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A HOUSE DIVIDED

A Play By
SEAN DAVID BENNETT

“Weep, my darling, weep. That is the first step. Then, tomorrow we can make something strong of our sorrow.

- Lorraine Hansberry,
The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window

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A HOUSE DIVIDED
A Play by Sean David Bennett

CHARACTERS (In order of appearance):

Molly Shields: The matriarch of the Shields family; in her late fifties, still very attractive, carrying herself with an energy that is part youthfulness and part resignation

Bud Shields: Her elder son, a well-meaning, attractive man about 36; a man that feels overlooked and underappreciated by his father

Fr. Stephen Shields: A good-looking man like his brother, Bud; a devoted priest about 33, with dark curly hair, bright eyes and an easy smile

Sarah Shields: Bud Shield’s wife; who emigrated from war-torn Northern Ireland where her brothers were killed in a clash between Protestants and Catholics

Fr. Sebastian Toole: The Shields’ “adopted” son saved from a dysfunctional family that died in a fire at their home

Thomas Shields: The stalwart head of the family; a “true” Irish Catholic, often unyielding without awareness of the consequences

Monsignor O’Connell: Father Stephen Shield’s superior at the Rectory

THE SETTING:

The action of the play takes place in the recent past and is set in the living and dining rooms of the Shields home in Kenwood Manor, a Long Island, NY suburb.
ETC:

A House Divided was first presented by the Arena Players Ensemble, Farmingdale, L.I., New York on February 17, 2005, with the following cast:

Molly Shields …………………………… SUE ANN DENNEHY
Bud Shields……………………………. ANDREW ROTH
Fr. Stephen Shields……………………. JOHN FRENCH
Sarah Shields …………………………… CHRISTINE SULLIVAN
Fr. Sebastian Toole …………………….. PETER CONNOLLY
Thomas Shields……………………….. MICHAEL LANGE
The Monsignor………………………… EDWIN YOUNG

Directed by Frederic De Feis. Scenic design by Fred Sprauer; costumes by Lois Lockwood; Lighting by Al Davis. Production Stage Manager was Evan Donnellan.

A HOUSE DIVIDED
Part I of The Kilmallock Trilogy

Is dedicated to
Gary Garrison and Lynne LaSalle
Good Friends, Wonderful Teachers

THE KILMALLOCK TRILOGY
Is dedicated to
JACK V. HORNBACK

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A HOUSE DIVIDED
A Play by Sean David Bennett

ACT I; SCENE ONE

(AT RISE: A Thursday afternoon in spring; the Shields home in Kenwood Manor. The front entrance is upstage right and opens onto the living room. On the sill of the bay window up center are small plants and family photographs with a writing desk beneath. Downstage right is a sofa and a reading chair as well as a liquor cart. A staircase just left of the bay window leads to the bedrooms off. A dining area with a sideboard and a table elaborately set for dinner stands stage left. A swinging door just above leads off to the kitchen. MOLLY SHIELDS is dusting the dining room. SHE wears a Sony Walkman on her head and sings along with the music. MOLLY is in her late fifties, still very attractive, and carries herself with an energy that is part youthfulness and part resignation, according to her needs of the moment. As SHE dusts, MOLLY removes a copy of the Daily News from the sideboard, and pauses to read a headline that has caught her eye. SHE retrieves her coffee from the side-board and sits with her back to the living room. BUD SHIELDS enters through the front door followed by his brother, FR. STEPHEN SHIELDS. THEY are both good-looking men, with dark curly hair, bright eyes and easy smiles. BUD is wearing a sports coat, shirt and tie. HE comes into the room, sees his mother reading, puts a hand to his lips to silence STEPHEN, and moves further into the living room.)

MOLLY
(Sings) “At the Copa, Copacabana….”

BUD
(Speaking in a large, booming voice, obviously not his own) “Is that all you can do – sit there and read the paper while I’m out working myself to the bone?”

MOLLY
(Jumping up, throwing a dust rag over the paper) Oh, you devil. I thought you were your father. You sound just like him.

BUD
(Kissing her cheek) Just as long as I don’t end up looking like him.

MOLLY
(Pulling away) You should look half as good when you’re his age. Where’s your brother?

STEPHEN
(Crosses to desk to drop off books HE has been carrying) In the living room—
BUD

(Removing the headset from her head and putting it on his own) I’ll look better. I know for a fact he didn’t look half as good when he was mine. (HE takes her in his arms and starts to dance.)

STEPHEN

(Calling from living room) That’s because we both get our looks from our mother.

MOLLY

Don’t be putting your father down, either of you.

BUD

(As HE stops dancing) What is this – Guy Lombardo?

MOLLY

I wouldn’t be caught dead listening to him. It’s Barry Manilow.

BUD

They aren’t the same?

MOLLY

I smell beer on your breath.

BUD

Ed Fitzgerald stood us a round at the Oasis.

MOLLY

Sarah will be ticked.

BUD

It was only a small one. You know how cheap Fitzgerald is.

MOLLY

Why is he still celebrating? His daughter Rose was born three months ago.

STEPHEN

(As HE enters the dining room) Little Rose will be walking before that happens.

MOLLY

You’re worse than your brother – going into a bar in broad daylight with your collar on. What will people think?

BUD

That Stephen’s a regular guy— not some snob like O’Connell.
MOLLY
(As STEPHEN reads her paper, MOLLY reaches to take it back) Here, you — give me that! (SHE tries to swat him, but STEPHEN ducks and holds the paper for BUD to see.) I said—

STEPHEN
(Reading) “Woman trapped in shower gives birth to triplets—Uses husband’s razor to cut umbilical cords.”

BUD
(Shaking his head) Makes a person wonder why the good nuns teach some people to read...

MOLLY
(Grabbing the paper and walking away) I read other things.

BUD
(Ticking them off) “True Confessions,” “Modern Romance,” Danielle Steele.

STEPHEN
Mrs. Shields’ five-foot-shelf of the world’s greatest literature.

MOLLY
(Exiting into the kitchen) I don’t know what the two of you think you’re doing — coming in here, scaring the life out of a person. Serve you right if I fell down dead — right at your feet.

BUD
(Calling after her) There’s a good idea — Stephen could give you Last Rites.

In spite of the life you’ve led...

STEPHEN

BUD
St. Peter would be forced to let you in, whether he wanted to or not. (Falling on his knees, Al Jolson-style.) Sings:
“Open up your Golden Gates,
Dear St. Peter—here I come...”

MOLLY
(Entering with bread basket) How would either of you know what kind of life I lead? You only come by when it suits you.

STEPHEN
(To BUD) I knew that was coming.
BUD
(To MOLLY) Well, then — are you saying you’re not a sinner?

MOLLY
I most definitely am not.

BUD
So where does that put you and Jesus — above him, below?

STEPHEN
(Grinning) They’re equals.

MOLLY
I mean I’m in a state of Grace. At least I was until you two walked in. Don’t you be messing up the living-room, Stephen.

STEPHEN
Fine, I’ll just take these upstairs.

BUD
(Pointing to the newspaper article) You should think about something other than sex, sex, sex all the time. I’m leaving this place. I want nothing to do with loose women.

MOLLY
May I remind you that I am getting a big, fancy birthday dinner ready for His Highness, your father? I don’t need your brother or you underfoot.

BUD
I’m just saying, if seeing either of us is giving you dirty thoughts...

MOLLY
That’s enough, I said.

STEPHEN
Bud’s concerned about the state of your immortal soul.

BUD
You could go blind – or grow hair on your hands.

MOLLY
I’ve given you both my last warning. I’ve too much to do before company gets here.

STEPHEN
We’re having company? Who else is coming?
Bud and Sarah.

BUD
I’m not company, Mom. I’m your other son. Sarah’s my wife.

STEPHEN
Just because Sarah’s an Episcopalian doesn’t make her company.

MOLLY
Her faith has nothing to do with anything, and tonight you’ll both do me a favor and keep religion away from the dinner table.

You don’t want me to say Grace?

MOLLY
I mean I don’t want another one of your wild talks about Jews and Buddhists and every religion being the same.

Fine, then, Sebastian can say grace.

MOLLY
Sebastian?

STEPHEN
He’s just arrived from Chicago, so I invited him over for Pop’s birthday.

Without asking me?

STEPHEN
I didn’t think you’d mind. He’s coming over to talk to me, so I told him to stay for the party.

BUD
Since when aren’t you glad to see Sebastian? You’re the one goes around calling him your third son.

MOLLY
I’m always glad to see him. I half-raised him, didn’t I? I just don’t want your father upset on his birthday by the three of you and your crazy arguments. One of you always brings up a sore subject — like Ecumenism or women priests. You know how much it upsets him but you do it anyway. Your father is from the old school.
BUD
The old school: “Put your history books away now, boys — time for bigotry class.”

MOLLY
Your father is not a bigot. He’d give the shirt off his back to anyone who asked it of him. Black or white, catholic or not. I mean what I say about not riling him up tonight. Your father is getting old. He’s a good man and a simple one.

STEPHEN
Not just simple, Mom. Old fashioned.

MOLLY
So leave him be. You aren’t going to change him.

BUD
Or Sarah. Either of you know which pope decided to make religious warfare a part of the marriage contract?

MOLLY
Bud Shields – How many times do I have to tell you? Sarah’s religion doesn’t make a bit of difference to me – or to your father. We love Sarah – we really do.

BUD
Despite the differences. (Looking up from the paper) Not to change the subject, but did you ever find out which it is?

MOLLY
(Confused) Which is?

BUD
You know – blindness or hair?

MOLLY
(Messing his hair) For your sake, I hope it’s not hair. You used to have such beautiful curls when you were a baby.

BUD
You know what they say: “The less hair, the more …”

MOLLY
That’ll be enough, thank you.

BUD
Pick on Stephen, why don’t you?
Thanks, Bud.

There’s nothing to pick on. (To STEPHEN) You’re all skin and bones. Don’t you eat?

You know what Mrs. Cooney’s cooking is like. You’ve been to enough church suppers.

Addie Cooney, patron saint of rectory cooks. Eighty-five, if she’s a day, and blind as a bat. She still cooking everything in Thunderbird?

Only when she isn’t drinking it.

You’re thin as a rail, Stephen. I don’t believe she’s feeding you at all. If she is, it’s a secret potion, known only to her and God.

And neither of them is telling what’s in it. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some work...

Don’t be ducking the issue, Stephen. The weight you’re losing shows in your face.

I’m fine, Mom, really I am. It’s just been another one of those weeks when I wish I could have my old room back and hide under the covers.

No chance. I’m done matching kids’ socks and making their beds. Twenty years was enough. (As BUD burps) Bud Shields, you had better have some coffee before Sarah sees you. Stephen?

No, thanks, Mom. I’ll wait a bit.

We had one beer, that’s all — but if it makes you happy.

(As SHE starts to exit) Stephen, light the desk lamp if you’re going to read or you’ll be as blind as your Uncle Dean when you’re his age.
BUD
I didn’t know he — uh — you know—

MOLLY
Never knew he what?

BUD
Nothing. Besides, Stephen has all his hair. I’m going upstairs to make a pit stop.

MOLLY
Remember to put the seat up. (Crossing upstage to where STEPHEN is sorting through documents) You ought to have better sense.

STEPHEN
What now?

MOLLY
Drinking and joking with your brother in a bar in the middle of the day. Have you no brains? Honestly, Stephen.

STEPHEN
I was keeping an eye on Bud so he wouldn’t overdo. That’s what started the last argument, isn’t it?

MOLLY
You look tired, too. O’Connell has no right to be asking you to put in all those extra hours at the Chancery. Instead of wearing you out, let him turn it all over to the lawyers. That’s what they pay them for, isn’t it?

STEPHEN
Lawyers? Are you kidding?

MOLLY
How else do they expect to handle all this?

STEPHEN
They don’t. They’re waiting for it all to go away.

MOLLY
Be serious. Do they really think this whole thing is just going to blow over?
STEPHEN
Either that or they’re damned good actors. The Cardinal only talks about getting away to France on vacation next month. He’s turned everything over to Bishop Walsh, who ducks into his office whenever he sees me coming down the hall. That leaves only O’Connell and me.

MOLLY
What’s his part in all this?

STEPHEN
O’Connell handles the press. Occasionally, he oversees a meeting I’m having with a member of the family – but only if he has to.

MOLLY
He should worry less about your work and see more to his own. It’s all they talk about on television these days.

STEPHEN
O’Connell’s doing a fine job – in his own, calculating way. Never loses his cool, no matter what. Keeps everyone at bay— lawyers, reporters, families— goes about everything like he has ice water in his veins.

MOLLY
Your father says the same thing about him.

STEPHEN
It’s true. You’ve no idea what a heartless man he is.

MOLLY
Oh, yes I do. I’ve gone to him for Confession.

STEPHEN
I’m not joking, Mom. The three of them are only interested in cutting their losses. That’s why they won’t talk to any of the families directly. Instead, O’Connell will come to me and say, “See what you can do, Stephen. Find out what they’re really after.”

MOLLY
Go back to your parish work, before you get hurt.

Mom, I can’t just walk away.

MOLLY
Yes, you can. When you first went down there, you said it was only a matter of a few rotten apples and it would all be over in a few months. It’s been almost two years.
That’s what I was told.

And you believed them.

It isn’t like any of us knew the true facts.

Somebody did. Things like this don’t happen unless someone is looking the other way. There’s nothing in this life without its seamy side, Stephen, including the church.

I don’t know that. And I have been asked – for now that the whole business stay as low profile as possible.

Make them find someone else. You need to learn when to walk away, Stephen. No one person can do what you’re doing without it changing them, and I don’t mean for the better.

Mom, look. Maybe you’re right, maybe it is changing me— and maybe I need to be changed. Until now, all I knew of evil came from books in the seminary. It never occurred to me that one day I would come face to face with it – feel its presence, alongside me in the room, as I’m listening to one of these families. Sometimes, I feel like I’m all that stands between evil and these children. I can’t walk away. Not if I want to be the kind of priest I mean to be.

Walk away, Stephen. That’s what you must do with this whole business.

I can’t do that.

You most certainly can. Why can’t you at least have the common sense of the spider in the nursery book I used to read to you? Or have you forgotten?

What are you talking about? What spider? What nursery book?
MOLLY
Your grandmother brought it over from Ireland when she was a little girl. I used to read to you from it.

STEPHEN
You used to frighten me with it, you mean. Those were some of the most terrifying stories ever told to a little child. No wonder all the young people leave Ireland.

MOLLY
You’re missing the point. The spider lays its eggs, remember? And then what happens?

I don’t know. I forget.

