

GOD BLESS THE CHILD

A Play in Two Acts

by Ron Healy

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GOD BLESS THE CHILD

CHARACTERS

NAOMI CHAPMAN	66 Divorced, then remarried and widowed, then married to Oliver in 1970
OLIVER CHAPMAN	70 One prior marriage, to Avis, ended with her death
JAMIE O'NEIL	27 Naomi's grandson
CAREY O'NEIL	26 Jamie's wife (married five years, two children)
PORTER CHAPMAN	46 Oliver's only child
CAL CHAPMAN	18 Porter's son

TIME AND SETTING

Late August, 1972. Jordan, small farm town in south central Wisconsin, county seat of Fox Prairie. Farmhouse on edge of town with red barn and other outbuildings adjoining corn field.

SETS

1. Inside house, main floor All is pin neat. C and R: Kitchen table and four chairs; stove, sink, counter with coffee pot. Cornfield can be seen through window upstage. Offstage R: Mudroom, downstairs guest room (with bathroom) where Jamie and Carey stay, and exit to barn.) L: Parlor with easy chair and davenport. Offstage L: Naomi and Oliver's bedroom.

2. In front of partially open barn door – DC

ACT 1

SCENE 1

CUE 1 MFX: **MUSICAL BRIDGE: "God Bless the Child" by Billie Holiday**

Friday, late August, 1972

NAOMI and OLIVER are sitting at the kitchen table. NAOMI looks worried and OLIVER is restless, dissatisfied, grumpy; drums nails on table off and on. OLIVER stands up, walks into parlor, and looks out window. OLIVER comes back, sits down, bolts up.

OLIVER Well, they're late, and I'm hungry already. You know that chicken's gonna take an hour in the oven. You might as well put it in and it'll be ready when they get here.

NAOMI folds her arms across her breast, says nothing.

OLIVER Well?

NAOMI shifts in her chair so that her back is to him.

OLIVER Well?

CUE N SFX: **CAR ARRIVES, DOOR OPENS, SHUTS.**

NAOMI jumps up, walks quickly offstage right.

CUE N SFX: **NAOMI FOOTSTEPS LEAVING**

NAOMI *(Calling back)* Why, it's Cal.

OLIVER My grandson?

NAOMI *Our* grandson, yes, Cal. Hello, Cal. What are you doing here?

Enter NAOMI and CAL. NAOMI has her arm over CAL's shoulder. He appears embarrassed but happy about the affection she shows. OLIVER walks over to CAL and shakes his hand.

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS ARRIVING

OLIVER Well, Cal, what brings you home?

NAOMI Would you like something to eat? Can you stay for supper? Are you thirsty? Did you just get in town? Who's that out in the car?

OLIVER You're askin' too many questions, Naomi. Let the boy answer my question.

NAOMI Question? What was your question?

OLIVER I was just askin' what brings him here all the way from Door County. Your mother's okay? Your sister? You came with someone else, Cal?

NAOMI Now who's asking too many questions?

CAL *(Flustered, looks back and forth between NAOMI and OLIVER, speaks haltingly)* I... I have... some... paperwork... some business to take care of. I had to see Mr. Lambert.

OLIVER Paperwork? You got business? With Mr. Lambert? Were you over to the bank to see your dad?

CAL I was gonna talk to him. We went over to the bank, his car was there and I knocked on the door but I guess he didn't hear me. You know, when he's there on Saturday afternoon by himself with the bank closed he doesn't like to be interrupted. He's always doing some kind of figuring. You know. *(Looks sheepish)* Don't tell my dad I was here, okay?

NAOMI and OLIVER look surprised.

CAL I know, it seems weird. I just... I just have to take care of some business and... I can't explain right now. You understand, don't you?

NAOMI Well sure, dear, but—

OLIVER But you talked to Mr. Lambert over to the high school? The counselor? What'd you have to see him about? You already graduated. What do you need him for?

CAL Well, he's... Just some stuff. Uh, listen, I gotta go. Mom's expecting me back. I got Eddie waiting for me. He drove me over.

OLIVER Why, you just got here!

NAOMI You can't stay for supper, Cal? Your friend is welcome. Jaime and Carey will be here.

CAL Who?

NAOMI Jaime and Carey, my grandson and his wife. They were at our wedding.

CAL No. But thank you. I should get back. I just wanted to stop in and say hello.

NAOMI Well, that was nice of you, Cal. Sorry you can't stay. Give my love to your mom and sister. And Happy Birthday! My calendar says you have a birthday coming up in a couple of days.

OLIVER *(Trying to hide his disappointment)* Yeah, Happy Birthday, Cal. Guess we won't be seein' ya on your birthday. But... Well, you drive careful.

CAL I will, thanks. Bye. And you won't say anything to dad, right? I gotta go.

NAOMI and OLIVER nod yes. CAL Shakes hands with OLIVER. Goes to shake hands with NAOMI, who hugs him.

NAOMI Bye, dear.

OLIVER Bye, Cal.

CAL exits stage right

CUE N SFX: CAL's FOOTSTEPS LEAVING.

CUE N SFX: CAR DOOR OPENS AND SHUTS. CAR LEAVES.

OLIVER sits down at table, raises a coffee cup to his mouth. He looks in it and it's empty. He waggles it at NAOMI.

NAOMI Such a nice boy.

OLIVER Sure is. But I don't understand what just went on here. *(Waggles his cup again.)*

NAOMI And the school counselor. I am curious too. I—

OLIVER Naomi, my coffee cup's empty.

NAOMI Well, why doncha step up to the coffee pot and introduce yourself! It'll do you both some good!

NAOMI and OLIVER glare at each other.

CUE N SFX: SOUND OF CAR ARRIVING, DOORS OPENING AND SHUTTING

NAOMI walks quickly offstage right, speaks from there.

CUE N SFX: NAOMI FOOTSTEPS LEAVING

NAOMI They're here! Come in, children, come in, come in! Do you need help with your suitcases? Will you go out and help them, Oliver? Please? No? *(Aggravated)* Too late. *(Elated)* Come in, come in!

NAOMI, JAMIE, and CAREY come onstage. CAREY is carrying a little pink cosmetics bag with a black scroll letter "C" on it. JAMIE is struggling with two big suitcases.

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS ARRIVING

NAOMI Oliver?

OLIVER Well, hello there, you two. Did you eat yet? Your grandma was just about to pop a chicken into the oven. Course, I don't know what *you'll* eat! *(Forces a laugh)*

NAOMI frowns at OLIVER.

OLIVER You just missed Cal. Did you see him?

JAIME Cal?

OLIVER Cal, my grandson. You met him at our wedding last year—

NAOMI *Our* grandson. *(To OLIVER)* We've been married almost a year now, you know.

JAIME Oh sure, your grandson. No, didn't see him.

OLIVER Good, 'cause if you seen him, he wasn't here. Don't say nothin' to his dad.

JAIME and CAREY look mystified.

OLIVER It was a...a surprise visit. Can't really talk about it. Just don't say nothin'

JAIME *(Puzzled)* Okay.

CAREY *(Overlapping)* Okay.

OLIVER Here, let me help you.

OLIVER walks over to JAMIE and takes a suitcase from him, places it inches away. JAMIE sets the other down. OLIVER and JAMIE shake hands while NAOMI and CAREY embrace. NAOMI's eyes are wet with tears as she turns to kiss and embrace JAMIE. JAMIE and NAOMI hold the embrace for ten seconds or so while OLIVER puts an arm around CAREY and walks her into the kitchen.

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS AND SUITCASE

NAOMI So wonderful to see you children! Wonderful!

OLIVER Yes, sure is, sure is. Thought you might be here earlier, though.

JAMIE Well, we stopped in town at the bank to cash some traveler's checks, and who did we see but your son Porter. He just happened to spot us at the teller's window and invited us into his office and—

CAREY And, you know, we hadn't seen him since we met him last summer at your wedding, and—

JAMIE I'm just surprised he recognized us, seeing us just the once a year ago. I recognized him right away, though.

CAREY Me too! I never forget a face. Did Porter know we were coming?

OLIVER I don't think I told him. Naomi?

NAOMI Well, of course I did. I invited him for dinner tomorrow. *(To JAMIE and CAREY)* Elsie and the kids are at their place in Door County, little town called Sturgeon Bay. But Porter said he can't come. He's got something he

has to do tomorrow. You know bankers, it's business every day, even Sunday. Maybe we'll see him later in the week.

OLIVER Yes, business every day, nothin' but business, even when the bank's closed. Took you right into his office, did he? Gave you some coffee, right? *(Shoots a stern look at Naomi)* Set you down in them nice leather easy chairs? Did he say ennathing about me?

NAOMI Please, don't start on that, Oliver!

OLIVER I'm just curious. Just curious. *(To JAMIE)* See, he thinks I don't know how to manage my own affairs. Thinks I should have all my savings in his bank, let him manage it. Says he'll "invest it wisely." Hmmmph! He's the one barely scrapin' by. You know, next year he'll have three kids in college; that is, if Cal don't join up instead—

NAOMI *(Somewhat nerved up, talking fast)* Oliver! Porter's doing the best he can. You know he is. He—*(Interrupts herself, takes a deep breath, and speaks to JAMIE and CAREY)* Now, how was your drive? Was it pretty busy around Chicago? Your folks always said that was the worst part of the drive from Michigan. How are your kids? It's awful nice of your mother to take them, Carey. I wish I could've seen them, but sometimes the parents just have to get away. I know we're just going to have a real nice visit.

