

The Iron Cottage

A Play

By

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The Iron Cottage

The lights come up to reveal Karen, wandering through the set, which is parts of different places; the living room of her house, a ramshackle cottage of rusted iron sheeting, a cemetery, a barn, and a blank open area.

KAREN

Alone. A forest of trees clawing at the sky. The blood-rust shambles of a shack leaning inward on itself, tilting toward some future collapse, swaying with the wind like a drunken derelict, reeling under the weight of its own structure, held aloft, held up, held together by its own oxidizing inertia. Haphazard windows carved out of iron. Jagged angles and jangling glass. Shattered. Shards strewn in the tall grass, catching light like knives, cutting into the flesh of the earth. The wind rocks the trees, bending branches, like twisted limbs. Forced down, crying for relief, scraping, scratching, scrawling their pleas in the rusted iron roof, ringing hollow from within, the branches are drown out by the storm, suffocated by the drops of rain demanding entrance, a milky orange stream dripping down inside, forming a puddle, then a river, of rust, flowing down into the ground, absorbed like blood, sopped up by mother earth. Like tears. Tears shed within. Within the shed. Within the iron cottage.

The lights come up on the Sheriff.

SHERIFF

Norwood Gazzette. October 10th.
Local Girl Takes Life. The body of Karen Wilkes was discovered yesterday evening in her bathtub by relative, (more)

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Shelly Wilkes. Karen Wilkes died from a shotgun wound to the head and police are ruling the death a suicide.

KAREN

Sanctuary: A sacred place or a place or refuge. It was our only true sanctuary.

The lights come up on Shelly.

SHELLY

I found her. There in the bathtub. Layin' there. Dead. Most her head gone. Blood. Lots of it. All jelly like and crusted over. She'd been there for most the day. I just come over to see how she was. Just stopped by to say hey. Like I always did. No particular reason. Just to shoot the shit.

SHERIFF

In a strange twist of family fate, Ms. Wilkes, age 30, took her life with the same shotgun that her grandfather used to take his own, thirty years ago this month. While there was no suicide note found, friends and family say that Ms. Wilkes was often depressed.

KAREN

Shelter: What ever shields or protects; a refuge; a roofed place. It was a shelter from the wind, the rain, and storms of our family.

SHELLY

She was the only really decent person in the whole fucking town. But she was always had a dark streak in her. Not that I can blame her. Those of us who knew her, John and me in particular, none of us could blame her for the way she was.

The lights come up on Helen.

HELEN

It runs in the family. That's what they say. At least that's what folks outside the family say. Everybody in the family knows better. Tragedy doesn't just happen. Not in this family anyway. In this family it's handmade. Baked fresh from scratch. Of course I didn't realize that when I married into it.

KAREN

Sacrifice: Giving something up for the sake of something else. She sacrificed her life for ours.

SHERIFF

One family member stated that Ms. Wilkes had been taking medication for depression for several years. Police have found no evidence of a particular event that might have triggered Ms. Wilkes suicide, but Sheriff, Don Jaspers, a long time family friend stated "It doesn't surprise me much. She was always a little on edge. Ever since she was a kid."

SHELLY

The bathtub. I know why she did it in the bathtub. 'Cause she knew I'd be coming over and she didn't want me to have to clean up a mess. She even pulled the shower curtain closed.

KAREN

Sacred: Something regarded as holy. It was not a sacred place, but a place where sacred things could be imagined.

Lights comes up on John.

JOHN

I can't believe she's gone. I been expectin' it for years. But I can't believe she finally did it. And with grandpa's shot gun too. That I never figured on. Thought she'd go for pills or something a little more dignified like hanging herself, but I guess I shoulda known.

HELEN

I never had a family of my own, so I was overwhelmed by it. The idea of it. Families are beautiful things. But they can have a sick underbelly to them, and if you're not smart enough to turn them over and smell the stench, then before you know it, your flesh is rotting too.

KAREN

Safe: Being free from danger or injury. It was the only place I have ever felt safe.

SHERIFF

Ms. Wilkes, who was single and with out children, is survived by her brother, Paul Wilkes, a writer in New York. Ms. Wilkes was the Norwood town librarian for the past ten years and worked part time as a waitress at Earnie's Pub on Broad street. It was in her capacity as librarian that Ms. Wilkes started the annual Norwood Book drive to provide books for the local library and underprivileged children.

JOHN

When we was kids she always used grandpa's shotgun when we went huntin'. Had a wild streak in her then. Always the tomboy. Always wantin' to do everything Paul and I did. One of the boys. And she was. Always took her knocks like a man. Never cried. Not once.

KAREN

Symbiosis: The living together of two or more organisms for their mutual benefit. We held among us, in that place, in that battered iron shed, a magical symbiosis, which opened us and tied us to each other forever.

HELEN

When I married John's father I didn't see any of this. I thought his grandfather had killed himself. Ashamed of his drinking. He was never ashamed. Karen was ashamed. But she never touched a drop in her life. The only one who didn't, and the only one who never had a reason to be ashamed. Not like her brother. Or my son.

SHERIFF

Services for Ms. Wilkes will be held at the Grace Memorial church on Saturday, October 12th, with burial to take place in the adjacent church cemetery. The family has requested that those wishing to show appreciation for Ms. Wilkes years of public service, donate books to the public library.

KAREN

Succor: Help or relief from distress. The succor we sought as children did not come as we turned to adults, but hung, ever elusive, just out of reach, somehow slipping through our grasping hands.

JOHN

Hell, even Paul and I cried that time her old man found us building a tree house in his favorite willow. Beat her just as much as he did us, but she never shed a tear. Not one. Maybe she was too tough. Wonder if her brother will come home for the funeral.

KAREN

Solace: Comfort from sorrow. I long for moments without thoughts, without memories, for moments of solace.

SHERIFF

Is Paul Wilkes available please? Oh, it's been so long I didn't recognize your voice. This here's Sheriff Jaspers, Don Jaspers. You might remember me, I used to date your aunt Helen for a while there after you uncle died, or maybe you was already gone by then... Well, what I got to say ain't easy for me... You see, Paul, the reason I'm callin' is 'cause your sister's dead.

The lights come up on Ed.

ED

Don't think I didn't try to stop her. I was right there with her the whole time. Doing my best. Tryin' to talk her out of it. I think she could hear me there for a little bit. But then I think she knew who I was, and that didn't help none at all.

KAREN

Specter: A ghost; a source of of terror; an image of something unpleasant. The specter of their deaths follows me; calls to me.

The lights come up on the grandmother Lilian.

LILIAN

All those years wasted. Thrown away in the pull of a trigger. What was the point of stayin' alive all those years, all the bad years, if she was just gonna kill herself? Hell, she coulda killed herself years ago and saved the struggle. Only reason I never did.

SHERIFF

Now, the reason I'm callin' and not John or Helen, is because it looks like it was a suicide... With a shotgun... Now, I'm callin' it a suicide, and I'm pretty sure it is, but I have to write a whole report for the judge... That's the way these things are done when it looks like a firearm is involved... Yes, that's all taken care of... I was hopin' you would.

KAREN

Strength: The quality of being strong; the capacity for exertion or endurance. Somewhere along the way I've lost my strength to carry this burden and it weighs me down.

LILIAN

Everybody's got a burden to carry. You shoulder it and get on. Every time I thought about endin' it, I just remembered all the years I'd carried that burden. What was I carryin' it for if not to see it through to the end?

ED

I tried to explain how sorry I was. That just 'cause I had been so fucked up didn't mean she had to be fucked up. But maybe that ain't true. Maybe that's just the way the world works. My old man was fucked up. Her father was fucked up. I was fucked up. Her brother's fucked up. My son's fucked up and he's fucked up his wife, just like I fucked up mine.

KAREN

Sepia: A reddish brown pigment. My memories of that time are drenched in the sepia tones of the rusted iron lives we led.

SHERIFF

You're aunt Helen is takin' care of things. Funeral is Saturday... Just for my report, now, your sister was on medication?... Was she often depressed when you talked?... When was the last time you spoke to her? That long. Well... No. No, we didn't find no note. I don't know why she did it... I'm sorry to have to call you....

KAREN

Sienna: A brown pigment or color. Her hair was a deep lustrous sienna, youthful and full of curls.

ED

Maybe Karen was right. Maybe the only way to stop is to cut it right off. End it so it can't go no further. Maybe I should count myself lucky I was killed.

KAREN

Sloe: Blue-black color; sour fruit of blackthorn. The sloe-black bruises were always covered by my dress and what is not seen does not exist, did not happen.

LILIAN

And when the end came, I didn't regret carryin' that burden. Not one bit. That was my lot and I took it right to the end of the line. I imagine she regrets it now. I'll bet now she wishes she had a burden and a life to carry it in.

KAREN

Suicide: Intentional self-destruction; the taking of one's own life.

The lights fade on all and then slowly come up on the farm house. Paul can be seen through a screen porch. He stands there a moment, a duffel bag slung over his shoulder. The door is open and he slowly walks in. He sets his bag down and begins to wander around the room, taking it in.

PAUL

Still the same. New furniture,
new carpet, new wall paper, even
fixed up the kitchen, but it's still
the same. Can't get the ghosts out
of a house no matter how many
coats of paint you put on it.
A house remembers. And the
memories seep into the walls, into
the wood, into the foundations,
and they stay there. You can
cover them up. You can hide them.
But you can't get rid of them.
She should have sold it.

