

Starkweather

A full-length play

by

Jim Dalglish



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Characters

Mrs. Cook A gas station proprietress of mature years (mid seventies.) A woman with an enormous talent for self-deception – a well-tooled defense against the loss of a husband and the bucolic future they had planned together.

J. A Mexican migrant worker in his early twenties. A lost soul whose expectations of life have been lowered almost to the point where happiness is the same as merely existing. He struggles to overcome his natural reticence.

Tom Late twenties. A young man with nowhere to go and an eternity to get there. With nothing to call his own, he lives by his wits. He's not as clever as he thinks.

Setting

A prairie house, gas station and various places near Starkweather, a rural town on the rolling plains of North Dakota.

Any time between 1960 and now. This is a portion of the world where the steady rush of life swirls in a whirlpool far off the main current of time.

Synopsis

A charming young con man wanders into Starkweather – a prairie town in the very center of North America and nowhere. He meets his match when he breaks into the home of a woman “of mature years” with god on her side.

“Nothing’s more dangerous than a man with nowhere to go and an eternity to get there,” Mrs. Cook

Act One

Scene 1

(Lights up.)

Morning. The interior of a prairie home built around the turn of the last century. Clean – but cluttered – with aging furnishings. Mrs. Cook – a dignified, gray-haired woman in her 70s – peers into a mirror that hangs next to the door. She’s busy trying on a succession of black hats. None are quite right. J., a young man in his early twenties, sits at the kitchen table eating cereal. He holds the cereal box in his hands.)

J.

(With a Mexican accent:) Incred... ingred....

MRS. COOK

“Ingredients.”

J.

Ingredients. Wheat. Barley. Oats. Iron. Rib... rib...

(She examines the box.)

MRS. COOK

“Rib... rib... riboflavin.”

J.

What is, Abuela?

MRS. COOK

What?

J.

Riboflavin.

MRS. COOK

Well... it’s... it’s... one of the *ingredients*. Like it says on the box.

(J. eats the cereal. Mrs. Cook dumps her purse on the table and searches through the contents.)

Scrub the floors in the storage room last night?

J.

Si, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

With soap?

J.

Si, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

Filthy, J. And the glass cases?

J.

Si, Abuela.

(She abandons the purse and searches through the drawers of a large wooden bureau.)

MRS. COOK

Labels facing out?

J.

Si, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

Candy bars? Color coordinated. Like I showed you?

J.

Si, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

Tight ship.

J.

Is tight, Abuela.

(She searches the pockets of each jacket hanging in a closet.)

MRS. COOK

We can't afford sloppy work.

J.

No sloppy. Is tight.

MRS. COOK

Pride, J. Probably not a word in your language. But I'll teach you. Like all the others.

J.

Si.

MRS. COOK

Hard work.

J.

Lacy.

MRS. COOK

That's why God sent you here.

(She stops searching and stares at J. He crosses to the rosary that hangs on a crucifix next to the door and hands it to her.)

There it is. Are you sure?

J.

MRS. COOK

Palm Sunday.

J.

MRS. COOK

All those palms. A real treat.

J.

MRS. COOK

And the singing. You have such a lovely voice. (Singing:) *Christ has died. All lay luuuuuuu ya. Christ is risen.*

J.

MRS. COOK

Hmmmmm.

(She exits. After a moment, she re-enters, checks the gas dials on the stove, grabs her purse and hat and exits. J. stares at the door. She re-enters, crosses to an end table, picks up a prayer book and exits once again. J. eats the cereal.

Lights out.)

Scene 2

(Lights up.

A hot, summer afternoon. The interior of The Hubb, an old small-town gas station along an obsolete highway. A metal plaque hanging on a wall reads, "The Geographic Center of North America." A handmade sign above an entryway door reads, "Museum of the Northern Plains. \$3.00 entry. Restrooms. Free!"

J. is seen standing behind an old-fashioned cash register that sits atop a glass candy case. J. stares out the window and yawns. The sound of an approaching truck. Air brakes. Truck door opening and closing. The truck drives off. Tom enters, wearing dirty jeans and a flannel shirt. Tom stares at J. J. stares back. Tom smiles with a lot of heat. After a beat, J. looks down, embarrassed. Tom crosses to the glass candy case.