OLIVER Very strange about Cal. Just stopped in for a minute. Said he had some business with the high school counselor. But he already graduated high school, I don't know what business he'd have with him. Stopped here to say hello and took right off again for Door County. Couldn't stay for supper. Very strange. But mum's the word. ... All right then, Jamie. Let's get you situated. Here, let me get them big suitcases. You can carry that little pink one. Ha-ha-ha. These women can get supper goin'.

OLIVER and JAMIE pick up suitcases, exit stage right.

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS LEAVING

SCENE 2

CUE N MFX: **MUSICAL BRIDGE: "Black Coffee" by Peggy Lee**

Next morning

NAOMI and CARRIE are cleaning up the kitchen after breakfast. Oliver and Jaime are lingering over coffee at the table.)

JAMIE: Another great meal, Grandma. Last night's chicken was the best I ever had. And then this morning: Your scrambled eggs are the best in the world.

CARRIE: *(Meekly, as though Jamie's comment were a reflection on her own cooking)*
Well, I can't quite cook like Grandma, can I?

JAMIE: Oh, your eggs are just fine. *(To NAOMI)* She's a fine cook. You should taste her chili con carne.

CARRIE: *(In a self-absorbed, chattering tone)* The children do enjoy it, don't they. They seem to be hungry all the time. Actually, Kell doesn't eat a whole lot. She's a year away from kindergarten, so I'll still have both of them at home for another year. They can be such a handful, especially Pat. He's gonna be a big one. I wonder who in the family he gets--

OLIVER: *(With exaggerated politeness)* Naomi, dear, would it be too much trouble for you to refill my coffee cup?

NAOMI: *(At the sink with a wet, dirty pot in her hands. Speaks with similar exaggerated politeness)* Of course not, Oliver, dear. Would it be too much trouble if I finished washing this pot and dried my hands first? If you don't feel like waiting, since the coffee pot's within arm's reach for you, possibly you might get it yourself, dear.

(CARRIE stifles a laugh, then looks embarrassed. Silence all around for a couple of beats)

OLIVER: But--

NAOMI: But me no buts!

OLIVER: *(Suppresses anger. Stands up)* Jamie, whaddya know about mules?

JAMIE: Well, not much really, I--

OLIVER I got two draft mules and a Percheron. Used to have two Percherons. One of 'em died. Don't know why I still keep 'em, specially the Percheron. The mules are big as he is, but smarter. Some people think mules are stubborn and there ain't no way around 'em. But it ain't so. You just got to know how to handle 'em. Still, once in a while you get one that you can't do nothin' with.

NAOMI glares and OLIVER frowns. OLIVER blinks and clears his throat.

OLIVER Got me some hounds too.

NAOMI Now, there's something with character, a hound: loyal, dumb, knows how to take orders. Right up your alley.

OLIVER *(Ignores her)* Let's go feed the animals, Jaime.

JAMIE: *(Reluctantly)* Okay

OLIVER and JAMIE exit stage right. OLIVER's voice fades as he speaks to JAMIE offstage.

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS LEAVING

OLIVER Tell you what, my beagle'll scare up a rabbit where you'd think nothin' could exist. Good luck gettin' Naomi to clean game, though. I gotta do that or she won't cook it. Do you hunt? I got some good coon dogs too...

NAOMI Well... men.

CAREY *(Hesitantly, voice trailing off)* Well, yes, they...

NAOMI It takes a lot of adjustments sometimes.

CAREY *(Brightly, naively)* So isn't it about two weeks till your first anniversary? Almost one year of marriage?

NAOMI One year? Dear, it seems like I've never *not* been married! Why, I've been married most of my life! I married Jamie's grandfather when I was sixteen. We got divorced after nineteen years, and then I was married to Ike twenty-seven years. Now he's dead and it's Oliver and me. Almost a year. *(Pauses, sighs deeply)* If you think of each year as a candle and they're all in a row and each one goes out as you go from year to year... You look back and there's more and more burnt-out candles and you look ahead and there

aren't that many still burning... It's... I'm sorry That's the way I get sometimes when I think of the past.

CAREY looks mildly distressed.

NAOMI So long ago when I married Jamie's grandfather. Heinie was ten years older than me. Heinrich Stahlmann. (*Pronounces it the German way: HINE-rick SHTAHL-mon*) He's still alive—for some reason, I don't know why. I don't think you've met him, have you? I don't think anybody in the family sees him anymore. I was just sixteen when I married him. Oh, did I already say that?

CAREY What was he like? You told me last night how it was when you left him with Uncle Danny. But you didn't actually say anything about—"Heinie" you call him? Jamie's never told me anything about him. Mother O'Neil never says anything.

NAOMI "Mother O'Neil?" Oh, my goodness, you're talking about my Lila, Jamie's mother. Just goes to show how out of touch with the family I am since I married Oliver. We're all kind of scattered now, you and Jamie way over in Michigan, Lila's back home on the east side of Wisconsin, me on the west side. I'm alone over here...

CAREY She's is so sweet to me, Mother O'Neil.

NAOMI Yes, poor, sweet Lila. Well, you asked what he was like. Heinie was a hard man. Hard. I suppose we all have to adjust to something, don't we. Heinie, though, there was no adjusting to that man. I was married to him over half of my young life then. (*Pauses*) I might as well come right out with it, Carey. He was an evil, mean man. That's why no one mentions him or has anything to do with him. An evil, mean man.

CAREY (*Flustered*) Oh, I—

NAOMI He used to beat all of us, especially me and the boys. Lila mostly got spared, except for that one time... She was so fragile, vulnerable. I'm ashamed to say how long I put up with it. There wasn't much a woman could do then. I never finished high school. I got married to get away from *my* father, and Heinie seemed so, I don't know, so kind and responsible. Little did I know. Little did I know. Anyway, it was like going from the frying pan to the fire.

CAREY I didn't know. Well, Jamie might have hinted, but nothing outright... Mother O'Neil never said anything. Oh, it must have been awful! (*Starts to sniffle*)

NAOMI There, there.

NAOMI embraces CAREY.

NAOMI You are a sensitive one. There, there.

CAREY wipes her eyes, laughs.

NAOMI It was over a long time ago... (*Musing, looking off into the distance*) If anything like that is ever really over. I had many good years with Ike after I divorced Heinie. Now, just think, I'm adjusting to my third husband. Well, Ollie. Oh, there I said it!

CAREY "Ollie?" You mean Oliver? He doesn't seem like an "Ollie."

NAOMI He calls me "Molly" sometimes when he's peeved with me. It took me a while to figure that one out. It's what a female mule is called. So I call him "Ollie" sometimes. You know, as in Laurel and Hardy? Kind of brings him down to size, you see; he doesn't like it anymore than I like "Molly." Just wipe it right out of your mind, will you, dear?

CAREY Oh, certainly.

NAOMI He's a good man. A good man, but bossy, real bossy. Now, my second husband, Ike—of course, you knew Ike—he was on the bossy side too when I first met him. But after Heinie I wasn't going to let anybody boss me around. No sir! Took Ike a while, but we came to an understanding. More than an understanding. (*Sighs*) Oh, I miss him. I shouldn't be saying that, being remarried and all. Still... (*Reflectively*) Ike thought the world of Jamie. He took a liking to you too.

CAREY (*Brightly, eager to contribute something after her crying*) Oh, yes, Ike. He was very kind to us, to Jamie and me, and the kids, too. I was scared of him at first. So big, such big hands (*In mock big voice as best she can*), big voice...

NAOMI and CAREY sit down at the table. CAREY yawns hugely.

- NAOMI** My, my, I shouldn't have kept you up so late last night. It's just the menfolk went to bed, and we were still up and—I just don't have anybody to talk to around here, no one who knows where I come from—I mean family-wise.
- CAREY** Oh, don't worry about it! I'm so happy we could talk. I just didn't know about that part of your life.
- NAOMI** I don't usually talk about it. Things got better. Twenty-seven years. Ike and I were married twenty-seven years. Think of it.
- CAREY** Why, I haven't been alive that long! I... I see what you mean about being married all your life, or most of it. Jamie and I—
- NAOMI** Oh, you and Jamie will be married a long time, dear. A good long time.
- CAREY** Sometimes... *(Starts to sniffle again)* Sometimes I don't think I'm such a good wife—
- NAOMI** Oh, dear!
- CAREY** No, I mean... I mean, I love Jamie dearly, but I mean, I'm not such a good mother either, that's what I mean. I—
- NAOMI** Mercy, child! What are you saying? Kelly and little Pat are wonderful, happy little children.
- CAREY** Oh, they're fine, I suppose, but it's...it's... Sometimes I don't think I'm cut out to be a good mother. I have to work so hard at it, and I'm so tired all the time.
- NAOMI** Oh dear!
- CAREY** And I can't be what I want to be for Jamie. I'm not always sure what he wants. Some people need to be told what to do, and others—like you—you always seem to know what to do. When I think of your life and what you've been through... Just look at you, you're heroic!
- NAOMI** Oh, my goodness! "Heroic?" Let's come back down to earth here. I just did what I had to do to get by, that's all... I can't tell you how much I just, well, improvised, just trying to keep ahead of...whatever was coming after me. We all do the best we can.

