

Squalor

By

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Characters/Time & Place

Characters:

William – early 70's. A successful mystery writer whose life has been consumed with storytelling, and who is currently enduring a sustained fallow period. Winsome, yet somewhat surly, we find William at a time when he is at the most depleted, as a person and artist.

Hannah – early 50's, a high school teacher in William's home town, and up-and-coming Young Adult novelist. She is fierce and self-reliant as a person and artist.

Young Anna – at about 18 years old; William's childhood sweetheart. (Only William will sense her.)

Older Anna – at about 60-70 years old; Hannah's mom. (Only Hannah will sense her.)

Time & Place:

Now; William's home town.

Scene 1

(At Rise: A city park, with a bench, and a nearby trashcan. There is an overlook.

WILLIAM sits on the bench reading a paperback. He gets up and, referring to the paperback, locates a particular spot on the ground near the overlook. As he is doing this his cell phone buzzes. He looks at the screen, and decides to answer the phone. Through the following conversation HANNAH appears, unseen by WILLIAM. She is wearing workout clothes and, after several moments, leaves unnoticed.)

WILLIAM

(On phone, while examining the area:)

Hello, Selma. I got in Monday. The drive was fine. Yeah, I'm out for a walk. The place is okay, haven't seen the maid yet. I'm kidding, the accommodations are fine, the drive was fine, I'm fine. I am a little out of breath, I just walked up a hill that thinks it's a mountain. I'm fine Selma, really. My body's trying to adjust to fresh air. I'll let you know if I do. Thanks for checking on me. Over and out.

(WILLIAM hangs up and takes in the view, then:)

[BLACKOUT]

Scene 2

(The City park. HANNAH jogs on, runs in place for a moment, then exits.)

BLACKOUT

Scene 3

(Same; different day. The lights come up on WILLIAM, paging through the same paperback. HANNAH jogs on unnoticed, and may run in place as she watches him. WILLIAM suddenly throws the paperback at the nearby trashcan. HANNAH flinches and audibly gasps; she catches her breath, then crosses and picks up the book.)

HANNAH

Yours? You flung it. It mighta hit me.

WILLIAM

Be grateful it wasn't the hard copy. I'm not sure *flung* 's a word. Sorry if I startled you.

HANNAH

You don't sound sorry.

WILLIAM

I. Am. Sorry.

HANNAH

That just sounds slower. I'm sure you'll find *flung* in the Urban Dictionary. Fling-flung. The point is I'm in training and you made me break stride. I coulda pulled a muscle.

WILLIAM

But you didn't.

HANNAH

Ah, a wise guy.

WILLIAM

Should I know you, you look familiar.

HANNAH

This is my route, I'm in training. I've seen you up here before. Earlier this week. You new around here?

(Handing WILLIAM paperback.)

WILLIAM

More or less, I'm visiting. This is quite a view. You can damn near see the whole town from up here. No really, have we met before?

HANNAH

Don't think so. You're not a stalker?

WILLIAM

No. You're not paranoid, or a celebrity with an eggshell temperament?

HANNAH

Hardly.

WILLIAM

(Giving/tossing book back to HANNAH.)

Keep it.

HANNAH

That bad?

WILLIAM

Rubbish.

HANNAH

It's a crime, yunno.

WILLIAM

Littering?

HANNAH

Mistreating a book.

WILLIAM

Ah, librarian.

HANNAH

High school English.

WILLIAM

Hmmph.

HANNAH

What?

WILLIAM

Explains the misplaced reverence.

HANNAH

Oh, now, I don't know.

(Reading snippets from both front and back cover of the book:)

Mind Over Matter. "New York Times Best Seller"..."Compelling whodoneit"..."Kas –

Kasinski's original masterpiece"..."tenth printing!"

WILLIAM

Probably printed in batches of a hundred. Yunno, you can't tell a book by its cover, front or back.

HANNAH

Not much into mysteries. I pass one of those Little Libraries on the way back.

WILLIAM

I'd look for a Little Orphanage.

HANNAH

(Checking watch.)

Gotta get back. Lame apology accepted. Nice meeting you!

(HANNAH jogs off, taking book.)

BLACKOUT

Scene 4

(WILLIAM is again on the bench. He seems to be waiting. After several beats:)

BLACKOUT

Scene 5

(The bench is empty. HANNAH jogs on, stops, waits momentarily, then exits.)

BLACKOUT

Scene 6

(WILLIAM is sitting on the bench, asleep, a newspaper on his lap. HANNAH jogs on and stops, on seeing him. She sits on the bench and, after waiting for WILLIAM to open his eyes, pushes the newspaper off his lap. Nothing. HANNAH picks up the newspaper and rustles it, waking WILLIAM up.)

HANNAH

Afternoon.

WILLIAM

Hello.

HANNAH

You dropped this.

(HANNAH hands WILLIAM the paper.)

WILLIAM

Up all night? It's a crime, yunno.

HANNAH

(HANNAH gets up and stretches through the following.)

Loitering. I'm reading your book.

WILLIAM

Ah, that book? Thought you hated mysteries.

HANNAH

Did I say that? Not my usual fare. I don't respond well to clever. But, guess what, seems I know the author.

WILLIAM

Do you.

HANNAH

Think so. The photo on the back's a bit dated. I *Googled* the guy and – turns out – he was born and raised right here in good ol' Smallville.

WILLIAM

You don't say?!

HANNAH

Yup. And, as they say, the plot thickens. He went to the same high school where I teach.

WILLIAM

Quite a coincidence, given the size of the universe.

HANNAH

Is it? Correct me if I'm wrong, but in the well-conceived mystery there are no coincidences.

WILLIAM

Well, hardly earthshattering, at that.

HANNAH

Ah, it gets better.

(Checking her watch.)

What do I find at page six. Our murder – the scene of the crime - takes place in a city park very much, no, almost exactly like this one.

(Crossing to that same spot that WILLIAM focused on in Scene 1, indicating:)

I'd say right about here.

(Holding out her hand.)

Hannah Simpson. Two “Hs.” Beginning and end.

WILLIAM

A palindrome. William Kasinski, but you know that.

HANNAH

There were rumors we had a big shot novelist in town, or should I say back in town. Got to go, I'm in training.

(On exit.)

Nice meeting you Mr. Ka - have you thought about a *non'd plume*?

(On exit.)

If you'd like, if you're here Saturday, say about nine, we could kick around your book.

Figuratively speaking. I'm on page 207.

WILLIAM

I might be. You're sure you're not stalking me?

HANNAH

(Off:)

I know who the killer is!

BLACKOUT

Scene 7

(HANNAH sits on the bench alone, with two coffees. The paperback book is on her lap.

Momentarily, WILLIAM enters.)

WILLIAM

Good morning, thought you'd be gone. Sorry, long night. Was that better, the "sorry." I practiced in front of the mirror.

HANNAH

You're not very good at small talk are you.

(Handing him a coffee.)

It may not be hot now.

WILLIAM

My punishment.

HANNAH

There's fixings.

WILLIAM

I'm good.

(WILLIAM's cell phone buzzes, indicating a message. He checks the screen, then puts the phone away.)

So, you plowed through.

HANNAH

There was some plowing. I finished it.

WILLIAM

And?

HANNAH

I mean, no, it was fine.

WILLIAM

“It was fine.” There’s a pull quote for you.

HANNAH

Well, it *was* your first.

WILLIAM

Now you’re my apologist. I told you it was rubbish. If you want to talk about it, be honest for Christ’s sake. Don’t temporize, waste my time.

HANNAH

Okay. I’m not sure how much it matters at this point. I mean, you wrote it, what, forty years ago. So. It’s not rubbish. It’s not memorable either. Better? I actually liked it more than I thought I would. Maybe because I know you wrote it. Oh, your detective guy – Buscadoro – “seeker” in Spanish. A little on the nose.

WILLIAM

I was going for being inclusive.

HANNAH

Bueno. That means good. Anyway, I told you, I’m not a mystery fan. Not this kind.

WILLIAM

This kind?

HANNAH

Oh, the well-made, rather dry whodoneit. I mean, it really doesn't matter. I'm a bit of a lost cause when it comes to this. You can throw in some danger, surprise, violence, a little sex, a lot of sex, and I'll still feel *manipulated*.

WILLIAM

Whoa. While you're reading, or after the fact? You were never drawn in, into the story?