Helen walks into the room from the bathroom with a bucket
and a sponge in her hand. She is startled to see Paul.

HELEN

Jesus!

Paul turns around.

HELEN(CONT'D)

You scared the hell out of me, Paul.
The Sheriff said you were comin',
but I wasn't expecting you 'till
tomorrow.

PAUL

I decided to fly.

Paul and Helen embrace.

HELEN

How are you?

PAUL

As good as you can be when your sister
kills herself.

HELEN

Still a smart ass.

PAUL

Runs in the family.

HELEN

I was just cleanin' up. I didn't want you to have to deal with it.

PAUL

Thank you. I don't think I can go in there.

HELEN

It's fine. All the blood was in the tub. She closed the shower curtain so there wouldn't be a mess. You know how she was. Always so neat and tidy. Hell she couldn't come over for dinner without mopping the kitchen floor. You'd a thought if she was gonna do it, she'd a used pills or somethin'.

PAUL

The Sheriff said there wasn't a letter.

HELEN

Not that we could find. We looked, but all we found was books. She loved to read.

PAUL

Yeah, she did.

HELEN

You stayin' here?

PAUL

I was planning on it.

HELEN

'Cause if you don't feel right staying here, I got a spare room that ain't being used these days. You're welcome to it.

PAUL

No. Thanks. I think I need to be here. Might ask to use your shower though.

HELEN

It's clean, I swear.

PAUL

No, it ain't that. I never liked that bathroom. Mom used to lock us in there when we was kids. Wasn't so bad. Except you never knew what was going to happen when the door opened.

HELEN

You want a beer. There's some in the fridge.

PAUL

Karen had beer in the house?

HELEN

Naw, I brought it with me. Figured I might need a beer or two. Should be cold by now.

PAUL

No. Thanks. I'm on the wagon this month. Trying to stay that way.

HELEN

Congratulations.

PAUL

Little early for that. This is the fifth time in five years.

HELEN

Your uncle always used to say a fifth is lucky.

PAUL

He and my dad got that from Grampa.

HELEN

Maybe you can convince John to dry up. For a while at least.

PAUL

How is he?

HELEN

How are any of us?

PAUL

How's Shelly? I heard she found Karen.

HELEN

She's shook up. She and Karen were close. I think they were the only friends the two of them had. She'll be glad you're home. So will John.

PAUL

It's been a long time.

HELEN

Doesn't matter. Nobody in this family ever changes. Present company excluded, obviously.

PAUL

I haven't changed.

HELEN

How's the writing goin'? Karen said you were working on a novel.

PAUL

It's finished.

HELEN

Well, when we gonna see your name on a bookshelf?

PAUL

I don't know. I don't know that I'll try to publish it.

HELEN

Why not?

PAUL

It's a little too autobiographical. Don't know if I want to go through with all that.

HELEN

All what?

PAUL

You know. Sometimes it's better to leave the past buried. Hell, I don't even remember the first two months after I finished it. Got so drunk, I gave myself an ulcer.

HELEN

Well, you're on the wagon now.

PAUL

For now, yeah.

HELEN

I'd love to read it. Your book.

PAUL

Maybe. Need to be able to read it myself first, I think.

HELEN

Wish John had some talent like that.

PAUL

John's got plenty of talent.

HELEN

With a back hoe, or a plow, maybe. He's mighty talented with a bottle of JD.

PAUL

He used to draw when we were kids.

HELEN

Oh, he might doodle on a bar napkin now and again, but that doesn't take much talent. His sister had talent though. Used to write these little stories. Little books like kids make. All the pictures in crayon and the story written at the bottom of the page. Still remember the last one she gave me. Story about (MORE)

HELEN(CONT'D)
a fish named Tim. She was proud of that. Don't know what ever happened to that little book. Thought I saved it, but I never could find it after... She mighta had it with her I guess. Maybe that's where she always wrote everything, up there in that loft.

Paul is caught in an awkward silence.

PAUL
I don't know what to say, Aunt Helen.

HELEN
Ain't nothing to say.

PAUL
I'm sorry.

HELEN
You ain't the one that got drunk and lit the barn on fire.

PAUL
Well, I...

John steps up to the porch and can be seen though the screen door.

HELEN
Well, speak of the devil. We were just talking about you.

JOHN
Had nice things to say, I hope.

HELEN
Now, when have I ever had nice things to say about you, Son?

JOHN
I remember a time, long ago.

HELEN
That was before you learned to talk.

Paul and Helen greet John. John shakes Paul's hand and they embrace lightly.

JOHN
Been a long time stranger.

PAUL
Too long.

JOHN
Sorry to see you comin' home for a funeral.

PAUL
Yeah.

JOHN
I'm really sorry about Karen. I tried to be a, you know, a brother for her after you left. God knows, Shelly was over here enough.

PAUL
I appreciate that.

Helen grabs her bucket and her beer.

HELEN
I'm gonna head on back home.

JOHN
I got the truck, Momma, I'll drive you.

HELEN
I need the air. When you get settled in, Paul, come on over for dinner.

PAUL
Thank you, but I think I need to stay around here tonight.

HELEN
Suit yourself. Makin' pot roast tonight.

JOHN

Ma makes a damn good pot roast.

HELEN

Remember that on mother's day and you might find yourself invited to dinner sometime too.

Helen leaves.

PAUL

You mother's sense of humor hasn't dulled any.

JOHN

Naw. She'll still cut ya in half if you giver her the chance.

PAUL

How you been?

JOHN

Usual.

PAUL

Still farmin' Shelly's old man's place?

JOHN

Yeah. I'm like his partner now.

PAUL

That sounds good.

JOHN

Not really. His idea of a partner is he owns all the land and I do all the work.

PAUL

Sounds like he's just as cheap as ever.

JOHN

He gets cheaper as he gets older.
And senile. Remember that time
you brought Shelly home two hours
late from the dance. Well, the
old coot tries to tell me that
I brought her home late and for
that I should pay for a month's
worth of gas for the tractor,
because it "devalued" his daughter.

PAUL

Sounds like him.

JOHN

The only way I got out of was
by telling him he was lucky I
was a kind enough man marry such
a devalued woman.

PAUL

What'd he say?

JOHN

What could he say? I think he
was afraid I was gonna ask for
a refund or something.

PAUL

How is Shelly?

JOHN

Good. You know. Married life.

PAUL

Domestic bliss?

JOHN

Well, it's domestic. Which reminds
me. You owe me a beer for missin'
the wedding.

PAUL

Yeah, I know.

JOHN

Had to have Ned Potters stand in
as best man.

PAUL

Just didn't seem like a good idea
at the time.

JOHN

Well, maybe not. Still owe me a
beer. We should drink one for
grandma too.

PAUL

A long as we don't have to drink
that shit she drank.

JOHN

I'd rather you poured me a cup of
warm piss than drink that stuff.
Don't know how she managed that
everyday.

PAUL

It was cheap. And she was a fish.

JOHN

Ain't we all.

PAUL

Except for Karen.

JOHN

Well, she was too good for this
family. She and Jenny. I think
Jenny'da turned out okay.

PAUL

I'm sure she would have.

JOHN

I really am sorry about Karen.

PAUL

You got nothin' to be sorry about.

JOHN

I know. But I still feel responsible some how. Like we coulda been around more.

PAUL

I'm the one who shoulda been around more.

JOHN

How could you know?

PAUL

I coulda called.

JOHN

She said you called her all the time. Wrote her letters.

PAUL

I did. At first. Talked to her two or three times in the last year. Hell, we hadn't talked in six months.

JOHN

Was something wrong?

PAUL

You know how our family is. When you're fucked up, you turn on the people closest to you. We had a fight the last time I called and she said not to call back. I was too drunk to call her anyway.

JOHN

You shoulda come home.

PAUL

Yeah, well, better late than never.

JOHN

No, I mean it. Ten years is a long time. It says a lot.

PAUL

It wasn't you.

JOHN

Doesn't matter. We're still family.

PAUL

I know. But I couldn't do it. I bought a ticket twice, but I couldn't get on the plane. Drove once all the way to Jacksonville.

JOHN

That's an hour away.

PAUL

I know. I pulled over to have a drink in some little bar. Figured I'd brace myself. Just kept drinkin' Woke up the next day in the car, a hundred miles outside the city.

JOHN

I don't know...

PAUL

Maybe you shoulda left.

JOHN

I thought about it. Shelly and I talk about it now and again. She wanted to go. But my mother was here and her father and I don't know what we'd do for money.

PAUL

Well, I'm home now. Only took Karen to blow her head off to do it, but I'm home.

JOHN

How long you stayin'?

PAUL

Don't know. Think I have to sell the house.

JOHN

Well, look, I'm gonna head on home, let you settle in. I'll see you tomorrow. I'm glad you're home. It's good to see you, even if it ain't the best reason to see you.

PAUL

Thanks. It's good to see you too. And hey....

JOHN

Yeah?

PAUL

Wear a suit tomorrow not yer overalls.

JOHN

I'll see what I can do. Wouldn't want Karen to mistake me for someone else. We'll have that beer afterward.

PAUL

Just don't mention it to your Mother. I told her I was on the wagon.

JOHN

You're on the wagon?

PAUL

Naw, but I tell people that. Makes them feel better about my drinkin'.