Both still seated, NAOMI scoots her chair over and puts her arm around CAREY's shoulder.

CUE N SFX: CHAIR SCRAPE

NAOMI You're just worn out, I can see that. Worn out. Every mother needs some time off. Just take a deep breath, dear. Take all the deep breaths you need, the air's free here. It's hearing about Heinie. That's what upset you. He's history, gone. There's today, tomorrow, the next day. That's all that counts. Why, you're on vacation now. Just relax. You're probably tired after your travels. Would you like to have a lie-down? Then we can go for a walk after lunch. It's awfully pretty around here, lots of hills, pretty fields, crops, woods. We could go look at the lake. It'll be cool down there. Would you like that, dear?

CAREY nods, rests her head on NAOMI's shoulder for a moment, then raises it.

CAREY Yes. *(Beat)* Sometimes I wish Jamie would be more... not "aggressive," that's not the word. What's the good word? "Assertive," that's it. That's the way it works with my parents. My father tells my mother what to do and she pretty much does it.

NAOMI still has her arm around CAREY, but she draws her head back and looks at CAREY, incredulous.

CAREY I don't mean a woman has to be a doormat or anything, but things go much better when a man's in charge, don't you think? I know Gloria Steinem would roll over in her grave if she heard me.

CAREY laughs. NAOMI looks puzzled.

CAREY Well, she's not dead, but you know what I mean. Anyway, Mom says the main thing in life is to be happy. She's happy, I think. She says she's happy, so she must be. *(Yawns, stands, stretches)* Maybe I will have a lie-down. We drove all day yesterday, just stopped half an hour for lunch. Then we visited with Porter a bit. Jamie said we'd have to leave by four a.m. to get here in time for supper. He was right. He's usually right about things.

NAOMI *(Conflicted, but kindly)* Yes, a lie-down. That will probably fix you up.

CAREY Oh, but we're not finished cleaning up.

NAOMI You go ahead, dear. I'll manage. Rest well.

NAOMI pats CAREY on the cheek. CAREY exits right as NAOMI, bemused, watches her.

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS LEAVING

BLACKOUT

SCENE 3

CUE N MFX: MUSICAL BRIDGE: "Coon Hunt" by Reverend Gary Davis

OLIVER and JAMIE stand before the barn door. OLIVER wears a John Deere cap. A horse nickers from the dark inside.

CUE N SFX: A HORSE NICKERS FROM THE DARK INSIDE.

JAMIE *(Tightlipped, irked, but trying to make pleasant conversation)* So, the mules... stubborn but smart. Not as good-looking as the Percheron. You used to have a pair of Percherons, did you?

OLIVER *(Says "yup" on the inhale, Midwestern farmer style)* Yup. Duke died not long after I married yer Grandma. Yup.

OLIVER grasps his cap and moves it around on his head farmer-like as he talks. JAMIE looks increasingly agitated during the following exposition.

OLIVER Yup, horses are beautiful animals, and once they trust you, they'll do just ennathing you want. You can easy work a horse to death if you don't know what you're doin' or you don't care. Now, yer mule is a different animal altogether. Lot of folks don't really understand mules. Think they're stupid when all it is is they're stubborn. Stubborn ain't the same as stupid. Once a mule understands what it is you want him to do, he'll do it—if it ain't dangerous. But if you want him to do somethin' that's dangerous, or he ain't had a chance to learn about it, he won't do it. You just gotta know what the mule's limitations are. More often than not, it's the man that's stupid, not the mule.

JAMIE *(Very agitated)* So if Grandma's the mule and she won't do what you want, what does that make you?

OLIVER looks extremely surprised. Shakes his head.

OLIVER I never said she was a mule!

JAMIE Sure sounded like it back in the house.

OLIVER It did?

JAMIE Pretty much.

OLIVER shifts his weight back and forth, works his cap around, turns around, steps towards the barn, turns back around, shifts his cap around, avoiding JAMIE's eyes. JAMIE expels a great deal of air.

JAMIE Maybe I'm speaking out of turn here, I don't know. Every couple has their bad moments.

OLIVER There... There may be somethin' to what you're sayin'. Things ain't exactly the way I thought they'd be. Okay, so I'm not comparin' yer grandma to a

mule, but pound for pound yer mule is stronger'n yer horse. And yer grandma, she's a lot stronger'n any woman I ever knew before. Now, Avis—that's my first wife, Avis—you never met her—she was as gentle as a little filly.

OLIVER is looking away from JAMIE, does not see him roll his eyes and shake his head.

OLIVER Yup. Me and Avis, we got along just fine. We knew each other inside and out (*Embarrassed*), manner o' speakin'. Mostly didn't have to tell her what to do, she already knew what I wanted. We always knew what each other was thinkin'. Now, your grandma, I can't figure... She's a pretty complicated kind of person, you'll grant me that?

JAMIE Well, she's always just been my grandma, I don't know.

OLIVER Your granddad, now, he—

JAMIE I haven't seen him since I was a little kid.

OLIVER Naomi talked about him once before we was married. His name don't come up much now but when it does, it ain't good. Pretty mean fella, was he?

JAMIE (*Frowns, looks uncomfortable with the subject*) Well, like I say, we never saw much of him, but that's what I hear. (*Deliberately changing subject and adopting a less gloomy tone*) You know, my dad sold our Belgians when I was about eight or nine, I think. I used to like to get up on one and lie back on its big rump. It was so soft. We used to hitch them up to a dray and go out in the woods in winter and get firewood. I asked him why he got rid of them. He said, "Tractor's king, Son. Can't afford to keep 'em around anymore."

OLIVER "Tractor's king." (*Looks wistful*) Yup, that's about the size of it. You can't stand still. (*Looks to his right toward the house*) Nothin' stays the same.

JAMIE We still had our pony, though, and Ike used to keep a blind standardbred mare on our farm. He'd have her bred every year and every summer we'd have a foal prancing around the pasture. I used to love those little foals. I wasn't supposed to but I used to want to ride them. Couldn't do it. I was too small and they'd just skitter away from me as soon as I came near.

OLIVER Ike, you say? Her second husband? Ike had this standardbred?

JAMIE Yeah.

OLIVER I never met Ike. Pretty nice fella, was he?

JAMIE Oh yeah. Always very kind to us, to my family. We more or less looked on *him* as our grandpa. He was kinda rough on the outside. Used to scare us kids when we were little, he was just so huge. Strong, too. Strongest man I ever saw. I saw him lift our pony once, and she was no little pony. I was small then, so maybe the pony wasn't as big as I recall but—

OLIVER *(Deliberately changes the subject)* You never told me if you like to hunt? You ain't no vegetarian the way you dug into that chicken last night! Let's have a look at my dogs.

OLIVER talking, he and JAMIE slowly amble off stage left, pausing now and then as OLIVER makes a point.

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS LEAVING

OLIVER I used to hunt with a mule. I trained him to jump over fences.

JAMIE *(Surprised)* What? A jumping mule?

OLIVER Yes-siree-bob! You see, you're out huntin' and you come to a fence, and you're carryin' your rifle or shotgun, you can't just yell "Tally ho!" like you was fox-huntin' and jump the fence carryin' yer firearm. Too dangerous. Thing is, a mule can jump higher'n any horse. See, you train it to jump from a standin' start. So when you come upon a fence, you get off the mule with your firearm and just have the mule jump over the fence. Then you put your firearm over and climb over yourself... *(His voice fades out.)*

CUE N SFX: SOUND OF CAR ARRIVING, CAR DOOR OPENS AND SHUTS.

CUE N SFX: PORTER WALKS FROM STAGE RIGHT, STOPS BEFORE THE BARN DOOR. DOGS BARK.

JAMIE's and OLIVER's voices are heard from stage left.

JAMIE Do you let your dogs out to run when you're not hunting?

OLIVER *(Surprised)* Oh, course I do! I let 'em out to run most days when the weather's okay. I take care of those dogs like they was my babies.

JAMIE No, I was just asking.

OLIVER In winter they get the sun there on the south side, and they can go into the barn through that burlap.

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS RETURNING

OLIVER and JAMIE come back into view and see PORTER.

OLIVER Well, Porter, when did you get here? Jamie and me was talkin' and them dogs barkin'. I didn't hear you.

PORTER Oh, I just got here.

PORTER Shakes JAMIE's hand.

PORTER Enjoying your visit, I trust.

JAMIE *(Politely)* Sure.

PORTER Well, I hope so. Naomi'll see you're well fed, that's for sure. She's a pretty good cook, which you probably know better'n I do.

OLIVER Well, you ought to come out here more often then. Working all—

PORTER Let's not start that again, Dad. I got a family to support, kids in college—

OLIVER Did I tell you, Jamie, Porter says I should sell off the rest of my land, 120 acres of prime farmland, keep a couple of acres for the house and outbuildings, and invest the proceeds.