HANNAH

No, ... well, yes. I can admire it. It's all so carefully constructed, calibrated. A little too tidy. I hate puzzles, too, by the way. That's not life, real or imagined.

WILLIAM

Life.

HANNAH

Give me a messy poker game any day.

WILLIAM

Who's talking about life!?

HANNAH

Picky, picky. Alright, art. You can call it a mystery, but it's not *mysterious*. I'm afraid all I see is artifice. No, really. I mean, think about it. Well, of course you have. But you – as the architect of it all – you've got to know who did it, right? From the get-go. And then, what, I imagine you work backward from that, make it as hard as you can for us to figure it out, without giving up, or losing interest, *and* still remain plausible. I concede that's an art. Just not my art.

WILLIAM

You are stalking me. Don't stop now, you're on a roll.

HANNAH

So then you've got the big reveal, and we're supposed to go *aaah*, as we hear the tumblers *click* neatly into place. And we're left to wonder how we coulda possibly missed it. And, there we are - humbled, thankful, content, reverent.

WILLIAM

And resentful, don't forget resentful. I gather you had the wrong killer. You know you've just dismantled a whole literary genre.

HANNAH

William, if I may, I owned my bias. What can I say, I see the seams. It doesn't matter if it's you or Conan Doyle, or Dame Agatha. In the end, I'm no closer to understanding life. I find it all a bit of an idle distraction.

WILLIAM

Wait a minute, I entertain, I'm not a philosopher. I'm not here to help you understand life. I want you to join me in my world, get lost in it.

HANNAH

I get it, we need distractions. They serve a purpose. I just wasn't interested enough. I'm sure your later work is much more sophisticated, that you've honed your craft.

(A beat.)

Listen to me. It's the pedagogue in me. Sorry.

WILLIAM

You don't sound sorry.

HANNAH

I. Don't. Do. I.

WILLIAM

Ehh. I'm trying to feel defensive. Let's just say you're entitled to your opinion.

HANNAH

Oh, now, come on. I'm just a snotty creative writing teacher who likes her stories muddy, like life. You're the one with all the awards, a recent *Times*' best seller, *Outa Luck*?

WILLIAM

That was three years ago, as Selma, my agent, keeps reminding me.

HANNAH

Haven't read it.

WILLIAM

I'm sure you'd find it the same ol' same ol'.

HANNAH

Oh, now, that's not fair. We're talking here about something you wrote long ago. Are you saying your work hasn't evolved in all that time?

WILLIAM

Don't you have somewhere to run?

HANNAH

Benched, *plantar fasciitis*. Latin for bunged-up foot.

WILLIAM

Painful?

HANNAH

Oh yes! They say it's usually due to overuse – you're going along, invincible, and, *bam*, it's barking at you. By then, it's too late.

WILLIAM

And the cure?

HANNAH

Time. There's some exercises, a brace at night. Mainly, you wait it out. Very irritating. Shows up out of nowhere and you really don't know when it'll go away.

WILLIAM

Sounds like writer's block. Similar symptoms.

HANNAH

Ahh.

WILLIAM

So they say.

HANNAH

Is that why you're back here, you're between books right now?

WILLIAM

No, I've got something in the works. I don't talk about what I'm working on while I'm at it.

You do that, it just goes away, evaporates. Does that make any sense?

HANNAH

Seems reasonable. Speaking of your writing, how'd you like to come and talk to my creating writing and AP classes? Advanced Placement. School year ends next Friday. You'll be the honored guest, badge and all. Talk about your work, career, storytelling. How you busted out of this burg and found your Voice. It'd be a grand finale. The killer lesson plan I've been looking for.

WILLIAM

Not much of a public speaker.

HANNAH

Let me see your phone.

(WILLIAM hands HANNAH his phone, and through the following HANNAH inputs her contact information into the phone and hands it back to him.)

It's not a commencement address, William. Very informal. You might have fun. There's my contact info. Who knows, you might touch fledgling author, who goes on to change the world.

WILLIAM

Since I obviously haven't.

HANNAH

Look, you're here, you're from here, and you're back here. From a plot standpoint, this seems inevitable. Text me if you're in. We'll just have a conversation, a Q and A. Very low impact.

BLACKOUT

Scene 8

(Lights up on HANNAH and WILLIAM in a classroom. Each may carry on a stool or chair, and sit, joining an unseen classroom full of noisy students.)

HANNAH

Alright, everyone, let's get started. Hey, in the back!

(Classroom calms down, somewhat.)

(To WILLIAM:)

We have a few students from other classes – word got around. Paul?! Thank you. Our special guest today is home town novelist William Kasinski.

(A smattering of applause.)

Hey, come on! He hasn't been here since –

WILLIAM

- the last millennium.

(Stronger, yet still tepid applause.)

HANNAH

Better. As we've discussed, our guest grew up a few miles down the street and went to school on these very grounds -

HANNAH

(Perhaps consulting notes.)

Let's see... William – he said we could call him that - graduated here, according to him without honors, in 1974 [or 52 years ago] and is quoted as saying he "left town the next day for greener, bigger pastures, and tall buildings - Chicago." After finishing up grad school at Northwestern, our guest picked up his pen and has since authored 23 mystery novels, including the *Miller*

Wright detective series, now standing at, what, 14 books. Three times short-listed for the Edgar Award, for adult mystery novels. So, welcome back home-town boy, William Kasinski!

(Leading a more upbeat round of applause.)

So, let's take advantage of this rare opportunity to have a conversation with a dedicated and well-regarded alumni. Who'll start? Yes, Lenny.

[The questions/remarks from the class are heard OFF. Some speeches involve overlapping student VOICES. These may be pre-recorded.]

CLASS (Off.)

Any of your books made into a movie?

WILLIAM

No.

CLASS (Off.)

Anybody want to?

WILLIAM

They tried, I didn't. Yunno, film's a very different medium. "Art by Committee." I'm still trying to master this one. And, I'm not inclined to hand my story over to an industry that's all about commerce. (Rubbing fingers together.) Mulah -

CLASS (Off.)

You make a lot of scratch writing books?

WILLIAM

Money. I don't dwell on that too much, most of us just plod along. Probably minimum wage, when you add it all up.

CLASS (Off.)

How do you get by?

WILLIAM

Some teaching on the side, workshops. We, Clare, my wife...she taught too...some book reviews, delivering pizza, cat burglar! Just kidding, about the pizza.

HANNAH

Yes, Sarah.

CLASS (Off.)

Wikipedia says you're divorced.

WILLIAM

Ah, the gospel according to Wikipedia.

HANNAH

(An aside:)

They didn't have much time to prep.

WILLIAM

Well, yes, eventually. We remained friends. She's gone, now.

CLASS (Off.)

Like dead.

WILLIAM

No, actually dead. Several years ago. You heard it here first. Feel free to update my *Wiki* profile.

HANNAH

(Indicating.)

Okay. Yes, over here.

CLASS (Off.)

What's with the "William?" Yeah, why not Bill?

WILLIAM

I don't know. I like it better than Bill. My folks called me Billy, Bill. You can call me Bill if you like, I answer to William.

CLASS (Off.)

Are you he/him, she/her or they/them?

HANNAH

Lisa, that's not really why we're –

WILLIAM

(Overriding HANNAH.)

No, I'm hopelessly CIS. Right? Sorry/not sorry.

HANNAH

(Aside:)

You're a natural.

CLASS (Off.)

You use ChatGPT?

WILLIAM

What? Chat –

HANNAH

(Overlapping.)

We've been looking at AI. ChatGPT's –

WILLIAM

I know what it is. For God's sake, you mean to write? In my work? No!

CLASS (Off.)

It's right there. Everybody's using it.

WILLIAM

Oh, I forgot, we're *all* novelists now? Just a couple of prompts, push a button. Easy-peasy.

HANNAH

We've been exploring the boundaries of using it as a resource, the ethics of relying on it -

WILLIAM

I chisel every word. Have the calluses to prove it. I'm a wordsmith, not a machine.

HANNAH

(Sighs, indicating.)

Yes.

CLASS (Off.)

So, where do you get your stories, ideas?

WILLIAM

Why, I buy them on the writers' black market, like everyone else. There's this back alley on the dark web. Gotcha! The usual - experience, reading, *thinking*!

(Indicating head to hands.)

The idea starts here, and finds its way here. There's times I can feel it traveling down my arm.

But let's go back to AI. I agree with Vonnegut. Anybody?

(He looks at HANNAH.)