MOLLY
It goes away. It doesn’t stick around to fertilize the eggs. It has the common sense to go about its own life first. And why do you suppose that is, Stephen?

STEPHEN
The spider likes to party?

MOLLY
It goes away because it knows that it will die if it stays and fertilizes the eggs. It seems to me, Stephen, that spider knows more than you do.

STEPHEN
But it does come back, mom. It fertilizes the eggs, so that they don’t die. All the time it spends away from them, the spider knows it must return, just as nature intended.

MOLLY
As God intended, you mean.

STEPHEN
Fine, by God, then.

MOLLY
And when it does, what happens to the spider, Stephen? Did you forget that?

I’m not a child, mom. I get your point.
MOLLY
Ah, you don’t understand any more today than you did when you were a boy. The spider has the good sense to take care of itself first. Unlike you, the spider knows its time on earth is limited, whether it lives another day or just for another second. All we ever have, Stephen, is what we have before us – this moment right now contains the full, entire span of our lives.

STEPHEN
Stick to Danielle Steele, Mom. Philosophy’s not your forte.

MOLLY
(Kissing his cheek) You’re just like your father. Neither you nor he can see into life’s dark places, but that doesn’t mean they’re not there. If you really want to make your priesthood matter, Stephen, you’ll have to learn which battles you can win and which ones you must walk away from.

STEPHEN
I’m telling you, I know what I’m doing. Don’t be so dramatic.

MOLLY
Don’t you be so dismissive.

STEPHEN
Let’s not talk about this for the sake of the old man’s birthday — and not while Bud’s here.

BUD
(Coming downstairs) Let’s not talk about what while Bud’s here?

MOLLY
Did you put the seat down?

BUD
Yes, Mom. This may come as a surprise to you, but I’m toilet-trained.

MOLLY
You can’t tell it by my mop. (SHE exits into kitchen)

BUD
She changed moods quickly — what were you two talking about?

STEPHEN
The work I’m doing at the chancery. I shouldn’t have involved her.
BUD
She involves herself. That’s how she came by the name ‘Mother’.

STEPHEN
She means well. She and Pop both do.

BUD
They don’t play fair. Sarah and I have given them two grandchildren, for God’s sake. When do you think they’ll notice we’ve grown up?

STEPHEN
Parents don’t have to play fair. You know that.

BUD
It’s different for you. They respect you. You’re mankind’s great savior and I’m just a high school administrator.

STEPHEN
I’m the last person you should envy, Bud. They treat me the same way as they do you—like we’re still making model airplanes and living upstairs in our bedrooms.

BUD
I’m not jealous, Stephen — just stating a fact. When I told them I was the youngest administrator appointed by the school board, they had almost nothing to say. When you went away to seminary, they couldn’t stop talking about you.

STEPHEN
And now that it’s gotten messy, they’re both pulling back.

BUD
Maybe they’re just doing what we’re all trying to do.

STEPHEN
Which is...?

BUD
Come on, Stephen — we’re all doing our best to cope with an impossible situation. It’s one thing to stand up for you, but the rest of it—

STEPHEN
You mean these cases I’m working on?

BUD
It just seems like every day there’s some new scandal which, you have to agree, wouldn’t be happening if priests were allowed to marry.
STEPHEN

(Smiling) Excuse me, but I thought I just heard Sarah’s voice echoing off the sofa.

BUD

It may surprise you all, Stephen, but I’m not only toilet-trained, I have a mind of my own. I don’t need my wife – or my family – to do my thinking for me — as you’ll find out tonight at dinner.

STEPHEN

What’s that supposed to mean?

BUD

It’ll keep. I’m waiting to tell you all at the same time. Look, I didn’t mean to speak so harshly about the priesthood, before. It’s not just these stories going around. It’s all the rest of it. I could never have done it… You and Sebastian both strike me as two very lonely men. You more than he.

STEPHEN

Sometimes. All the same, I’m sorry if what others are doing causes you to have misgivings about me.

BUD

I haven’t — not about you. It’s only that I hate the way the priesthood’s been so demeaned. People we both know crack jokes and ask me all the time if you’re staying with it or not.

STEPHEN

With the priesthood? Of course, I’m staying.

BUD

I know that. I tell them how happy you are…

But—

BUD

The truth is— it’s me. I’m ashamed that you’re one of them. I wish I could tell people that you’re a cop— or a plumber.

STEPHEN

Why haven’t you told me this before?
BUD

It’s not you. I love you and I’m proud of you. You’re my brother, for Christ’s sake. But I know what people are thinking—and so do you. A priest zips his pants up, goes to hear confession and leaves an eleven-year-old boy in the sacristy bleeding from his anus. If someone were to touch my son that way—or my daughter—I’d kill him. Rip the balls right off him.

STEPHEN

That’s enough, Bud. You know damn well those men aren’t priests, they’re diseased animals.

BUD

(Pouring a drink from the sideboard) Is that how you hold yourself together—telling yourself that they’re sick and you’re sane? You may not be out there doing the things they’re doing, Stephen, but they’re out there, doing the things you’re doing: baptizing, saying Mass—What in the world do you tell your parishioners on Sundays?

STEPHEN

I don’t. I don’t have to. I go to greet a young family before Mass and the mother and father each grab an arm of their child, so he can’t run to me the way he used to. You know how that makes me feel?

BUD

I have an idea—

STEPHEN

No, Bud, you don’t. You don’t have a clue how dirty it makes me feel. Dirty. I don’t feel like a priest any more. I’m supposed to be their shepherd, but I—I don’t feel like I am. I don’t feel like I can be a shepherd to anyone.

STEPHEN

Stephen, I didn’t mean—

BUD

I stand there in the church hall thinking that everyone can look straight through me into my soul. They see what it’s in danger of becoming—if it hasn’t already. That’s what I feel. I understand them—I ask myself the same questions they’re asking.

BUD

And what’s your answer?

STEPHEN

I don’t have one. All I can do is pray.
BUD
Pray? That’s all? As in, “Pray and it will all get better?”

STEPHEN
You can’t put a man down for praying, Bud— For behaving as if there is still something
to believe in. I pray because I don’t understand any of it— not one damned bit of it—

BUD
—that a man’s hands can go from touching a girl’s vagina to consecrating the Body and
Blood of Christ?

STEPHEN
No, Bud, I don’t— and I never will. Sometimes, when I’m in my room in the rectory, I
lose all concept of time and space. Bohrer says I’m having panic attacks.

BUD
You’ve been seeing Dr. Bohrer?

STEPHEN
For God’s sake don’t tell Mom. Some nights I fall asleep and dream I’m back at the
summer house, and Pop is teaching us how to swim— yelling at us from the dock to keep
our heads up. Suddenly, I’m not able to touch bottom with my toes anymore and I start to
sink because there’s nothing underneath me. It’s all water. I hear him shouting at me to
come back, but I just keep waving my arms and kicking my legs, until I’m in the middle
of the ocean and I can’t find my way back.

BUD
You know what I say? If the Church can do this to a person then screw the church. Fuck
it.

MOLLY
(Entering with hors d’oeuvres tray) Bud Shields! What did you just say?

BUD
Sorry, Mom. I didn’t hear you come in.

MOLLY
What difference does that make? How dare you use such language in this house?

STEPHEN
Bud didn’t mean it. We were having an argument.

BUD
It’s just a four-letter word. You and Dad use plenty of them.
MOLLY
Not that one we don’t. In all the time you were living here, you never heard either of us use that word. I’ve never said that word in my entire life.

STEPHEN
Bud didn’t mean anything, Mom. They say it every day on television. It’s just a vulgar term for having intercourse.

BUD
You know, like you and Dad did to have both of us — you did do it, didn’t you?

(MOLLY is a picture of rage and confusion. Her mouth opens, but no words come out. When SHE finally does speak, it is a sputter)

MOLLY
You—You— Your father and I may have had intercourse— but we never fucked! (As both men break up in laughter, MOLLY puts down the tray, and speaks almost to herself.) I could have gone my whole life without saying that word. I honestly believe I could have— if I’d never had such dreadful, disgusting children.

STEPHEN
(Going to her) Mom, we’re sorry. It slipped out...

MOLLY
(Pushing him away) How dare you? How dare either of you conduct yourself in a manner that brings out the worst in a person? What kind of priest are you – Or don’t you care? You both think you can stand there and apologize— as if words can wipe away actions? Well, they can’t. The hurt is here – right here inside me – where you can’t get at it— because I won’t let you go there anymore.

SARAH
(Entering with laundry) Is everything all right, Molly? I could have sworn I heard you say—

MOLLY
(Brushing past her.) Excuse me, Sarah. I have to watch the stove.

BUD
Sweet Jesus— I never saw that one coming.

SARAH
(Folding laundry on the dining room table) She’s not been herself all day. I think she’s worried about seeing the doctor tomorrow.
BUD
She told me she was going for a check-up. Has she said anything different to you, Sarah?

SARAH
Jesus, Mary and Joseph— Don’t either of you recognize when a woman thinks she’s found something?

BUD
Like what?

STEPHEN
You mean, a lump of some kind?

SARAH
That’s exactly what I mean. You’d best go to her, Stephen.

STEPHEN
I will. I’ll just give her a moment. *(Indicating the laundry basket)* Can I help you with these?

SARAH
They’re just about folded. Go now— I want to have a word with your brother.

STEPHEN
*(To BUD, as HE exits)* Looks like the festivities are beginning earlier than usual this year.

SARAH
How many? And don’t lie to me. I need to know if you’re still sober enough to do what I asked you to do this morning.

BUD
*(Bounding up from the sofa)* Oh, Christ! I forgot...

SARAH
You forgot. How? How do you forget to pick up your own children at Day-Care?

BUD
I’m sorry, honey— I can explain—

SARAH
No, you can’t. You can explain a lot of things, Bud Shields, but that isn’t one of them. It’s not like I ask you every day. Just today— so I could help Molly with your father’s birthday dinner. I thought it was a simple enough request, but I was wrong.
BUD
Honey—Sarah, it’s still early. I can leave now and get there well before the day-care closes.

SARAH
That’s not the point. Saturday, you stayed up half the night watching a soccer match from Italy, but couldn’t get up the next day to take your two kids to Mass. I had to take them to my church with me.

BUD
You said I could. There’s nothing wrong with them going to Good Shepherd with you.

SARAH
Tell that to your father.

BUD
It’s none of his business.

SARAH
It will be, if I give in to all the pressure to sign them up for Sunday school. How do you think he’ll take it when one of his neighbors comes up to him and says, “Hello there, Thomas— I hear your grandchildren have joined the Church of England?” Who do you think will get blamed if that happens?

BUD
You’re beginning to sound like my mother.

SARAH
And you’re beginning to act like your father.

BUD
Sarah, we can talk about this when we get home. I’ll go now— and get them to your aunt’s house, like I promised.

SARAH
You’ll be back in time for the party? No stopping off?

BUD
(Going to her, taking her in his arms) I promise. Honey, I’ve got something really important to tell you this evening – and I don’t want this to spoil it. Please.

SARAH
What is it, then?
BUD
I’m saving it for tonight— for the whole family. But I can tell you this— I’m about to make you the happiest woman in the world.

SARAH
(As HE moves to leave, smiling) Where’s my kiss?

(HE kisses her, starts to exit, and stops when HE sees FR. SEBASTIAN TOOLE standing in the doorway. SEBASTIAN also wears his clerical collar)

SEBASTIAN
Hello, Sarah — Bud.

SARAH
Sebastian. I didn’t know you were in town. Good to see you. Where are your manners, Bud? Say hello.

BUD
Good to see you, Sebastian. I gotta run. I’ll catch up with you later. (HE exits)

SEBASTIAN
Later then. (To SARAH) Seems a man in a great hurry, doesn’t he? May I come in?

SARAH
Trust me, he is. Of course, you can come in. What brings you to town?

SEBASTIAN
I’m here to visit with Stephen— and of course there’s the big birthday bash for Tom. I’m surprised you’re here, though.

SARAH
If you’re referring to the last battle-royal, I can tell you it’s over and done with, as far as Bud and his father are concerned. Tom wangled a couple of seats to the Rangers game last week, and that was enough for Bud.

SEBASTIAN
But not for you.

SARAH
I made Molly a promise— if Thomas didn’t bring it up again, neither would I. I just came over to help with the dinner. Can I get you something? A cup of coffee?
SEBASTIAN
No, thanks. I’ve already had a couple gallons with O’Connell down at the rectory, listening to him repeat himself on all his favorite subjects—mainly himself.

SARAH
Make yourself comfortable and I’ll go tell Molly you’re here.

SEBASTIAN
Ah, stay a minute, now. Leave, and you’ll take all the beauty out of the room.

SARAH
Don’t be flattering me, Sebastian—I know better. I look as old and tired as I feel.

SEBASTIAN
Not true. You look exactly the same as you did four years ago.

SARAH
Five. It was at Brian’s christening.

SEBASTIAN
Has it been that long—Brian is five?

SARAH
Going on six. About to lose two teeth, as a matter of fact.

MOLLY
(Entering from kitchen) Why Sebastian—how nice to see you. Where are your bags?

SEBASTIAN
Hello, Molly. I’m staying at the rectory. O’Connell wants me where he can keep an eye on me. Are there any more beautiful, charming women like yourself hiding in the kitchen, or are you the only one?

SARAH
Be careful, Molly. He just tried a similar line on me.

MOLLY
And I suppose you objected.

SEBASTIAN
She did.

MOLLY
Give her a few years. Thomas will be so happy you’re here for his birthday. How long can you stay?
SEBASTIAN
Only a few days — Some parish business.

MOLLY
Of course— your promotion. I’m so happy for you. How was your trip?

SEBASTIAN
In a word— Amtrak! And no talk of a promotion. Nothing’s official, yet. Is Stephen around?

MOLLY
In the kitchen. Go and say hello.

SEBASTIAN
(Kissing her, then exiting to kitchen) I will.

SARAH
I wish you’d warned me.

MOLLY
I’m as surprised as you. Stephen didn’t mention a word until this afternoon. He looks well, doesn’t he?

SARAH
I suppose.

MOLLY
I write and invite him to visit us every holiday, but he always begs off. Too many memories. Women are better at dealing with some things than men—That’s always been my belief.

SARAH
I’m not so sure. If I hadn’t come to this country – after you know – I probably would have lost my mind.

MOLLY
That was a different matter entirely. Your brothers, rest their souls, died for a cause they believed in. A far cry, if you ask me, from what that boy’s mother did.

SARAH
The cause of the fire was never proven, Molly.

MOLLY
Thanks to my Thomas— but you mustn’t ever say anything to Sebastian.
SARAH
He doesn’t know? All these years you’ve let him think it was an accident?