JOHN

You don't have to worry about my mom's feelings. Not the way I drink.

PAUL

It was more out of habit.

JOHN

Well, you secret's safe with me.

PAUL
I'll hold you to that.

JOHN
Later.

John leaves. Paul is alone.

PAUL
My secrets are your secrets.

Karen appears.

KAREN
A secret place.

PAUL
Buried in the past.

KAREN
A half buried hut.

PAUL
Hidden from view.

KAREN
A hiding place.

PAUL
But always present.

KAREN
Always sheltering.

PAUL
Hanging around our necks like a
noose.

KAREN
A lamp hung from the cross beam.

PAUL
Waiting for someone to pull
it tight.

KAREN
Waiting for the danger to pass.

PAUL
Hoping for an end to the memories.

KAREN
Hoping for an end to the pain.

PAUL
An end to the secrets.

KAREN
An end to childhood.

PAUL
Like when we were kids.

KAREN
Cowering beneath the sheltering
sheets of iron.

PAUL
Huddled in that rusted shed.

KAREN
Praying for an end.

PAUL
Praying not to be found.

KAREN
A dance of rain drops echoing on
the metal roof.

PAUL
The sound of the rain, gentle and
soothing.

KAREN
Soothing our fears.

PAUL
Holding each other. Wet. And
cold. And afraid.

KAREN
I'm afraid, Paul.

PAUL
It's okay, Rat.

KAREN
I'm afraid.

PAUL
He can't find us here.

KAREN
But what if he does?

PAUL
He won't. He never comes out this far.

KAREN
But what if he does?

PAUL
He's too drunk to walk this far.

KAREN
I don't want to go back.

PAUL
We won't go back.

KAREN
Promise?

PAUL
We won't go back until night.

KAREN
Not at all.

PAUL
Somebody's go to take care of Mom.

KAREN
She's just as bad as him.

PAUL
But somebody's got to.

KAREN

Not us.

PAUL

We won't go back until it's safe.

KAREN

It's never safe. Can't we stay here?
Forever.

PAUL

Then they'd really look for us.

KAREN

Please.

PAUL

It'll be okay, Rat. I won't let
anything happen to you.

KAREN

Forever?

PAUL

Forever.

KAREN

Promise?

PAUL

Cross my heart.

KAREN

And hope to die?

PAUL

And hope to die.

KAREN

I wish they would die. I wish they
would. Can we pray for them to
die. Can you pray for that?

PAUL

Sure, Rat. You can pray for anything.

The Sheriff enters.

SHERIFF

Police accident report. June 15th.
Scene of accident: Corner of Millberry
and Fulsome roads. Description:
Head on collision between two cars.
First car occupied by Tom Wilkes, age
36 and Sandy Wilkes, age 33. Both
occupants killed on impact. Second car
occupied by Jason Lambert, age 24.
Mr. Lambert suffered mild head injuries
and was treated at Saint Kelly Hospital
and released. Mr. Lamberts's statement
at the scene indicates that Mr. Wilkes
swerved into his lane just as the two
cars were passing. Mr. Kelly showed
no signs of intoxication and has only
one minor traffic violation on his
record. Preliminary autopsy indicates
that Mr. Wilkes was legally drunk at the
time of the accident. He was previously
convicted for driving while under the
influence. Fully responsibility for the
incident appears to rest entirely with
Mr. Wilkes.

Paul's grandmother, Lilian enters.

LILIAN

Norewood Gazzette. June 16th. Tragedy
strikes local family. Two local
children have suddenly been left wards
of the state today after their parents,
Tom and Sandy Wilkes, were killed in
a head on collision last night.

SHERIFF

It is the court's recommendation that
the children in question, Paul Wilkes,
and his sister, Karen Wilkes, be
remanded to into the custody of
their paternal grandmother, Lilian
Wilkes, of 401 Waterloo Road, in
the town of Norwood.

LILIAN

Best thing that could have happened to those kids. I knew it. They knew it. Everybody knew it. Seemed like they'd finally have a fresh start. Shoulda known better. Our family ain't meant for such things. Each generation has a bigger load to carry than the last. Just a matter of time before they crumble under weight.

Paul is looking through an old photo album.

PAUL

Crazy old woman. You never made a damn bit of sense your entire life, but you were okay. Bottle in one hand and your notebook in the other. Always writing down everything in that little note book and stuffin' the sheets of paper in that coffee tin. I shoulda gone to your funeral.

Paul rummages through the shelves of the kitchen and pulls down an old coffee tin. He peels off the plastic lid and pulls out a handful of paper scraps. He smiles.

PAUL

Idea #215: Apple raisin cake made with beer instead of milk.

Paul pulls out another slip of paper.

LILIAN

Karen asked today if the sky is made out of water because the ocean is water and it's blue. She's eight. What the hell does she know.

PAUL

Sandy had a little girl today. Named it Karen. Told them Andrea is a better name, but nobody listens to me.

LILIAN

Chickens laid green eggs again. Have to stop George from feedin' 'em whiskey.

PAUL

Paul and John play like brothers. Wish their brother's were like that again.

LILIAN

Idea #303. Live the rest of my life without a husband.

PAUL

Tom said today that he was marrying Sandy, that girl he's been seeing. Must be pregnant. They never learn.

LILIAN

George doesn't want another child. Explained what that meant. He got drunk and climbed in bed anyway.

PAUL

Kids driving me crazy. Too much trouble at my age. Glad they'll be old enough to leave soon. Don't need more worry in my life.

LILIAN

Paul is in love with the little neighbor girl. Cute thing. John likes her too. Their too young to know better.

Shelly enters.

SHELLY

Hello.

Paul stands up and puts the coffee tin on the table.

PAUL

Hello.

SHELLY
Helen said you were here. Thought
I'd stop by and say hi.

PAUL
John was just here.

SHELLY
Glad I didn't come earlier then.

They embrace.

PAUL
How are you?

SHELLY
Good. Good enough.

PAUL
Come in. You want something to
drink? Helen left some beer.

SHELLY
A beer would be nice.

Paul gets two beers from the fridge.

PAUL
You look great.

SHELLY
So do you. City treatin' you well?

PAUL
Well enough.

SHELLY
Still writtin'?

PAUL
I was.

SHELLY
Ever write that novel?

PAUL
Yeah.

SHELLY

Read your stories. Helen would bring the magazines home from the library.

PAUL

Really.

SHELLY

I like them. You're a good writer.

PAUL

Thank you.

Silence.

SHELLY

I found her.

PAUL

I know. I'm sorry.

SHELLY

Not your fault. Who knew she'd choose that day to crack. Always figured she might, but...

PAUL

How was she? Before.

SHELLY

She was down. She'd been seein' this guy and he turned out to be a jerk and then everything got her down. I tried to be around, but... You know how it is.

PAUL

Yeah.

SHELLY

Didn't you two talk?

PAUL

Not for a while.

SHELLY

She never said anything.

PAUL
She wouldn't.

SHELLY
Did something happen?

PAUL
Nothin' new.

SHELLY
Well, I'm glad you came home.

PAUL
How could I not?

SHELLY
You didn't come home when your
grandma died.

PAUL
That was different.

SHELLY
Yeah, I guess so. You and Karen
were close.

PAUL
Once. We were close once.

SHELLY
We were all close once.

PAUL
Yeah.

SHELLY
What happened?

PAUL
Distance.

SHELLY
That's it?

PAUL
That's enough.

SHELLY

You never called. You never wrote.

PAUL

I wrote.

SHELLY

At first, but not after. You didn't even send a card for the wedding.

PAUL

I couldn't.

SHELLY

They don't have stamps in New York.

PAUL

You know what I mean.

SHELLY

No. Not really. I used to know what you meant.

PAUL

I'll write you when I get back.

SHELLY

Doesn't seem much point now, does it?

PAUL

Maybe not.

SHELLY

You do write well, though. Your letters are better than your stories.

PAUL

That's depressing news.

SHELLY

I used to love your letters.

PAUL

I couldn't stand yours.

SHELLY

Thanks.

PAUL

That's not what I mean. They made me want to come home.

SHELLY

Is that why you started returning them?

PAUL

I couldn't read them.

SHELLY

You could have thrown them away.

PAUL

Didn't seem right.

SHELLY

John found them. After we were married. I kept all the letters you sent me and the ones you returned.

PAUL

I kept yours too.

SHELLY

He was pissed. Couldn't believe I still wrote to you.

Lights come up on John.

JOHN

Dear Paul, I miss you so much. When are you coming home? I hope it's soon. I can't wait to hold you again. To see your eyes. To make love. To be together. Write me soon. Please.

PAUL

Dear Shelly, everything is so fast here. The pace is amazing. I hardly have time to breath. My writing is going well. I have a job at a book store, which is okay because I get discounts. I miss you. I love you. Don't forget me.

SHELLY

Dear Paul, I'm tired of waiting for you to come home. I want to join you. I think we should live together. I'm dying to get out of this small town. If it weren't for your sister, I'd go crazy. And John. He's a sweat heart. He still gets in too many fights though. I think he misses you almost as much as I do.

PAUL

Dear Shelly, things are finally looking up. There's an editor who loves my short stories. I'm going to be a published author. I miss you.

SHELLY

Dear Paul, I'm getting impatient. When can I come visit? I promise I won't move in... Not right away. I Need to see you.