Christ! Who can tell me his first name?

CLASS (Off.)

Clyde/Who cares.

WILLIAM

(Awkward silence. Aside, to HANNAH.)

Really, honors? Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. You build the gizmos, you pay a price. Ask Kilgore Trout about technology. The danger.

HANNAH

Which is?

WILLIAM

More proficiency, less dignity, self-worth. And now AI thinking for us, storytelling. The “A” is for artificial. Why am I feeling like a fossil here? Do your homework.

HANNAH

Alright. Who hasn't asked a question. Heather?

CLASS (Off.)

Why do you write?

WILLIAM

Actually, that's a very good question. We're back on script. So, if you'd asked me that fifty years ago I'd said it's the path to fortune and fame – a way to get chicks – girls, *women*, be the hero of my own life, all that crap. Who knows? We've established it's not about money.

Alright: I've always had a need to tell stories, get lost in them. Try to make sense of it all, maybe entertain others, myself, along the way. Make an otherwise crazy, senseless, wacko world tolerable. Sound bleak? Don't make too much of it, I'm still here. I haven't plunged into the abyss, or sucked on a gun barrel, yet.

HANNAH

Anyone else?

CLASS (Off.)

What are you doing here? Yeah, why'd you come back?

WILLIAM

I wish I knew. It's a mystery.

CLASS (Off.)

Have you read any of Mrs. Simpson's books?

HANNAH

Jeff, this isn't about –

WILLIAM

Mrs. Simpson! Oh, well well. Books!? No, I haven't had the pleasure.

(Aside to HANNAH.)

Quite the coincidence.

CLASS (Off.)

She's a bad-ass. Writes yunno, under a different name/yeah/pseudo-Haley Gillis./YA stuff.

HANNAH

Young Adult.

WILLIAM

Yes, yes. YA, I'm not a complete moron. Can you still say moron? Haley, the bad-ass! You mighta said something.

HANNAH

...

CLASS (Off.)

Tell him about your movie deal./Yeah, your flick!

HANNAH

(Aside to WILLIAM:)

Just an option, tiny. Streaming.

(To class.)

This morning is not about me.

CLASS (Off.)

Her stuff is great. Yeah/savvy/everybody loves her/except the school board.

WILLIAM

HANNAH

Ah, banned in Smallville?

CLASS (Off.)

Let's move on – yes.

HANNAH

(Sighing.)

Language –

WILLIAM

Oh, probably more in the fucked-up column. Wandering around in the wilderness, like most of you, I suppose.

(Several beats.)

HANNAH

Alright. Does anyone have a question about writing, Mr. Kasinski's work? Yes, Kevin -

CLASS (Off.)

What are you writing now?

WILLIAM

Nothing special. Actually, nothing.

CLASS (Off.)

Are you retired?

WILLIAM

Nope. Just tired.

CLASS (Off.)

So you're stuck, like that writer's blockage Ms. S was talking about?/Writer's block.

WILLIAM

(Startled by questions.)

Well, Kevin, very pointed and searching question on your part – with maybe some help, huh?

Why don't you share with all of us what writer's block is, and I'll tell you if I'm afflicted.

(Several beats.)

Anyone? Well, I'm sure Mrs. Simpson, aka Gillis, can help us here. Please enlighten us, not that you've ever experienced it yourself.

HANNAH

Yes, well... We've covered the concept very briefly...if someone who, say, writes fiction, a YA novelist, for example...who, for whatever reason can't find a story to tell, or is stuck in the

middle of one...as you know, we call that writer's block. It's more complicated than that. Most writers confront it sooner or later, in one form or another. There's degrees.

WILLIAM

You can get a degree in writer's block?

HANNAH

Sometimes it's only a time out to, ah, recharge the batteries, recalibrate.

WILLIAM

Or *retire*, surrender. Kevin, does that sound about right? Good. Well, then, guilty as charged.

HANNAH

Oh, I'm sure you're being too hard on yourself, William.

WILLIAM

That's very kind. But, as I'm sure you know, as an established YA novelist, with a tiny film option, we run the risk every single day of everything coming to a terrifying, grinding halt.

Waking up and finding yourself emptied out. It's a crime you know.

CLASS (Off.)

Writer's block?

WILLIAM

No, blindsiding someone. I don't know about all of you but I'm about spent. Where the hell's a bell when you need one. Or maybe Ms. S has a final thought.

HANNAH

(Aside to WILLIAM:)

Why *did* you come back?

(Bell rings.)

BLACKOUT

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Scene 9

(The living room of the RBO where WILLIAM is staying. His bag or suitcase is visible. He's half asleep in a sofa chair, in dim light. The floor is littered with books and food/ drink remnants. There is a waste basket with burnt papers inside, still smoldering. A small amount of smoke rises from it. There is an exterior window frame near the chair. We hear persistent knocking, OFF, along with muffled calls from HANNAH - "William"/"Hello?" / "Anybody here?" WILLIAM stirs in response. The knocking/calling stops, and shortly HANNAH appears, on the opposite side of the stage, outside the house at the window. She taps on the window. A startled WILLIAM sees a figure in the window and jumps up and staggers to his bag/suitcase and pulls out a revolver, then crosses toward the window. HANNAH sees WILLIAM with the gun and ducks out of sight. After several beats HANNAH is again calling out OFF, from her original location, but more distinctly now:)

(Off.)

William? It's me.

HANNAH

WILLIAM

Who's me?

HANNAH

Hannah. I'm coming in.

WILLIAM

Christ!

HANNAH

Don't shoot! Please.

(HANNAH enters.)

WILLIAM

For God's sake!

HANNAH

Huh, it was unlocked.

WILLIAM

What the hell are you doing skulking around in the middle of the night?

HANNAH

(Referring to revolver:)

Could you...

(WILLIAM lowers the revolver; HANNAH checks the time.)

It's not even nine. I wanted to come by and thank you for yesterday.

WILLIAM

By scaring me to death? Get out of here.

HANNAH

I turned around and you were gone. I had another class.

WILLIAM

Don't sound so surprised. I came expecting a welcome wagon, and you'd assembled a lynch mob.

HANNAH

A bit melodramatic.

WILLIAM

You've said your thanks, next time send a card.

(HANNAH is taking in the room.)

How'd you find me?

HANNAH

Followed the bread crumbs. You left this address at the front office when you checked in.

WILLIAM

It's the little things that trip you up. Go!

HANNAH

I need a moment.

(Referring to gun.)

Is that real?

WILLIAM

Wanna find out?

HANNAH

You're scaring me, William.

WILLIAM

Then we're even. It's not loaded. Jesus, it's just a totem of sorts. Part of my writing kit. It's a kinesthetic thing. When I'm working on a murder I keep it handy, shells and all. Same with my Buck Knife. You hold it, feel it, cold and lethal.

(Putting revolver away.)

Gives me an edge as I shoot for verisimilitude, having not actually murdered anybody – yet.

HANNAH

So, you're alright?

WILLIAM

I've been better. It *is* a crime, yunno.

HANNAH

Trespassing.

WILLIAM

Bushwhacking.

HANNAH

The class? You were fine – I thought you held your own.

WILLIAM

Yet here you are, doing damage control.

HANNAH

Okay. They might have caught you a bit off-guard. I coulda briefed you better. These kids, everything's spontaneous, out loud, unfiltered. Welcome to the 21st century. More mosh pit than colloquium.

WILLIAM

Not that you primed them?

HANNAH

(At waste basket.)

What's this about?

WILLIAM

Do I have to call a cop? I don't know whether you're having a pang of conscience, or curious, or what. We're not playing nice.

(HANNAH picks up one of the books off the floor and looks at it.)

HANNAH

You're reading this?

WILLIAM

Read it.

(After several beats:)

Well?

WILLIAM

It's a fucking mess.

HANNAH

Thank you! That's exactly what I was going for.

WILLIAM

Then you're a shoe-in for this year's Fucking Mess Award. Congratulations.

HANNAH

You don't like it, I get it. It's not Mrs. White in the Study with the Candlestick.

WILLIAM

Just when you had me feeling guilty. I thought you were checking on me, turns out you're back for more.

HANNAH

You know nothing about YA. Ever been a teenager, left the 20th century – 19th century? This is their life.

(Again at the waste basket.)

What IS this?! I mean, this is dangerous, William. And, you, you look like hell. I'm concerned about your safety. And the town's. Is this why you came back, to burn it down?