TOM

Pretty. (Pause.) Don't you think?

J.

Escusa me?

TOM

Candy bars. All in a row.

J.

By color.

TOM

I'll be damned.

(J. smiles.)

I like candy. Do you?

J.

Si.

TOM

Nothing hits the spot like a little chocolate. Some nuts. Rolled up into a nice, fat candy bar. How do you like it?

J.

Escusa me?

TOM

White. Dark. Or milk?

J.

Is ok.

TOM

I'm thinking maybe dark today. But not too dark. Semi-sweet. Think you got something like that for me?

(Tom crouches in front of the glass case and stares at J.'s crotch.)

Been a long time since I've wrapped my lips around a nice, creamy chunk of semi-sweet chocolate. Kinda makes your mouth water, doesn't it? I hate the ones that have all that cardboard crap. Fools you into thinking you're getting more than you do. But something tells me I won't be disappointed here.

(Tom laughs.)

Which is your favorite?

(J. points to a candy bar.)

Mine too. We're a lot alike. Aren't we?

J.

You want?

TOM

Oh, yeah.

J.

50 ecent, please.

(Tom reaches into his pockets and realizes they are empty.)

TOM

Haven't eaten in two days. Hitched all the way from Billings. Not a bite. Know what that's like?

J.

Si.

TOM

You'd think it would be easy finding what you want. You'd think it would be everywhere you look. Right in your face. But it's been a long time. Know what I'm saying?

J.

TOM

I think you do. I could see it in your eyes the minute I walked through that door. You're hungry too. Maybe even hungrier than me.

(J. removes a candy bar from the case and places it on the counter.)

For me?

J.

Si.

TOM

You'd do that for me?

(J. smiles. Tom reaches out and gently jostles J.'s head. J. laughs. Tom laughs. Tom grabs J.'s shirt, pushes his face against the counter and twists J.'s arm behind his back. He punches the key to open the till, takes a few twenties and shoves them into his pocket.)

J.

No. Estop. Please. No. Please!

(Tom reaches between J.'s legs. Removes a candy bar from the case and stuffs it into his shirt pocket. He pushes J. to the floor. As Tom ambles to the door, J. staggers to his feet, slams the register door and jumps on Tom. They fall to the floor and begin to wrestle. Tom easily overpowers J. and ends up pinning him – his back to the floor. J. tries to sit up, but Tom needs only one hand to push him back to the floor. J. stops struggling.)

TOM

You okay?

J.

Si.

TOM

Ticklish?

J.

Escusa me?

(Tom tickles J. He struggles under Tom's weight, but he can't help but laugh.)

Estop!

(He stops and J. calms down. They look into each other's eyes for a moment. Tom removes the candy bar from his pocket. He opens it and is about to eat it, when he stops and offers it to J. Tom smiles. J. smiles.

Lights out.)

Scene 3

(Lights up.

Sunset. Prairie House. Mrs. Cook places a kettle on the stove, turns on the flame, then sits at the table and knits an afghan made from scraps of yarn. J. enters.)

MRS. COOK

Have the money?

(He hands her a wad of bills. She counts them.)

Not much business today.

(She crosses to the safe.)

Why don't you get yourself a glass of water?

(She waits for him to cross into the kitchen before she kneels on the floor and spins the combination.)

Dust the wild guinea hens?

J.

Si, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

Yes, J.

J.

Escusa me?

(She inserts the money into the wad of cash and starts counting the bills.)

MRS. COOK

No si. Yes.

J.

Okay.

(She stops counting and looks at him, an eyebrow raised.)

Jess.

MRS. COOK

You come to our country, you learn...

MRS. COOK

...to speak our language.

J.

Speaka language.

MRS. COOK

Developer fluid in the photo booth?

J.

Is full.

MRS. COOK

And the median?

J.

MRS. COOK

Mow the grass? On the median?

J.

No.

MRS. COOK

No?

J.

Is small, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

What?

(She puts the wad of cash in the safe and closes the door.)

J.

(Indicating the grass height with his thumb and index finger:) Grass is small.

MRS. COOK

Short. The word is *short* and it isn't. It's *long* and *spindly*.

J.

Is short, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

We can't have that. I asked you to mow that grass this morning. And you haven't.