PAUL

Dear Shelly, I don't know how to write these words. They aren't words I ever thought I would have to write, but I don't think you should come to visit. I don't think we should see each other again. Not for a while. I realize now, living here, that I need to be on my own, to figure some things out. To figure myself out. I'm sorry.

SHELLY

Dear Paul, I understand how you could need time alone. I'll wait for you. As long as it takes. I'll always wait for you.

JOHN

Dear Paul, you're last two letters were returned. Have you moved? I hope this letter gets to you. John has proposed to me. I think I'm going to marry him. It's been so long since you left. I don't know what else to do. He loves me. I care for him, but I still love you.

The lights fade down John.

PAUL

Are you happy with John?

SHELLY

Nobody's ever happy in this family. It was a relief when I realized that, because I realized that I wouldn't have been any happier with you.

PAUL

You didn't have to stay here.

SHELLY

Where could I go?

PAUL

Anywhere you wanted.

SHELLY

I thought about it. But, you were the only reason I would have left. I just couldn't do it alone.

PAUL

You and John could have...

SHELLY
No. John isn't you.

PAUL
Lucky for him.

SHELLY
Or lucky for you.

PAUL
I always hoped you'd be happy.

SHELLY
You should have known better.

PAUL
Yeah, I guess so.

SHELLY
Why did you cut yourself off?

PAUL
It's difficult to explain.

SHELLY
You made promises.

PAUL
I know.

SHELLY
Then why? What made you change
the way you felt about me?

PAUL
Nothing. I never changed the
way I felt about you.

SHELLY
Then what?

PAUL
You know as well as I do.

SHELLY
I want to hear you say it.

PAUL

You reminded me of the past.

SHELLY

I didn't have to. We could both
could have left it behind.

PAUL

No. It wouldn't work. I was
walking through the city. The
lower east side. Looking at all
of the old buildings. I was
thinking about how little the city
changes in places. How it holds on
to its history. How they don't just
tear down the old buildings and stick
new ones in their place like other
cities. And I realized that if you
came to New York, I'd be living with
the past. Sleeping with it. I
couldn't look at you and think of the
future. Just the past. I can't now.

SHELLY

So you left me stuck here with it!

PAUL

I didn't know what else to do.

SHELLY

You could have been a man.

PAUL

Look, this isn't doing either of
us any good. I'll be gone in a
couple of days.

SHELLY

I've waited ten years to talk to
you. The least you can do is
listen.

PAUL

Listen to what? How I ruined
you life?

SHELLY

No. You didn't ruin my life. You ruined John's life. Then ran away. Why do you think I married him? Because I love him? He was like a brother to you and you abandoned him. After the fire you were all he really had and you ran away. I married him so he would have something. Something that was yours. A connection to you. So he wouldn't hate you so much. And so I could have a connection to you through him. Then I started to hate you.

Shelly walks toward Paul, who backs away from her.

PAUL

Jesus, that's fucked up.

SHELLY

It's your family, what do you expect?

PAUL

I don't know. I don't know anymore.

SHELLY

I put so much faith in you.

Shelly backs Paul against a table.

PAUL

You should have known better.

SHELLY

I never knew better with you.

Shelly and Paul kiss. As they kiss, Shelly begins to cry and Paul comforts her. Suddenly she begins to hit him. (They deliver their lines overlapping each other).

SHELLY

I hate you. I hate you.

Shelly hits Paul as he tries to hold her.

PAUL

I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

SHELLY

I hate you. I hate you.

She breaks free and starts throwing things at him, objects from the table, books from the shelves. Paul stands back and Shelly walks to the door. She stands there a moment and collects herself.

SHELLY(CONT'D)

I'll see you at the funeral.

Shelly leaves. Paul is alone. He looks down at the floor and begins picking up the books and placing them on the table. Among the books one catches his eye. He opens it. As he reads the lights fade up on Karen. As she and Paul trade lines, she acts out an afternoon of watching her cousin Jenny.

PAUL

Misshapen Saturday afternoon. Clouds clinging to close to the ground. Toys and tea. Dolls and dresses.

KAREN

Luke warm water filling tiny plastic cups. Little dishes and squares of cake.

PAUL

Raindrops smearing dust on the window pane into small brown rivulets.

KAREN

Sleepy eyes, lids drooping, head nodding, wrapped up and carried away, drifting into the land of darkness.

Karen mimes placing young Jenny on the couch, asleep.

PAUL

Sleep. Sleep and rain.

KAREN

A cruel and quiet summer's day.

The lights come up on Ed.

PAUL
Whiskey. The smell in silence.

KAREN
Footsteps hammering through the door.

Ed and Karen act out the events as they are described. The events of Ed's attack.

ED
Words.

KAREN
Soft and grating.

PAUL
Edging up the back of the neck
like crows caws.

ED
Salutations.

KAREN
Invitations.

PAUL
Gestures of kindness...

ED
Blanketing motives.

KAREN
Whiskey.

PAUL
Hiding the scent of cigarettes.

ED
Smells drowning out words.

KAREN
Words drowning out meaning.

PAUL
Hands.

ED
Roughly callused.

KAREN
Gently placed.

PAUL
Massaging tension into muscles.

ED
Warm breath.

KAREN
Stale and hot on the neck.

PAUL
Burning a fear deep within.

ED
Hands sliding.

KAREN
Making measure.

PAUL
Seeking out.

ED
Greedily.

KAREN
Feet pulled up.

PAUL
A chair left behind.

ED
Dry lips forced upon.

KAREN
Held close.

PAUL
Held up.

ED
Held out.

Held down. KAREN

Held open. PAUL

Held ransom. ED

A lifetime's payment. KAREN

Paid. PAUL

Again. ED

And again. KAREN

The lights fade down on Ed and Karen as the lights fade up on Helen. (Note: the lines of Helen and Paul can be alternated in presentation)

HELEN
I knew. You try to convince yourself that your mistaken, but you know. You hear things, see things, notice things on the wind, or on the sofa. And the pieces themselves don't make any sense, but you start puttin' them together and they add up to somethin'. And you tell yourself that can't be right. But you know it is. You tell yourself he wouldn't, but you know he would. You know everything else he's done, and you know he would with half a chance. And once you know, what'd you do? What can you do? You have no real proof. And what if you did? You do what you can. You hide. Hide in yourself like ya always do. Try to adjust things so it can't happen again, and try not to think about it when it does. You freeze. Like a (MORE)

HELEN(CONT'D)

deer in headlights, you just stand there and watch it happen. Like it happened to you. Like your own mother watched. I should have done somethin'. I knew it then. But I didn't see the consequence. I didn't see how it would come back to me, my silence. But I shoulda done somethin'. Anything. My little Jenny'd be alive today if I had.

PAUL

Chapter Eight: The Burden. How long she carried it no one knew. One day, one year. It all blended for her, and in her silence it all became the same moment. The last time became the first time, and the time before, the time yet to come. This silence enveloped her like a cloud, blocking out the sun she held within and casting all about her into darkness. This darkness did not go unnoticed. But it did go unexplained. This shadow of silence clung to her for more days than she could count and eventually it forced questions to appear where before there had only been assumptions. And these questions multiplied, like maggots eating away the flesh of the truth, gnawing at the dead lies and conceits constructed for protection, not simply for her own sanity, her own version of reality, but for the source of that shadow which threatened to eclipse her completely in violence. But, eventually the lies became truths, and the truths became knowledge and it poured into her as well as from her. Self knowledge revealing self hate, a clouded form of self blame for blameless events. Blame fell instead where it should have all along. And with the fall of blame fell justice, or what would pass for justice in world such as hers. A justice that would punish even the innocent.

The lights fade down on Paul and Helen as they fade up on John and Shelly. They are having dinner or doing something similarly domestic.

JOHN

What'd he say?

SHELLY

Not much more than he said to you I imagine. Don't figure he much wants to talk or we'd of heard from him before now.

JOHN

Good to have him home though.

SHELLY

Yeah. How ever long he stays.

JOHN

Said he's thinkin' about sellin' the house.

SHELLY

Wouldn't surprise me. The only thing tyin' him to this town anymore.

JOHN

He's still got us.

SHELLY

Yeah. I 'spose.

JOHN

Grab me another beer.

SHELLY

How much you plannin' on drinkin'?

JOHN

As much as I want. You got a problem?

SHELLY

We ain't got that much left.

JOHN

Well, why didn't ya buy any?

SHELLY

I thought you were gonna buy it.

JOHN

Like I don't pay for enough around here, I got to buy all the booze too.

SHELLY

You drink most of it.

JOHN

And you never touch a drop.

SHELLY

I don't drink half what you drink.

JOHN

You gonna get me a beer or what?

Shelly gets John a beer.

JOHN(CONT'D)

So what'd ya talk about?

SHELLY

You don't let up, do ya?

JOHN

I'm just askin'.

SHELLY

Just makin' conversation, right?

JOHN

Yeah, just makin' conversation.

SHELLY

You are so fuckin' transparent.

JOHN

Like you ain't.

SHELLY
We talked about you, ya stupid shit.

JOHN
So, I'm stupid now?

SHELLY
No, you always been stupid.

JOHN
And I suppose Paul is the genius
of the family.

SHELLY
Hell of a lot smarter than the
rest of us.

JOHN
Smarter than me, you mean.