WILLIAM

I'm not explaining myself to you. Why this fucking obsession with why I'm here? Town not big enough for the both of us? Chalk it up as my *Trip to Bountiful*, a last look at the old homestead.

HANNAH

That's actually a beautiful story. Horton Foote, isn't it? A bit sentimental for my tastes. You don't seem the kind. So, I'm going to call bullshit, unless you tell me you're dying. Are you?

WILLIAM

Not at the moment, to the best of my knowledge and belief.

HANNAH

Well, you look like you're dying. Smell like it, too.

(Referring to waste basket:)

And this?

WILLIAM

My life. Notes on my memoir.

HANNAH

Memoir!?

WILLIAM

Right, who could possibly care. A life in such a minor key!

HANNAH

No, it's...I thought you were working on a new novel.

WILLIAM

You're not leaving, are you?

HANNAH

Pretend I care, I don't know why. We could cut through all this and have a plain, old conversation.

(A beat.)

What's it called, your memoir?

WILLIAM

Squalor. Working title.

HANNAH

Inviting. No novel.

WILLIAM

Can't find a story worth telling. So Selma gets the bright idea - off the record!

(HANNAH assents.)

Selma -

HANNAH

- your agent.

WILLIAM

Thirty years. Thinks she owns me, since Clare died. Knows I'm stuck, now along with the rest of the world. She comes to me and says she's pitched a memoir to my publisher. I already owe 'em a book. She thought it might keep them at bay, get me off the dime. They went for it. I think she called in some chips. A modest advance for a ho-hum life. Understood. The contract had a blank for the title, I came up with *Squalor*. They liked it, intrigued anyway. Little did they know. She wrangles me a year. A month goes by sitting on my hands, she sends me a one-way bus ticket here. A bus ticket! Says go find the book or we're through. Told her I'll drive, thank

you. She gets me this shithole of a place. Not to worry, I'm gone tomorrow. You've done your due diligence Hannah with two H's, but it's over. Hannah. *Hannah*!?

(Singing:)

Hannah! H-a-n-n-a-h! Hannah Hannah Bo-ban-a, Banana-fana, Fo-fan-a, Fe-fi Mo-man-na
Hannah! Tune from my youth.*

(WILLIAM grabs the waste basket and THROWS UP in it.)

HANNAH

Shit!! William! William!! Hey!!! I'm calling 911!

WILLIAM

No!

HANNAH

Yes!

WILLIAM

Gimme a minute! Better yet, let me be.

HANNAH

What's wrong? Talk to me!

WILLIAM

Worst case of writer's block on record. Get outa here.

HANNAH

I'm not leaving you alone.

(Tries to help WILLIAM up.)

Come on! You can stay with us tonight. We'll get your stuff in the morning.

* See *The Name Game*, by Shirley Ellis, 1964.

WILLIAM

I'm fine, goddamit!

HANNAH

Grow up. You're sick, or drunk, or incredibly sad.

WILLIAM

It's a crime, yunno.

HANNAH

What, kidnapping?

WILLIAM

Caring for somebody.

BLACKOUT

Scene 10

(That next morning, HANNAH's living room. WILLIAM is drinking coffee, and looking at a framed photograph when HANNAH enters through the front door carrying a grocery bag.)

HANNAH

Good morning.

WILLIAM

We'll see.

(Referring to photograph.)

Least I'm in the right place.

HANNAH

Yeah, me and the boys. That's Joe on the left, Bobby on my right. See you found the coffee.

(HANNAH takes the photograph and crosses to the back and exits to what is the kitchen, OFF.)

I thought you'd sleep it off, sleep in. I needed to stock up, the cupboard was bare. I left you a note.

WILLIAM

News to me.

(HANNAH enters and shows him the note, then exits.)

HANNAH

(Off.)

So, how do we feel this morning?

WILLIAM

Old, beat up.

HANNAH

(Off.)

Those are self-inflicted wounds.

WILLIAM

Damn near see the whole town from here.

HANNAH

(Off.)

Where'd you grow up?

WILLIAM

Over off Elm. Between Elm and...Oak. On Third.

HANNAH

(Off.)

Third. Yeah, yeah.

(Entering.)

Hungry? I picked up some bacon and eggs.

WILLIAM

Where's the *us*? Last night, you said stay with us. Are your sons around?

HANNAH

Nope, just me and Tom, the cat. After they both had left for college, so did my ex. Not college – left left. I got the view, and Tom. *Us*. He's out mousing.

WILLIAM

Did you undress me?

HANNAH

I might've helped, more in a supervisory capacity. You were pretty wasted.

WILLIAM

I'm not one of those mean-drunk writers who peer into the darkness. Just off my game. I'm gonna take off. Can you run me back over?

HANNAH

What's the hurry, William? You not missing your shithole? At least have breakfast. Your stuff's in the wash, anyway.

(Referring to clothes.)

Those were the boys'. Bobby's shirt, Joe's pants. *Aahh*, you're worried about the optics. Single school marm has tall, dark, rugged, stranger houseguest. I'm working on that. If anyone asks, I'm going with the visiting, long-lost uncle trope. Whaddya think?

WILLIAM

I've got to get back. Mail me my stuff, a, C.O.D.

HANNAH

(Laughing.)

C.O.D.? Who says that? Back to what? The novel you can't find? Your memoir. My bet is you haven't given it a chance. Have you forgot how easy it is *not* to write. Really write. Maybe you're right. Maybe you're just tired now. You're what, seventy-one, two. I'm fifty-some and feel every inch of it.

WILLIAM

You're a kid.

HANNAH

What's the harm in giving this a couple a days. See if you can find a thread. You're welcome to stay downstairs. Bobby's old room – fortress. He liked his privacy. It'd be an upgrade, and the price is right. Daylight basement, own bath, bed, desk – everything but a sauna and outside entrance. I'd let you be. Or, if you need anything, a local guide. Hey, speaking of which, whaddya say you show me your old house? Seems like a natural place to start.

WILLIAM

Why do you give a shit about my life story - you don't even like my work?!

HANNAH

You keep saying that! I've been straight with you. It's not my kind of storytelling, but you've mastered it. Made your mark, have a following. You're an accomplished writer, William, whose absolutely stuck, big time. Well, am I wrong? That speaks to me. Actually, that worries me. You need to ask yourself why it's happening, or get a whole lot better at ignoring it. Your Selma might be right. Maybe somewhere here you'll find something new to explore, say. If I can help, as a colleague, make that happen then I'm in. And, anyway, it's summer vacation, and I'm free as a bird.

WILLIAM

My turn to call bullshit. What do you want from me?

HANNAH

Okay, I'm working on a longer piece. One for grownups. Here I am trying to get my bearings, and here you are right under my nose. It's all a bit unsettled right now. I mean, I'm still of the

fucking mess school of thought, but that doesn't mean I couldn't benefit from your wisdom and more linear, orderly approach.

WILLIAM

And my connections.

HANNAH

I'm not a leech. I've got my own connections, thank you. And, who knows, maybe we can help each other. There are no coincidences, right. Oh, hey, I forgot. Just a sec. I've got something for you in the car. A peace offering.

(HANNAH exits out the front. Momentarily, WILLIAM exits through the back and returns with his shoes. He realizes he has no socks, but is putting the shoes on anyway when HANNAH returns and hands WILLIAM an oversized book.)

Your yearbook, senior year. I borrowed it from the library. I thought it might, oh, serve as a prompt.

(WILLIAM opens the book to a tabbed page and stares at it, joined by HANNAH.)

You've kinda got that same look. Like, get outta my way, you're wasting my time. I've places to be, stories to tell.

WILLIAM

You got my phone?

(HANNAH exits to the back, as WILLIAM examines the book. HANNAH returns with his phone, wallet and other items and hands them to WILLIAM.)

HANNAH

Phone, wallet, keys and two dollars and...thirty-three cents.

(WILLIAM takes the phone and immediately dials a number, then listens:)

WILLIAM

(To HANNAH.)

Wanna receipt?

(Frustrated at what he hears; into phone:)

Call me, now!

(WILLIAM signs off, then uses his phone to take a photo of HANNAH, then works intently with his phone through the following:)

HANNAH

What's going -

WILLIAM

I know what you're doing. I know who you are.

HANNAH

...

(SOUND of message being sent.)

WILLIAM

I mean, she *is* that diabolical. Are you?

HANNAH

Who?

WILLIAM

This was fishy from the start. We just *happened* to run into each other in the park.