MOLLY
That boy has had a terrible life, Sarah—all that drinking and the fighting. All Thomas
did was convince the district attorney that she’d never live to see trial—and wasn’t he
right? She died that very morning and it was a mercy that she did. A terrible way for a
child to lose his parents. Thank God he was spending the night here.

SARAH
They’re awfully quiet in there, don’t you think?

MOLLY
(Turns to kitchen, calls) Stephen! Sebastian! Doing be touching anything in the kitchen.
If you want something, ask me. I don’t need another of your messes.

STEPHEN
(From the kitchen) We were just helping ourselves to some of the pound cake. Is that
okay?

MOLLY
Sebastian can have anything he wants. I’ll deal with you later.

(STEPHEN enters from kitchen. MOLLY turns her back to him)

SEBASTIAN
Now there’s a familiar phrase. Okay, Stephen, what did you do this time?

STEPHEN
Nothing. Just a little misunderstanding—right, Mom?

MOLLY
Is that what you call it?

SEBASTIAN
You’re not going to let it spoil Thomas’s birthday, are you? None of us would want to be
doing that, now would we? Whatever it is, make it up. You know, don’t you Molly—
Anger causes the face to wrinkle prematurely.

MOLLY
Don’t be sweet talking me, Sebastian, the way the rest of my family does.

SEBASTIAN
And why not? I’m the third son, remember?
MOLLY
(To Sarah) I invite him to stay for supper— one night, mind you. The next thing I know I’m buying him a toothbrush and putting out an extra facecloth in the bathroom for him. (To Sebastian) That one puts years on a person, but you take them right off.

SARAH
(Picking up laundry basket) These are all folded. I’ll go bring in the rest. You know, Molly, you have a perfectly good dryer in the basement. One of these days you should try using it.

MOLLY
The chemicals in those fabric softeners make me itch.

STEPHEN
(A wink) Mom thinks Proctor and Gamble are plotting to poison her— don’tcha, Mom?

MOLLY
Regardless of what their commercials say, laundry always smells fresher when it dries in the sun. I don’t like funny smells sticking to my clothing.

STEPHEN
Sometimes when people get older, they start to have these odors... How often do you and Dad bathe?

MOLLY
Will you never learn when a person has had enough?

SEBASTIAN
I don’t think he can.

STEPHEN
No one ever wants to hear my side— Where’s Bud gone off to in such a hurry?

SARAH
He went to pick the children up at Day Care and take them to my Aunt Mary’s.

SEBASTIAN
They won’t be here for Tom’s party?
SARAH
They won’t be to any parties, anywhere, any time soon. I spent all Tuesday afternoon at their school, explaining which words they learned at home and which words they didn’t. I don’t think their teacher believed me, and until she does, it’s no birthday cakes, no desserts, no movies, and no TV. There’s too much watching television in this country as it is.

STEPHEN
Dad won’t be happy if they miss his party. He’ll say you’re punishing him instead of them.

MOLLY
And well he’d deserve it. Almost everything that comes out of their mouths they learned from him.

STEPHEN
So did Bud and I. You might as well forgive your children as you do your grandchildren.

MOLLY
Don’t be telling me what I should or shouldn’t do. You know how I feel on certain issues.

SEBASTIAN
Somebody want to tell me what’s going on?

STEPHEN
Just before you came, a very tiny four letter word slipped out of Bud’s mouth. He didn’t mean to say it.

MOLLY
He never does. That’s why God, in His wisdom, made him part of this family, where you all think it’s so easy to forgive and forgive and forgive. (SHE exits)

SARAH
I’ll just bring these upstairs. You two catch up. (SARAH exits upstairs)

STEPHEN
(Imitating) “Forgive and forgive and forgive.” Mom still has the touch. “Who’s not feeling guilty? Come sit by me.”

SEBASTIAN
She’s changed a lot.

STEPHEN
My mother? How so?
SEBASTIAN
Not your mother— Sarah. Seems a bit defensive, sort of.

STEPHEN
You’ve got to admit, Sebastian, it’s a bit awkward...

SEBASTIAN
I thought your father and she had put all that to rest.

STEPHEN
I’m not talking about that. I mean you and her.

SEBASTIAN
Stephen, there was never anything between us. I’ve told you that. It was twelve years ago.

STEPHEN
For you—

SEBASTIAN
For either of us. She’d just come to this country and my parents had just died. We were thrown together like two mourners at a funeral. Which we were. Helping her cope with her loss helped me with mine.

STEPHEN
There was a little more to it than that.

SEBASTIAN
We were fond of each other. That’s all there was to it. Besides, your brother came along and swept her right off her feet.

STEPHEN
She married him on the rebound.

SEBASTIAN
Sometimes, I feel just like Molly. I never know when you or Bud is joking. If you’re serious, then tell me this. Why would she have to do a thing like that? She was pretty enough to have any man she wanted.

STEPHEN
—Except one.
SEBASTIAN
You’re the only person who ever thought that and I wish you’d put it out of your head—especially now. Sarah means nothing to me.

SARAH
(Descending the staircase.) Thank you, Sebastian— and why do you suppose that is?

SEBASTIAN
God, Sarah, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.

STEPHEN
I was goading him about the past, Sarah— the way you two always went about together.

SARAH
Right— I heard it out of context.

Yes, exactly.

STEPHEN

SARAH
How did you mean it then, Sebastian?

SEBASTIAN
I was referring to there not being an especial closeness between us. It’s something Stephen has often teased me about.

SARAH
Good. I’m glad you set the record straight. With all the lunacy and lust among the clergy these days, a man in your position can’t be too careful.

SEBASTIAN
What do you mean: a man in my position?

SARAH
We all know you’re a man who’s about to be given his own parish.

SEBASTIAN
Stephen, you shouldn’t have said anything.

STEPHEN
Don’t look at me. Your buddy O’Connell isn’t the best person in the world for keeping secrets. He’s very proud of you.

SEBASTIAN
It’s only in the talking stages. You know how these things go. One black mark and—
STEPHEN
(Laughs) And we all know you. When you set your mind on something, you pull out all the stops. With that god-given gift for persuasion of yours, who is going to say “no” to you?

SEBASTIAN
People say “no” to me all the time.

SARAH
Trust me. You’ll make it happen, especially if O’Connell puts in a good word for you. And we all know you’ve got him in the palm of your hand.

I don’t.

SARAH
We’ll see. I’m going to help Molly with dinner. (SHE exits)

STEPHEN
He talks about you as if you were his own flesh and blood. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he was in love with you.

SEBASTIAN
I find that offensive, Stephen. I really do.

STEPHEN
I mean like a son. The way my father took to you when we were kids.

SEBASTIAN
The man’s been good to me, that’s all.

STEPHEN
Better than he’s ever been to me, and I’m with him practically every day. But then, I don’t cater to him.

SEBASTIAN
Are you saying I do?

STEPHEN
Come on, Sebastian. Whenever you’re home, you sit up half the night listening to his stories, as if they were brand new and you hadn’t heard them a dozen times. You even write to him.
SEBASTIAN
If I didn’t know better, I’d say you didn’t like him.

STEPHEN
I don’t. I’m not half as keen as you are on having his company. I get plenty of it at the rectory and now down at the Chancery. I don’t trust him, either. The less I have to do with him, the better I like it. I should tell you that Sarah isn’t the only person who’s changed around here. I hate what I’m doing and what it’s doing to me. And O’Connell is a large part of it.

SEBASTIAN
O’Connell tells me you’re doing a fine job.

STEPHEN
He talks to you about my work?

SEBASTIAN
Once in a while...

STEPHEN
In detail?

SEBASTIAN
Not the names or anything. Sometimes, he’s just looking for a second opinion.

STEPHEN
That’s just wrong. These matters are confidential.

SEBASTIAN
Perhaps he trusts me.

STEPHEN
I don’t know how you do it — Here I am, doing all his work for him, running interference for him with the press and with the victims’ families — and I can’t get the time of day from him. But he’ll talk about it all to you — a thousand miles away.

SEBASTIAN
Let’s change the subject. I’ve had four hours with the man on top of a horrible train ride. That’s enough penance for one day. *Looking around at the room* How little this room has changed since we were kids. I can still see your Lego blocks strewn all over the carpet – trying to build that Ferris wheel— the one we saw at Coney Island.

STEPHEN
The Wonder Wheel!
SEBASTIAN

Is it still there, or has it been torn down with all the other rides?

STEPHEN

No. It’s there. It was in some PBS documentary. The cars are a lot older and it looks scarier today than when we were kids. *(HE smiles)*

SEBASTIAN

What are you laughing at?

STEPHEN

Nothing – just that with your fear of heights, how will you ever manage being a part of the hierarchy?

SEBASTIAN

A person does what he has to, I guess. What are these?

STEPHEN

Just some travel brochures.

SEBASTIAN

*(Picking up the brochures)* Prague ... Warsaw ... Berlin.

STEPHEN

I stopped by a travel agency on my way home, today. I thought it would take my mind off my work.

SEBASTIAN

Good for you. Sabbatical?

STEPHEN

Maybe a couple of weeks next summer. I was hoping you’d consider going, too.

SEBASTIAN

I’d like to, but I can’t this year, Stephen—

STEPHEN

—“Something’s come up.”

SEBASTIAN

It has.

STEPHEN

We talked about it before. It’s called “fear of heights.” You don’t have to go by plane...
SEBASTIAN
I only wish it were that simple. Jesus, Stephen, this is so difficult. The reason I came back is because I’m here to meet with Bishop Walsh.

STEPHEN
What on earth for? He knows you’re not interested in transferring.

SEBASTIAN
No. Look, Stephen. I was supposed to wait until tomorrow and let O’Connell tell you, himself. He made me promise, but it isn’t right to keep it from you. I’m to talk with him and the Bishop about you.

STEPHEN
About me?

SEBASTIAN
It seems there’s been a complaint.

STEPHEN
Against me? What kind of a complaint?

SEBASTIAN
One of your parishioners has come forward and claims that you – made an improper advance to him when he was a kid. Jesus, now I’ve said it.

STEPHEN
Him? A Man? Who...is this person? What am I supposed to have done? How does it involve you?

SEBASTIAN
I was called here to give evidence as to your character.

STEPHEN
To give evidence — there’s to be some kind of a trial?

SEBASTIAN
Not a trial. Not yet. A meeting has been arranged between O’Connell and the lawyers for the man who’s accused you. Maybe it won’t have to come to anything. I don’t know all the details—

STEPHEN
Yes you do. You wouldn’t have said anything to me at all unless you knew what you were talking about. How am I supposed to defend myself? What is it I’ve done?
SEBASTIAN
I told you— I don’t know any of the details. Tomorrow’s meeting is to see if they can work things out.

STEPHEN
What things?

SEBASTIAN
There’s a chance that these two are just doing this to make a little money.

STEPHEN
Two? There are two of them?

SEBASTIAN
They’re both involved in the same accusation...

STEPHEN
How long have you known about this?

SEBASTIAN
O’Connell called me on Saturday — ordered me to come as quickly as I could. Look, it may not be all that serious. They all respect you at the Chancery — and your family. They’re doing everything they can to effect some sort of damage control on this.

STEPHEN
What the hell are you talking about — damage control? I want to know what I’m accused of. I’ve seen the Bishop every day this week at the Chancery and he’s mentioned nothing to me. The son of a bitch hardly ever comes out of his office.

SEBASTIAN
Keep your voice down. You don’t want your mother to hear.

STEPHEN
What am I supposed to have done?

SEBASTIAN
You remember the Retreat you and I held seven years ago for some teenage boys on probation?

STEPHEN
Of course I remember. We took them to St. Jerome’s Campground upstate for the weekend.
SEBASTIAN
Two of the boys – men, I mean – have come forward and accused you of improper conduct with them.

STEPHEN
How? What kind of conduct?

SEBASTIAN
Their story is that you went into their cabin and you brought with you some magazines...

STEPHEN
What sort of magazines? This is ridiculous.

SEBASTIAN
There’s more. One of the boys had been excused, earlier in the day, from playing softball. He was running a fever. Your excuse for the visit was that you were checking up on him.

STEPHEN
…And?

SEBASTIAN
You sat down on his bed to feel his forehead — as you did, the magazines fell onto the bedcovers.

STEPHEN
None of this is true…

SEBASTIAN
The boy says — I mean, your accuser claims that you sat there for a long time — never moving to pick up the magazines—

STEPHEN
He’s making it up.

SEBASTIAN
—You removed your hand from his forehead, took his hands in yours and moved them to your pants—

STEPHEN
It never happened.

SEBASTIAN
—and that you had an erection. He claims he was frightened and asked you to leave the cabin.
STEPHEN
You’ve known me all my life, Sebastian. I’d never do anything like that. I work with these cases every day. The priests who are guilty have a terrible evil in them — and I just don’t have that. I don’t.

SEBASTIAN
That’s why I’ve been called here to vouch for you.

Who else knows about this?

SEBASTIAN
I told you before. The diocese means to keep it quiet until they have all the facts.

STEPHEN
So quiet that not one of you could tell me about it?

SEBASTIAN
Stephen, keep your voice down…

STEPHEN
The stinking shame of it— You, the Bishop, O’Connell — have all known this since Saturday but couldn’t pick up a phone to call me? We’ve been friends since second grade. Why didn’t you warn me?

SEBASTIAN
I told you. I was ordered not to speak to you. They wanted time to go over your file first. Study your behavior… stuff like that.

STEPHEN
Observe me – like a criminal, you mean?

SEBASTIAN
Walsh has been warned not to have another scandal in this diocese so he’s moving cautiously with any new accusations. O’Connell says they’re both doing all they can to make the problem disappear.

STEPHEN
O’Connell? Damn it, Sebastian, I need a lawyer.

SEBASTIAN
If you get a lawyer at this point, no one is going to believe you’re innocent. The Bishop won’t even meet with you if you bring a lawyer. It will only look as if you have something to hide. My advice is let everything proceed the way the Church wants it to.
SEBASTIAN, Continued
After tomorrow’s meeting, they’ll call you in and lay all the facts before you. There’s nothing to fear if you’re not guilty…

STEPHEN
If? That’s the lowest thing you could have said. Why don’t you just get the hell out of here if that’s what you think?

SEBASTIAN
You know what I meant.

STEPHEN
And I heard what you said. Don’t any of you think I’ve learned a single thing down at the Chancery? I know what the Church can do, if it wants. I damn well will get a lawyer.

SEBASTIAN
What will that solve? This is all very preliminary. The two men have promised not to take things any further.

STEPHEN
To go to the papers you mean? Jesus Christ!