(J. crosses up the stairs.)

Where are you going?

J.

Bed.

MRS. COOK

Without dinner?

J.

No hungry.

MRS. COOK

(Calling after him:) *Not* hungry. You are *not hungry*.

J.

Si. Grass is small and I am no hungry.

MRS. COOK

Oh! This can't happen again. You must do as I say. Pride, J. Pride.

(Lights up. Second-floor bedroom. Bed. Window. Lamp. Stained wallpaper and a picture of the Sacred Heart of Christ.)

J. enters, crosses to the window, opens it and looks out.

Lights up outside the house.

Tom. He looks up toward the bedroom window. He removes a lighter from his pocket. He flicks the lighter on. Clicks the cap shut. Flicks the lighter on. Clicks the cap shut. J. sees him and slowly removes his shirt. They smile at one another. The tea kettle sings in the kitchen. Tom returns the lighter to his pocket and ambles off-stage. J. throws his shirt to the floor and sits on the edge of the bed. Mrs. Cook finally notices the whistling kettle.

Lights out living room. Lights out bedroom. Lights out stage left.

Scene 4

(Lights up.

Night. Bedroom. J. lies in bed, sleeping. Tom crawls through the open window, locks the door and sits on the bed next to J. He pulls the covers down slowly. J. wakes up. Tries to say something. But Tom covers his mouth with his hand. J. struggles.)

TOM

(Whispering:) You'll have to be quiet or she'll wake up.

(This calms him down. Tom lets him go. J. sits up and tries to kiss Tom, but he holds J. back.)

Yeah... I don't do that.

(Tom takes off his shirt and drops his pants. He rolls J. over onto his stomach, pulls his underwear down, spits on his hand and smears it on J.'s ass.)

J.

(Frightened:) No. Thas too much. I doan like.

(He struggles.)

Estop... No... Parar! Parar!

(Mrs. Cook, wearing a nightgown, appears in the hallway outside J.'s room. She knocks on J.'s door.)

MRS. COOK

J.? Are you okay?

(She tries the door. It's locked.)

J.

Is okay, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

I heard voices.

J.

Bad dream.

MRS. COOK

I heard voices.

J.

Talking in esleep. Is okay.

MRS. COOK

You sure?

J.

Si.

MRS. COOK

(Mumbling:) I heard voices.

(She exits. Tom pulls up his pants, grabs his shirt and opens the window. J. closes it.)

J.

Stay. I bring you breadfacks in bed. Then you give money back. I know you no mean to take. You hungry. Thas all.

TOM

You want me to stay, or give you the money?

(J. lies down on the bed, rolls over onto his stomach and slides his underwear down.)

When I finish, you're going to tell me everything you know about this place. Every little thing. Ok, baby?

(Lights out.)

Scene 5

(Lights up.)

Late afternoon. Kitchen. Mrs. Cook opens the oven door and stirs the contents of a casserole dish. She closes the oven and sets the timer on the stove. There is a knock at the door.)

TOM

(Through the screen door:) Hello.

(She is startled.)

May I speak with the woman of the house?

MRS. COOK

Excuse me?

TOM

May I speak with the woman of the house?

MRS. COOK

What do you want from her.

TOM

I want to *give* her something.

MRS. COOK

I bet you do.

(Tom produces a bouquet of flowers from behind his back.)

Whose garden did you steal those from?

TOM

They're field flowers.

MRS. COOK

My vacuum cleaner works just fine.

TOM

May I come in?

MRS. COOK

Why?

TOM

To put them in water.

MRS. COOK

Who are you?

TOM

A friend.

MRS. COOK

Why are you giving me flowers?

TOM

Someone asked me to.

MRS. COOK

TOM

They're wilting.

MRS. COOK

Stay here.

(She takes the flowers and let's the door slam on Tom's face. She crosses to the sink and fills a vase with water.)

What did you say your name was?

TOM

Tom.

(She crosses back to door with the flowers.)

MRS. COOK

I don't know any Tom.

TOM

But I know you, Mrs. Cook.

MRS. COOK

I very much doubt that.

TOM

Jack sent me.

MRS. COOK

Jack?

(She almost drops the vase of flowers. Tom enters, grabs a towel from the kitchen and begins to wipe up the spilled water.)

