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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

It's buzz, darling! It's what book publishers do best – create buzz.

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.)

SEAN

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.

SEAN

You think everybody's dead.

PEARL

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

SEAN

Pearl!

PEARL

You never talk about them. Besides, parents know.

SEAN

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, Moooooooooooooom, Daaaaaaaaaaaaad. . . *(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.

BILLY

I guess you was sleepin' when I came in.

SEAN

I don't believe this.

BILLY

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

SEAN

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

BILLY

Born and bred in Manchester, New Hampshire.

SEAN

You sound like you're from the South.

BILLY

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

SEAN

Lingua franca?

BILLY

Yup. It means –

SEAN

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

BILLY

Billy's the name.

SEAN

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

BILLY

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.

SEAN

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.

BILLY

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-it-y 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.

SEAN

A what?

BILLY

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

SEAN

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

No-one's ever accused me of being funny. Sick. Twisted. Yes. Funny. No.

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

Yes. Nobody. Nobody in Africa. Nobody in Asia. Nobody in Europe. Nobody—

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.)

SEAN

Okay, I'll start. Pearl's just gonna watch this first round, isn't that right, Pearl?

PEARL

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

SEAN

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

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

SEAN

Remember, I'm starting with "Will and Grace." Then it's your turn.

PEARL

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.)

SEAN

This is a –

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

MARGARET

A box!

BEN

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

MARGARET

Ooh, ooh, "Raging Bull!" *(To SEAN)* "Raging Bull!"

SEAN

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

BEN

Margaret, I don't think "Raging Bull" was made into a TV show.

MARGARET

You're right, Ben.

SEAN

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

Three. “*The Raging Bull?*”

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.

SEAN

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 pantomimes “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 pantomimes 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?

(SPOT OUT on BEN.)

SEAN

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

(SPOT 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

BILLY, *Continued*

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.

SEAN

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.

SEAN

I can be a fireman angel.

MARGARET

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

SEAN

Can you make me into a fireman angel?

MARGARET

Of course I can, Seannie.

SEAN

With a soldier's gun.

MARGARET

A fireman angel with a soldier's gun?

SEAN

I won't shoot anyone with it.

MARGARET

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.

SEAN

And...a magic wand.

MARGARET

A magic wand?

SEAN

Yeah, like angels have.

MARGARET

You mean, like fairies have?

SEAN

Yeah, like a fairy.

MARGARET

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

SEAN

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 father 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, dontcha? 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 solider 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?!

MARGARET
LOU-ISE?!

LOUISE, *Off*
MAR-GIE!

MARGARET
LOU-ISE!

LOUISE, *Off*
Margie, Margie, Margie!

MARGARET
Louise, Louise, Louise!

(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.

LOUISE

Yah?

MARGARET

Yah, you did. Sven Svensen came later.

LOUISE

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.

MARGARET

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.)

LOUISE

Oh yah, now I remember.

MARGARET

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.

MARGARET

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?

MARGARET

(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?

SEAN

I made them read her biography.

BILLY

You know who the stupid one is here?

SEAN

What are you talking about?

BILLY

Tell me what you know about that Virginia Woolf woman.

SEAN

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

BILLY

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

SEAN

That she was a brilliant writer...

BILLY

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

SEAN

She killed herself. But why would my father...?

BILLY

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

SEAN

You're a fag.

BILLY

What else does it mean?

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

SEAN

Oh my God—Crazy.

BILLY

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.)

SEAN

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.)

MARGARET

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.)

BEN

How was the flight from L.A.?

SEAN

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 –

JEFF

That you and I –

SEAN

That I –

JEFF

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

SEAN

Shh, shh, they'll hear us.

JEFF

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

We have to tell them.

JEFF

No, no, let's see how far they'll go.

SEAN

Why did they think –?

JEFF

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

SEAN

Sean, we can't do this.

JEFF

Humor me, okay?

SEAN

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

Stuffed Portobello mushrooms with melted goat cheese and basil.

MARGARET

Mmm, my favorite, Mom.

SEAN

And grilled peppers with pine nuts and just a hint of vinegar-ette.

BEN

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.

BEN

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