SEBASTIAN
Walsh and O’Connell both think these men aren’t interested in hauling you into court. They’re just looking to cash in on these scandals.

Michael Silvio—

SEBASTIAN
What?

STEPHEN
The kid with the fever.

SEBASTIAN
You remember the kid?

STEPHEN
Yes. He was fifteen or sixteen. Skinny. He came to me just before softball practice and said he had a fever. I knew he was faking it, but I said he didn’t have to play. I never saw him again that day. I swear it. Didn’t we take some of the boys canoeing that evening?
SEBASTIAN

Did we? I don’t remember that…

(THOMAS SHIELDS, smartly dressed in a dark suit, white shirt and blue tie enters through the front door carrying a leather briefcase.)

SHIELDS

Well, well, well. If this isn’t a sight right out of the past— the two of you standing there in your Cub Scout uniforms. Only back then, it really was a Cub Scout uniform.

SEBASTIAN

Hi, Thomas. Happy Birthday.

STEPHEN

(Without smiling) Happy birthday, Dad.

SHIELDS

A little less enthusiasm there, Stephen, and it would sound like a death wish. Why the long faces? One of you in trouble with Molly again?

STEPHEN

(Not meeting his eyes) I am.

SEBASTIAN

(Covering) We were just having one of our serious talks when you came in.

SHIELDS

Now why doesn’t that surprise me? Who wants to join me in a little birthday toast?

SEBASTIAN

Scotch?

SHIELDS

(Making a face) Bushmill’s. What brings you to town, Sebastian? Something to do with your promotion?

SEBASTIAN

Just a short visit – mainly to see Stephen. Does the whole world know about my promotion?

SHIELDS

Just about. O’Connell likes to boast about his “two young men,” as he calls you. A highball, Stephen?
STEPHEN
Not me. I’m going upstairs to make a couple of phone calls.

SEBASTIAN
If you’re trying to reach O’Connell, forget it. He’s gone out to play bridge.

STEPHEN
At a time like this? Damn it. Maybe I can still catch him.

(STEPHEN exits upstairs)

MOLLY
(Entering from the kitchen) I thought I heard your father.

SHIELDS
You did.

MOLLY
(Giving him a small, wrapped present) You’re home early. Happy Birthday.

SHIELDS
What’s this? You already gave me a present.

MOLLY
No, I didn’t.

SHIELDS
This morning— don’t you remember?

MOLLY
(Understanding) You’re getting to be plain dirty-minded.

SHIELDS
I certainly hope so – and to thank you for all your generous hospitality, Molly dear, I’m taking tomorrow off so we can spend a long weekend together. Never can tell what might come up.

MOLLY
My advice to you, Mr. Shields, is don’t quit your day job until you know for certain that you can perform another miracle.

SHIELDS
Come, my raven-haired beauty – sit awhile.
MOLLY
And let the roast burn?

SHIELDS
Let the house burn! Have you no conception, woman, of what it means, after a hard day’s work, to come home to a genuine Hollywood pin-up girl? How often do you suppose that happens, Sebastian?

SEBASTIAN
I’d say not often, Sir.

SHIELDS
And you’d be right. Ready for another?

MOLLY
(As SHE exits) You’d better be putting something in your stomach if you’re starting in on the whiskey. I’ll fetch the hors d’oeuvres.

SHIELDS
A fine pair, aren’t they?

SEBASTIAN
Who, sir?

SHIELDS
Molly and Stephen. They share a private language between them, I swear. All smiles, the two of them when the sun is out. But watch out when the clouds come. Any idea what they were arguing about?

SEBASTIAN
Same as always, I suppose. So, now that you’re sixty-five, Thomas, are you going to start making a little time for yourself?

SHIELDS
You mean, am I planning to join a senior center?

SEBASTIAN
No, sir. I meant, take up new interests. Do some traveling with Molly.

SHIELDS
A pretty picture that would be— The two of us climbing about a yellow school bus with our box lunches of tuna fish on rye and a little bag of potato chips – for what? A day trip to the Museum of African-American History? No, thank you. I’ve seen what happens to men when they retire. They give up. They grow – old.
SEBASTIAN
I was thinking of something a little more exciting than that. You might even find out that there’s life after civil service.

SHIELDS
(Smarting) I’m not some Jamaican filing clerk, you know. Thirty-six years I’ve been at City Hall and I’ll be there until they carry me out feet first.

SEBASTIAN
I meant it would be nice if you and Molly had some more time for yourselves.

SHIELDS
The Party needs me right where I am, especially with this new administration. Besides, what with having put the boys through school, and the summer place they no longer have time for, I can’t afford to retire as easily as some.

STEPHEN
(Coming downstairs) You didn’t want Bud or me paying you back when we graduated, remember? If there is a money problem, you’ve only to ask us—

SHIELDS
Am I complaining? Your mother and I aren’t heading for any poor house soon. We manage our finances well enough, thank you. I’m saying that I simply wanted you both to have what I never could. (Switching off desk lamp) Mind you, we’re not rolling in dough— Not so we can go around leaving lights on in broad daylight.

SEBASTIAN
That’s just what Bill Gates was saying the other day.

SHIELDS
(To STEPHEN) I hear you and your mother have been at it again. What is it this time?

STEPHEN
That’s the least of my worries.

SHIELDS
Don’t you know when to give her a wide berth? She’s got that doctor’s appointment hanging over her head. You shouldn’t tease her so. Let her have a little peace.

STEPHEN
If it’s peace you want, then try not to get into another brawl at the dinner table with Sarah. The two of you keep pushing this war of yours and one day you’ll force her to choose between you.
SEBASTIAN
Did you get through to O’Connell, Stephen?

STEPHEN
The line was busy.

SHIELDS
Is that why you’re so edgy tonight? Has O’Connell gone and ruffled your feathers?

STEPHEN
No.

SEBASTIAN
Yes.

SHIELDS
Well, which is it?

SEBASTIAN
It has to do with these cases Stephen’s been working on. A new one has just come along and Stephen has reason to believe this particular priest has been falsely accused.

STEPHEN
I know he has. And O’Connell is ignoring it as usual— the same way he’s handled this whole stinking mess from the beginning.

SHIELDS
Why do you think he’s kept you under his thumb all these years? He’s never been a man to get his own hands dirty. That’s for you to do.

STEPHEN
He hasn’t even called the man to give him his support. O’Connell’s sat on the case for almost a week without even talking to the man.

SHIELDS
Perhaps O’Connell knows more than he’s letting on. Maybe the man is guilty.

STEPHEN
Haven’t you been listening? The man is innocent. I — I know this man.

SEBASTIAN
You’ll do more to help him by staying calm and thinking rationally, Stephen.

STEPHEN
You’re calm enough for both of us. I’m going to try again to reach O’Connell.
SHIELDS
Listen to Sebastian, Stephen. You believe the man to be innocent, then all you have to do is fight for him. Even O’Connell can be made to listen once in a while.

STEPHEN
What is wrong with the two of you? O’Connell’s gone too far this time. He’s out—playing bridge with the Bishop while this poor guy is suffering.

SHIELDS
I thought you said the man wasn’t aware of the accusation?

STEPHEN
He – he’s not.

SHIELDS
You shouldn’t personalize your work this way, Stephen. Just do what you can, and let the rest of it go. You must always maintain the middle ground in all this.

STEPHEN
There’s no middle ground— not in any of these cases. (To SEBASTIAN) A man is innocent or he’s guilty.

SHIELDS
You miss my point entirely. There’s such a thing as mitigation, as many a lawyer would tell you. How else could we live with one another? Look out the window, Stephen. What do you see? You don’t just see houses and trees– you see shades of light and dark. That’s what shapes everything in our world — not the houses, not the trees, but the shades and the shadows, the light and dark all around us.

STEPHEN
Mitigation? How can you even think of such a thing, Pop? There isn’t any mitigation. What do you think I’ve been doing for the last eighteen months — taking a museum tour? Looking at paintings, with a guide alongside me to explain the uses of chiaroscuro? There are no shadows in any of this — you get two choices, black or white. The Church can’t protect the innocent and cover up for the guilty. Don’t you know that? Either a priest keeps the promises he makes to God or he doesn’t. You don’t touch a child, then tell yourself — or God — if you still believe in Him — “This is an exception. It’s only this one time.” God doesn’t allow the slaughter of innocent souls to be mitigated. It’s a sin. An unforgivable sin.

(STEPHEN turns abruptly and exits back upstairs. SEBASTIAN and SHIELDS look on as LIGHTS FADE OUT.)

END SCENE
ACT I, SCENE TWO

(ATRISE: Later than evening. MOLLY, SHIELDS, SEBASTIAN, BUD and SARAH seated around the dinner table. STEPHEN is not among them.)

SEBASTIAN
You’ve done yourself proud, Molly. Dinner was wonderful

BUD
A cut above Mrs. Cooney’s food pantry, didn’t you think so, Pop?

Indeed. Indeed.

SHIELDS
I’ll take that as a compliment.

BUD
(Winking) Although the roast was a bit stringy.

MOLLY
(With feigned interest) Was it?

SHIELDS
Oh, but it was much better than the vegetables. I thought the carrots were a bit too soft.

BUD
We had carrots tonight?

SHIELDS
(Pointing) The bowl over there — with the orange lumps — and the green bits of leaf.

BUD
(Holding it up) This? I thought they were turnips.

SHIELDS
You’ll hurt your mother’s feelings. She copied the look of it right off the cover of Family Circle Magazine, didn’t you, Molly?

BUD
Ah, me. Where is Martha Stewart when you need her?

SHIELDS
Checking her portfolio.
And Julia Child?

Dead.

(Rising, and preparing to exit) The nerve of you — Comparing what I’ve just served to Mrs. Cooney’s cooking. This may not be your last birthday meal, Thomas Shields, but I can promise you this — it’s the last I’ll be cooking.

You’d both be better off coming up with a compliment every now and then, don’t you think?

We were complimenting her. Compared to the last dinner we had here...

Bud, go easy on the wine.

Mom knows we’re joking. She’s a good sport.

When she’s up for it. I’m telling you now this isn’t one of those times.

Molly can give as good as she gets.

I’ll just go and help with the coffee. (SHE exits)

As I was saying to Bud only last week, Sebastian, you and Stephen are lucky men — choosing vocations that don’t allow you to marry.

Did you always know this, Thomas, or are you only discovering it now, after forty years of marriage?

Thirty-nine. Don’t make it worse than it is. Marriage is a difficult proposition under the best of circumstances but never more so than when a woman lacks a sense of humor.
BUD
Mom has a terrific sense of humor, Pop. She married you, didn’t she?

SHIELDS
That’s not the point. In all the years we’ve been married, I can count on the fingers of one hand the times she’s gotten the point of a joke, or one of my stories.

BUD
That’s no measure. There are a lot of times, I don’t get them either. Maybe she’s not the one at fault.

SHIELDS
Of course she is. (As SARAH enters with cups and saucers) Did I ever tell you, Sarah, about the time I took her to see “Fiddler on the Roof” on our first anniversary?

SARAH
Many times. I mean, yes.

SHIELDS
It’s all right. Sometimes I forget who I’ve told what and repeat myself — an old man’s failings.

SEBASTIAN
Sixty-five isn’t old.

SARAH
No, it isn’t. Anyway, you don’t look it.

SHIELDS
Compliments, compliments — true sign of an Irish tongue.

SARAH
Oh, so now I’m Irish.

SHIELDS
You’ve the map of Ireland right there on your face.

SARAH
(Laughs) That’s not what you thought last time we were here.

SHIELDS
We’d all had a drop too much that night, but that was then and this is now. I say we all move on.
BUD

Great idea. Let’s drink on it.

SARAH

Bud, you promised.

BUD

And I’m as good as my word, aren’t I? Here’s to peace.

SHIELDS

—And a new beginning for all of us. What do you say, Sarah – just a little one?

SARAH

Bud’s had enough “little ones,” as you call them. Toast each other with coffee, why don’t you? (Exits)

SHIELDS

That’s marriage for you — does something to a woman’s sense of humor. I was telling you about the time I took Molly to see “Fiddler on the Roof”. There’s Zero Mostel up on stage, the funniest man who ever lived, singing a love song to his wife. They’ve been through everything together — financial problems, pogroms, five unmarried daughters — and after all this he sings “Do You Love Me?” We’re sitting in the fourth row of the orchestra and Molly has forgotten she’s not watching television. She leans over, pokes me and, in her best Irish whisper says, “What I want to know, is does he love her?” Her voice carries right up to the stage. Mostel stops singing, glares at your mother, walks over and says, “Madam, that is not the point. Of course I love her. Now be quiet and listen to the rest of the play.”

MOLLY

(Entering) What’s he been telling you?

BUD

Oh, Pop was just saying that you don’t have a great sense of humor.

MOLLY

I most certainly do. I married him, didn’t I?

SEBASTIAN

He was telling us about the time he took you to see “Fiddler on the Roof.”

MOLLY

You’ve gotten a lot of mileage out of that story, Thomas, but there isn’t a word of truth in it. It was another play entirely, and it was you who opened your big mouth and embarrassed us. But I’m sure you won’t be telling that to the boys, will you?
SHIELDS

I hadn’t finished.

MOLLY

You wanted to leave at intermission because you couldn’t understand a thing they were saying.

SHIELDS

That damned English play you took me to. A bunch of fairies — all with Limey accents — mumbling and snarling at one another. A waste of good money, that’s all it was — and the damned thing goes on to win every award that year.

MOLLY

Don’t get started on the English tonight, Thomas.

BUD

Or the Irish, or the Anglo-Irish. Sarah and I are here because it’s your birthday — we didn’t come to bomb the house.

SEBASTIAN

I’ve a great suggestion: Let’s change the subject.

MOLLY

And don’t be getting all sentimental with your stories about the past. If this is going to be one of your crying-jag birthdays, I’ll just bring the coffee in and go to the movies with Sarah.

SHIELDS

A fine day it is when a man can’t speak his mind in his own home.

SEBASTIAN

Perhaps just not on the English, Thomas.

SHIELDS

And why not? They haven’t changed. Still trying to dump their crap on our shores — that play was proof of it.

BUD

Dad, Sarah can hear you.

SHIELDS

(Raising his glass) So? She calls herself Irish, doesn’t she? Isn’t that the point she’s always making — she and the rest of the Anglo-Irish are as good as real Irishmen? No difference at all between a Protestant and a Catholic — when it’s her people stole the land
SHIELDS, Continued
from us, and ruled over us just like the Brits were doing here? They were never anything better than lackeys, the lot of them.