HANNAH

What, no, who are you talking about?

WILLIAM

Selma! Using you for ah, what - bait. A spy. The memoir. She sets you up as her, her operative, her *Man in Havana*. I hope she's paying you well. She'll do whatever it goddam takes to keep her scribblers in line - productive and profitable.

(WILLIAM's cellphone rings, and he answers it:)

(Into phone:)

What! Too bad, the rest of the world's been up for hours. You get the photo? Just now. You do too! That's crap. I know you hired her. Hannah, aka Haley somebody.

(Aside to HANNAH:)

Is she your agent?!

HANNAH

WILLIAM

(Into phone:)

Using her to keep me on task, that's what!

(WILLIAM listens.)

Okay, fine. Am I. Just forget it. It would be just like – Selma?

(SELMA has hung up.)

HANNAH

Well? What'd she say?

WILLIAM

She's blocking my number until I give her a chapter. Called me an idiot. You're not –

HANNAH

No!

(Laughing.)

Fishy. Bait? Really, William. If it wasn't so funny, ironic, it would be scary. I don't know what you're afraid of unless it's the *end*. I am not your Selma's accomplice, or here to seduce your old wrinkled ass, or use you up. And, when I think about it, I'm not really sure if I wanna help you at all. What I am here, in our story, and you should know this, is the classic *red herring*, ginned up by you to lay blame where it doesn't belong. To avoid dealing with whatever's eating you up. I mean, you've known me for five minutes. Selma's known you for thirty years. And it sounds like she's got your number, and you're just blowing her off. You owe her more than that.

(On exit to kitchen.)

Now, I don't know about you, but I'm starving!

(HANNAH exits. SOUND of pots and pans, etc. OFF. WILLIAM picks up the yearbook, opening it to the tabbed page. He then thumbs through the rest of the yearbook, stopping abruptly at another page. He tears out the page, folds it up and pockets it.)

(YOUNG ANNA appears, fleetingly, and is gone.)

(Off:)

How do you like your eggs?

WILLIAM

Cooked.

BLACKOUT

Scene 11

(Early morning. WILLIAM stands on the sidewalk in his old neighborhood, taking in his unseen childhood home. A hopscotch game pattern is rendered in chalk on the sidewalk. He uses his phone to take several photos of the family home, and then scans the other houses nearby. WILLIAM focuses in on one house, but, hesitating, chooses not to photograph it.)

(As WILLIAM does this, YOUNG ANNA BRIEFLY APPEARS IN THE DISTANCE,
AND THEN IS GONE.)

(A car door closing is heard OFF, and shortly HANNAH enters in workout clothes, towel around her neck.)

Good morning!

HANNAH

WILLIAM

...

HANNAH

(Wiping her face with towel.)

Figured you were here. I thought we were going together after my workout. You walked down?

(WILLIAM nods.)

Good for you.

WILLIAM

I might catch a ride back.

HANNAH

Sure. So, this is it?

WILLIAM

Hardly *Graceland*.

HANNAH

You get some photos?

(WILLIAM nods, indicating phone.)

So, what's the first thing went through your mind? When you saw it. Very first thing.

WILLIAM

Size. Everything's so small. Almost miniature. Nothing to scale.

HANNAH

Okay, that's a start. Something to ponder. I mean, we know it didn't shrink. Of course, you're bigger, but it's probably more than that, right? Oh, hey, let me get one with you. Come on, come on.

(HANNAH takes WILLIAM's phone and WILLIAM reluctantly poses in front of his childhood home. HANNAH takes several photos, then gives WILLIAM his phone back.)

How long did you live here?

WILLIAM

Born here. Left after high school graduation.

HANNAH

And the neighborhood?

WILLIAM

Pretty much the same, couple stop signs I don't remember.

HANNAH

Oh, William, you can do better than that. All the living that must have gone on around here, in there.

WILLIAM

Didn't pay that much attention at that time. Pretty routine, father a postman, mother part-time checker. Everybody home by five, dinner at six, lights out - well, it evolved as we got older. They were in bed by ten, always by ten. Pretty simple, really.

HANNAH

There's what, maybe a couple paragraphs. William, they're not going to care about a new stop sign, or the family meal time. They want details, the juicier the better.

WILLIAM

Then I'll just have to make some shit up.

HANNAH

Isn't this supposed to be real life?

WILLIAM

You remember what you were doing when you were five years old?

HANNAH

Yes. Some. Sure, it's been 60-70 years. You've got to work at this, *want* to remember. Look, I checked out who lives here. They've got kids in the grade school, and a friend of mine has one of them in class. I'm sure she'd be willing to reach out to the folks, if you want to take a look inside, see what it jars loose.

WILLIAM

I'll think about it.

HANNAH

You are one tough nut to crack.

(HANNAH tosses her towel aside and, using her keys as a marker, starts playing hopscotch on the sidewalk.)

WILLIAM

Then stop trying. Maybe I should change the working title to “One Tough Nut to Crack.”

HANNAH

If you’re not going to take this seriously give the advance back and go take up golf, or checkers.

Or hopscotch.

(HANNAH completes one round.)

You’re up. Did you play?

WILLIAM

Maybe once or twice. We played dodge ball. This was for sissies. I know, I know –

HANNAH

There! You see, already a little nugget. The boy-girl thing. Go with that, see where it leads.

(Giving WILLIAM her keys.)

Use these to lag. They’re pretty good. I had this little bag of pennies.

(WILLIAM is poised to start.)

Here.

(HANNAH takes his phone from him and puts it with her towel.)

You’ve got to toss ‘em inside the first square to start. Then to the end and back. You pick up the marker on the way back – bending over, no lines.

WILLIAM

(Big sigh. WILLIAM lags then steps over the first square, planting a foot in each of the succeeding squares.)

HANNAH

(Protesting.)

Ah, no. *Uh-huh!* Go back, start over. It's called *hopscotch!* You got to hop, mister.

(WILLIAM lags again, then successfully completes the round.)

Not bad! Feeling six yet, and "as clever as clever"?

(HANNAH takes the keys back and lags to the second square and successfully completes another round.)

Yeah! Take that!!

WILLIAM

(Grabbing the keys from HANNAH:)

You've got 20 years on me, hot shot.

(WILLIAM lags towards the second square, but the keys land on the line. HANNAH makes a loud SOUND, suggesting he's disqualified.)

HANNAH

Out.

WILLIAM

What do you mean, it's close enough!

HANNAH

On the line.

WILLIAM

...

HANNAH

Okay, *one* do-over. That's all you get. 'Cause you're old.

(WILLIAM successfully re-lags and then works his way up and back the grid, but loses his balance on the return and falls, GROANING loudly.)

(Going to WILLIAM.)

William! You okay?!

WILLIAM

Old guy breaks back while working on memoir.

HANNAH

Can you get up?

WILLIAM

I don't know!

HANNAH

Really, anything broke? Let me help.

WILLIAM

Why'd I ever – no!

HANNAH

Okay! Okay.

WILLIAM

I can't fall any more. Give me a minute, dammit. I'm fine.

(Several beats.)

My father fell off that roof.

HANNAH

What? When?

WILLIAM

Trying to fix the antenna, for the TV. It was all about antennas back then.

HANNAH

And?

WILLIAM

He landed in the flower bed, we watched it happen. Scared the hell outa me. My sister tried to catch him.

HANNAH

Sister?

WILLIAM

Jennifer. Mother comes bursting out of the house and says *I told you.*

HANNAH

Was he okay?

WILLIAM

Broke his arm. He actually *bounced*, you could see the bone.

HANNAH

How old were you?

WILLIAM

Maybe third, fourth grade.

HANNAH

And Jennifer?

WILLIAM

Must have been around twelve.

HANNAH

Where's she now?

WILLIAM

Heaven, according to mother.

HANNAH

I'm sorry.

WILLIAM

Lymphoma.

HANNAH

When was all that?

WILLIAM

Must have been 7th grade.

HANNAH

Were you close.

WILLIAM

I guess so. Close as you can get to an older sister who treats you as a leper when anybody's around. It was better after she got sick. She couldn't talk to them, so we'd talk, usually at night. She's the first one I told, about wanting to write.

HANNAH

What'd she say.

WILLIAM

Don't remember. But that Christmas she gave me a thesaurus.

HANNAH

And the folks.

WILLIAM

The house got pretty quiet, they moved down south the year after I graduated.