SHELLY
At least he had the sense to get
out while he could.

JOHN
I coulda left.

SHELLY
Yeah, right. You couldn't leave
this town any more than you can
leave the bottle.

JOHN
Like you can leave either of 'em.

SHELLY
I can leave any time I want.

JOHN
Is that a threat?

SHELLY
I'm just sayin'.

JOHN
Well, what are you sayin'?

SHELLY
I'm just saying I can leave.

John grabs Shelly.

JOHN
You ain't leavin' no where.

SHELLY
Don't fuckin' touch me!

JOHN
Whatta ya gonna do? Leave?

SHELLY
Let go of me.

JOHN
Tell me you ain't leavin'

SHELLY
Fuck off!

JOHN
I said, tell me you ain't leavin'!

SHELLY
I can leave when I want.

John hits Shelly.

JOHN
Tell me you ain't leavin'!

SHELLY
Fuck you.

John hits Shelly again and she struggles out of his grip.
She grabs a knife from the table.

JOHN
Gonna kill me now? Is that it?

SHELLY
Stay away from me.

JOHN
You gonna kill me? Come on!

SHELLY
You want me to? You want me to
enact the grandmother clause?
'Cause I will if you want it.

JOHN
You ain't got the guts.

SHELLY
That's just what they said about
yer grandma, and that's just why
she got away with it.

John is silent a moment.

JOHN
Fuck you!

John grabs he beer and walks out.

SHELLY
Buy some beer while you're out.

The lights fade up on Ed.

SHELLY(CONT'D)
Maybe I'll still be here when you
get back.

The lights fade on Shelly. The lights come up on Karen.

KAREN
The Grandmother Clause. A poem.
G is for grandmother, old and gray.
R is for revenge when she has her day.

Lights come up on Ed.

ED
My father died when I was
twenty-five. Five years after
I was married and five years
before my brother died. Suicide.
At least that's what the Sheriff's(MORE)

ED(CONT'D)

report said. Even though there wasn't no note. That's what we told everybody. That's what we said. Said he was depressed. Feelin' low. Drinkin' too much. But he always drank too much. Never made him suicidal. Just made him violent.

KAREN

A is for adultery he committed with the neighbor's wife.

N is for neglect of his family life.

The lights come up on the Sheriff.

SHERIFF

Police report. May 27th. Nature of incident: Death. Cause of death: Suicide. Subject: George Samuel Wilkes, white male, age 57, height five feet eleven inches, dark hair, brown eyes, one hundred ninety pounds. Subject was found at five thirty five a.m. by subject's wife. Subject apparently placed the barrel of a loaded shotgun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

KAREN

D is for damned like his soul in hell.

M is for murder, committed so well.

The lights fade up on Lilian.

LILIAN

He was on a streak. Had been for days. Don't know what started it. Never knew what would start it. Just tried to stay out of his way. Let it run its course. 'Course that wasn't easy. He didn't want it to be easy. It did do no good tryin' not to provoke him. He wanted to be provoked. He'd push ya. Call ya names. Smack you around. Anything to get a reaction,(MORE)

LILIAN(CONT'D)

'cause all he was waitin' for was a reaction. As soon as he saw it, just a hint of it, then he'd go for ya.

KAREN

O is for ordeal that went on for years.
T is for time still frozen with fears.

ED

But it was suicide. We all said so. Especially the Sheriff. The judge agreed with him. They made it clear it. Never said a word about my mother havin' the side of face smashed in. But then she never said anything about it all those years. I never said anything about the broken arm. Tom never said anything about the cigarette burns. We have a silent family, see.

SHERIFF

Pathologist's report indicates that the subject was highly intoxicated and appears to have suffered a long history of alcohol abuse. Though no note was found at the scene of the death the subject's wife stated that he appeared to have been depressed for some time prior to the incident and had been drinking heavily for several days.

KAREN

H is for harrowing years under his reign.
E is for enduring more and more pain

LILIAN

He was always like that when he was on a streak. Not all the time mind ya, just when he was hittin' the bottle heavy. Not everyday. Hell, we might a been able to take it, but he couldn't. Might be two months between streaks. The in between times could be okay. Not so bad. Sometimes even good. Remind me why I loved him. I did love(MORE)

LILIAN(CONT'D)

him you see. Even in the worst of it, even when he took a bat to me, I still loved him, 'cause I could see what he was doing to himself. That what he was doin' to me was only what he wanted to do himself, but wasn't strong enough to. So, that night I figured if he didn't have the strength, then I had to have it for him.

ED

So, none of us ever said anything. It was suicide. And we never mentioned it. Just took his shotgun and put it back in the hall closet like nothin' ever happened. And nothin' really did. Life went on. I don't think we even missed him. Tom and I just stepped in to fill his shoes.

KAREN

R is for rage that threatens and mocks.
C is for caustic words thrown like rocks.

SHERIFF

Given the nature of the subject's state of mind and his consistent use of alcohol prior to the incident, as well as the lack of any contrary evidence, the subject's death is undoubtedly a clear case of suicide.

KAREN

L is for lashes struck with a belt.
A is for anger and the pain of the welt.

LILIAN

He'd thrown me down the basement stairs. Hit my head on a box at the bottom. When I come to, I saw the shotgun leanin' against the wall and a box a shells on the shelf. Must a been clean'n it there and left it, 'cause usually it was in the closet up stairs. So, I grabbed the shotgun and racked a shell. I'd shot enough ground hogs(MORE)

LILIAN(CONT'D)

to know how to use it. And I climbed up the stairs and there he was, passed out in the chair. I knew he wouldn't wake up. Slid the barrel in his mouth and placed his finger on the trigger. I thought it was going to be hard. Hard to pull the trigger. Thought I'd feel somethin'. I'd thought about it so many times. Thought... I don't know. Just pulled the trigger, and that was that.

KAREN

U is for umber like the color of rust.
S is for slaughter because she must

The lights come up on Paul, who is sitting and reading Karen's journal

PAUL

E is for emancipation that's just.

The lights fade on every one except Paul. He closes the journal and stands up. He slowly walks down stage. He is now at the funeral. He is joined by Helen, Shelly, John, the Sheriff

PAUL

I'd like to thank all of you for coming today. I know you all loved Karen very much. She loved you all as well. To most of you she was a friend, or a cousin, or a niece. To me she was a sister, and I... No one, could have asked for a better sister, for a better friend, a better confidant, a better companion, a better playmate, a better soulmate.

Karen appears and goes to Paul.

PAUL(CONT'D)

We were more distant these last years than when we were kids, but I always felt her presence. And I've felt it these last few days, even more, now that she's gone. I don't know why she took her life. But I know we will all miss her. I found this journal in the house. It's filled with poems. I never even knew she wrote poems. She never told me. But I stayed up last night reading them. And I'd like to share one with you now. It's the last one she wrote.

Paul opens the journal and begins to read. As he does so, Karen goes to the living room and begins to act out the last moments before her death.

PAUL(CONT'D)

Desolate landscapes outside my window. A blue, cracked-paint sky above a swollen, rust-orange field.

Lilian appears.

LILIAN

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.

PAUL

It leaves me with the longing to fly, like the sloe black crows, slowly circling the outstretched arms of the walnut tree, landing briefly in it's boughs, and taking flight again, forming a charcoal halo above the twisted sable branches.

LILIAN

He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul.

PAUL

I long to reach up like those branches
and embrace the sky, but my roots are
too deep, too tangled beneath the
heavy ocher earth that weights me
down.

LILIAN & SHELLY

He leadeth me in the paths of
righteousness for his name's sake.

PAUL

I am embedded here in this
ground, held firm by the husk of
my life, the bark that bites and
keeps me planted, branches straining
upward, yearning for release from
this cellulose shell, this wooden
life.

LILIAN & SHELLY

Yea, though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death, I will fear
no evil. For thou art with me.

PAUL

But wood can fly. It can be freed to
float through the breeze like birds.
The lapping tongues of fire turn wood
to ashes which the wind carries as
easily as crows, far from the stained
earth of its origin.

LILIAN, SHELLY & JOHN

Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the
presence of mine enemies.

Ed appears as Karen acts out her suicide. He goes to her.

ED

Don't do this. Please don't do this.
I know it hurts. I know. But this
isn't the way. This doesn't end it.
It doesn't stop. It just goes on. If
not with you then with someone else.
With your family. It just falls on them.

LILIAN, SHELLY & JOHN
You anoint my head with oil.
My cup runneth over.

ED
I know it's difficult. I know. And I know I'm the reason it's so hard. Or part of the reason. But, don't you see, that just makes it easy, that don't make it right. That don't make it good. Blame me. I should be blamed. Blame your father. Blame your mother. Blame your brother if you want, but don't blame yourself. Don't take it out on yourself.

LILIAN, SHELLY & JOHN
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

ED
Take it out on me. Please. For Christ's sake, take it out on me! I'm the one. I'm the one who should pay, not you! Don't you understand, it's not you. It was never you. It was me. And I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

Ed breaks down in tears as Karen steps into the bathroom with the shotgun. A curtain is heard closing. Then silence

ED
Please, I'm beggin' you, please don't do this. Please! Please hold on!
Please!

A shotgun blast is heard. The lights fade on Ed.