MOLLY
You’ve had your warning, Thomas – enough. Bud, go and call your brother down — he’s been on the telephone all evening. Hardly touched his dinner. (Exits)

SHIELDS
Never mind. I’ll call him. I hope to God he’s not calling long distance. (Rising and crossing to living room, calling up stairway) Hey, Your Eminence, hang up the phone and get down here. (Returning) He’s a good boy, but he takes his job too seriously. You should have been the priest, Bud. You’ve a better sense of diplomacy.

BUD
That’s probably the first compliment I’ve gotten in this house since high school, but I decline. No, thank you very much, to my being a priest.

SEBASTIAN
(Lightly) And why is that?

BUD
You haven’t been reading the papers?

SEBASTIAN
That isn’t funny, Bud. You think it’s some kind of job description, like the press is calling it?

BUD
For some, maybe. Not that I’m accusing anyone — especially not you or Stephen.

SHIELDS
That’s enough. I’ll not have that filth discussed in this house. Save it for the bar rooms – or the rectory.

STEPHEN
(Entering) Sorry I’ve been upstairs so long. I had some things to do besides trying to get O’Connell on the phone.

SHIELDS
If there’s one long distance call on my bill, I’m mailing the whole thing to the rectory. O’Connell and the Pope can split it between them.

SEBASTIAN
(To STEPHEN) So – were you able to reach O’Connell?
STEPHEN
Of course not, but he had Mrs. Cooney all prepared for my call: “The Monsignor sends everyone his regards, and he especially wishes your father a very happy birthday.” The gall of the man.

SARAH
(As SHE enters) Who are you talking about?

SEBASTIAN
It’s not important—

STEPHEN
(Whirling on SEBASTIAN) Don’t you even think of saying that. It is important. We’re talking about an innocent man. How can you sit there and be so unconcerned?

BUD
What’s this all about?

STEPHEN
Some young men have come forward and made accusations against another young priest…

SARAH
How does it concern you, Stephen?

STEPHEN
They all concern me, Sarah. This priest is one of the best men the Bishop ever had working with him. O’Connell knows the man has been accused – he knows – and he has made himself unavailable. He’s gone off to play cards.

SEBASTIAN
Stephen, sit down. We’ve been all through this. It will all be taken care of in the morning. You’ll see. Nothing is going to be settled tonight. There’s no need to spoil your father’s birthday. Trust me.

BUD
More crime in the confessional? Good thing we didn’t bring Brian and Megan tonight after all. They’d be all ears and have us up half the night with their questions.

SHELDS
Are you suggesting my home isn’t a fit place to bring you children?

BUD
Of course not.
SHIELDS
Don’t “of course not” me. Is that why you didn’t bring them?

SARAH
We’ve already told you why they’re not here. They’re being punished.

BUD
It was pretty funny though. Brian’s third grade teacher walked in on a bunch of the boys acting up. She was just in time to hear Brian singing:

“Our, Dickory Dock
The priest has swallowed some cock.”

SHIELDS
Little Brian — came out with that? Where did he hear it?

SARAH
Bud, I’ve told you before, it’s no laughing matter. It’s not funny tonight and it wasn’t funny on Tuesday when I had to tell his teacher it wasn’t something he’d heard at home – not that she believed me.

SHIELDS
And just what do my grandchildren learn at home— can either of you tell me that? More importantly, which of you has taught them to mock the priesthood? (To SARAH) Is it your doing? — (Then to BUD) or yours?

BUD
No one’s teaching them anything.

SHIELDS
That seems clear.

SARAH
Neither one of us is poisoning their minds against the Church — you should know us better than that.

SHIELDS
Well, I don’t.

SARAH
Whose fault is that? We’re forever coming over here — you haven’t been in our house in over a year.

STEPHEN
Everyone settle down.
SHIELDS

(Muttering) Ah, for the love of …

SEBASTIAN

Thomas—

BUD

Please, everybody. Can we not ruin this evening? Besides it being Dad’s birthday, this is an important night for me, too. There’s something I want to tell you all, so I can have your blessing.

SEBASTIAN

It’s not ruined. If you have good news, Bud, now’s the time to share it.

SHIELDS

There’s never a bad time for good news.

BUD

Wait till Mom gets here.

SHIELDS

Why doesn’t someone go check on her? She might have fallen asleep out there.

MOLLY

(From the kitchen) I can hear every word. I’m putting the candles on the cake.

SARAH

I’ll go fetch her.

SHIELDS

Well, that’s two gone. They’ll get to fussing over some damn thing in the kitchen and forget to serve the cake until we’ve all gone to bed. Might as well have ourselves a whiskey while we’re waiting. (Going to the bar) Who’s with me? Besides Bud, I mean?

(BUD follows SHIELDS into the living room. SEBASTIAN and STEPHEN exchange glances. STEPHEN starts to speak but SEBASTIAN puts his finger to his lips motioning to STEPHEN to be quiet.)

SEBASTIAN

I’ll join you.

SHIELDS

(As HE pours the whiskey) Now that I’m officially an old man...
SEBASTIAN
You’re not old, Thomas.

SHIELDS
No, no, no. Hear me out. Now that I’ve reached an age where men are respected for their wisdom...

BUD

Some men –

SHIELDS
Molly may not get the point of my stories, but it’s important to me that you fellas do. Thirty-six years I’ve been at City Hall. Seen men come and go – educated men, honest ones, from mayors on down – men wanting to do good things – tossed out by the voters or never given their party’s nomination – and you know why? Because they never learned the secret of getting along with other men.

BUD
Which is what, Pop? To get ahead, a man has to know how to tell bad jokes? Is that what our tax dollars are going for?

SHIELDS
If you’d open your ears instead of your mouth, Bud, you might learn something. What I’m getting at is that my jokes and stories have played an important part in my ability to survive all these years. Men always want a bit of laughter in their life – get in one good story, and they’ll wait a week for another.

BUD
Even yours?

SHIELDS
The stories I tell are the means justifying the end. To know what a man is thinking, you must have access to him. A man waiting patiently for your next story is a man who keeps himself open around you. He looks up to you, does what you tell him to do. Success is being able to know whether the man standing beside you is useful or expendable, the way they do in the army: certain men get sent out on patrol and certain men don’t. An officer learns the men who can be trusted – he keeps those men close to him. The others he sends out on patrol.

BUD
Who’d you learn that from, Pop – our side or theirs?
SHIELDS
You think I’m joking? I’m trying to educate you. It’s my duty to put you both wise – not to stand by and watch you cast aside on life’s highway. Your mother and I – well – all we have is you – here – to look after. You and Stephen, and of course you, too, Sebastian. We love all three of you boys.

MOLLY
*(Enters from kitchen, followed by SARAH)*
Is it turning sixty-five that’s made you sentimental, Thomas? Or did you hoist a few at the Oasis with your boy-os before coming home? Come have your coffee and tea. I’ll go bring in the cake.

BUD
No, Mom. Wait. I’ve got an announcement. Pop’s been talking about wanting to see us all succeed and what I have to tell you is going to put a great big smile on his face.

SHIELDS
Well, out with it.

BUD
I’ve quit my job.

SARAH
*(Coming into the living room)*
You did what?

BUD
As of next Friday, no more Assistant Principal. I’m going into the health spa business — with Bernie Hoffman.

SHIELDS
The little Jewish kid from Astoria?

STEPHEN
That’s great, Bud. How long have you guys been planning this?

BUD
Six months. We’ve already got leases for our first two locations.

SARAH
Six months? You’ve been planning this for a half year? And you never told anyone?

BUD
You’d all have talked me out of it. But it’s a done deal. Bernie’s asked me to manage both stores.
SARAH
(Quietly) How much did you have to lend him?

BUD
It’s not a loan, Sarah.

SARAH
How much?

BUD
It’s an investment — fifteen thousand, that’s all — and I own forty percent.

SHIELDS
How much did Bernie put in?

BUD
He’s the contact person. We agreed he didn’t have to put in anything. So far, he’s the one has done all the work — made all the deals. He does all the promotion and marketing — and doesn’t get a salary unless we make a profit.

SHIELDS
Except for the money you’ve given up.

BUD
So what? He’s already got some people signed up from his law firm. Look — these two places were dying on the vine. They have every kind of new equipment — nautilus, bicycles, steam rooms, saunas — the works. The former owners were lousy managers. In a year, we’re going to be rolling in money.

SHIELDS
Dying on the vine, were they? And just what the hell makes you think you can turn them around?

SARAH
You kept this from me for six months? (Her voice begins to rise) You used our savings to go into this — but you couldn’t tell me what you were doing?

SEBASTIAN
Now, Sarah—

SARAH
(Whirling on SEBASTIAN) Stay out of this. (To BUD) Have you any sense of what a betrayal this is? Do you have any idea what you’ve just gone and done to our marriage?
BUD
I haven’t done anything to our marriage. For ten years, you’ve all told me what a dead end my job was. Now I’ve done something about it. You’ve always told me to go out on my own. You wanted me to go into business with your father after your brothers were killed — remember? You were all set to move us half-way around the world.

SARAH
I told you what I was thinking of doing. I didn’t hide it from you.

SHIELDS
That’s enough — if there’s to be any arguing, do it at your own home.

BUD
I would have gone with you, except that you got pregnant with Brian and we couldn’t travel. I would have changed my whole life for you. Whose side are you on anyway?

STEPHEN
Take it easy, both of you.

BUD
(Pouring himself a drink and downing it) No. Here’s to being free. Here’s to emancipating the real third son in this family — the one nobody ever pays attention to.

MOLLY
That isn’t true. You’ve never been put after Stephen. Never.

BUD
And to all the sons everywhere who never amount to anything in the eyes of their fathers – or their wives. That’s all I’ve gotten out of the past ten years from both of you. Well, now’s my chance to do something for myself and I’m taking it – with or without your blessing or your help or your concern.

SHIELDS
You wouldn’t talk this way if you knew how to handle your liquor. What the hell do you know about managing a business?

BUD
(Spilling his drink) Nothing. Absolutely nothing. But it’s more than you know about me.

SHIELDS
You great big drunken fool. The money’s as good as gone.

BUD
That’s just like you, Pop — all set to bury me and my dreams — before I’ve even been laid out. Can’t you fucking see? I’m still alive. I’m still breathing.
STEPHEN
Stop, Bud. You’ve said enough. You and Sarah talk about this when you get home, but not now.

SARAH
We have nothing to talk about. That man over there – the one I used to think was my husband – has just invested half of the money we have in the bank in some stupid business deal – something he only tells me about now, six months after he’s gone and done it.

STEPHEN
You have good reason to be upset, Sarah, but something this personal shouldn’t be discussed with the rest of us listening in.

SARAH
Jesus, Mary and Joseph — What do you two think a marriage is? Something you can commit to part time? That’s what Bud has gone and done — forgotten his wife and children in a juvenile, selfish search for his own freedom. Take it, then. Go ahead, Bud, take your freedom and be done with this marriage.

MOLLY
(Slamming down a plate on the table) Silence, every one of you. Not another word. The next one speaks, I’ll run this knife through you. (THEY turn to her as SHE advances into the room) Look at all of you – standing there, behaving like a bunch of wild children. Is that how you want me to treat you? Then, fine. That’s the way it will be. I’ve had it with the lot of you and that’s the God’s honest truth. The only thing to do with a bunch like you is to make you take a time out.

STEPHEN
Mom—

MOLLY
Time out, I said. There’s only one thing left to be done this evening and that’s to bring out the cake, which I’m about to do – unless you want me to dump it in the garbage. Not another word out of any of you, until you can bring yourselves to behave like adults.

SHIELDS
Now, Molly—

MOLLY
Don’t you “now, Molly” me, Thomas Patrick Shields. The time out goes for you as well. Shame on all of you for tearing into one another as if you didn’t have an ounce of civility or love in you. (SHE exits)
BUD
(Crossing to SARAH) I wanted to tell you, but there never seemed to be a good time. I did the wrong thing. I’m sorry.

SHIELDS
Molly’s right. Best to take this argument home with you. I say we drink to a truce and a new beginning for all of us. What do you say, Sarah – just a little one?

BUD
I’m for that.

SARAH
No. You can have coffee or tea. No more drink.

STEPHEN
Good idea. The best peace is a sober one.

SHIELDS
Damn it. This isn’t Northern Ireland, Sarah. This is a real Irish household. When we call for a truce, we keep our word. We don’t use it as a device to get men killed.

SARAH
What did you just say?

BUD
Knock it off, Pop.

STEPHEN
It was just such a phony truce cost Sarah’s brothers their lives. How could you forget?

SHIELDS
I’m not forgetting a damn thing. I’m talking about the way it was done, not about those who got caught in it. Sarah’s brothers were good men. Did I ever say they weren’t? They were noble men who died for Ireland. I’ve always said that.

SARAH
Oh, for Christ’s sake — come into the real world, Thomas. My brothers weren’t the great martyred patriots you think they were — or wish that you could be. They were stupid – and arrogant – lightheaded from all the malarkey fed to them by men like you — two stupid young fools who put themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time.

SHIELDS
That’s a terrible, terrible thing to say about your own flesh and blood.
SARAH
You don’t know the first thing about it. You weren’t there — I was. They had no business going out that morning. Everybody else had the good sense to stay in their houses and go about their business. There had been enough warnings. Only those two thought they had to prove something.

SHIELDS
They died for what they believed in. It takes great courage to be willing to die for a cause — surely you believe that?

SARAH
Would you really like to know what I believe, Mr. Shields — about boys who get themselves killed for ideas they don’t understand, and old men who stand around their coffins and drink to their deaths? Do you think my mum and dad believe my brothers died for a cause? What cause? All they knew was that their sons were bits of bones and flesh — and fresh, sticky blood running down Connaught Street. People came out to go shopping that Saturday and they slipped and fell on my brothers’ blood — until the dustmen came and washed it all down the sewer. The day they were buried, my father’s hands shook so that I had to hold the razor and shave him. He couldn’t do it by himself. To hell with all your ideas of courage and causes.

SHIELDS
Who do you think you are — coming in here and speaking to me like that — in my own home?

SARAH
(To BUD and SHIELDS) Your home — your life — that’s all the two of you ever think of — yourselves, (To SHIELDS) and you’re more to blame than he is.

SHIELDS
Me—?

SARAH
Who else did he learn from? Like father, like son.

SHIELDS
You had a better one, I suppose?

SARAH
I did indeed. He loved us and he was bright enough to treat us all with respect.

SHIELDS
Bright is it? He was a bright man, all right. Bright enough to teach his two sons just enough to get themselves killed by a bloody bomb.
SARAH
Don’t you say a word about my father or my brothers, Thomas Shields. The fact that you
go around toadying to every boy-o in City Hall doesn’t mean you know a goddamn thing
about politics. Especially Irish politics.