HANNAH

Seems like, hard as it is, you've tapped into something here, William. This is good! Don't you agree? Way beyond stop signs. Now you have to dig deeper.

WILLIAM

(Shrugs.)

Not sure why I'm here. Sure as hell isn't the money. Washed up second-rate mystery writer, I mean, who cares.

HANNAH

Uh-huh. This, this is good stuff. Give it some time. But you need to drill down. Make it happen. You said in class you were fucked up. Was losing Jennifer part of it all?

WILLIAM

Oh, who knows. It *was* the 70's. I was an odd bird, anyway, brown shoe kinda guy. Band, chess club. Who does that, unless they're already fucked up?

HANNAH

That cultural stuff, I'm sure you can work it in, but you gotta stay in the weeds. The personal stuff. So, what else is there about here that you can tap? Who'd you play with, your best friend, the girl next door?

WILLIAM

Troy and Jimmy. We hung out a lot 'til they discovered sports, and I kept my nose in the books. *Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, Sherlock.*

HANNAH

Maybe they're still around.

WILLIAM

I doubt it. We weren't that close, anyway.

HANNAH

You should track them down. What's the harm? And the girl next door?

WILLIAM

(Another glimpse of YOUNG ANNA, who then disappears.)

Three doors down, from first grade on. Ah, Ann.

HANNAH

(OLDER ANNA appears briefly, then is gone.)

Ann? This sounds promising. Ann. You're sure.

WILLIAM

(Working at standing up.)

Enough, I'm heading back.

HANNAH

Come on, I'll give you a ride old man. I wanna hear more about *Anna* - ah, Ann.

WILLIAM

(Stopping suddenly, WILLIAM stares at HANNAH.)

I'll walk.

(HANNAH picks up her towel, and WILLIAM's phone with it.)

HANNAH

Sure, I'll, I'll start on lunch.

WILLIAM

Not hungry.

HANNAH

Okay. Oh, say, I just thought...I've got something else that might help you along. I'll set 'em on the bed downstairs.

(On exit.)

You're sure you don't want a ride?

(WILLIAM shakes his head, and HANNAH starts to leave.)

WILLIAM

Hey -

(HANNAH stops.)

HANNAH

Yeah.

WILLIAM

You need to back off.

(HANNAH exits. WILLIAM stares after her.)

BLACKOUT

DO NOT COPY

Scene 12

(BOBBY's old room in the basement of HANNAH's house. The basement stairs, leading to the upstairs main floor entrance, and a portion of the main floor hallway area are visible. On the bed in the basement is a pile of WILLIAM's clothes, some water bottles, and a deli sandwich. WILLIAM's suitcase/bag is nearby. WILLIAM appears on the main floor, and stops at the basement door, and listens. Hearing nothing, WILLIAM goes down to the basement. He puzzles at the water and food, then picks up the suitcase/bag and starts packing. As he does so, he finds his phone and unsuccessfully attempts to make a call.)

WILLIAM

What the hell...

(Calling OFF.)

Hannah!

(HANNAH appears at the basement doorway.)

What's with the reception down here?

(HANNAH retreats, shutting the basement door. She works the keypad outside the door, locking WILLIAM in. She then exits, returning with a chair that she props under the basement door doorknob, for good measure. WILLIAM hears the distinct click of the lock, and crosses up the stairs and tries to open the door.)

Hey, what is this?!

HANNAH

(Perhaps sitting on the floor, leaning against the hallway wall.)

Bobby's security system. His hedge against snooping parents, and an unkind world. Bobby loves gizmos. He gave me the code when he moved out.

WILLIAM

(Unsuccessfully working the keypad on the basement wall.)

Open the goddam door, Hannah! I'm leaving.

HANNAH

You're not going anywhere.

WILLIAM

You want me to kick it in, break a window? Try me. What are you, nuts? What's going on!?

HANNAH

I'm here to help you with your memoir, *Willie*. Dig it all up, like it or not. Win you that Pulitzer! If not you, me.

WILLIAM

What'd you say?

HANNAH

Willie. She called you Willie, right? Your "Ann." You signed her senior yearbook "Chicago here we come – XXO, Willie." I've got it upstairs.

WILLIAM

Who are you?

HANNAH

Oh, just stupid 'ole me.

(OLDER ANNA appears.)

Guess I couldn't let you get away with calling her Ann. Her name was *Anna*. Couldn't let you lie like that. Just as well, I'm tired of the cat and mouse. You know damn well who I am.

WILLIAM

No, really, are we related?

HANNAH

Ninety eight point seven percent match, according to 23 & Me, Ancestry.Com. One hundred percent according to Mother.

(OLDER ANNA is gone.)

Forgot to give you these in all the excitement.

(HANNAH shoves two envelopes under the basement door.)

WILLIAM

You're my daughter?

HANNAH

No. You're my biological father.

WILLIAM

(Overwhelmed.)

My God...

(WILLIAM retrieves envelopes. He will look at the contents of each envelope through the following:)

HANNAH

Well?

WILLIAM

How is this possible. I, I can't believe -

HANNAH

- Can't or won't. Like you didn't know. Smart guy like you. Big shot storyteller. Creator of Miller Wright, Master Detective.

WILLIAM

Open the door, Hannah.

HANNAH

Not a chance. You're a runner, Willie.

WILLIAM

Stop calling me that! This is...I, I didn't know.

HANNAH

Sure, sure. This morning, you just forgot her name was Anna. Ann! She was Anna all her life.

You knew.

WILLIAM

That's not true. I mean, yes, I knew it was Anna's house. I don't know, I wasn't ready to say her name.

HANNAH

Why Willie?!

WILLIAM

I'm not a liar. I, I don't know what I am.

(OLDER ANNA appears.)

(Holding up a paper from one of the envelopes.)

But you. You knew! This one's ten years old! You've known all this time? Never reached out.

Playing puppet master since I got here? Your mother never said a word to me.

HANNAH

Wonder why! That was her choice, her right.

(OLDER ANNA disappears.)

WILLIAM

I haven't seen her in fifty years, since graduation.

(YOUNG ANNA appears.)

YOUNG ANNA

Wasn't it a lovely ceremony.

WILLIAM

It was okay.

YOUNG ANNA

It did get a little tedious. That's graduations for you. Willie, don't forget after the reception, our picnic.

WILLIAM

Anna, really. I don't know what's left to talk –

YOUNG ANNA

- oh, now, we've come too far to just shake hands and walk away. We can celebrate all that we've had.

WILLIAM

Alright.

YOUNG ANNA

(Handing WILLIAM the map.)

Here's the map I made.

WILLIAM

Of the park? Anna, I know my way around the park.

YOUNG ANNA

Follow the squiggly lines to the spot.

(YOUNG ANNA disappears.)

WILLIAM

Is she alive?

HANNAH

She died in January. By the inch, breast cancer. In and out of treatment for years. She didn't deserve that either.

WILLIAM

I'm sorry.

HANNAH

Touching. You're quite the pro at that.

WILLIAM

I didn't know, Hannah.

HANNAH

Ahh, you want to plead down to a case of willful blindness. I don't think so.

WILLIAM

How in God's name would I have known, or had any idea. I, I wondered...

(A beat.)

I wondered...

HANNAH

Wondered?

WILLIAM

That first day in the park. Your voice.... Immediately, it sounded familiar.... I couldn't place it. The way you twirl your hair. She'd do that when she was upset, or her mind was somewhere else. But I never really thought - you're nothing like her. You're more -

HANNAH

What?

WILLIAM

Like me.

HANNAH

Fuck you!

WILLIAM

Yeah. Fuck me.

HANNAH

What would make you think there's any part of you in me, besides genetics?

WILLIAM

Your energy. You seem willing to grab a hold of things, shake them up. Relentlessly. Anna wasn't like that. Daring. Oh, she'd try. Get right up to the edge. It wasn't in her. I know goddam well she wouldn't have kidnapped me.

HANNAH

What about "Chicago here we come, XXO?"

WILLIAM

When I wrote that, it was settled. We loved each other. We were going, making a life together.

(YOUNG ANNA reappears.)

YOUNG ANNA

Willie, I'm thrilled for you. Northwestern!

WILLIAM

They were starting up a creative writing program.

YOUNG ANNA

For us. When's the Fall Term start? New city, new friends, new life! New, new, new!! So many questions. Where will we live? How will I balance my work, classes?

WILLIAM

This was it.