PORTER *(Miffed)* Well, if you want to talk about it in front of Jamie—

OLIVER Why not? He's family, ain't he?

PORTER Well, sure but—

OLIVER “But me no buts!” *(To JAMIE)* Isn't that what your grandma would say? Porter says I could sell my land right now, be a gentleman investor, buy stock in GM, GE, Standard Oil, buy some, whadayacallem, moonies.

PORTER *(Looking put-upon, long-suffering)* Munis, Dad, municipal bonds. They're tax-free. *(To JAMIE)* You know what I mean.

OLIVER Don't bring Jamie into it!

PORTER What do you mean, don't bring Jamie into it! You just did.

OLIVER 'Sides, I get a good income leasin' the land to Delbert Ames. Delbert knows how to farm, I know what he's doin', and I don't need to fool around with stockbrokers and wheeler-dealers like that!

PORTER So I'm a "wheeler-dealer," am I?

OLIVER Oh, I don't mean you, Son, but you know what I mean.

OLIVER puts his hand on PORTER 's shoulder. PORTER shrugs it off.

PORTER No I don't know what you mean!

OLIVER Look, Son, all I know is farmin'. I know what I got and what to expect and... Say, speakin' of sellin' property, if you're so strapped for cash, why don't you sell your place in Door County?

PORTER This isn't about my finances! You're just losing money compared to what you could have if you sold your land! I could lay out a careful investment plan for you. Planning is what it's all about.

OLIVER Phooey! I don't understand your thinkin! I got a plan already and it's workin' fine! I got some business to take care of!

OLIVER walks offstage left.

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS LEAVING

PORTER *(After a strained silence)* Boy, there's a lot he doesn't understand. A lot. Sorry you had to see this, Jamie.

JAMIE *(Embarrassed)* These things come up in families, I guess.

PORTER Yeah, they do, they sure do.

JAMIE He must realize you're just trying to help.

PORTER *(Pacing around agitatedly)* Damn! I wish he wouldn't act like I'm after his money! That's why he brought up my vacation place, just to get a dig back at me. He knows I could *never* sell that place! My wife could not abide that. It was her folks' place after all. Maybe if it was actually mine... But it's not.

She's gone there almost every summer of her life. Still, I got two kids in college, three next year if Cal goes. I just can't figure it out.

JAMIE Wow, that's tough! *(Beat)* That could be me in a few years.

PORTER My oldest graduates college in a year and then I'll be back down to two. I can handle that. I just gotta get over this hump. Just one year where things will be really tight. I don't know what Cal's gonna do. He mentioned the navy a while back, but nothing about it for, oh, quite a while. When he first brought it up a few months ago, it was after my dad had been talking about his days in the navy and how great it was to serve your country. Cal respects my dad a lot. But I don't think his heart is in it. I told him to apply to University of Wisconsin and we'd decide about the service after his birthday. I'm just so afraid he'll get sent to Vietnam. What would be the point of that?

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS RETURNING

OLIVER *(Returning from kennel. Clears throat.)* Well, I just think you should let Cal join up, go to college afterwards on the G.I. bill, if that's what he wants. Navy discipline'd do him some good, get that wildness out of him. And you'd save some money to boot.

PORTER Do him some good?! Do him some good?! It might get him killed! I'd rather have him wild at home than dead over there! Besides, what's in Vietnam for us? What good are we doing anybody there?

OLIVER Well, what do you think mighta happened if we took that attitude about World War I or II?

PORTER You forgot to mention Korea. I guess I did some good there. But Vietnam's no World War! And we're not under attack! It's just some poor little country that... *(Shakes his head as if to get the cobwebs out)* Look, if he wants to go to college, he'll go. I'll get the money somehow, don't you worry about that! He's going to college!

JAMIE *(Embarrassed)* I think you should know: It was on the news—we're pulling our last combat troops out of Vietnam. Now, excuse me, nature calls.

JAMIE walks off-stage towards the kennel. PORTER and OLIVER glare at each other, then look away simultaneously. They shift back and forth uneasily for a few seconds.

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS LEAVING

- OLIVER** Geez, how did we get off onto this?
- PORTER** Well, if you weren't stubborn as a mule—
- OLIVER** You're the one that's stubborn as a mule! 'Sides, like I was just tellin' Jamie, mules ain't stubborn, they're just smart! *(Takes his cap off and puts it back on again)* Oh boy, I'm at that again!
- PORTER** Okay, okay, we're both stubborn, we're both smart, whatever. There's something more I got to say while Jamie's not here. Have you revised your will since you remarried?
- OLIVER** Oh god, Porter! Can't you just let it go?!
- PORTER** Dad, you can't just put your head in the sand! You gotta think about these things! Everything'll go to Naomi. Is that what you want? If that's what you want, say so and I'll forever hold my peace.
- OLIVER** Hold your peace? That'll be the day! *(Pauses)* Now, son, I have given that some thought. Yes, I have.
- JAMIE** *(Returns having overheard the part about Naomi. Starts speaking ironically)* I couldn't help hearing what you just said. Okay, since it's all in the family...*(Speaking earnestly, forcefully now)* Porter, Grandma's life has been harder than you can imagine. She's had to work most of her life. She's earned everything she's got and she's not dependent on anyone. I guess you don't know this, Porter, but she gets Social Security and Ike's pension, and she has some land of her own, her and Ike's retirement place, sixty acres, a pretty decent house. It's got a nice woods and it borders a state forest. My Great Uncle Matt—that's her brother—he rents it from her. It's his getaway. He brings his pals up from Chicago to hunt and fish. She could sell the place but Uncle Matt makes it worth her while not to.
- OLIVER:** *(Abashed)* Why, she... never told me. She... she's... independently wealthy!
- JAMIE** Not exactly "wealthy," but secure. She... You're surprised, Oliver? You mean you didn't know this?
- OLIVER** Well, she's always been pretty close about her finances. I knew she was puttin' her Social Security check into the other bank in town. I never figured it amounted to much. I didn't know ennahting about this pension or this... this—waddayacallit—"getaway" place. I... Well, she does have a pretty good head for figures. She takes care of the groceries and different stuff for

the house, electric and phone bill. I do seem to have more money in my accounts than before. We don't lack for ennahting. We just never got around to talkin' about finances.

PORTER rolls his eyes.

OLIVER Well, it just never seemed necessary.

JAMIE Oh boy! I guess I've betrayed a confidence here. I can't believe you didn't know this stuff, Oliver! I'll have to apologize to her for shooting my mouth off..

OLIVER Jamie, I wish you wouldn't! Let me talk to her. She and I—we gotta have a good long talk.

JAMIE All right. But, Oliver, you can't blame her if she keeps her finances close to the vest. *(Turns to go, then turns back)* One thing I'm sure of: She'll never be a burden on either of you.

OLIVER and PORTER look chagrined.

OLIVER *(Very subdued)* No, I see what you mean.

JAMIE I may be speaking out of turn here as far as Grandma is concerned, but I'll say it anyway: Oliver, if you wanted to leave everything to Porter, Grandma certainly wouldn't interfere. *(Ironically)* I don't think she married you for your money.

JAMIE pauses, puzzled, exasperated. OLIVER and PORTER look at each other, then look away.

JAMIE Boy, I sure feel like I should say *something* to her, after... after blabbing like this about her affairs. Normally these kinds of things are something a man and woman work out between themselves, without sons and grandsons butting in. But it doesn't seem to work that way here. *(Shakes his head)* Well, I'm done.

OLIVER Just hold off on sayin' ennahting, will you, Jamie? Please? I got some thinkin' to do here. I'm reconsiderin' some things here.—

JAMIE *(Brusquely)* All right.

JAMIE exits stage right towards the house.

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS LEAVING

BLACKOUT

SCENE 4

CUE N MFX: **MUSICAL BRIDGE: "I'm So Lonesome I could Cry" by Hank Williams**

Same day, late afternoon

NAOMI and OLIVER are sitting at the kitchen table, speaking slowly, softly.

OLIVER Nice lad, your Jamie. We didn't really get much of a chance to talk at our wedding. Sure loves his grandma.

NAOMI I love him too. I'm very proud of him. He seemed a bit upset when he came in. What happened out there at the barn? He went right downstairs for a nap, he said. Didn't look at all sleepy. Carey was already down there.

OLIVER She's nice too, a nice girl. Sweet. Reminds me of Avis.

NAOMI Yes, very sweet. A bit of a shrinking flower, though...

OLIVER raises his eyebrows, folds his arms. NAOMI's voice becomes angry but is still soft.

NAOMI I know what you're thinking. I should be such a shrinking flower. No, that's not it. You want a doormat! Isn't that so? Isn't it?

OLIVER *(Bewildered and exasperated)* I never said that. I never said ennathing like that.

NAOMI I'm not Avis.

OLIVER No. And I'm not Ike.

NAOMI No. And I'm no doormat, never was, never will be. Ike understood that. Took him a while to grasp that idea, but he did. He loved me. We had a good marriage, a *good* marriage. Heinie tried to beat the spirit out of me. He couldn't. I told you all this before we got married. You weren't listening!

OLIVER All right, all right! I'm not Ike! But I'm not Heinie either!