SHIELDS
And I suppose you do. I suppose that’s why you’re here — in this country. Because
you’re so full of love for the old one.

SARAH
(Quietly, at first) No, Mr. Shields. That is not why I’m here. I’m here because I want to
live — not die like my brothers. They didn’t make it, more’s the pity, but I did. I came
here because I was tired of not being able to walk where I wanted to; of having to take
the long way around to church or to work; of having to be in before curfew. I was tired of
being told by my parents to watch what I said for fear it would be overheard and lead to a
midnight visit from your murdering boy-os. I was tired of Protestant killing Catholic and
Catholic killing Protestant. All that killing, killing, killing. Ireland is too small a country
to hold all her dead. There’s no room for the living. (Beat) I don’t need another thing
from anyone in this house ever again. I’m going home. You can come with me, Bud, or
you can stay.

BUD
Sarah, wait a minute.

SARAH
I’ll be in the car. I’ll count to one hundred and then I’m going. (Exits)

STEPHEN
Go out to her Bud.

SHIELDS
(Grabbing BUD’s arm) One day, you’re going to have to teach that wife of yours to
respect the men of the house. I’ve told you that before.

BUD
(Shaking loose) You know, Pop, we can’t all marry nice, docile women like Mom. Good
night, fellows.

MOLLY
(Entering) What’s just happened?

STEPHEN
Ask Dad.
SEBASTIAN  
I think I should be going, too. I’m sorry your birthday wasn’t a happier occasion,  
Thomas.

SHIELDS  
You don’t have to be off, Sebastian. Come and have some cake with us.

STEPHEN  
That’s all right, Pop. Mind if I walk along with you, Sebastian?

MOLLY  
You’re both leaving me?

STEPHEN  
It’s best, Mom. I’ll be back later. Good night, Dad.

(STEPHEN and SEBASTIAN exit. MOLLY turns around and heads back to the kitchen.)

SHIELDS  
Where are you going? (MOLLY exits without responding) Dammit, I’m talking to you.  
Don’t run away.

(After a moment, SHE appears in the doorway with the birthday cake. Only one of the  
candles is lit. SHE half-sings, half-speaks the next.)

MOLLY  
Happy birthday to you, Happy birthday to you — Happy birthday, dear Thomas….

(SHE places the piece with the lit candle in front of SHIELDS)

MOLLY  
Happy birthday to you.

(LIGHTS FADE OUT)

END ACT I
ACT II, SCENE ONE

(AT RISE: Late morning, the next day. THOMAS SHIELDS is seated at the dining room table reading the Daily News and having his breakfast. After a moment MOLLY enters from upstairs with a basket of laundry. SHE keeps her back to THOMAS and does not acknowledge his presence.)

SHIELDS
The paper says it’s going to rain all weekend.

(MOLLY crosses to the dining room table and stands upstage of it. SHE keeps her back to THOMAS as much as possible while SHE pours a cup of tea, stirring in her milk and sugar)

SHIELDS
I was going to put those bulbs in when we got back from the doctor’s, but I’d better wait.

(MOLLY finishes and starts to exit into the kitchen)

SHIELDS
Where are you going? Sit down and have your tea — talk to me. You haven’t said a word to me all day.

MOLLY
What I have to say would fall on deaf ears.

SHIELDS
I know I thanked you for the bathrobe.

MOLLY
You did. Twice.

SHIELDS
All I said was perhaps the color made me look heavy.

MOLLY
Fat. You used the word fat.

SHIELDS
That’s no reason not to talk to me all day. If it’s that other business— I admit my part in it, but I didn’t start the argument.

MOLLY
What difference does that make? Next you’ll be saying that you were only defending the honor of your family – or Ireland. God damned, blessed Ireland.
SHIELDS

*(Going to her)* I understand you being upset. It was a wonderful dinner.

MOLLY

*(Pulling away, offended)* Draw back, Mr. Shields, and don’t be setting your hand to do something you heart should have done. Did I ask you to apologize?

No, but—

MOLLY

Then don’t. It isn’t my place to be upset. I’m here to do the ironing, dust the furniture, vacuum the carpets, make the beds and serve you dinner —

SHIELDS

Are you going to be like this for the entire weekend? What was the point in taking the day off?

MOLLY

*(As before)* —Peel the potatoes, shop for food, set the table — while you ride roughshod over what’s left of our family.

SHIELDS

You weren’t in the room. You didn’t hear the things that woman said.

MOLLY

That *woman* — as you call her — is our daughter-in-law — the mother of your two grandchildren. The real question, Thomas, is whom do you think *you* are?

Me?

MOLLY

Yes, you. Apparently it isn’t enough for you to be my husband or Bud and Stephen’s father – Or Brian and Megan’s grandfather. You have to parade yourself like some Great Liberator, raised up from the ruins of Tara. I’ll tell you this, great king of mine: you will not be seeing your grandchildren again until you pick up the telephone and make amends with Sarah.

SHIELDS

I’ll do no such thing. She’ll be getting no telephone call from me. The nerve — asking for such a thing after the way she spoke to me.
MOLLY
Make no mistake — I’m the one telling you to call. Sarah doesn’t care if she ever hears from you again.

SHIELDS
I’ll go to my grave first.

MOLLY
Suit yourself. For the time being. I can take the bus over to Sarah’s and see the children any time I want. Since you’re not welcome there, and they won’t be coming over here, I don’t expect you’ll see your grandchildren in this life.

SHIELDS
(Through the newspaper) I know my son – Bud would never let that happen. What do you mean, “For the time being”?

MOLLY
I’ll tell you when I’m good and ready. Right now, I want you to pay attention to every word I’m telling you: This is my family as well as yours — and I order you not to break the bond between us and our boys — or Sarah — or our grandchildren.

SHIELDS
You — order me?

MOLLY
Nothing. Not your politics – or the Church – or people’s backgrounds is more important than this family, and if you think differently, you can march right out that front door and not come back — or you can tell me to go and I’ll be gone before you can finish your tea.

SHIELDS
(Rising from his chair) All right — now calm down. I’ll admit things got a little bit out of hand…

MOLLY
It was worse than Bedlam when I came in here with your birthday cake. I should have dumped that cake right on your head. (The fight has left her and SHE is now close to tears) As much as I love you, Thomas – and I do – I’m not going to have us all divided by such foolishness. Do you hear me?

SHIELDS
(Chastened but exasperated) I hear you.

MOLLY
Then you promise?
SHIELDS
Yes. Now sit down and have your tea with me.

MOLLY
(As SHE sits) I’ll give you one chance, and then I’m through.

SHIELDS
All right, all right – can I have my newspaper back now?

MOLLY
I’m not finished. There’s something else.

SHIELDS
What now?

MOLLY
I want you to have a word with Stephen. The work he’s doing — I think it may push him right out of the priesthood.

SHIELDS
He would never leave the Church — it’s the great love of his life.

MOLLY
Do you remember how you used to say Stephen and I were so close it was as if we had our own language? Well, he doesn’t talk to me at all – not one word – about his work.

SHIELDS
He’s forbidden to — he told us that himself. Even if he could, do you really want to hear about such things? It’s all filth. Don’t you get enough of it in those magazines of yours?

MOLLY
(Exasperated) You’re missing the point. The secret language you claim we had — it’s dead. He doesn’t talk to me. He doesn’t talk to anyone. Did he say where he went last night?

SHIELDS
I haven’t seen him. He’s been up in his room all day.

MOLLY
You see? Talk to him, the sooner the better. This afternoon, when we get back from the doctor’s. Do you want some more tea?

SHIELDS
I’m fine. I can’t talk to him tonight. (Sheepishly) We have dinner reservations at the Anchorage. I wanted it to be a surprise – to make up for – you know...
MOLLY
Then call him down and talk to him while I go get ready.

SHIELDS
Molly, what do I know about his work? He’s an educated man – a priest. I barely finished high school.

MOLLY
Nonsense. Of course, you can talk to him.

SHIELDS
When it comes to the Faith, I’ve always done what I was told — I don’t know the right questions to ask. He’ll think I’m a fool. He’ll cut me off and say it’s a matter that concerns only the Church.

MOLLY
For heaven’s sake, Thomas, don’t be putting yourself down at this time in your life. Stephen’s your son. He’s also a man. You can hold your own with any man living. It’s no different in the Church than it is at City Hall. Some men wear collars, others play pinochle.

SHIELDS
Molly, this is the Church you’re talking about, not some gang of hoodlums.

MOLLY
For the love of God, Thomas, you’re as gullible as he is. I’m not saying a word about the Church. I’m talking about a group of men. Men who are using our son to keep their own hands clean. Stephen is in over his head — I’m telling you.

SHIELDS
A fine thing it is to take a day off from work — only to sit at my own dining room table and find I’ve still got a boss to answer to.

MOLLY

THOMAS —

SHIELDS
I’ll talk to him. Jesus, save us! Now get ready for your doctor’s appointment. I don’t want to be sitting the whole day in Bohrer’s office reading a copy of last month’s Newsweek. If it’s one thing I regret, it’s never having taught you to drive.

MOLLY
(Getting up from the table) That’s the other thing.
SHIELDS

What other thing?

MOLLY

For the time being, I’ll go by bus when I want to see Sarah.

SHIELDS

You said that.

MOLLY

But — not for long. I’ve decided to take driving lessons from that Chinese place on Roosevelt Avenue.

SHIELDS

And what do you plan to use for a car? Not the new Buick.

MOLLY

It’s our Buick.

SHIELDS

If you put one scratch or dent on that car...

MOLLY

You’ll just have to live with it. The way I see things, it’s either your family or your car. I’ll just clear these.

(SHE exits into kitchen. SHIELDS reads the paper as STEPHEN enters from upstairs.)

STEPHEN

Hi, Dad. I thought I heard Mom say she was going to take driving lessons. That’s good.

SHIELDS

Good for whom, Father Shields? Have you been having a pleasant day?

STEPHEN

I’ve been doing some writing in my room.

SHIELDS

Did you sleep well last night, Father?

STEPHEN

(Pouring coffee) Fine. What’s all this about? I’ve had the same bed since high school.

SHIELDS

Ah, but things change, Father.
STEPHEN
And why this “Father” stuff all of a sudden? Stephen is good enough.

SHIELDS
Would you prefer I call you Stephen instead of Father?

STEPHEN
I’m only saying there’s no reason for being formal all of a sudden.

SHIELDS
That’s what I mean about things changing. You’ll always be Stephen. But we’ve only known you as “Father Shields” for what — eight years now? Will we always know you as Father Shields?

STEPHEN
Did Mom put you up to this?

SHIELDS
Nobody puts me up to anything. I just wanted to ask you a few questions, myself, that’s all. See how you’re doing — find out if you need anything.

STEPHEN
She did — didn’t she?

SHIELDS
You weren’t home before I went to bed last night. What did you do?

STEPHEN
Nothing. I took the subway into the city and walked up Fifth Avenue. I thought I’d find a bookstore. I wanted to be alone with my thoughts.

SHIELDS
You wanted to be alone — so you went into Manhattan?

STEPHEN
What better place? I’ve always loved the city — and never more than last night. It started raining when I came up out of the subway — sheets of rain turning red and then green with the changing of the traffic lights. Strangers huddled under a tobacco shop awning; cabs were dropping their passengers into puddles of rainwater — traffic paying no attention to a cop blowing on his whistle — my own sound and light show! I must have lost all sense of time taking it all in. An old lady – a street person, actually – came up to me and asked “Are you lost, Father?” I didn’t know what to answer, so I just stood there. “Are you lost, Father?” she asked again and suddenly I realized why I had gone to the city — somehow, instinctively, I knew I would run into someone like her — someone
who could see inside me. “Yes, I am,” I said, and then – because I felt embarrassed – I
crossed the street to get away from her. I found myself in front of Jimmie Dougherty’s, so
I went in and had a couple of beers.

SHIELDS
You went to Dougherty’s by yourself?

STEPHEN
(Smiles) I don’t get carded these days, you know.

SHIELDS
You know better than to go off drinking on your own. Do you want to wind up like your
brother?

STEPHEN
That’s not fair. Bud tried to tell us last night what he’s been feeling and we wouldn’t
listen to him.

SHIELDS
I thought so. You were upset because of what happened last night. I’m sorry.

STEPHEN
No, Dad. I told you, I wanted peace — a stillness that would make the world right again.
In Sarah’s church, they call it “the peace that passes all understanding.” That’s the kind
of peace I want, Dad, and I don’t have it. I’ve never been able to find it.

SHIELDS
None of us has. You’re talking about perfection, and we don’t have that.

STEPHEN
That’s not true. Martin Luther King had it — and Mahatma Gandhi. They had an
acceptance that I just don’t have.

SHIELDS
Not that it did them any good. Nor will it you, if that’s what you’re looking for. They
were made in God’s image. We aren’t.

STEPHEN
How can you say that?

SHIELDS
You and I? We’re just ordinary men and like all ordinary men we run from the saints.
We don’t have it in us to trust them. We hide — and in our frenzy to save ourselves, we
kill our peace-makers.
STEPHEN
How long have you felt this way?

SHIELDS
A man can have his faith, Stephen, and not believe all he’s told, which is why we’re having this conversation. Things are happening in your life that you could talk about with me — or with your mother. You’ve no right to cut us off. You’re getting old before your time. Do you think I like sitting here, feeling that I have to force the words out of you? Tell me what’s on your mind. I promise you I’ll just listen — and not say a word. What the hell do you and your brother think we’re here for — Ourselves? Let us in, for the love of God, Stephen.

STEPHEN
The love of God – I always thought I knew what that was.

(Sings) Sing God a simple song, lauda lauday
Make it up as you go along, louda, louday
For God is the simplest of all. – For God...

(HE breaks off, in tears)

SHIELDS
You’re crying.

STEPHEN
I used to be able to do that — pray and turn things over to Him. I kept telling myself God had a plan for us — that everything would be made right in the end — for all of us. Now I don’t know if it ever can be. Why won’t God help me?

SHIELDS
(Alarmed) Stephen, tell me what this is about.

STEPHEN
(Turning away) If I could talk about any of this with you, Dad, I would. It’s something I have to process for myself. Things happen in life that can destroy a man’s faith forever. I thought I knew what evil was, but I don’t. I didn’t know it could smile, kiss you, embrace you with kindness — entwine itself around good the way ivy clings to a wall. You forever criticize the Jews because they won’t let go of the Holocaust – but I’m beginning to understand – (Turning back) The evil in this world is as powerful as the good. At least the Jews – some Jews – have learned that they must be always watchful against evil — forever on their guard against it. In our faith, we haven’t learned that yet. We don’t know the shapes, the forms that evil can take – we’re too busy sprinkling it with Holy Water – baptizing it, confirming it, allowing it to propagate. I don’t know what else to tell you.
SHIELDS
You’re talking like a man who has no faith. What’s come over you?