YOUNG ANNA

Chicago.

WILLIAM

I'd been writing stories since we were kids. I was so hungry for more, so ready.

YOUNG ANNA

What an adventure. I mean, Chicago! Oh, Willie, we have to have a plan.

HANNAH

But, there was no we. You left.

WILLIAM

Is that what she told you?

HANNAH

That's what you did.

WILLIAM

No. She stayed.

YOUNG ANNA

I've tried, Willie. I really did. I even fooled myself.

(YOUNG ANNA disappears.)

HANNAH

So it was all her fault.

WILLIAM

No. There is no fault. Just each of us needing to do what they needed to do. Except for you.

She had no right –

HANNAH

Yes, she did.

WILLIAM

How long have you known about me?

HANNAH

Since the first test.

WILLIAM

Ten years, and you did nothing. What about before? All that time growing up.

(OLDER ANNA reappears.)

What'd she say? About who I, who your father, was.

OLDER ANNA

(To HANNAH.)

Remind me who she is?

HANNAH

Julie. Mom, only my best friend. She sits next to me in class, she's been over. She asked me again today. She's not the only one. The teachers, sometimes, I don't know what to say.

OLDER ANNA

You don't say anything. Tell them it's none of their business.

HANNAH

I can't do that. Isn't it my business?

OLDER ANNA

Someday, child. Always in a hurry. Rush, rush, rush.

HANNAH

You always say that. Does he know about me, who I am? Did the stork bring me?!

OLDER ANNA

Don't be a smart aleck. No one likes a smart aleck. He's irrelevant, a biological footnote. A nobody. Everything that's anything, you got from me. But, you're right, you're getting older, it's a little bit your business. So, we'll talk about this, and then we won't again.

(Several beats.)

HANNAH

Momma?

OLDER ANNA

Yes. Yes. Of course we had sex. Sexual intercourse. You know about that, right?

HANNAH

A little. Some.

OLDER ANNA

No need to draw a map. We'll talk when you're older. Anyway, we did it. Once. Once too many. And here you are.

HANNAH

So, who was -

OLDER ANNA

I'm getting there, Hannah. Patience . We barely knew each other. I was young and...young for my age. I got pregnant. I wasn't well versed. Age of Aquarius, my eye. You're not ready for all that now. You will be, believe me I'll see you're prepared! It was one weekend. We went our separate ways. I never loved him. He didn't love me, hardly knew me. Sounds so tawdry. I loved you from the minute I saw you! Know that. That's the only thing that matters. He, he died in a motorcycle accident that fall.

WILLIAM

Where did all that come from. The motorcycle's a nice touch.

OLDER ANNA

Served him right, may he rest in peace.

WILLIAM

She was always terrified by motorcycles.

OLDER ANNA

And, no, we were never married.

HANNAH

Is that what I say?

OLDER ANNA

No! I told you, tell them it's none of their damn business. Tell them that. It's barely any of your business. If they keep at it, send them to me and I'll give them what for. People have a right to privacy, Hannah. Their own story. You do not have to broadcast your life, explain yourself. Every family has things like this. It's how it is.

HANNAH

That was the family history, growing up and beyond. She insisted. I shared it with my own family, my children. Everyone took an oath, for her sake. 'Til Bobby went off to college, DNA testing came along, and he sent in his sample. Some cousin of yours was in the system, and it all led back to you. That put an end to what we called mom's Bad Boy story. Bobby came to me with the results. Said what now. I showed them to her.

OLDER ANNA

My own grandson. Going behind my back, sick as I am.

HANNAH

Mom, he's young, curious. These tests are available now. It's the latest thing.

OLDER ANNA

Making me out to look the fool.

HANNAH

Well....

OLDER ANNA

I'm tired now.

(OLDER ANNA is gone.)

HANNAH

I got the other one after she died.

WILLIAM

So, she lied to you.

HANNAH

To protect me, herself. I don't blame her.

WILLIAM

And all of you left me in the dark.

HANNAH

You're the one who skipped out.

(YOUNG ANNA reappears.)

WILLIAM

I don't know what you think you know. One day we're mapping out our life...

(A beat, then suddenly:)

What? What did you say? Anna?

YOUNG ANNA

I can't.

WILLIAM

Can't?

YOUNG ANNA

Leave.

WILLIAM

When did you – Anna, we put down a deposit on the apartment.

YOUNG ANNA

...

WILLIAM

It came out of nowhere. We were graduating in weeks. I start summer classes in a month. Take a deep breath. Tell me what's going on.

YOUNG ANNA

I haven't been sleeping. It's...I keep wondering if we're ready. Whether I'm ready? We're teenagers, Willie.

WILLIAM

Anna, we are ready! We are so ready. I know I laughed at your plan, writing it all out. But you were right, it's all laid out in your notebook, called it our *Great Adventure*. We're adults, we have a plan, and it's in place, step by step.

YOUNG ANNA

I know, I know. It's all there. I keep asking myself why, what's the hurry.

WILLIAM

It's started, Anna, we're already on the way. And you trust me.

(YOUNG ANNA nods.)

And I love you and you love me, and we're *us*.

(YOUNG ANNA laughs.)

YOUNG ANNA

Oh, Willie, you know I love you. I've loved you since third grade, when you tripped me walking by your desk.

WILLIAM

You weren't looking where you were going.

YOUNG ANNA

I am, now. And, please, I can't. Not yet.

WILLIAM

When? Was she like that later on?

(YOUNG ANNA looks at WILLIAM, as OLDER ANNA reappears.)

HANNAH

No, we will talk about this, now.

OLDER ANNA

No.

HANNAH

OLDER ANNA

Yes!

HANNAH

This is my life, not yours.

What do I tell the boys? My husband? I know you're sick, the treatment. It's not the best timing. But this could all have been avoided.

OLDER ANNA

Stop yelling.

HANNAH

I'm not yelling, mom. I'm not yelling. But we are going to talk. I just found out my father wasn't a low-life who died in a motorcycle crash, and that you haven't told me the truth in forty

years. That he's alive and a novelist and, my God, I think I've seen him interviewed on some talk show.

WILLIAM

Dick Cavett.

HANNAH

So, if I am yelling, deal with it. What happened?

OLDER ANNA

I realized I wasn't ready, and he couldn't wait. Wouldn't wait. So he took off to live his life.

HANNAH

And what about me? The baby.

OLDER ANNA

I...

WILLIAM

Hell, no, I didn't know.

HANNAH

But you were having sex. Unprotected sex.

WILLIAM & OLDER ANNA

Yes.

OLDER ANNA

That once.

YOUNG ANNA

I'm glad you came, Willie. I know you think I've let you down. Us down.

HANNAH

You didn't tell him.

OLDER ANNA

...

WILLIAM

(Handing YOUNG ANNA the map.)

Nice map.

YOUNG ANNA

There's chicken, wine. I feel awful. You feel awful. But we have to find a way past this.

Please. Pretend this is one of those tea parties you endured when we were kids. Tell me you don't hate me.

WILLIAM

I don't hate you, Anna. I want us to be together. Just not here.

OLDER ANNA

Fact is, he didn't love me enough. Yes, I got cold feet. I was born with them. He knew that. I'm cautious by nature, so sue me. He wouldn't hear of it. I don't know why he was so surprised. We'd always had different ways, different gears. He was the hare, I was the tortoise. Like him, I wanted to move on. That was enough for me. I wasn't ready to get swallowed up in a whole new world.

YOUNGER ANNA

You can write here, Willie. Right here. You can write anywhere.

WILLIAM

I guess. But I don't want to. Junior college's a joke. They've invited me to something new and exciting, Anna. Something big.

YOUNG ANNA

Bigger than me.

WILLIAM

Come on! This feels like it could be the major leagues. I know you see that. And just because I want this doesn't mean I don't ache at the thought of losing you. Why do you have to look so fetching tonight.

YOUNG ANNA

(Playfully.)

I should hope so. See what you'll be missing.

WILLIAM

That's not fair. Then, we were kissing.

OLDER ANNA

Then we're messing around.

YOUNG ANNA

(Giggling, somewhat.)

Willie, what are you doing? We'll squish the pie.

HANNAH

No -

OLDER ANNA

No!

WILLIAM

Pie, shmie, it'll taste just the same. You started it.

HANNAH

No, no.

YOUNG ANNA

Willie, what, no...Willie no...what are we doing?!

OLDER ANNA

And then he found a whole new gear. And I couldn't breathe, and it was over.