NAOMI covers her face and weeps. OLIVER stands up, looks distressed, reaches a consolatory hand towards her. She doesn't see it and he lets it drop. After a few seconds NAOMI recovers her composure.

OLIVER So?

NAOMI So?

OLIVER So where does that leave us?

NAOMI Ollie and Molly, that's where.

OLIVER *(Pause)* Ollie and Molly? *(Slow recognition)* I see. Ollie and Molly. *(Pause)* So how come Molly never told Ollie about her property over there north of Chicago?

NAOMI How do you know about that?

OLIVER Don't you worry about that!

NAOMI Never mind! At least you know I didn't marry you for your money! *(Pause)* How come Ollie never told Molly he expected a slave for a wife?

OLIVER Slave? Slave? You're tellin' me I treated Avis like a slave? *(Balls up his fist)*

NAOMI *(Speaking in one angry, frightened phrase)* What's that hand doing mister what's that hand doing?!

OLIVER What? *(Looks down at his hand and slowly relaxes the fist)* Why, I don't know. Why... Looka here, I never hit Avis. I never *had* to hit Avis!

NAOMI Really! Did *she* ever have to hit *you*?!

OLIVER *(Pondering, puzzled)* Well—

NAOMI *(She puts her hands over her face, cries, and rocks back and forth.)* Oh, how did it come to this? How did it come to this? How? How? How?

OLIVER *(Utterly baffled)*I... I don't know. I... Avis and I... We *(Searching his mind)* Was there something...? Was I...?

OLIVER studies NAOMI and reaches out a tentative hand..

CUE N SFX: **A TOILET FLUSHES IN THE BASEMENT.**

NAOMI Oh, the children are up from their nap! I can't let them see me like this!

NAOMI looks at OLIVER's outstretched hand. OLIVER pats her on the cheek. Her anguished expression is relieved by a faint smile. She tentatively places her hand on his. Voices and footsteps are heard from the stairs.

OLIVER *(Tenderly)* You go on now. Wash your face. Take your time.

NAOMI hurries offstage left.

CUE N SFX: **NAOMI FOOTSTEPS LEAVING**

BLACKOUT

SCENE 5

CUE N MFX: **MUSICAL BRIDGE: "Someone to Watch over Me" by Art Tatum**

Later that night

JAMIE and CAREY are in the parlor reading. They talk softly so as not to awaken Naomi and Oliver. CAREY puts down her book and gazes reflectively into the distance.

CAREY Naomi and Oliver went to bed quite early.

JAMIE nods.

CAREY They were rather quiet tonight, don't you think?

JAMIE I suppose they were.

CAREY You were rather quiet yourself.

JAMIE shrugs.

CAREY Is there something going on I don't know about?

JAMIE *(Pause.)* Hard to say.

CAREY Well, I'll tell you what, your grandma is a remarkable woman. She is so strong, so sure of herself. I've never met anyone like her before.

JAMIE *(Abstractedly)* She's her own woman, that's for sure.

CAREY She told me a lot of things about her life. She didn't want to leave your grandfather until your mom and her sister and brothers were grown. So then the day came. Dave had joined the navy, and Luellen got married and then your mom got married and there's just "her baby left"—that's what she called him—just your Uncle Dan at home. And... Are you listening?

JAMIE Yes, of course I am. I—

CAREY Do you know this stuff?

JAMIE Some of it. I mean, Mom talks about how mean her dad was, but—

CAREY Well, so Naomi can't hold on any longer. She takes Uncle Dan with her when she runs away. He's barely a teenager. They go to Branford. And she gets a job as a waitress. She doesn't make much. She can hardly afford rent, let alone food and clothes for her and Uncle Dan. *(Sits up, animated)* They live in these—she called them “coldwater flats”; they were like studio apartments, but they had no heat and no hot water! They had kerosene heaters and they had to heat water for dishes and baths and stuff, and... Anyway, she'd get too far behind on the rent after a few months and scout out another flat in a different area of town, or across the state line in South Branford, and they'd move in the middle of the night without leaving a forwarding address, and she'd find another waitress job. What a life! What a *hard* life!

JAMIE Keep it down!

CAREY *(More quietly)* I think she was downright heroic! I told her that. Heroic.

JAMIE Well, that's a lot more than I ever heard before. I wonder why she's telling you all that now.

CAREY I don't know. I guess I confided in *her* a lot. She was returning the favor? Maybe she was trying to show me how good I have it.

JAMIE *(Surprised)* Were you complaining?

CAREY Not exactly. Not about you anyway.

JAMIE About who then?

CAREY Well... about me, myself. You know all my insecurities... Do you... Do you ever wish I could be like her?

JAMIE Well... I never thought about it. You're not the same people at all. She's my grandma, and you're my wife. I—

CAREY You're just saying the obvious. I feel like I'm so wishy-washy compared to her. Am I wishy-washy? Do you like me the way I am? I'm so much like my mother, don't you think?

JAMIE Well, not exactly. You're—

CAREY “Not exactly?” “Not exactly!” How am I supposed to take that?

JAMIE opens his mouth to reply.

- CAREY** Never mind. Never mind... Do you think she's happy? Do you think Oliver appreciates her? Appreciates the kind of person she is?
- JAMIE** (*Guardedly*) I think they're still working out their relationship.
- CAREY** I kinda have that feeling too. But do you think he... *appreciates* her?
- JAMIE** It's hard to say... No, I don't think so. I don't really think so.
- CAREY** (*Surprised*) You don't?
- JAMIE** (*Hedging, not really wanting to talk about this*) Well, it depends on what you mean by "appreciate." "Appreciate" as in "like"? Or "appreciate" as in "understand"?
- CAREY** Well, I certainly hope he *likes* her. I mean, does he *understand* her? (*Pause*) Wait, what exactly do *you* mean?
- JAMIE** Oh, this is too complicated. I just mean I think they seem to be having trouble adjusting to each other.
- CAREY** There's that word!
- JAMIE** (*Softly*) Carey, not so loud! What word?
- CAREY** (*Softly*) "Adjusting." She talked about adjusting to your grandfather—Heinie?—and to Ike. Well, she said there was *no* adjusting to Heinie. She said she's still adjusting to Oliver. After a year of marriage, she's still adjusting! It didn't take *us* that long... Or did it? Are *we* still adjusting, do you think?
- JAMIE** I guess maybe it's... Isn't it an ongoing process for every couple? But it's different with them. They've got their histories, they've got their ways. They were both married, to someone else, longer than we've been alive—
- CAREY** That's exactly what I said to Naomi!
- JAMIE** Carey, you'll wake them. (*Pause*) I guess you two covered quite a bit of ground already, eh?
- CAREY** (*Vehemently but softly*) Well, what about you and Oliver? And Porter? What did you talk about? You're the first one to mention "adjusting" here.

JAMIE *(Leaning away and scrutinizing her)* You seem pretty fired up tonight, Carey.

CAREY How about answering my question!

JAMIE Shhh! Shhh! It's kind of a long story. I don't want to go into it now. *(Picks up his book)*

CAREY Well, if you don't want to talk about it... *(Pauses, studies him for five seconds)* At least answer me this: Do you wish I was more like your Grandma, more forceful-like? I do. More sure of things. Compared to her, like I said, I'm wishy-washy.

JAMIE Do you wish I was more like your father?

JAMIE and CAREY look at each other in surprise, then look away.

JAMIE Maybe we should—

CAREY Call it a night?

JAMIE Yes, call it a night.

JAMIE reaches over and turns off the light.

CUE N SFX: **SOUND OF LIGHT SWITCH**

LIGHTS FADE TO TWILIGHT

JAMIE and CAREY stand and he holds out a hand to her. She takes his hand, then pulls him forcefully towards her. They kiss.

CAREY *(Smiling)* This is not so complicated, is it.

JAMIE No, it's not.

Hand in hand, they walk off stage right.

CUE N SFX: **FOOTSTEPS LEAVING**

BLACKOUT

INTERMISSION

ACT 2

SCENE 6

CUE N MFX: MUSICAL BRIDGE: "Blue and Sentimental" by Count Basie

Next day, mid-afternoon

NAOMI and CAREY are standing in the parlor looking at family pictures on a buffet.

NAOMI And that's Oliver and Avis, Oliver's first wife, and Porter. Porter's about twelve there, I think. And here's Ike and I and his favorite dog, Badge. Ike always had interesting names for his dogs. "Badge," "Zigmo," "Ruckus." Here's our wedding picture, Oliver's and mine.

CAREY Why, there's a dog there at his feet.

NAOMI *(Ruefully)* Yes, well, Oliver likes his dogs too. And look, back there over his shoulder in the distance.