SHERIFF
The subject was discovered at three p.m. by sister in-law, Shelly Wilkes. Cause of death was a self inflicted shotgun blast to the head. The subject placed the(MORE)

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

barrel in her own mouth and pulled the trigger with her thumb. The blast removed most of the back of her head and death was instantaneous. No suicide note was found at the scene, but family members have stated that the subject was taking several anti-depressant medications and had attempted suicide in the past. Given the lack of any evidence to suggest foul play at the scene, it must be concluded that the subject's death is the result of suicide.

Slowly, Paul is left alone on stage. Karen enters from the bathroom as Paul kneels down at the grave.

PAUL

I'm sorry I wasn't there for you, Rat. You were always there for me.

Karen kneels down to embrace Paul.

KAREN

You're so distant.

PAUL

I live in New York.

KAREN

Why don't you ever come home.

PAUL

I can't go home.

KAREN

Just for a little while. Come home.

PAUL

You know I can't.

KAREN

You won't.

PAUL
I won't.

KAREN
For me. Just for me.

PAUL
Karen.

KAREN
I need you.

PAUL
Then come here.

KAREN
I need you here. In my life.

PAUL
I am.

KAREN
No. You haven't been in my life
since you left.

PAUL
I can't go home.

KAREN
Not even for me?

PAUL
Not even for you.

KAREN
If you won't be in my life, then
I don't want to talk to you.

PAUL
Karen...

KAREN
Don't call me again.

Karen walks away from Paul.

PAUL

Karen...? Rat...?

The lights fade on Paul as they fade upon the Sheriff.

SHERIFF

A small town is never as small as it seems. It's larger inside than out. Inside the people. That's where it spreads out and takes up space. The space between people. Relationships. Between friends, between families. That's the space you have to watch. That's where things happen. But you have to look close. Watch the details. You'll figure it out. It's not that hard, 'cause once you know 'em, they don't change much. Most these people are just the same as they were back when I was a deputy like you. Take John Wilkes over there for instance. If you knew his grandfather, you knew his father, and if you knew his father, you know him. A drunken wife beater. Nothin' more. Nothin' less. Thought for a while he might prove me wrong when his old man died. Guess his sister's death struck him hard. His mother and I were close for a while. But she doesn't change much either.

The lights come up on Helen.

HELEN

I said no.

SHERIFF

Well you gonna give me a reason why?

HELEN

Because I said so.

SHERIFF

You care for me, don't ya?

HELEN

Yes, Don, I care for you.

SHERIFF

Then I don't see what harm there'd be in it. I love you Helen.

HELEN

I know.

SHERIFF

And the boy would benefit from havin' a man around the house.

HELEN

He might, but I don't see how I could.

SHERIFF

That's a mighty narrow view.

HELEN

I don't need a man in my life.

SHERIFF

We all need company.

HELEN

Not in my house.

SHERIFF

Then why have you bothered these past months?

HELEN

I don't know.

SHERIFF

There must be some reason.

HELEN

I guess I'm just lonely.

SHERIFF

You don't have to be lonely.

HELEN

I'll get over it.

Helen leaves.

SHERIFF

Norwood Gazette August 19th.
Barn burns down with father and
daughter inside. Late Sunday
afternoon the barn on the farm
of Ed and Helen Wilkes caught
fire. Trapped inside the blazing
inferno was Mr. Wilkes and his
nine year old daughter, Jennifer.
The police and fire departments have
released a statement indicating
that the blaze appears to have been
accidentally started by a cigarette
in a large pile of hay. It is not
known at this time why Mr. Wilkes
and his daughter were unable to
escape the fire before it engulfed
the barn.

The lights fade on the Sheriff and come up on Paul, Shelly
and John. They are seated together, drinking beers.

JOHN

Remember that time we were huntin'
on old Doc Jackson's back forty.

PAUL

I thought she was gonna kill me.

JOHN

You're lucky I was there to step
in and talk her down.

PAUL

No, I'm lucky she missed.

SHELLY

She never missed.

PAUL

This one time she missed.

JOHN

And lucky for what ever future
children you might have.

SHELLY
You remember that old shed.

JOHN
The cottage.

PAUL
The iron cottage.

SHELLY
I remember the four of us hiding'
from your parents. Laying on the
ground, looking up at the ceiling,
countin' the holes in the roof.

Karen appears with a book in her hand.

JOHN
Seventy-two.

PAUL
It was more than that.

JOHN
No, I remember.

SHELLY
I remember Karen reading from
the dictionary.

PAUL
Used to drive me crazy when she
did that.

JOHN
I didn't mind.

KAREN
Vice: Evil or immoral habit or
practice. Fault. Imperfection.

SHELLY
They don't know where this place is
do they?

JOHN
No.

PAUL
We wouldn't be here if they did.

KAREN
Victim: Person killed or injured as
the result of another's deeds.

JOHN
We should wait 'till sundown.

SHELLY
Why so long?

PAUL
They're more likely to be drunk
and asleep.

KAREN
Violate: To break a law or agreement,
To infringe. To rape or desecrate.

SHELLY
How'd you find this place?

JOHN
Hunting.

PAUL
John shot it.

JOHN
I thought it moved.

KAREN
Violence: Action marked by extreme force.

JOHN
He doesn't hit me all the time.

PAUL
Most of the time.

JOHN
Not more than you get it.

SHELLY
Maybe you could both live with me.

KAREN

Virgin: One who has not had sexual intercourse. One without sexual experience.

PAUL

I can't wait 'till I'm old enough to leave.

JOHN

I'm leavin' first thing.

SHELLY

We'll all leave.

KAREN

Virtue: Moral goodness or moral quality.

JOHN

It's dark. We should go.

SHELLY

I don't wanna go alone.

PAUL

I'll walk you home.

KAREN

Void: A vacuum. An empty space.

PAUL

What ever happened to that shed?

JOHN

I came across it a few years ago when I was hunting. The wind had finally knocked it down. Just some sheets of metal on the ground now.

SHELLY

I'm gonna get another beer, you boys want one?

JOHN

Sure.

PAUL

Thank you.

Shelly leaves.

PAUL (CONT'D)

You know, I was thinking, I'm
plannin' on sellin' the house,
and if you want it...

JOHN

That's nice of you to offer,
but I don't think we could
afford it.

PAUL

The money's not important. You
could move in when you want
and just give me what ever
you get for your house.

JOHN

That's something to think about.

PAUL

It's a hell of a lot bigger house.

JOHN

Well, we don't need much space.
We don't have much to put in it.

PAUL

You could use the extra space if
you ever have kids.

JOHN

Not much chance of that.

PAUL

Why not?

JOHN

You oughta know.

PAUL

Why would I know?

JOHN
Think about it for a minute.

PAUL
I don't know what yer talkin'
about, John.

JOHN
Think back to just before you
left.

PAUL
I don't...

JOHN
When you got her pregnant.

Shelly appears behind Paul.

SHELLY
You can't be serious.

Paul turns to her.

PAUL
I am.

SHELLY
But why?

PAUL
You know as well as I do we
can't keep it.

SHELLY
I can keep it.

PAUL
By yourself?

SHELLY
What about you?

PAUL
That's what I'm saying. I'm
leaving a few months.

SHELLY

So?

PAUL

So, I can't leave a child behind.

SHELLY

Take me with you.

PAUL

That's even worse.

SHELLY

I can't believe you.

PAUL

I'm serious. You have to do this.

SHELLY

I don't have to.

PAUL

Yes, you do.

SHELLY

I won't.

PAUL

You will, if I say you will.

Paul grabs Shelly's arm as the lights come up on the Sheriff.

SHERIFF

Attending doctor's report, Saint Kelly Hospital. Patient was admitted with severe intrauterine bleeding due to complications from an abortion at the County Health Clinic. While the bleeding was stopped quickly and the patient is recovering with no signs of infection, the damage caused to her uterus is extensive and will likely result in sterility.

Paul lets go of Shelly and turns back to John as the lights fade on the Sheriff and Shelly leaves the stage.

PAUL
She never told me.

JOHN
Doesn't surprise me.

PAUL
I don't know what to say.

JOHN
Yeah, well...

PAUL
I'm sorry.

JOHN
You're what?

PAUL
I'm sorry.

JOHN
Well, a lotta fuckin' good that
does.

PAUL
What'da you want me to say?

JOHN
Nothin'. I don't want you to
say nothin'. I'm sick and tired
of you're fuckin' apologies. All
I get is apologies from you.

PAUL
Look, maybe I should leave.

JOHN
You already ran away once, maybe
you oughta stick around and take
the heat for a change.

PAUL
You're drunk.

JOHN
And you're a fuckin' coward.

PAUL

No, you're the coward, John.

John stands up.

JOHN

Is that right? Well, maybe this
coward is gonna kick your ass.

Paul stands up as John grabs him.

PAUL

You're the coward. You'd still
be sitting on your hands if it
weren't for me.

JOHN

Yeah, and if it weren't for you
my wife could have kids.

PAUL

Like you deserve em'? Like you
deserve her? You think I don't
see the bruises under the make-up?
I may be a coward, but I don't
beat my wife.

John grabs Paul by the throat.

JOHN

It's all you're fault.

PAUL

That's right, it's all my fault.
Never yours.

JOHN

It's your fault she's dead.

PAUL

You think I don't know that?

JOHN

But you never took the heat.

PAUL

I didn't know.

JOHN

That's what you always say.