STEPHEN
I don’t know. I don’t think I know anything, anymore.

SHIELDS
Have you lost your faith? Stephen, if that’s it, I want you to tell me.

STEPHEN
I’m trying to. I don’t know. That’s the only answer I can give you. That’s why you can’t help me. I know things now that I didn’t count on having to know when I first went into the seminary. Things I don’t want to know. People do things —

SHIELDS
What things? What is this about?

STEPHEN
When is God going to break his silence? When is he going to help us?

SHIELDS
Oh, my boy. My boy — What’s happening to you?

STEPHEN
To me? What’s happening to all of us? This isn’t the world we were promised it would be, is it?

SHIELDS
Stephen, everyone has a crisis of faith...

STEPHEN
Don’t pull that crap on me, Pop. Talk to me man-to-man: this isn’t the world we grew up thinking it was going to be — is it?

SHIELDS *(Looking away)* No, it’s not. It’s not the world my Grandmother left Ireland for, it’s not the world my father fought for, it’s not the world I told you kids it would be when you grew up. It is what it is.

STEPHEN
Yes —
That’s the terrible secret no parent ever wants a child to find out – that the world has dimensions to it that none of us can understand: the way it hurts and maims and changes us all. We’re told to make sacrifices for the sake of others, but we can’t — we’re so busy fending off what we can’t see, tending wounds that never heal. We have no choice but to put the needs of those we love second to our own. Your mother and I have let you down, haven’t we? What can I do to help you?

It’s as you said: The world is what it is. You didn’t make it that way — it just is. I’m the only person who can help me. Pray for me, Dad and — do me a favor. Keep it from Mom, will you?

She already suspects you’ll be leaving the Church.

(Shaking his head) What if it’s already left me?

(Enters with her purse) There you are, Stephen. There’s a fresh coffee cake in the kitchen and — Mother of God, look at you. You look as if you’d walked to the gates of Hell and back. Where were you all night?

We can talk about it in the car. Let’s go, or we’ll be late.

I told you O’Connell said he’d stop by, didn’t I?

Yes, you did. But don’t let him near the pound cake. He’ll go through it like a dose of salts.

Okay. See you later.

Try and get some rest. (HE and MOLLY exit, leaving the front door open)

(Crosses to desk, picks up his Breviary and reads) “And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying, Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted - Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth - Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness—
(MONSIGNOR O’CONNELL, unseen by STEPHEN, stands in the threshold, observing him)

O’CONNELL
Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

STEPHEN
Blessed are the pure in heart—. . . I didn’t hear you come in, Monsignor. Good morning.

O’CONNELL
Good morning to you, Stephen. Trusting people, you Shields’s, leaving your front door unlocked. I did knock, you know.

STEPHEN
I didn’t hear you. Lost in thought, I guess.

O’CONNELL
I’m not surprised. You’ve been through a rough twenty-four hours.

STEPHEN
(Ignoring this) Would you like some coffee?

O’CONNELL
I think not. We can get this all over with very quickly. I’ve brought you some very good news.

STEPHEN
Why is that?

O’CONNELL
I beg your pardon?

STEPHEN
“Get it over quickly,” you said. Is there some reason we have to rush? I was told I would be allowed to defend myself.

O’CONNELL
(Smiling) It’s perfectly natural for you to want to do that Stephen, but it isn’t going to be necessary. That’s the good news I’ve brought you.

STEPHEN
The charge has been withdrawn?
O’CONNELL
Better than that — it’s been settled.

STEPHEN
Settled? How?

O’CONNELL
The two young men and their attorneys have agreed to a settlement. For a small consideration, mind you. No investigations, no meetings, and the Cardinal can take his vacation in France as scheduled. All water under the bridge, as far as anyone is concerned. Finished.

STEPHEN
Water under the bridge?

O’CONNELL
That’s what I said. You’re free as a bird. I’ve just come from meeting with the lawyers and the Bishop.

What made them drop the charges?

STEPHEN
Oh, they didn’t do that.

O’CONNELL
Then how can I be free?

STEPHEN
I told you – the complaint has been settled and all the records are to be sealed – Part of the agreement. What’s more, the two men can never bring another accusation against you, or any other priest. That’s also in the agreement. These men were just looking to cash in on a sure thing. As soon as I met with them, I knew what they were after.

STEPHEN
Are you saying you gave in to these men? Without an investigation?

O’CONNELL
Some of these people coming forth know we aren’t in any position to put up much of a fight so, sooner or later, they name one figure, we propose another — each side compromises and we come up with a settlement that makes everybody happy. Those are the kinds of tawdry cases I’ve kept out of your hands, Stephen — so you could make progress with the tough ones. I’ve meant to tell you before how grateful the Bishop and I are for the way you’ve handled your share of this terrible burden.
STEPHEN
You didn’t think there really was an issue of abuse? But you paid them off anyway? That’s blackmail.

O’CONNELL
Hardly. When you’ve been in the game as long as I have, you’ll spot this kind of person. The kind of accusation those men made was merely a shadow cast across the Bride of Christ — and now the shadow has been removed.

STEPHEN
You call bribery and blackmail a shadow on the Bride of Christ? There’s no Bride of Christ involved here — just His whore.

O’CONNELL
I’d watch how I spoke, Stephen. This isn’t all over with yet. If it weren’t for what you’ve been through...

STEPHEN
How do you know what I’ve been through? You never asked. How could you effect a settlement without even speaking to me? How can you be so indifferent?

O’CONNELL
I will not tolerate you speaking to me this way, especially when I’ve just resolved another acute embarrassment for the Church and managed to protect your priesthood as well.

STEPHEN
Committing one crime to avoid looking into another?

O’CONNELL
If we can get a settlement, we move on it. That’s all there is to it — your case is no different. It’s what we have to do if there’s going to be any Church left to us when this is all over. Don’t act like you’re hearing this for the first time.

STEPHEN
In the other cases the men were guilty. We had an obligation to settle.

O’CONNELL
Guilt or innocence has nothing to do with it. We have an obligation to settle these cases as expeditiously as possible. As a result of all our efforts, including your friend Sebastian, you’ve got a long career ahead of you as a priest now, instead of a jail sentence. Are you forgetting what might have happened if your case went to trial like some of the others?

STEPHEN
What case? I told you I was innocent — and that I could prove it.
O’CONNELL
Stephen, let me tell you something a wise old priest told me when I was your age. I’d caught this young boy stealing lunch money from one of his friends and I wanted him expelled, but my advisor knew the kid’s family. They had both money and power — and they would have used it. “Let it go,” I was told, “by the time his family is through with you, they’ll have made you out to be the thief.” He was right — they would have, and I’ll never forget his words. “Son,” he said, “the more you stir the shit, the more it’s going to smell.”

STEPHEN
Jesus...

O’CONNELL
I understand you wanting to clear your name — and I sympathize with you. But think of your future.

STEPHEN
How can you stand there and say I have a future ahead of me as a priest? That it’s over and done with? Innocence or guilt does matter. If these men were sexually violated, we’ve an obligation to them.

O’CONNELL
Don’t try my patience, Stephen, by second-guessing the Church’s decision. Of course we have an obligation to them — and it has just been paid — In full. You probably think they’re entitled to more — twenty years of therapy, or a written apology from the Vatican — plus a settlement. They weren’t interested. All they wanted was ready cash, so don’t stand there passing moral judgments, when it’s your neck I’ve just removed from the noose. No one is interested.

STEPHEN
If I understand you correctly — the Church doesn’t care what happens to those two men and, more importantly, has no interest in finding out whether or not I’m guilty?

O’CONNELL
Oh, the Church cares, Stephen — Very much. I’m not finished with what I have to say. You can either hear me out now or tomorrow you can have a formal meeting with the Bishop. It won’t change what’s already been decided.

SEBASTIAN
(Knocking on the open front door) May I come in?
O’CONNELL
Sebastian! I was just giving our friend here the details of the settlement we worked out — but he isn’t taking it very well. Seems to think we were wrong to keep his name out of the papers — wants his day in court, as it were.

SEBASTIAN
I’m not surprised. This must all come as a shock, Stephen. But just be glad it’s over. It’s such good news.

STEPHEN
Is it? To me, Good news has always meant proclaiming the Gospels.

SEBASTIAN
Of course it does. But this is good news, too.

STEPHEN
God help us, if that’s the case. You both stand there looking at me as if you’d found a new Gospel — the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Predator.

O’CONNELL
That’s sacrilege, and I won’t stand for it.

STEPHEN
Why not? You’ll allow bribery – or is that as far as you go – Monsignor?

O’CONNELL
For God’s sake, Stephen, think of the shame we have all saved your parents. If it ever got in the papers — it wouldn’t matter whether you were innocent or not. The shame would have killed them.

SEBASTIAN
Give Monsignor O’Connell a chance to explain everything to you. Be glad it’s over.

STEPHEN
Maybe I’m not motivated by expediency, Sebastian. Why have you been hovering over my case, anyway? Are you afraid my predicament might damage your promotion? Why the hell don’t you just drop me? Walk away — like you did with Sarah? Or is there another piece to the puzzle?

SEBASTIAN
You keep bringing up that fantasy about Sarah every time I see you. Regardless of what you think, I’m here because I’m your friend.
STEPHEN
When someone has to announce that he’s your friend, chances are you’ve just been
fucked. I’m innocent — and I mean to prove it.

O’CONNELL
Get it through your head, Stephen. The matter is closed.

STEPHEN
No. You get it through your head, Monsignor. I’m innocent. And you know it or you
wouldn’t be here now — Either of you.

O’CONNELL
You’re innocent. I heard you, and I’m glad for you, but it’s you who hasn’t been
listening, Stephen — Your case is closed. It doesn’t matter what I or anyone else
believes. It’s never going to come up. Your innocence or guilt is no longer a matter of
concern to anyone.

STEPHEN
It is to me.

O’CONNELL
Then, by all means, keep telling yourself you’re innocent – if it will help you – but you
are not to speak of it again outside this room, do you understand? That is a direct order
from the Bishop. The Church is not a debating society, Stephen, and, as your Superior, I
am ordering you to keep silent. It’s time we moved on. Now, I want you to go upstairs,
pack your things, and come back to the Rectory.

STEPHEN
(Calmly) I want to see the records.

SEBASTIAN
You can’t do that, Stephen.

STEPHEN
Oh, yes I can. I’ll bring suit, if I have to.

O’CONNELL
No one sues the Church, Stephen. First Amendment would get you thrown out of court.
Even if you could, what would you accomplish? Go public with this and the press will eat
you alive – the first thing they’d want to know is how many priests you’ve covered up for
– and who would be there to come to your defense? Not the Church, boy-o — and
without the records—

STEPHEN
You bastard—
O’CONNELL
Who was it once wrote, “Name calling is the last refuge of the ineffectual?” It must be in a book I read. Go ahead — bring about the end that we’ve just saved you from. Your family can turn everything it owns into cash and you’ll never have enough money. You’ll ruin yourself — and your family.

STEPHEN
I think I finally understand you, Monsignor: something I read in a book. “All are guilty, therefore all are innocent.” Albert Camus. So you sweep me under the carpet, and do nothing for those two men.

SEBASTIAN
What the hell do you think we should do for them? They were trying to scam us. They’re your blackmailers, Stephen

STEPHEN
What makes you so certain?

SEBASTIAN
It was just one of those cases that comes out of nowhere. Two creeps looking to cash in on a good deal. They were lying, their attorney was lying — and they knew that we knew it.

STEPHEN
May I ask how much I cost?

O’CONNELL
How much you cost?

STEPHEN
Yes — How much did I cost you? How much do you think I’m worth to your church?

O’CONNELL
I remind you, Stephen, that you took an oath of obedience. I am holding you to it at this moment. There is nothing more going to be said about the matter.

STEPHEN
My obedience is owed to God. I want to know my worth — and, while you’re at it, why was this case so important to you, Monsignor, since you’ve hardly taken an interest in any of the others? How did you know these men were just looking for money? How did they give themselves away? Who suggested a cash settlement to whom?
O’CONNELL
That’s it. I am going back to the rectory and you are to follow with Sebastian. I’ll expect you there within the hour.

STEPHEN
You know what I don’t buy about all this? It’s the fact that you have no compunction whatsoever about having a pedophile in your rectory.

O’CONNELL
Haven’t you been saying all along that you are innocent?

STEPHEN
I am. But, since there’s to be no investigation, I’m standing here wondering why you’re not just a little bit nervous about having me in the rectory? Either you believe I’m innocent, or you know that I am.

SEBASTIAN
Stephen, you’re going too far. It can all be discussed later, when you’ve calmed down.

STEPHEN
I thought so. You do want something more from me. Why don’t you two just stop all your dodging and darting and tell me? I have a right to know.

SEBASTIAN
It can wait.

STEPHEN
No, it can’t. You expect me to play along with this little game, then it’s only fair that you fill me in on what my role is supposed to be.

O’CONNELL
Fine. You want to know? I was going to tell you tomorrow when you’d cooled down — but there’s no reason you can’t know now. All the records are sealed like we told you, so there’s no chance of anyone finding out anything that took place. That was agreed to by both sides.

STEPHEN
So?—

O’CONNELL
We – the diocese – can’t look as if it paid no attention to the charges. There’s been enough of that already. It’s been arranged for you to take a short holiday out in Illinois close to Sebastian’s parish.
STEPHEN
You’re not talking about Bethel House in Evanston, are you? That’s a psychiatric facility. That’s where you sent Cranston and Jenner and Rafferty. It’s for drunken priests and — and…

O’CONNELL
And people with your sort of problem... I mean with the problem you’ve been accused of. It all comes down to the same thing. You’ll only have to be at Bethel House for a month — six weeks at the most. Then you’ll be transferred to work with Sebastian in Evanston.

SEBASTIAN
It’s only to keep our part of the bargain.

STEPHEN
I see. You’ve arranged to take care of all three victims: myself and the two boys — and protect the one guilty party. Nice work, only it isn’t going to happen.

O’CONNELL
What are you talking about?

STEPHEN
I mean I am not going to Bethel House or any other penitential purgatory you try to put me in. I’m not going to atone for a crime I didn’t commit. And there’s another matter as well. You haven’t told me how much you are willing to pay for my silence.

SEBASTIAN
Stephen, do you really expect to be paid?