- CAREY** You mean those horses?
- NAOMI** No, those are his mules, Woodrow and Frank. You know, he actually wanted us to be sitting up on them for the wedding picture. He even said he wanted them named as witnesses to the marriage! I think he was joking—but I'm not sure.
- CAREY** I guess, the dog's not so bad. But the mules? Well... that's different.
- NAOMI** Isn't it? *(Pause)* You know, speaking of names, I just can't get used to *my* name, "Naomi Chapman." Someone calls out, "Mrs. Chapman"—say, I'm at the doctor's office—and it might take me a couple of seconds to figure out, that's *me!*
- CAREY** It took me a while to get used to "Mrs. O'Neil," but I kind of like it now. I wonder, what if Oliver had taken *your* last name? "Oliver Dixon." Wouldn't that be something.
- NAOMI** "Dixon?" Well, then he'd be taking Ike's last name.
- CAREY** Oh, yeah. Of course. I mean, well, what about your maiden name? "Forester" is a nice name.
- NAOMI** Idle speculation, my dear. "What isn't and never will be." That's in a book somewhere.
- CAREY** *(Looking around admiringly)* This is a nice room. I'll bet you spend a lot of time in here.
- NAOMI** Not really.
- CAREY** But it's such a lovely room, nice wallpaper, nice davenport and chairs, very comfy.
- NAOMI** I'm afraid I can't take credit. It's all Avis's doing. Oliver won't hear of changing anything. A woman likes to put her own stamp on her home furnishings, but... Sometimes I feel like I'm in an Avis museum. Not that I have anything against Avis. She was a nice lady.
- CAREY** Oh, you knew her then, Avis?
- NAOMI** Oh, certainly. I met her and Oliver years ago at church camp where they had district meetings every August. The campgrounds were not far from where Ike and I lived. I couldn't get Ike to go, so I'd just go myself for the day.

Avis and Oliver and I would share a table in the dining room. She was quiet, a nice lady. Oliver would get to telling his stories about hunting, and dogs, and mules, and so on. Made us all laugh. He was quite a character. *(Becomes pensive)* Still is, I guess. Not as big as Ike. Better looking, I suppose. Though the longer I knew Ike, the better looking he got.

CAREY This is a pretty frame. And a nice picture. A man and a workhorse. That isn't Oliver, is it?

NAOMI Yes it is, taken about thirty years ago, I think. That would be Oliver on the left.

CAREY *(Laughing)* Oh, Naomi!

NAOMI *(Smiling)* The other creature isn't a horse. He's a mule named Nimitz—or was; he's dead for some time now. Look at the ears, they're too big. You're looking at Oliver, aren't you? I mean too big for a horse.

NAOMI and CAREY laugh. NAOMI sobers.

NAOMI *(Softly, pensively)* Oliver. Oliver. I think there's still hope for you.

CAREY looks questioningly at NAOMI, who smiles brightly.

NAOMI For me too! Hope for everyone. Wouldn't Oliver have fun with you, not knowing a mule from a horse! Or a man from a mule! *(Laughs)*

CAREY *(Laughs)* Naomi, stop!

NAOMI and CAREY are still laughing as OLIVER and JAMIE come in via the mudroom. They suppress their laughter. OLIVER and JAMIE smile.

OLIVER Don't stop on my account. Looks like somebody's havin' a good time. What's so funny?

NAOMI and CAREY laugh some more as NAOMI speaks

NAOMI I was just teaching Carey the difference between a mule and... and a horse.

OLIVER *(With a bit of a laugh)* Hold on there, that's a pretty serious subject, if you ask me. Course, a mule *can* be pretty amusing at times. Did I ever tell you about the mule that got into the rhubarb wine?

NAOMI Yes, Oliver, you have.

OLIVER Well, I'm sure Jamie and Carey ain't heard it. And I mean to tell it as soon as I get us some of *my* rhubarb wine.

OLIVER walks offstage right, returns with a brown clay jug. NAOMI gets some cut glass tumblers from the china cabinet, places them on the buffet.

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS LEAVING, THEN GLASSES

OLIVER We gotta celebrate Jamie and Carey comin' to visit. This is the first visit from any of your relations since we got married. I'm happy to have them.

NAOMI *(Smiling)* We don't have proper wine glasses—we don't usually drink wine—but I have some pretty glasses that Ike... I once got for my birthday.

OLIVER That's all right, you can say Ike gave 'em to you. *(Smiles sincerely at NAOMI)* Lord knows there's enough of Avis in this room.

OLIVER pours each glass three-quarters full.

CUE N SFX: SOUND OF GLASSES BEING FILLED (4)

NAOMI Mercy! That's a lot of wine, dear. Careful not to spill any on the buffet. *(Takes a sip)* Why, this is not half bad!

OLIVER, NAOMI, JAMIE, and CAREY sip and smile.

JAMIE Tasty, very tasty. Sweet and tangy at the same time.

CAREY Ummm. I like this. *(Glugs half of her glass)*

JAMIE Better take it easy, Carey.

CAREY What for?

OLIVER How about a toast then. Here's a sailor's toast: "Ships are like women, expensive to rig and difficult to steer."

OLIVER winks at JAMIE. NAOMI makes a face at this and is joined by CAREY. Nobody drinks except OLIVER.

OLIVER *(Embarrassed)* Course, I was just a young buck in the navy when I first heard that one. *(Beat)* Okay, here's a real toast: "There are good ships and

wood ships, and ships that sail the sea. But the best ships are friendships, and may they always be.”

OLIVER winks at NAOMI who smiles at him.

NAOMI Now, that's very sweet, I can drink to that.

NAOMI, OLIVER, and JAMIE sip while CAREY glugs.

CAREY *(Fanning her hand in front of her face and bosom)* Oh my, I'm feeling a little tipsy already. This is so good.

JAMIE Better slow down, Sweetie.

CAREY Well look at you, Speedo, your glass is almost empty.

JAMIE No, it's not. I—

OLIVER Here, let me pour you some more, Carey. You too, Jamie.

Oliver steps over to the buffet.

JAMIE Not so much this time. Just half a glass.

OLIVER pours as much as before into CAREY's glass and tops up Jamie's glass.

CUE N SFX: SOUND OF GLASSES BEING FILLED (2)

JAMIE *(He sips.)* It is good.

NAOMI moves over by CAREY, smiles, and puts a hand on her drinking arm.

OLIVER Now, about that mule that got into the rhubarb wine.

NAOMI *(Laughing)* Here we go! This actually is a pretty funny story.

OLIVER See, this ole boy—

NAOMI *(Aside to JAMIE and CAREY)* All his stories are about “this ole boy.” It's his southern Missouri connection.

OLIVER Now, as I was a-sayin',—

NAOMI Listen to him! “A-sayin,.” He's back in Missouri again.

OLIVER smiles at NAOMI.

OLIVER As I was a-sayin', this ole boy had staked his mule out in the hot sun with no water and left his jug of rhubarb wine in the shade just out of reach of the mule, and he'd went off and forgot him. Well, the mule...

CUE N SFX: A CAR COMES UP FAST, STOPS, THE CAR DOOR SLAMS

PORTER storms in from stage right.

PORTER (*Disheveled, sweaty, tie loose*) Have you seen him? I thought he might've come here.

OLIVER Who? Seen who, Son?

PORTER Cal! Cal! I looked everywhere! I went to his friends' places. I even went to the draft board. They haven't seen him. They must've thought I was crazy.

OLIVER Back up a minute here! What would Cal be doin' at the draft board, or ennowhere hereabouts?

PORTER Betty called. Said she got up this morning pretty early and Cal wasn't there. He didn't leave a note on the table. She figured he'd gone fishing with some of his pals. They like to get out at the crack of dawn. She said he was restless, moody last night. Couldn't sit still. She could hear him talking to himself in his bedroom. He—

OLIVER Well, maybe he *did* go fishin'.

PORTER Well, that's what I figured. But he usually leaves a note on the table when he goes out early. When he wasn't back by mid-morning she figured they'd hung around and swum for a while after fishing. She made a cake for his birthday and then she thought she'd just look in his room and that's where she found a note. It had fallen on the floor. It said he's hitchhiking back home. Couldn't get anybody to give him a ride. Said he's eighteen today, and he's made up his mind what he's gonna do.

OLIVER "Made up his mind"? Well, you don't enlist at the draft board. He'd have to go to the recruiters in LaCrosse, I spose. But let's see, he's comin' from Sturgeon Bay, that's about—

PORTER Two-hundred and fifty miles. Takes us over five hours with bathroom stops.

- OLIVER** And he's hitchin'. *(Makes hitchhiking gesture with hand)* Might take him all day.
- PORTER** We don't know when he left, exactly.
- JAMIE** Suppose he left around five, before your wife got up. Just so we could estimate when he might arrive.
- CAREY** *(Slurring)* That's good, Jamie. Let's suppose that.
- PORTER** *(Looks momentarily puzzled at Carey's slurring, then at the jug of rhubarb wine, then at his father, then re-focuses on the problem at hand)* Good point! Good point. Sky's getting light by 4:30 over there this time of year. Say he's out of the house then, takes five minutes to walk out to the highway. He gets his first ride by five o'clock. He could be here early afternoon. He could be here now!
- OLIVER** Son, did you look down by the lake?
- PORTER** No.
- OLIVER** Why don't we check there? You know how he loves it down there.
- PORTER** No, first let's let's go back to my place. Maybe he's home by now. If we don't find him, we can quick check the lake, then head out on the highway. He could still be out there just trying to get that last ride into town.
- OLIVER** Well, at least he's comin' back here. I know I've been all for him joinin' up, but I don't want him to do ennahting without having a final talk with you. I never wanted to interfere, Son.
- PORTER** Well, you did. You know you did.
- OLIVER** I'm sorry, Son, I—
- PORTER** Never mind that. I guess I've been interfering in your life too. *(OLIVER nods silently.)* What if he does decide to go to the recruiter? What if he doesn't come home first? I can't let that happen. We gotta talk first. Let's go!
- JAMIE** Do you mind if I come along? An extra pair of eyes?
- PORTER** Sure, sure. C'mon!