Did you say *Jack*?

TOM

He told me to bring you flowers.

MRS. COOK

Jack.

TOM

Yes.

MRS. COOK

Where is he?

TOM

He said that if I ever find myself in Starkweather, I should pick a bunch of field flowers and go to the farmhouse on the edge of town. Behind the old gas station...

MRS. COOK

...Where is he...?

TOM

... hand her the flowers and tell her that he is all right.

MRS. COOK

When did he tell you this?

TOM

A few months back. Gave me a ride from Sacramento to Bakersfield.

MRS. COOK

But how... why did he...?

TOM

What?

MRS. COOK

What did he tell you?

TOM

When I get into town, go down by the lake...

MRS. COOK

...Why would he...?

TOM

...Like you did 50 years ago...

MRS. COOK

...He told you that...?

TOM

You do remember. Don't you?

MRS. COOK

TOM

He didn't think you would.

MRS. COOK

TOM

Do you? Remember?

MRS. COOK

(Remembering:) I hiked up my skirt and went wading. Which was scandalous at the time. I had my parasol...

TOM

... and he picked you a bunch of field flowers. Just like these here.

MRS. COOK

And then. The next day. He disappeared .

(Her eyes well up.)

TOM

He thinks about you every day.

MRS. COOK

Where is he?

TOM

(Shrugging:) California. I mean... that's where....

MRS. COOK

Which city?

TOM

Just passing through. Gave me a lift.

MRS. COOK

Where is he now?

TOM

I don't know.

MRS. COOK

Why?

TOM

Because I don't.

MRS. COOK

You're lying to me.

TOM

MRS. COOK

This is a trick. A horrible trick to play on a lonely old woman. Who sent you here?

TOM

Jack.

MRS. COOK

You don't know my husband. Get out of my house!

(Tom crosses to an end table and picks up an old framed photo.)

TOM

(Pointing to photo:) Jack. Sure, he's older now. Gray hair. A little thinner. But I'd recognize that devilish smile anywhere. Spent three days with him. Got to know him real well. But, hey, if you don't want to believe me... I've done what I promised... No skin off my...

MRS. COOK

Don't go.

TOM

I don't stay where I'm not welcome.

MRS. COOK

It was a shock... I overreacted.

TOM

(Referring to the photograph:) Who's the beautiful one in white?

MRS. COOK

Me. Taken on our wedding day.

TOM

Gave up the railroad to be with you.

MRS. COOK

That's right.

TOM

Handsome.

MRS. COOK

Best looking man in the county.

TOM

He must have been a rascal then. Still is.

MRS. COOK

In his eighties by now.

TOM

Wouldn't have guessed it. Spry as an old fox. Still got his teeth... hair. Real proud of that.

MRS. COOK

One night, he disappeared. I filed a report. They dragged the lake. Nothing.

(J. enters. He's surprised to see Tom.)

MRS. COOK

J.! My prayers have been answered. He's alive!

J.

Abuela?

MRS. COOK

This young man. What did you say your name is?

TOM

Tom Norman.

MRS. COOK

... has seen Jack. He's alive and he's sent this young man to tell me. I kept faith and I'm being rewarded. He's coming home.

(J. stares uncomfortably at Tom.)

TOM

I didn't say anything about him...

MRS. COOK

...Mr. Norman, this is J. His real name's Jesus...

J.

...*Hey-zeus*, Abuela...

MRS. COOK

...but we call him J. Less sacrilegious. I guess they're less particular about those things down in Mexico. (Whispers to Tom:) Migrant worker. (To J. :) Shake his hand, J.

(Tom extends his hand. J. is about return the handshake, when Mrs. Cook notices the wad of bills.)

The money! Give me that. Why don't you take Mr. Norman into the kitchen for a glass of water?

(J. crosses to the kitchen. Mrs. Cook opens the safe. Tom crosses back and peers inside. The oven timer sounds.)

J.

Abuela.

MRS. COOK

Yes, J.?

J.

Tatertotts.

MRS. COOK

The tatertott hotdish. Oh. J., could...?

(She shoves everything into the safe and slams the door.)

Care to join us for dinner, Mr. Norman?

TOM

You don't mind?