WILLIAM

It just happened. We got caught up.

YOUNGER ANNA

Oh, Willie!

HANNAH

Caught up!

WILLIAM

We sat and watched the sunset, hardly said a word. It was weird.

(YOUNG ANNA and OLDER ANNA are gone.)

(HANNAH hurriedly unlocks the basement door and crosses downstairs to confront WILLIAM.)

HANNAH

Caught up? Caught up!! Fetching. What are you saying – that she *invited* all that, that she *seduced* you?!

WILLIAM

No, no, that's – never! I don't know, we got carried away, both of us. It was like we combusted.

HANNAH

That is pure fiction! She resisted, and you know it! You said she said *no*.

WILLIAM

That's, that's not true.

HANNAH

Admit it!

WILLIAM

She was the love of my life. Sure, I was selfish, guilty. I couldn't, wouldn't conform my life to hers, make it work. I've regretted that. I didn't have a relationship worth a damn for years. But, force myself on her – no!

HANNAH

You said it – she said "no, Willie."

WILLIAM

She said it, yes, but it wasn't that way.

HANNAH

Oh, yes it was.

WILLIAM

You weren't there. Is that what she told you?

HANNAH

That's what happened. That's exactly what she told me.

WILLIAM

Then she'd gone mad, Hannah.

HANNAH

So it's she said, he said. That's your defense?

WILLIAM

No. I have no defense.

HANNAH

You're right there.

WILLIAM

What, you're gonna prosecute me. Is that what this is?

HANNAH

Oh, you know it's far too late for that. But I can out you for the evil motherfucker that you are.

WILLIAM

You'd do that?

HANNAH

Watch me. It'll be a runaway best seller.

(WILLIAM hurriedly gathers his belongings and suitcase/bag.)

Where you goin', Willie??!

WILLIAM

(Crossing to the basement door.)

Get out of my way! I'm not a MON-ster, Hannah.

(WILLIAM exits.)

HANNAH

(Calling OFF:)

Run, Willie, run!!

(Several beats.)

It's a crime, yunno...

(Alone, HANNAH collapses.)

BLACKOUT

Scene 13

(WILLIAM is in the City park, early morning, pre-dawn. He stands at the overlook, the revolver held at his side. HANNAH enters, unnoticed, and stands watching him. Finally:)

HANNAH

Hello.

WILLIAM

Still stalking me? How'd you find me this time?

HANNAH

Added me to your “Find my Phone.” You been up all night? The scene of the crime. What’s with the gun?

WILLIAM

I’m thinking of killing myself, unless you want to volunteer. I have no idea why, a thousand years ago, I set that first murder scene here, of all places. There are no coincidences. They tell you when you start, write what you know. I don’t remember what I knew back then. I have no memory of forcing myself on your mother. Raping her. Anna thought I did. I can’t ask you to ignore that. For you, it’s settled. There’s nothing I can say that will change your mind. But, I need to know, for myself. Whether I’m a liar, a denier, a confabulator, or just plain evil. Otherwise, I’m lost. You could help.

HANNAH

Why would I help you?

WILLIAM

Not help. Ah, grill me, dig down. Replace doubt with certainty, one way or the other.

HANNAH

So you can exonerate yourself -

WILLIAM

- or convict.

HANNAH

- win me over with some well-crafted air tight justification you been plotting out to a fine point.

WILLIAM

That's no good around here. We're in your world now, where I can't trust myself and you're the only one who knew her, who can stand in for her. Ask me anything.

HANNAH

Anything.

WILLIAM

Tear me apart.

HANNAH

(After several beats, referring to the revolver:)

Give me that.

(WILLIAM hands her the revolver. HANNAH starts to raise the revolver and point it at WILLIAM, but hesitates, and continues to hold it through the following.)

Why'd you come here that day? You were angry, you said it was over.

WILLIAM

Angry? More likely frustrated. It was hard to get angry at Anna. She wasn't willful.

HANNAH

You came here to change her mind. Do whatever it took to throw her over your shoulder.

WILLIAM

Maybe. As I walked up here tonight, following the squiggly line, some of it came back. Classic Anna. Why didn't I see it. Yes, I guess I had to try. We had an apartment, summer classes were weeks away, she was starting on the pill. We were done fumbling around, going to be adults. She even bought a copy of *The Joy of Sex*. That was daring, for her. We'd known each other since grade school. I think we both came here out of hope. She wasn't trying to seduce me and I don't believe I was out to make some cave-man move, engage in some kind of revenge sex. Punish her. No.

HANNAH

So you claim. When she was dying those last few months, we finally talked. She'd held it in all those years. Not to a friend, pastor, family - no one. I think at the end she was afraid. She knew I needed to know more, wanted to see you for myself. She thought I wouldn't honor her wish, her ultimatum. So she told me what you'd done, and that you'd admitted it.

WILLIAM

What did she say?

HANNAH

No. You tell me.

WILLIAM

How would I know what was going on inside her.

HANNAH

No, what she said. You heard her say "no," but you didn't stop. Yes or no?

WILLIAM

I, yes. But, I didn't have any sense – it wasn't that kind of no.

HANNAH

Was she enjoying herself? Was she enjoying herself??!

WILLIAM

This was all new for both of us. I think as much as she could. Either of us could.

HANNAH

Did she climax, William? Did she?!

WILLIAM

No. More of a gasp.

HANNAH

And afterwards, were there sweet nothings in your ear?

WILLIAM

Like I said, we sat there. It was quiet. I took her home. I tried to see her afterwards, twice. I'd forgotten. I called her that next morning, but she wouldn't come to the phone. I went over and her mother came to the door. She wouldn't see me. I came back later that summer.

HANNAH

When?

WILLIAM

Maybe a month. Anna came to the screen door. I could tell she was surprised to see me. I can see her through it, standing there. I asked if I could come in. She just stood there. I left.

HANNAH

She said nothing?

WILLIAM

I, I don't think so.

HANNAH

Yes, you do. As you walked away. "No means no, Willie." You stopped, you didn't turn around.

WILLIAM

I...

HANNAH

No means no, Willie.

WILLIAM

No, I...

HANNAH

No means no, Willie!

WILLIAM

Yes, I heard her. I didn't know what to say.

HANNAH

Because she was right.

WILLIAM

God help me, no! I can't say that. And anything else is just self-serving. I've searched my soul, Hannah. I only know we were broken.

HANNAH

So, no confession then.

WILLIAM

Is that what you want? The answer you're hoping for? I can't give it to you.

(A long pause. HANNAH crosses to WILLIAM and hands the revolver back to him.)

HANNAH

You're right about mother. She wasn't willful. But mother was mother. When I was about seven or eight, Julie was over and we were playing out front when we heard the ice cream truck coming down the street. We had to hurry, so I got a dollar outa mom's purse in the kitchen. She was gardening out back. She hadn't given me my allowance yet, so I knew it was okay. I took the dollar. She said I stole it, and wouldn't hear anything but. Sent Julie home, me to my room, and confiscated my cone. For days said she'd no idea she'd raised a thief. Wouldn't hear anything else. I didn't think I was a thief, but I felt like one. She could be like that. Funny how you remember things.

WILLIAM

I'm so sorry, Hannah. What now?

HANNAH

Isn't it your Miller Wright who always finishes up saying, "Well, that's that."

(Through the following, the light fade up slowly, suggesting dawn is coming.)

WILLIAM

Yeah, different world. One I've inhabited way too long. This one's muddy, exhausting. You read him, Miller Wright?

HANNAH

All 14 of them.

(WILLIAM manages a smile. A beat.)

WILLIAM

Goddammit!

HANNAH

...

WILLIAM

Selma, she might be right. About the memoir. I hate it when she's right.

(A beat.)

So -

HANNAH

Yeah?

WILLIAM

When were you born?

HANNAH

March 16th.

WILLIAM

Pisces. Not that I believe in that shit.

HANNAH

You?

WILLIAM

December 26th.

HANNAH

Capricorn.

WILLIAM

So I'm told. All I know is, I never got the same amount of presents everyone else did on their birthday. Would get these hybrid Christmas-birthday gifts. Always thought Capricorn stood for bad luck.

(A beat.)

What'd you weigh?

(WILLIAM and HANNAH watch silently as dawn approaches; sunrise is a shared experience, as much as each can muster.)

BLACKOUT-END OF PLAY

(Civic Audition Draft, 2/12/26)