PAUL

How could I know she was going to
kill herself?

Shelly appears and throws herself between Paul and John.

SHELLY

Stop it!

Paul and John stare each other down.

JOHN

Not your sister, damnit. Mine!

John turns and storms out. As Paul and Shelly stare after
him, the lights fade on them and come up on Ed.

ED

I have no defense. No justification.
No excuse. All I can do is explain.
And even that doesn't mean anything.
I can tell you about the sting of
my father's belt across my back.
My skin on fire from it.

The lights fade on Ed as they come up on the Sheriff.

SHERIFF

State child welfare board, case
number one-two-two-five-five-zero.
The Wilkes family. Father arrested
seven times for domestic violence.
No charges ever pressed. Father
arrested four times for disturbing
the peace.

ED

Or I can tell you about the
sting of the whiskey in my throat
and the fire rising up from below,
the heat of it spreading through
my veins, bringing up all the bile
I'd buried over the years.

SHERIFF

Arrested twice for malicious assault. Convicted on assault. Sentence waived against time spent in jail. Father arrested once for driving under the influence. Children cited six times for truancy. Mother arrested once for driving under the influence. State recommends further observation.

ED

Or the sting of my hand across their faces, and the swell of my anger, boiling over into rage and exploding from the inside, consuming everything, everyone, eating them whole, eating them alive.

Lights come up on Ed and Helen.

ED

I said to do it now.

HELEN

Just relax.

ED

Don't tell me to relax.

HELEN

You don't have to shout.

ED

I'll shout at the top of my goddamn lungs if I want to.

HELEN

You'll wake the children.

ED

Are you telling me what to do?

HELEN

No.

ED
You better not be.

HELEN
I was just sayin'...

ED
If I wanna hear what you have to
say, I'll fuckin' ask ya.

HELEN
The children...

ED
And until then, keep yer goddamn
mouth shut!

Ed grabs Helen and the lights fade down on them as the
lights fade up on John and Shelly.

SHELLY
You didn't have to pick a fight.

JOHN
And neither do you.

SHELLY
It's me you wanna fight anyway.

JOHN
I was stickin' up for you.

SHELLY
I'm sure you were. You're
so good at that.

JOHN
Somebody has to be. You sure
ain't.

SHELLY
You're the only person I need
protection from.

JOHN
The why was he so surprised when
I told him you couldn't have kids.

SHELLY
Why would you tell him that?

JOHN
Because somebody had to. You
sure didn't.

SHELLY
It's none of his business.

JOHN
It's his fault.

SHELLY
It was my decision.

JOHN
You always protect him. You're
still in love with him aren't
you.

SHELLY
Don't be stupid.

JOHN
You are, aren't ya!

John grabs Shelly.

SHELLY
Let go of me.

JOHN
Tell me the truth. Tell me the
truth. Tell me the truth just
once. You're I love with him
aren't you?!

John slams Shelly against a wall and pins her there.

SHELLY
Yes.

The lights fade on John and Shelly, coming up on Ed.

ED

I can tell you anything and it doesn't matter. I am what I am. And I know it now even if I didn't know it then. But it doesn't help any of them. They don't know what they are. None of 'em.

The lights fade down on Ed and fade up on Helen.

HELEN

He wasn't a cruel man. That didn't keep me from hating him, but he wasn't cruel. He wasn't kind either. He was distant. Cold and distant. And then suddenly hot and burning right in front of you. His father was the same way. And so is his son. A family trait. A stigma passed from one generation to the next. But you can't see it from the outside. It's only inside a family that you can see the deformities. The sickness. Lilian tried to warn me, but I was too young. Too naïve. Too in love with the idea of bein' married. Of belongin' to a family.

The lights come up on Lilian.

LILIAN

You had a chance to think about this marriage yet?

HELEN

What's to think about?

LILIAN

Let's just say my son ain't exactly a good catch.

HELEN

He's good enough for me.

LILIAN

Good enough ain't necessarily good.

HELEN

What do you mean?

LILIAN

The boy's got a mean streak. Just like his father.

HELEN

No. Not Ed.

LILIAN

Mark my words. You'll see it after the ring's on yer finger.

HELEN

I marked her words and sure enough they came true.

LILIAN

Idea #112: Take a fryin' pan an knock some sense into that Helen. Better yet, use it on Ed. Better yet, use it on George.

The lights fade on Lilian.

HELEN

I was sittin' at the kitchen table snappin' beans when he told me he was getting' married. First thing I thought was to warn her off. I could see in her eyes she knew she was makin' a mistake, she knew the family, but she was dead set on it. So was he.

The Lights fade up on John.

JOHN

I can't believe you're not excited.

HELEN

What's to be excited about.

JOHN

I thought you'd be happy for me.

HELEN

If I thought it would do you
any good, I might be.

JOHN

How could it not be good?

HELEN

'Cause it ain't gonna change you one
bit.

JOHN

Why should I change?

HELEN

Look in the mirror some time
and tell me what ya see.

JOHN

I see me.

HELEN

You know what I see when I look
at you?

JOHN

What do you see?

HELEN

Yer father. And that girl ain't
gonna change that. You'd be better
off runnin' away like Paul. We'd
all be better off.

The lights fade on Helen and John as they fade up on Paul.

PAUL

Chapter One: Running Away. To
run away means more than just to
flee or to hide. It is more than
a matter of creating distance. It
is an artful act composed of many,
measured, individual flights. It is
not one single action like running
a race. It is instead a series of
small sprints, each stride building(MORE)

PAUL (CONT'D)

upon the last, gaining momentum, until finally, the place where one was, has been left behind. To run away requires more than moving to a new town, or cutting off relations with the past. One must immerse one's self in a new future, creating a new past with every moment, until there is suddenly the illusion of a past in this new place. Then and only then can the place, or the people one has fled from, be truly considered "away." Only then does the running stop. Of course, one must be careful not to make the mistake of running full circle and finding one's self treading familiar paths, because then one runs the risk of finding one's self trapped, unable to run away.

The lights fade on Paul and fade up on the Sheriff and Helen.

SHERIFF

Every _____ seconds a woman is raped.

KAREN

Rape: The action of forcing someone to submit unwillingly to the act of sexual intercourse. Any violation or abuse.

SHERIFF

_____ women a day are battered by their spouses.

KAREN

Rage: Violent anger or passion. Fury.

SHERIFF

_____ people a year are killed by their spouses, most of them women.

KAREN

Revenge: Retaliation for wrong doing.
To inflict punishment.

SHERIFF

Less than half of all rapes are
reported to police.

KAREN

Rend: To tear apart violently.

SHERIFF

Every _____ seconds a child is
battered or abused.

KAREN

Repent: To wish one had not done
something.

SHERIFF

The average person consumes _____
gallons of alcohol per year.

KAREN

Regret: Sorrow or distress for something
done or left undone or lost.

SHERIFF

The average prison time for a man
convicted of battering his wife
is _____.

KAREN

Requiem: Mass for the dead.

The lights fade on Helen and the Sheriff as they fade up on
Paul. Paul organizing the slips of paper from the coffee
tin.

PAUL

Idea # 11: Get a note pad for
ideas. Idea #12: Get a tin can
to put ideas in. You were an
organizational genius grandma.

Helen appears at the screen door. She knocks. Paul stands
up as she lets herself in.

HELEN

I need to talk to you, Paul.

PAUL

If it's about John, I apologize.
I'll talk to him tomorrow.

HELEN

It's not about John.

PAUL

Then what's it about?

HELEN

This is just between you and me.

Helen walks into the room.

HELEN(CONT'D)

I want you to tell me about the
day Jenny and Ed died.

PAUL

You know as much as I do.

HELEN

That may be true, but I want to
hear it from you.

PAUL

Why? What good can it do?

HELEN

You can set my mind at ease.

PAUL

I can't do that, Helen.

HELEN

I know you were involved.

PAUL

I was with John when the barn
burned down.

HELEN

I know.

PAUL

Then what more can I tell you?

HELEN

You can tell me everything.

PAUL

That is everything.

HELEN

I know you and John were responsible.

PAUL

You read the Sheriff's report. It was an accident. He got drunk and fell asleep with a cigarette in his mouth.

HELEN

He never drank in the barn.

PAUL

He drank anywhere.

HELEN

Why don't you put it to rest. Once and for all.

PAUL

It is put to rest.

HELEN

Not for me it ain't. I need to know how my daughter died.

PAUL

It was an accident.

HELEN

What was she doing in that loft?

PAUL

I don't know.

HELEN

You were there.

PAUL
I wasn't there. I was with
John and Shelly.

HELEN
You were all there.

PAUL
Why would we be there?

HELEN
Because you wanted to kill him.

PAUL
Why would I wanna kill him?

HELEN
Because Karen finally told you.

PAUL
Told me what?

KAREN
About she and your uncle.

PAUL
What did she tell you?

KAREN
She didn't tell me nothin'. She
didn't have to.

PAUL
Then you knew?

HELEN
Yes, I knew.

PAUL
How long did you know?

HELEN
I don't know.

PAUL
How long did you know?

HELEN
A couple of months.

PAUL
And you let it go on? You let
him rape my sister for months
and you did nothing?

HELEN
What was I supposed to do?

PAUL
You could have told somebody.

HELEN
You didn't tell anybody.

PAUL
I told John.

HELEN
Was it your idea, or was it his?