MRS. COOK

A special celebration. Jack's alive and he's coming home.

(J. turns off the timer.

Lights out.)

Scene 6

(Lights up.

Sweltering evening. Kitchen. Mrs. Cook, J. and Tom sit at the table.
They chew.)

MRS. COOK

We so rarely get a chance to open our home for a special dinner party, Mr. Norman.

TOM

I'm honored.

MRS. COOK

You seem to know so much about us. Quite alarming, really. Jack must have given you an earful. I have so many questions. But I won't pester you now over dinner. That would be rude. In the meantime, we've thrown caution to the wind and opened our home. Invited you to celebrate this special dinner. And there you sit. In our sacred trust as we break bread. And yet, we know... so little... about you.

TOM

Nothing really to tell.

MRS. COOK

What do you do for a living?

TOM

Little this. Little that.

MRS. COOK

Don't patronize me, Mr. Norman.

(She is serious. Tom's smile disappears. He proceeds cautiously.)

TOM

Construction mostly.

MRS. COOK

Someplace nearby?

TOM

Montana, Nevada, California.

MRS. COOK

Construction. That would explain the dirt under your fingernails.

TOM

I work with my hands, Mrs. Cook. Sorry I didn't have time to clean up better. But as my father always says, honest work is nothing to be ashamed of.

MRS. COOK

See, J.? You must have been raised right, Mr. Norman.

TOM

By good, god-fearing people.

MRS. COOK

And where was that?

TOM

A farm.

MRS. COOK

Go on.

TOM

Near Arvilla.

MRS. COOK

You're a Dakota boy?

TOM

(Smiling:) Born and raised.

MRS. COOK

(Pleased:) The heartland. Arvilla. That's in the...

TOM

...Red River Valley.

MRS. COOK

I hear the soil is very rich in the valley.

TOM

Most fertile soil on earth. Dirt so fine it runs through your fingers like black water.
So rich you could eat it in a cereal bowl for breakfast.

MRS. COOK

(Laughing:) That *is* rich. Arvilla. Not much more than 100 miles away.

TOM

Thereabouts.

MRS. COOK

(Singing:) *From this valley they say you are going. When you go, may your darling go too?*

TOM & MRS. COOK

Oh, remember the Red River Valley. And the girl that has loved you so true.

MRS. COOK

You know that old song, Mr. Norman?

TOM

Dad used to sing it to me when I couldn't sleep.

MRS. COOK

And your mother? Did she sing to you?

TOM

Can't remember.

MRS. COOK

Really?

TOM

Died when I was five.

MRS. COOK

Imagine. A man raising a child... all by himself.

TOM

That was one helluva tattertot hotdish, Mrs. Cook.

MRS. COOK

A good man. He must have been to take all that on.

TOM

Not much of a choice.

MRS. COOK

Was he a good man?

TOM

Best in the county. Trust-worthy. Kind. Generous. No one more hardworking. And smart. Went to college. University over to Grand Forks.

MRS. COOK

When was the last time you were home?

TOM

(Shrugs:) Ten years.

MRS. COOK

How old were you when you left?

TOM

16.

MRS. COOK

And your father let you go?

TOM

Yeah.

MRS. COOK

Astonishing.

TOM

His idea.

MRS. COOK

An unusual idea.

TOM

He wanted me to see the world. Create my own destiny. Things can be a little rough when you have to create your own destiny. Can't be afraid of work. Or going a few days without food. But I thanked him for it. I did. He had college. I have the open road.

MRS. COOK

And have you found your destiny?

TOM

Just around the corner. Got a good feeling.

MRS. COOK

You sound like an optimist, Mr. Norman.

TOM

(Laughing:) Gets me out of bed in the morning.

MRS. COOK

All that travel. Footloose and fancy free. I bet you've seen a lot.

TOM

Oh, yeah.

MRS. COOK

Things I couldn't even imagine. All those far flung places. Then ending up practically in your own back yard. A sort of pilgrimage, I suppose. The return of the prodigal son. Am I right?

TOM

MRS. COOK

It's a biblical reference, Mr. Norman. Are you a religious person?

TOM

You could say that.

MRS. COOK

People often go on pilgrimages in the Bible. They go out into the world. Endure endless trials and tribulations. Then return home and everything is happy. It happens all the time.