CAREY What about me and...

PORTER, OLIVER, and JAMIE ignore her and hurry out stage right. Sounds from outside of car doors slamming and car starting, leaving.

CUE N SFX: **FOOTSTEPS, CAR DOORS SLAMMING, STARTING, LEAVING**

CAREY I guess I don't want any more of this.

NAOMI takes her glass to kitchen.

NAOMI No.

NAOMI walks over to window, looks out

CAREY I wish I could do something. I feel so helpless.

NAOMI We couldn't go with them, five of us ramming around in a car, anxious, worried, the men shouting, swearing. No, that wouldn't do.

CAREY I suppose.

NAOMI But we can put on our thinking caps here, shall we? Maybe we'll think of something. (*Ponders*) I don't think he's coming back to join up. I'm not sure he wants to go into the service. I've gotten to know him over the last year. I don't know exactly what he's gonna do. But his note said he was coming home to talk things over. So that's what he'll do.

CAREY You think so?

NAOMI I just know it. He's a nice boy, a thoughtful boy... sort of like our Jamie. He couldn't join up before his birthday without his dad's permission. Now it's his birthday, he wants to get things settled, and he's coming back to talk it over. That's what I think. His grandfather wants him to join and his father doesn't. But what does *he* want to do? What does *he* want to do?

NAOMI and CAREY hear sounds from the barn.

CUE N SFX: **DOGS BARKING, A HORSE NEIGHING**

NAOMI What's gotten into those animals?

NAOMI walks to downstage center and looks out the window.

CUE N SFX: NAOMI FOOTSTEPS

NAOMI I can't see anything. I wonder... I'll go out and have a look.

CAREY I'm coming too!

CAREY, still a bit tipsy, grasps NAOMI's hand. They exit right. About five seconds elapse and NAOMI's voice can be heard from direction of barn.

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS LEAVING

NAOMI Why, Cal, you're here. Your mother called. Everybody's been wondering where you'd show up.

NAOMI *(NAOMI's voice is getting nearer.)* Your mother called. Are you all right? You look warm. Why don't you hang up your jacket.

CAL and NAOMI enter stage right. NAOMI has her arm around his shoulder. CAREY is walking behind.

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS ARRIVING

CAL *(From offstage)* I left her a note. I didn't want anybody to worry. *(Shyly)* Excuse me, but who is this with you?

NAOMI Why, this is my grandson's wife, Carey. Remember my grandson, Jamie?

CAL frowns, puzzled.

NAOMI Well, maybe you don't remember. They came to the wedding. They're visiting. Jamie's out with your dad and grandpa looking for you.

CAL *(Embraces himself)* Ohhhhh!

NAOMI Why don't you sit down, dear, relax a bit.

CAL sits at the kitchen table. NAOMI stands beside him with her arm over his shoulders.

NAOMI Are you hungry? You've been hitchhiking all day. You must be hungry. I could fix you some eggs or maybe a baloney sandwich. Would you like a Coke? Carey, get him a Coke from the fridge, would you, dear? What would you like, Cal?

CAL stands up and Naomi's hand falls to her side.

CAL Oh, Naomi, I would just like this day to be over! I didn't want to cause any trouble! Why did they have to go looking for me? I'm not a baby anymore! I'm eighteen! I can take care of myself! I meant to call Dad as soon as I got here. I didn't want to talk to him at the bank. Too public. So I came here.

NAOMI Don't worry about them. They'll just be very happy to see you. I guarantee it. They said something about heading out on the highway, figuring maybe they'd find you, give you that last ride home. That's all. Nothing to worry about.

CAL *(Plaintively)* You think so?

CAREY *(Speaking more normally now)* Grandma's right, Cal. I don't think they're all that *worried*, they're just anxious to see you. After all, it *is* your birthday, right? And you've hitchhiked all this way to see them?

CAL Is that right, Grandma? *(Tentatively)* Grandma? I guess I can call you "Grandma"? They're not mad at me?

NAOMI I was wondering when you'd ever get around to "Grandma."

NAOMI stands on tiptoes, kisses CAL on the forehead. CAL leans into her.

NAOMI Yes, Carey's right. Still, you know, when they get back, they might sound a little worried, but that would just be because they didn't see you out on the highway. Your mom's the one that might be worried. Would you like to call her and tell her you made it?

CAL I guess I should. *(He steps up to the phone on the wall, dials and waits.)*

CUE N SFX: SOUND OF PHONE BEING DIALED

NAOMI *(To Carey)* Let's just look out the door for them, shall we?

NAOMI takes CAREY by the hand and they exit stage right..

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS LEAVING

CAL No answer. *(Raising his voice to be heard by the two women)* I've made plans, Grandma. I'm trying to think things through, the way my dad taught me. He's gonna be amazed at what I've already worked out.

NAOMI and CAREY return.

NAOMI I'm sure he will be. I think you two just need to talk things out. Maybe you should try your call again, Cal. Maybe she's outdoors. *(Softly to CAREY)* Carey, can you go outside and fill them in when they get here? They're going to be all het up when they get back. It would be a real help.

CAREY *(Hesitantly)* What should I say?

NAOMI You'll know how to put it. I trust you, dear. Just tell them Cal's okay, he's still a civilian, he wants to talk things over. That's basically it.

CAREY *(Less hesitantly)* Okay. *(Exits stage right)*

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS LEAVING, SOUND OF PHONE BEING HUNG UP

CAL *(Hangs up)* Still no answer.

NAOMI sits down at the table.

NAOMI We can try again in a few minutes. Would you like to tell me what's on your mind?

CAL *(Pauses as he gathers his thoughts)* My folks can't really afford to send me to UW-Madison, I heard them talking more than once late at night about it. And you know what? I don't really want to go there. I don't want to study business like Gary, or art like Sharon.

NAOMI What is it you'd like to do, dear?

CAL Well, I sure don't want to join the navy either.

NAOMI patiently folds her hands in her lap and smiles into his earnest face, as if prepared to listen indefinitely.

CAL I want to be a farmer! *(Points offstage right)* You saw what's on my jacket. "FFA" stands for "Future Farmers of America"! I love animals. I love farming. Dad knows that. Grandpa knows that. Here I was in my high school FFA and the only one who lived in town. I used to help out Grandpa

before he retired when I was just a little kid. I was so little when he showed me how to drive a tractor, I could hardly push the clutch down. I had to look *through* the steering wheel; I couldn't see over it! Then I started working for other farmers around here when I was eleven. This summer was the first year I didn't stay home to work on farms.

CUE N SFX: SOUND OF CAR ARRIVING, DOORS OPENING AND SLAMMING

CUE N SFX: MUFFLED, INDISTINCT VOICES ARE HEARD: WORRIED MEN; CAREY'S INSISTENT, HIGHER, BUT INDISTINCT VOICE

CAL They're here!

CUE N SFX: SOUND OF CHAIR BEING KNOCKED OVER

NAOMI Now, don't worry, dear. They're just going to be happy to see you. We'll all sit down and work things out. You'll see.

NAOMI puts her arm around CAL and smiles calmly.

AFTER TEN SECONDS OR SO, VOICES OUTSIDE QUIET DOWN.

Carey's voice is still heard above men's, but exact words still cannot be made out. They enter through mudroom in this order: CAREY, PORTER, OLIVER, JAMIE.

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS ARRIVING

PORTER *(Trying, not entirely successfully, to sound nonchalant)* Well, hello, Son. Heard you were coming. We were just out on the highway. Thought we might be able to give you that final lift in.

CAL Hi, Dad.

CAL and PORTER stare at each other for a couple of beats. Then CAL puts out his hand to shake hands with PORTER. PORTER quickly strides over to CAL, grasps his hand, then pulls him into a hug lasting several seconds.

PORTER Welcome home, Son! Welcome home. And happy birthday!

OLIVER puts out his hand. CAL grasps it, then embraces OLIVER for several seconds. They part.

OLIVER Yes, happy birthday!

CAREY Happy Birthday!

Overlapping

JAMIE Happy Birthday!

CAL Thanks.

CAL Shakes hands with JAMIE.

PORTER Son, you hitched all that way? Mom would've let you take her car.

CAL I just wasn't ready to tell her yet.

PORTER Well... And it's your birthday. I don't have a present for you, Son.

CAL You want to give me something?

PORTER Why sure, but—

CAL Okay, just listen to me, please. That's what you can give me. Just listen... Dad, I don't want to study business. (*He looks at OLIVER.*) I don't want to go in the navy either. I'm sorry, I just don't want to. I was talking to Grandma and—

PORTER “Grandma?”

CAL Yeah, Grandma, Grandma Naomi.

PORTER frowns and looks at NAOMI. OLIVER shifts his weight, cocks his head, and looks questioningly at NAOMI.