O’CONNELL
Your silence? Is this some kind of a joke?

STEPHEN
Am I smiling? Why are you making me spell it out? How much? You paid Silvio and his friend off when they came to you. Now it’s my turn. How much are you going to pay me? My folks aren’t rich — you know that. They could use a little money when my father retires. Besides, Silvio shook you down without a shred of proof — not a single document or witness…

O’CONNELL
Whereas —

STEPHEN
Good for you, Monsignor. You catch on fast.
O’CONNELL
There’s no chance of that. The Bishop will never hear of it.

STEPHEN
Ah — you’ve already discussed the possibility with him?

O’CONNELL
Not in so many words...

STEPHEN
But you wanted guidance — in case I wasn’t interested in taking the fall for someone else for nothing.

SEBASTIAN
Stephen, you’re not in your right mind. What fall are you talking about?

STEPHEN
Oh, Sebastian, you poor, dumb fool. You really didn’t think I’d remember, did you? (Almost to himself) The sun was going down, and it was starting to turn cold. A breeze was coming up off the lake and I didn’t know whether or not to call off the canoeing trip. I was always afraid of the water. If it had been up to me, I would have called it off. But the boys all wanted to go, so I stood there on the beach with them, waiting for you to show up and make the decision. “Let’s wait and see what Father Sebastian says,” I told them, “He’ll be here any minute. He’s just gone to check on Silvio.” So we waited, and waited — and when you finally came running down to the beach, you were all out of breath — and you looked scared.

O’CONNELL
I forbid you to say another word.

STEPHEN
He called you first — didn’t he, Sebastian? Before they contacted my diocese, Silvio tracked you down in Illinois and demanded money. Isn’t that right? (To O’CONNELL) Look at the two of us. We’re so much alike, even our own mothers used to get us mixed up when we were kids.

(STEPHEN throws a small cushion to SEBASTIAN with his left hand, which SEBASTIAN catches with his left hand)

STEPHAN
We’re both left-handed. When we came up to bat, my father used to say he’d have to squint to see which one of us was at the plate. But Silvio didn’t get us mixed up, did he, Sebastian?
SEBASTIAN
Do we have to go into all this now?

STEPHEN
He could have come knocking on the door of my church any time he wanted to – if he’d mistaken me for you – but he never did. Instead, he made a call to Chicago. Why was that? Why was he so certain that it was you who’d paid him a visit in that cabin six years ago? Because that wasn’t the only time you’d been to see him, was it? Tell the truth, Sebastian. You went down to his cabin that night to have sex with him, didn’t you? You’d been seeing him all that summer — and his buddy, Rohnert, was with the rest of the boys down at the beach that night. Silvio was alone in the cabin.

SEBASTIAN
We can talk about all this later. There’s so much you don’t know.

STEPHEN
No, Sebastian. We’ll talk about it now. What’s going on between the two of you anyway? You – my oldest friend – would have me placed in a mental hospital — and you – who has known me since I was a child – you’d let him get away with it. Which one of you had to work the hardest on the other?

O’CONNELL
(Angrily) You want it all out in the open now, do you? Then, fine. We’ll deal with it. The answer is no. No, I don’t give a good goddamn which of you is guilty. I told you when I first walked in here that what mattered to me was saving the Church from more scandal. This morning I was able to do that — and do a good job of it. Who the hell are you to judge me? You take one ride on a merry-go-round and you think you know all there is about riding a horse. I’ve been a priest for longer than you’ve been alive. Korea, The Philippines, Port au Prince — I’ve seen more filth and death and betrayal than a mere child like you could ever imagine. Twenty-nine years, I sweated it out in one hellhole after another before I finally got a parish where I didn’t have to keep one eye open throughout the night to see what was moving in the shadows. And I mean to keep this assignment. As far as I’m concerned, you can both take it up the ass. It’s man’s nature to commit evil acts whether he’s an officer, a parishioner or a priest. And if you want to survive as a priest, do yourself a favor and get used to it. That’s the true meaning of absolution as far as I’m concerned — agreeing to look the other way so that you and the other guy can both survive. It’s God who gets to pass judgment – not me – and not you. Hold people to account and you’re just asking for martyrdom. I know all about Sebastian and this boy. I’m his confessor as well as yours. He told me years ago, and I’ve been urging him to break it off ever since. When he finally came to his senses last year, that’s exactly what he did. That’s why the little bastard turned on him and tried to blackmail him.

STEPHEN
Jesus...
SEBASTIAN
I’m sorry, Stephen. I should have told you, too, but I didn’t know how…It started that same summer. Then he came out to Chicago several times to visit me. The last time was when I told him I couldn’t do it anymore. That was when he first started asking me for money. I gave him what I could, but he kept calling me for more. He threatened to go to my Bishop — and Ryan doesn’t understand these things. It’s all zero tolerance with him. He would have let me be arrested and stand trial, if it came to that.

STEPHEN
And of course the good Monsignor here told you this diocese was settling these things more quietly.

SEBASTIAN
I couldn’t be sure how far Silvio would go — whether he’d bring his accusations to someone else or…

STEPHEN
So, the two of you talked — and together you set me up.

SEBASTIAN
No, Stephen. It was the only way to keep me from disgrace. I’m sorry you got dragged into it. It wasn’t supposed to —

STEPHEN
To what? Ruin my family, my vocation, my life?

SEBASTIAN
Monsignor O’Connell needed a reason to get the Bishop to part with the money. It had to be a priest in this diocese or he would never have agreed.

STEPHEN
You could have come to me first, Sebastian. My family has always been here for you. We would have found a way to do better than this. What you’ve done is evil — and stupid — and can’t work. I can’t go along with this. You know I can’t.

SEBASTIAN
What are you going to do?

STEPHEN
For starters, I’ll probably resign. In the morning, I’ll write to the Bishop and ask to be laicized.
O’CONNELL
You’ll do no such thing. If you cause this settlement to be broken, the Church will not stand behind you. Do you hear me? You’ll be on your own. Try explaining your innocence to your father then. He won’t believe you any more than the neighbors on this block will. Not without the Church behind you. It so happens that I agree with you — Sebastian has been foolish and stupid. He’s done something completely distasteful to both of us. Nevertheless, what he says is true. I know his Bishop — Ryan would let him go to trial. He’d go to prison and be torn to pieces. Is that what you want to see? Of course not — none of us does. He made a mistake – a bad one – and we have to stand behind him. The only solution is for each of us to compromise, to make a small sacrifice. The Bishop has ordered you to Bethel House and you will obey. You will obey him the way I obey him — the way he obeys the Cardinal. These are orders, not choices.

SEBASTIAN
I’m sorry. What can I say to you?

STEPHEN
Nothing. You’ve taken my name, my priesthood, my life. I have nothing left.

O’CONNELL
These are mere means, Stephen. You’ve saved a fellow priest from disgrace. This small little sacrifice – erasing this unfortunate lapse – means Sebastian can go forward with his life, and so can you. Think of the future.

STEPHEN
I have no future — not as a man, and certainly not as a priest. If I go out to Illinois, it’s as good as admitting my guilt. If Silvio ever does come forward in the future – or if someone else accuses me – it will be on my record that I spent — what? — six weeks, six months — at Bethel House. My life is as good as over. Did you even think of that — or didn’t you care?

O’CONNELL
Listen to me Stephen; right now you’ve a belly full of self-pity. You stand there doing exactly what you’ve accused Sebastian and me of doing: thinking only of yourself. You want us to tell you we were wrong to do what we did. That’s all you care about. Well, keep to that point of view, if it does you any good. But get the notion of writing to the Bishop – or taking this matter any further than outside this room – right out of your head. The Church isn’t looking to make any new martyrs.

STEPHEN
The Church doesn’t make martyrs — they make themselves.

O’CONNELL
I have nothing further to say to you. Sebastian can stay and try to talk some sense into you, but I’m due back at the rectory. I’ll expect you both within the hour.
(O’CONNELL exits; STEPHEN and SEBASTIAN stand looking at one another)

SEBASTIAN
Can I help you get ready?

STEPHEN
I’d rather you left. Or are you supposed to stay and keep watch over me?

SEBASTIAN
Stephen, I don’t want this any more than you do.

STEPHEN
Oh, yes you do. It’s all going to work out fine for you.

SEBASTIAN
O’Connell was the only person I had to turn to.

SEBASTIAN
And he’s served you well, hasn’t he? Better than God could have. God might have wanted the ends to justify the means.

SEBASTIAN
You don’t have to make this any harder than it already is. Can’t you imagine how ashamed I am?

STEPHEN
Of what? Screwing that poor kid or buying him off?

SEBASTIAN
Of everything...

STEPHEN
I don’t believe you. I don’t believe you gave a thought to anything but saving your own neck. What am I going to tell my family, Sebastian? I can’t lie to them — or is O’Connell going to handle that, too?

SEBASTIAN
I never intended to hurt you, Stephen, or your family. They’re my family, too — I’m the third son, remember? That makes me your brother.

STEPHEN
I get it — just like in the Bible. Only you’re not the third son. Bud is.

SEBASTIAN
Bud?
STEPHEN
Adam and Eve’s third son, Seth — the most important man in the Bible, put there by God so the human race wouldn’t have to think of itself as descended from a murderer. You and I — Cain and Abel — we stay behind in the garden, coveting our parents’ and our own corruptions. But Seth — Bud — he gets to walk into the light with God’s blessing, sinless, to go forth and multiply.

SEBASTIAN
I don’t see where any of this is leading.

STEPHEN
God never said we were born in sin. How could we be created in his image if that were true? God is holy, and good, and pure. It’s men like you and O’Connell — and a church full of men who think like you — who would ever think of defaming God’s most noble creation. Lie and lie after lie — for what? Temporal power? Shame on you, Sebastian — not for what you did, but for who you are.

SEBASTIAN
“I am who I am.” Isn’t that what God said to Moses? “I am who I am.” Take a good look, Stephen, because I’m not what I am. I’m what you — and your mother — and Bud — and your father made me. The third son, created not by the breath of God but by a phone call your mother made asking if I could stay to dinner. Molly knew there’d be nothing at home for me except maybe a note telling me to fix myself a cheese sandwich. She knew what I’d find at my house — my mother passed out in bed — with a bottle or two on her nightstand, and my father locking himself in — down in the basement — with his wood saws and the lousy, stinking birdhouses he kept on making, night after night.

STEPHEN
I don’t want to hear any more. I need you to leave.

SEBASTIAN
Do you know what it’s like to have nothing of your own that you can bring to God — only what you steal from someone else? Look at me, Stephen — go ahead and look. I’m your brother — the one all of you in this house created. I’m not made in God’s image — I’m made in yours.

STEPHEN
Stop now, Sebastian, and leave.

SEBASTIAN
I gave this family my life. Ever since I was a kid, I’ve taken orders — from my family, then from yours, and now from the Church. What was I to any of you? Tell me that, if you can. Tell me that I exist, I’m begging you — tell me that I matter.
STEPHEN
Go. Go back to the rectory, Sebastian.

SEBASTIAN
Tell me! You can’t, can you? You can’t tell me I exist because I don’t. There isn’t any me. You think I sold you out but how could I, Stephen? I don’t exist. (Falling to his knees and making the Sign of the Cross) If that’s what you think then you have to forgive me, Stephen. Forgive me and grant me absolution. Then the seal of confession will bind us both – we’ll never be able to talk about what I did – and we can have our friendship back — like it was. I – want – absolution – not from the Church, Stephen — I want it from you. Bless me father. Bless me for I have sinned. Please.

STEPHEN
(Helping SEBASTIAN to his feet, half-pushing him to the doorway) Get up, Sebastian: you need to go. Your connection to me – to this family – is over. Over. I cannot give you absolution. It is not mine to give: Absolution is for the living: It doesn’t pass from one dead man to another.

(STEPHEN closes the door behind SEBASTIAN and comes back into the living room. HE takes his breviary from the desk and drops to his knees. When he speaks, it is almost in a child’s voice.)

STEPHEN
Who made the world, Stephen? You did, God. And who made you, Stephen? You did. Why were you made, child? To know you — to know you and love you and serve you in this world and forever in the next. (As HE slowly removes his collar and places it on the floor besides him) How, Lord? How are we to serve you if you never break your silence? (As HE undoes his shirt) “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall see the face of God” — Lord, why can’t I see your face? Why can’t I hear your voice? Please, dear God, I’m begging you — tell me that we all have a home with you. (STEPHEN makes the sign of the cross. As if a decision is growing within him, his voice becomes surer, but it is never loud, as HE repeats the following prayers to be said at a gravesite) Blessed be our God. Blessed be our God forever, for we know that if our earthly dwelling be destroyed, we have a building from God — and I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things...nor powers, nor height, nor depth...nor any other creature ....will be able to separate us from the love of God....

(LIGHTS FADE OUT)

END OF SCENE
ACT II, SCENE TWO

(AT RISE: Sunday morning, shortly before dawn. BUD is asleep on the sofa, a throw rug over him. HE is still wearing his clothing from the previous day. The light from the desk lamp shines on STEPHEN’S Breviary. SHIELDS sits in the darkened dining room. HE stares out into space but is otherwise immobile. After a moment, HE moans a frightening sound, covering his face with his hands. After a moment, SARAH enters from the kitchen, in her robe, carrying a pot of coffee, which SHE sets down on the sideboard. SHE turns on the lamp. When she speaks, it is with a softness SHE has not used towards SHIELDS before.

SARAH
You stayed up all night again, Thomas?

SHIELDS
I had things to do.

SARAH
What things? (HE doesn’t answer) What things, Thomas?

SHIELDS
Things my little boy wanted me to do.

SARAH
What did Bud want? He shouldn’t be asking....

SHIELDS
(Shaking his head) It was for Stephen.

SARAH
Stephen? What things were you doing for Stephen? Can you tell me...? (Putting her hand out to him.) You’re crying.

SHIELDS
(Turning away from her) No.

SARAH
It’s all right to cry in front of me, Thomas. I’ve seen men do it many times.

SHIELDS
(Softly) I’m not. I can’t. Not now. All my courage is in my tears.

SARAH
As it should be. Sure, we fight hardest for what we cry the longest over. How can I help, Thomas?
(SHIELDS raises his head to her, then gestures for her to come closer)

SHIELDS
I don’t know how I will bury my boy —

SARAH
Oh, Thomas… Thomas.

SHIELDS
How do I throw that first fistful of dirt on his coffin? Help me, Sarah. Don’t let my tears drown me.

SARAH
I promise. What was it Stephen asked you to do?

SHIELDS
Soon, Sarah. I promise — I’ll tell all of you soon.

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