the room, taking in the Christmas decorations and his boyhood home.)
It’s great to be home. I was kind of nervous, Christmas homecoming and all. But then I see
the tree, the stockings, the balloons…these are new. *(Inspects them closely)* Are these
balloons?

*(MARGARET and BEN look at each other as if to give each other strength.)*

Condoms.

BEN

Rubbers.

MARGARET

We wanted to get red and green ones.

BEN

But the colored ones were all pre-lubricated.

MARGARET

Just too messy for us.

*(MARGARET and BEN, still holding hands tightly, move quickly to the couch and sit together.
SEAN and JEFF exchange slightly puzzled, somewhat bemused looks and sit in the armchairs
next to the coffee table. There is an awkward silence.)*

How was the flight from L.A.?

BEN

Couldn’t have been better.

JEFF

We flew over Busch Stadium. I have to tell you, Mr. Mitchell, I’m still bummed that Barry
Bonds beat Mark McGwire’s home run record.

BEN

You’re a baseball fan?

JEFF

Big time. You must be a Cards fan.

BEN

Damn straight. *(MARGARET nudges him hard)* But I prefer…Madonna.

*(Stiffly, as if the two have practiced, BEN and MARGARET break into a Madonna song, way
off key.)*
BEN & MARGARET, *Singing*

“*Holiday! Celebrate! Holiday! Celebrate!*”

BEN
That’s a perfect song for the holidays.

MARGARET
But your father’s favorite is “Justify My Love,” isn’t that right, Ben?

BEN
Yes, Margaret. Madonna’s hot in that video.

SEAN
Mom, Dad, are you okay?

MARGARET
Of course, we are. We’re so happy to see you and to meet Jeff. We want you to feel right at home.

JEFF
Well, it’s great to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you both.

MARGARET
Thank you, Jeff. Are you originally from L.A. or are you a transplant, like Sean?

JEFF
I’m from New York. That’s where Sean and I met and I followed him to L.A.

MARGARET
That’s nice, isn’t it Ben? And what do you do for a living?

JEFF
I’m a designer.

MARGARET
Interior? Floral? Hair?

JEFF
Industrial designer, actually. I design offshore oil-rig machinery.

BEN
Is that a fact? That’s very…that’s very…

MARGARET
Butch.
BEN
That’s it. That’s very butch of you.

(Another awkward pause.)

MARGARET
Wine?

JEFF
I’d love some wine.

(MARGARET points to the glasses, which SEAN and JEFF notice at the same time.)

SEAN
(Hesitantly) Mom, how thoughtful of you. You’ve already poured it for us.

MARGARET
I wanted it to breathe. Young men like you two want their wine to breathe, isn’t that so, Ben?

BEN
That’s so, Margaret. Everyone with good taste, like you…fellas…makes sure their wine breathes. We read it in Martha Stewart’s Living magazine.

MARGARET
Don’t forget, Ben, we also read it in Out magazine.

(Still clutching her husband’s hand, MARGARET uses her free hand to grab and hold up a copy of OUT magazine, showing it first to SEAN, then to JEFF, as if she is a Kindergarten teacher holding up a storybook for the class.)

MARGARET, Continued
Or perhaps it was The Advocate.

(MARGARET repeats the routine with The Advocate, picking up a copy and holding it up for a long beat so that SEAN and JEFF can see it.)

BEN
Margaret, maybe we should bring out the appetizers.

MARGARET
That’s a good idea, Ben. We’ll be right back.

(Still clasping each other’s hands, the two exit. SEAN and JEFF look at each other and crack up.)
They think –

That you and I –

That I –

They think you’re a fag! I can’t stand it!

Shh, shh, they’ll hear us.

(SEAN and JEFF roll with laughter, trying to be quiet.)

We have to tell them.

No, no, let’s see how far they’ll go.

Why did they think –?

I told them I was bringing a friend with me. They must have thought friend was code for boyfriend.

Sean, we can’t do this.

Humor me, okay?

(Still attached at the hip, and hands clasped, BEN and MARGARET enter, each carrying a tray of appetizers in their free hands.)

MARGARET

Stuffed Portobello mushrooms with melted goat cheese and basil.

SEAN

Mmm, my favorite, Mom.

BEN

And grilled peppers with pine nuts and just a hint of vinegar-ette.
JEFF
How did you know?

*(BEN and MARGARET look at each other, pleased with their culinary choice.)*

BEN
Well, let’s have a drink, then!

*(The four take their wine glasses and hold them up.)*

MARGARET
Merry Christmas!

JEFF
Bottoms up!

MARGARET
You’re a bottom, then?

*(JEFF and SEAN choke on their wine.)*

BEN
I would have guessed Jeff to be a top, wouldn’t you, Margaret?

MARGARET
Yes, Ben. And by the looks of it I’d say well-hung with low hangers, too.

JEFF
Only the best for our boy.

MARGARET
That reminds me of the article I read just last night in Out magazine.

BEN
That was an interesting one. Very enlightening.

MARGARET
The magazine took a poll and found that 80 percent of its readers shave their balls.

BEN
Your mother told me I should do that, too.

MARGARET
He promised me he’d do it tomorrow, on Christmas day. It would be his gift to me. No more nasty hair down there.
JEFF
That’s a wonderful gift, Mr. Mitchell.

(BEN and MARGARET exchange looks again, even more pleased with themselves.)

MARGARET
Well, this is going very well, isn’t it?

SEAN
Mom, Dad, there’s something I have to tell you.

MARGARET
What is it, Sean? Are you both feeling at home? Is there anything we can do? We’ve taped all the episodes of “Queer as Folk” if you’d like to watch them.

SEAN
Jeff isn’t…well, he isn’t…

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