PORTER So you and “Grandma” have been making plans?

CAL Yes. No. Not plans exactly. I told her what I was thinking about and she said I should talk with you, Dad, that you'd help me work things out.

PORTER (*Raises his eyebrows, tentatively smiles at NAOMI, then turns his gaze back to CAL.*) Of course, Son. All right, I'm listening.

CAL I want to study ag! I want to be a farmer!

- PORTER** You want to be a farmer?
- CAL** Yes! That's what I came home to tell you!
- PORTER** A farmer. Like your grandpa?
- OLIVER** *(Shakes his head and smiles)* Well, I'll be.
- CAL** Dad, you're gonna be surprised. I planned things through, like you taught me. I applied to UW River Falls, they've got a great ag program there. Mr. Lambert— *(Aside to NAOMI)* he's my high school counselor—Mr. Lambert helped me figure things out. He helped me get a scholarship. And I can earn money working in the college barns. I can pretty much make it on my own. It's cheaper than UW-Madison.
- PORTER** Well, a farmer. If that isn't... You want to be a farmer. I never thought. ... I just thought you worked on farms for spending money.
- CAL** But we never really talked about it, Dad. You always assumed I'd go study business or something, Grandpa always talked about the navy. I didn't really know what I wanted. But I sure have thought about it this summer. And, well... It's not just ag in general. I want to go into animal husbandry—that's what they call it at River Falls. *(Looks around shyly, realizing he is a cynosure, speaks softly)* I love animals. I love the feel of my arm over a cow's back. I love how a horse's nose is so soft and their beautiful eyes look at you so trusting. I love to hear Grandpa's dogs bark when they're on a trail. I love to see calves running and jumping in the pasture. I even love goats!
- NAOMI** Isn't that lovely, Cal! Isn't that lovely, everyone! Maybe you could be a poet on the side!

OLIVER nods and smiles broadly at NAOMI.

- PORTER** Didn't you tell me a few years ago—I'm sorry I didn't really take you seriously then—didn't you say you might like to be a vet?
- CAL** *(Laughs)* Yes, Dad, that's it! I think that might be what I really want! But I can decide that later. I can study animal husbandry at UW-River Falls. If I decide to go on to be a vet I'll still end up going to Madison for that. I just know for sure, I don't want to be cooped up in an office. Nothing against being a banker, Dad, but...

(PORTER gestures dismissing Cal's concern.)

CAL *(Passionately)* I need to be around animals. I need to be outdoors. I need to feel the sun on my face and see the wheat and corn in the fields, and... *(embarrassed, suddenly aware that everyone is listening to him intently)* well, that's about it.

PORTER Son, I wish I loved banking that much. Don't get me wrong, it has its satisfactions, but... You amaze me. You applied all on your own, you thought about your finances... How can I say no?

CAL And I know Mom will go along with it. I've been hinting at it all summer, but I never really came out and said it till now.

PORTER All right, Son. But look, you're not doing all this on your own. I'll be able to help you out. You'll need some kind of transportation to get back and forth. It's a long way up there—

CAL One hundred and seventy miles.

PORTER You can't be hitchhiking back and forth all the time. Jim Diehl usually has some decent used vehicles on his lot.

CAL *(Excitedly)* Before I left for Sturgeon Bay this summer I saw this 1965 Chevy C10 there.

OLIVER C10? Dark blue? Little over 60,000 miles?

CAL Yes!

OLIVER Still there. Wants too much for it.

NAOMI It's looks in pretty good condition. No obvious rust.

OLIVER looks at her in surprise.

NAOMI What? I always have my eye out for a good vehicle. Just something for around town. Anyway, I think a cash offer might get Mr. Diehl down to something more reasonable. What do you think?

OLIVER *(Enthusiastically)* I think you're right. *(To CAL)* I'm also thinking maybe we could make this a birthday present.

NAOMI Yes! And I'll chip in too!

PORTER Yes the three of us—

CAL *(Shocked)* Really?! Oh, that's too much! Couldn't we... Couldn't we call it a loan?

CAL is looking at PORTER and doesn't see OLIVER and NAOMI wink smile at each other.

OLIVER A long-term loan, maybe.

NAOMI Very long term. Very long. No rush to pay back.

CAL Dad?

PORTER Well—

OLIVER I'm sure we could work something out. Maybe we should just go have a look at that pickup right now.

CAL Could we, Dad?

PORTER What are we waiting for?

CUE N SFX TELEPHONE RINGS.

Telephone rings near Porter. He answers.

PORTER I'll bet that's Betty. Hello. Yes, Betty, he's here! *(Pause)* Yes, yes, he's fine. *(Pause)* He wants to study ag at River Falls. *(Pause)* You knew that? How? *(Pause)* "Woman's intuition?" Okay, I'll buy that.

CAL Dad, let me talk to her!

PORTER Cal wants to talk to you.

PORTER hands the phone to CAL.

CAL Mom, I'm sorry I didn't say anything. ... Thank you, thank you. Mom, I'm going to get a car! *(Pause)* Yes, can we call you later? The car lot will close pretty soon. *(Pause)* I promise! *(Pause)* Yes, I fine! I'm great! *(Pause)* Me too. Bye. *(Takes a deep breath, smiles broadly at everyone)* Let's go!

PORTER All right. Let's go have a look at 'er, Cal.

JAMIE We'll follow you, Porter.

CAL, JAMIE, and CAREY exit right.

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS

PORTER *(Calling after them)* Okay, but you all go on out. I'll be out in a second. *(To Oliver and Naomi)* Dad, Naomi, thank you and God bless you. Live your lives. Be happy *(Choking up)* I... That's all I can say.

PORTER hugs OLIVER, then hugs NAOMI.

OLIVER You're a good man, Porter. Yes you are.

NAOMI is overcome, can't speak, just nods.

OLIVER You go ahead now, Son. Cal must be champin' on the bit by now. I just need a word with "Grandma" here. We'll be along in a jiffy.

After they're out of sight NAOMI looks mildly apprehensive until OLIVER puts his arm around her waist.

OLIVER Was that all Cal's thinking?

NAOMI *(Recovering, heaving a big sigh)* That was so sweet of Porter. Yes, Cal's and what's-his-name's, the school counselor. I just helped him get in the right frame of mind.

OLIVER Well, you done that all right. You know, he *is* a smart boy, figuring all that out.

NAOMI Takes after his grandpa.

NAOMI kisses OLIVER on the cheek.

OLIVER Say, Naomi, I been thinkin'.

As she did with Cal earlier, NAOMI smiles at OLIVER as if prepared to listen indefinitely.

OLIVER Don't you think it's time to do some redecoratin' here?

NAOMI Really?!

OLIVER Seein' as how we're both independently wealthy?

NAOMI "Independently wealthy"?! Well—

OLIVER We could start with the parlor. I'd want to keep them pictures we got up there, but—

NAOMI Of course we'd keep the pictures. They're about our past and our present too. But Avis...

OLIVER I'll always love Avis in my memory, just like you'll always love Ike. But you're my wife now, Naomi, and I'm your husband. Naomi and Oliver. Oliver and Naomi. We got to make a new world of our own.

NAOMI How sweet, Oliver. How very sweet. I see where Cal gets his poetry from. Yes, "a new world of our own." I like that.

OLIVER And the parlor's as good a place to start as any.

NAOMI Well, I do have some thoughts about that. (Beat) But maybe we'd better get down to the car lot before it closes. Say, what do you think of that red mustang convertible on Mr. Diehl's lot?

OLIVER Cal sure don't need ennathing like that. What could you haul in that?

NAOMI smiles impishly.

OLIVER What?! For you?!

NAOMI You got something against the color red?

OLIVER (*Laughing*) You know, you take the cake. You surely do.

NAOMI So, what about the car?

OLIVER I suppose, if you got the dough re mi...

NAOMI I do.

OLIVER "I do." Last time you said those words to me, I didn't know what I was gettin' myself into.

NAOMI puts her arm around OLIVER's waist and shakes him.

NAOMI Well, you do now. Let's go shopping!

OLIVER and NAOMI exit stage right.

NAOMI *(From offstage)* Oh, my purse!

NAOMI pops back in, grabs her purse from a table in the parlor, and hurries back towards stage right.

CUE N SFX: FOOTSTEPS LEAVING

NAOMI stops in the kitchen,, takes a deep breath, and starts to hum (first two lines) and sing "God Bless the Child".

*"Hum-um-um-um-um,
Hum-um-umm-um-um,
So the Bible said and it still is news.
Mama may have, Papa may have,
But God bless the child that's got his own,
That's got his own."*

CUE N SFX: A CAR HORN SOUNDS OUTSIDE. ITS PITCH IS THE SAME AS—AND SO BLENDS WITH—THE FINAL WORD OF THE SONG.

NAOMI I'm coming! I'm coming! *(To the audience)* God bless the child! *(She blows a kiss with a wide sweep of her hand towards the world [the audience]. Exit stage right.)*

CUE N SFX: NAOMI FOOTSTEPS LEAVING

CUE N MFX: MUSICAL BRIDGE: "God Bless the Child by Stéphane Grappelli

THE END