PAUL
It was mine.

The lights come up on John and Karen.

PAUL (CONT'D)
But he didn't believe me.

JOHN
It can't be true.

PAUL
It is.

JOHN
It can't be.

KAREN
I wouldn't lie.

JOHN
No. You wouldn't.

PAUL

Still, once he believed, once he knew, he was afraid to do anything. Like you. He wasn't going to do anything.

JOHN

We can't.

PAUL

Why not?

JOHN

We just can't.

PAUL

What else can we do? We can't stop him. Who can we tell? The police can't do anything. You know that. If he can beat the shit out of you for years what can they do for about this. Nothing.

JOHN

There's got to be some other way.

PAUL

There is no other way. You know that. End it now. Forever. You can be free of him forever.

JOHN

I don't think...

PAUL

If you won't do it for yourself, do it for Jenny.

JOHN

Jenny?

KAREN

He's right. God, he's right.

PAUL
You don't think he'll stop with
Karen do you?

KAREN
He won't.

PAUL
Jenny is almost ten.

JOHN
Shut up.

PAUL
It's the only way.

JOHN
Just shut up.

PAUL
John...

JOHN
I'll do it. But just shut up.

PAUL
We waited until Sunday, when we
knew you'd be away. Karen made
sure you stayed at grandmothers.

KAREN
We baked cookies and bread.

HELEN
And I told stories about summers
as a child in the city.

JOHN
I made sure there was an extra
bottle of Jack Daniels in his desk.

PAUL
We knew he'd drink it all.

The lights come up on Ed.

ED

Couldn't pass up a whole bottle
like that.

JOHN

So we waited.

KAREN

While we rolled dough.

SHELLY

And I waited outside.

PAUL

It was late afternoon.

ED

And I had passed out in the
old chair.

JOHN

We waited to make sure he was
sound asleep.

SHELLY

Waited outside the window.

LILIAN

Waited for the dough to rise.

PAUL

And then we crept inside.

JOHN

I grabbed his feet.

PAUL

And I took his arms.

KAREN

And I grabbed the rolling pin.

SHELLY

While I held the doors.

PAUL
And we carried him through the
house.

JOHN
And down the porch steps.

SHELLY
And across the yard.

ED
And I dreamt I was at sea again,
in the navy.

KAREN
Just as we were mixing more batter.

LILIAN
And greasing the pans.

PAUL
We carried him into the barn.

SHELLY
And I closed the doors.

JOHN
We threw him on a pile of hay.

HELEN
While I slid the bread into the oven.

The lights come up on the Sheriff.

PAUL
And tied his legs with twine.

SHELLY
Something that would burn away.

JOHN
But hold him if he woke up.

SHERIFF

The subject was found legs straight
and arms at his sides giving the
impression that he was unconscious
for the duration of the fire.

PAUL

And he did wake up.

SHELLY

While I was tying his wrists.

ED

I couldn't move.

JOHN

I froze.

ED

It felt like I was tied down.

PAUL

We all froze.

ED

I tried to wake up.

KAREN

And we all paused.

JOHN

Not sure.

ED

It felt like I was being held down.

LILIAN

A silence in the conversation.

SHELLY

Afraid.

HELEN

Waiting for a new direction.

ED

I could see shapes above me. Hovering.

PAUL

Then he started to struggle.

JOHN

And his bottle fell out of his pocket.

ED

I could almost see them through the
whiskey haze.

PAUL

I grabbed it and swung.

SHELLY

And hit him in the head.

ED

And I fell back.

SHERIFF

The subject's skull showed a
hairline fracture, which it is
assumed he suffered falling
to the ground.

JOHN

And then he was still again.

PAUL

We checked the knots.

SHELLY

And made sure he had his lighter
on him.

LILIAN

And we basted the bread.

PAUL

And then I lit a cigarette.

KAREN

And frosted the cookies.

JOHN
And I took a drag.

SHELLY
We all took a drag.

PAUL
To calm our nerves.

HELEN
And I felt suddenly nervous.

JOHN
And then we swore and oath.

PAUL
Never to tell.

SHELLY
Never to mention it again.

PAUL
And then I lowered the cigarette
to the hay.

SHERIFF
The fire appears to have been
ignited by a cigarette the subject
failed to extinguish.

JOHN
And we watched as the smoke began
to billow up.

LILIAN
As we pulled the bread from the
oven.

SHELLY
And then it was on fire.

HELEN
And we sliced the steaming bread open.

PAUL
And we ran, slamming the doors
behind us.

JOHN

And running across the field.

KAREN

As we greedily ate handfuls of the
hot, moist bread.

SHELLY

We ran to the iron cottage.

PAUL

Where we watched the smoke
rising into the air.

LILIAN

And we looked out the window
as we ate the bread.

JOHN

But we didn't know then.

KAREN

We ate the bread and watched
the smoke darken the sky behind
the field.

SHELLY

We thought she was with Karen.

HELEN

And then we knew.

PAUL

We had no idea she was in the
loft.

JOHN

She must have been playing there.

LILIAN

And we ran to the farm.

SHELLY

Or perhaps she had fallen asleep.

HELEN

And the barn was swallowed by the flames.

PAUL

But either way, she was trapped.

HELEN

The barn was too hot to look at.

JOHN

Trapped as the flames leapt around her.

HELEN

And then I checked the house.

SHELLY

Surrounding her.

LILIAN

And at that moment I knew.

PAUL

Engulfing her.

KAREN

I knew he was dead.

HELEN

And I knew she was dead as well.

The lights fade on all but Paul and Helen.

PAUL

We were horrified when we found out. John was stricken. Shattered. He blamed me. And he should have. He didn't say it out loud. We never said anything about it out loud. We kept to the oath. But I could see it in his eyes and the way he spoke to me. And he could see it in me. The guilt. Shelly could see it as well. And Karen. So I ran away. Afraid of their gaze. Knowing they knew.(MORE)

PAUL (CONT'D)

It was too much to bear. Too much of a burden, as Grandmother would have said. But the burden hasn't been any less. There's no place you can hide from death. It follows you, no matter how far you run. And now I've stopped running. And now you know.

Helen walks toward the door and then stops.

HELEN

It should have been you who died in that fire, not my baby girl and I'll always believe that.

Helen turns and leaves. Paul is left alone.

PAUL

And maybe you're right.

The lights fade on Paul and come up on Shelly and John. Shelly has a bag over her shoulder.

JOHN

He doesn't want you.

SHELLY

It doesn't matter.

JOHN

He's not going to take you with him.

SHELLY

Then I'll go somewhere else.

JOHN

Where can you go?

SHELLY

Anywhere I want.

JOHN

With what money?

SHELLY

I'll find a job.

JOHN

You'll be back.

SHELLY

I won't be back. I'm leaving.

JOHN

Leave then. Run to him. You'll find out. You'll see.

Shelly lingers in the doorway a moment and then leaves. John is alone for a moment.

JOHN(CONT'D)

You'll see how much he loves you.

The lights fade on John and fade up on Paul, who pulling a shotgun out of the closet. The light fades up on Karen. Paul continues with his preparations.

KAREN

Paul. Paul. Please don't, Paul. It isn't worth it. It's not a release. You never loose the burden, Paul. It's always with you. You carry it forever. Paul. Remember when we were kids? Hiding in the Iron Cottage. Do you remember? Do you remember how we sad it was our fortress? How it would stand against the world and protect us. We were wrong, Paul. It couldn't protect us. We were just running away. But there's no place to run, Paul. There's no place to hide. Trust me, Brother, I made that mistake. You tried to hide in another city, and I tried to hide in plain sight. You can't hide from yourself, not from your true self. Please, Paul. There's so much for you here. Even with all of the weight, there's more here than you know. There's forgiveness here, Paul. And hope. There are (MORE)

KAREN(CONT'D)
new beginnings. You can bear the weight.
There are people you can shoulder it
with. People who love you. Paul.

Paul goes in the bathroom with the shotgun. The sound of
shower curtain closing can be heard.

KAREN(CONT'D)
Paul. I forgive you, Paul. I forgive
you. Please don't. Please. I
forgive you. I forgive...

The sound of a shot gun blast is heard.

KAREN(CONT'D)
I forgive you.

Shelly comes running up to the screen door.

SHELLY
Paul?

Shelly opens the door and lets herself in.

SHELLY(CONT'D)
Paul?

She drops her bag and looks around the room. Slowly she
goes to the bathroom door and opens it. She turns away as
John comes running up to the door. She sees him and turns
away.

JOHN
Shelly?

John opens the door and walks into the room. He sees the
open bathroom door. He walks to the bathroom and stands in
silence. As he turns away from the bathroom, tears are
streaming down his face. He falls to his knees. Slowly,
Shelly goes to him and embraces him. Karen stands alone
center stage. The lights come up on Paul as he walks toward
Karen.

PAUL
Alone. A forest of trees clawing
at the sky.

KAREN

The blood-rust shambles of a shack
leaning inward on itself.

PAUL

A milky orange stream dripping down
inside.

KAREN

Forming a puddle, then a river,
of rust.

PAUL

Flowing down into the ground.

KAREN

Absorbed like blood, sopped up by
mother earth.

PAUL

Like tears.

KAREN

Tears shed within.

PAUL

Within the shed.

PAUL AND KAREN

Within the iron cottage.

The lights fade on all.

THE END