TOM

In the Bible.

(Pause.

Mrs. Cook hums a little more of "Red River Valley." Tom is relieved. He thinks he's passed inspection.)

MRS. COOK

This would be your first visit to Starkweather, Mr. Norman?

(Tom nods as he chews.)

What do you think of our little prairie village?

TOM

What this town needs is a good fire.

(She is shocked at first. Then laughs and slaps his arm.)

MRS. COOK

I think you are a joker, Mr. Norman. May not look like much on the surface, but Starkweather is a town of great historical importance. Did you know our little town is the geographical center of North America? Found out in 1938. That's why Jack named it "The Hub." Had a plaque made up special. Have you stopped into our roadside attraction?

TOM

Not yet.

MRS. COOK

It's more than a gas station. It's an important repository of a vanishing way of life, stuffed full of all sorts of artifacts of historical importance. Authentic tomahawks. A lonely Calvary officer's suicide note. Seventeen different kinds of prairie mosquitoes all stuck on a pin-board. Some as big as your thumb.

TOM

Fascinating.

(Tom stretches his foot under the table and touches J.'s foot.)

MRS. COOK

We even have an authentic mission church. That's where I found J. Five years ago. Passed out on the Altar of the Sacred Heart. Thin as a rail. Shivering. He's a foreigner. Did I mention that?

TOM

(Whispering:) *Migrant Worker.*

MRS. COOK

Used to be lots of them up here. Five years ago Government rounded them all up and shipped them back. Guess something about the whole set-up turned out to be illegal. But this one. Well... He came back.

(Pause.)

Where was I?

(They look at her blankly.)

Altar of the Sacred Heart. Passed out. Thin as a rail. Took him home. For a whole week he babbled Mexican and cried. "No send back. No send back." I could have, you know. Sent him back. But I'm a charitable Christian woman. So I gave him a job at The Hub. A godsend. Can't stand all day like I used to. Doctor says if I'm not careful he may have to cut my feet off. Chop them off right at the ankles. Poor circulation.

(Tom slides his foot up to J.'s crotch. J. is surprised. This catches Mrs. Cook's attention, though she doesn't know what's really going on.)

Sweep the lot today?

J.

Si, Abuela.

(J. pushes Tom's foot back down.)

MRS. COOK

Inventory?

J.

Is done.

MRS. COOK

It's so much work, Mr. Norman.

(Tom puts his foot back onto J.'s lap. He caresses J. with his foot. J. holds tom's foot and rubs it for a few moments before he releases it.)

TOM

I don't know how you do it.

MRS. COOK

It is difficult.

TOM

(Getting a little too cocky:) Specially when you consider only a dozen or so cars stop a day.

MRS. COOK

You may be surprised to learn that people used to fight to get into The Hub. Practically every car between Chicago and Seattle...

TOM

Had to. Only gas station 40 miles each way.

MRS. COOK

(Getting ruffled:) The Hub was a gold mine, Mr. Norman.

TOM

Till they built that interstate thirty miles south.

MRS. COOK

I blame the young people.

TOM

How do you figure?

MRS. COOK

They move away. Pretend they never heard of Starkweather. Even the Indians have packed up and left. Reservation wasn't good enough.

(Tom laughs. This flusters her.)

The young people. All their fault. For leaving us here. Alone. Defenseless.

TOM

Defenseless? Against what?

MRS. COOK

I don't think I should...

TOM

Go ahead. This sounds good.

MRS. COOK

(Slightly imperious:) Transients.

TOM

Transients.

MRS. COOK

People aimlessly wandering. Hitching rides on grain trucks. Heading God knows where. Looking for God knows what. But they still have to eat. Still have to find shelter from the winter wind. Nothing's more dangerous than a man with nowhere to

go and an eternity to get there. Sometimes I can't sleep at night I'm so frightened. I'm not accusing you of anything, Mr. Norman. But I think you know what I'm saying.

TOM

(laughing:) Oh, yes.

MRS. COOK

You do?

TOM

Hell, yes.

MRS. COOK

Then you know it's not funny.

(He stops laughing.)

TOM

I've seen those men and I know what hell they can raise. Thank God I have my mission. My... What did you call it?

MRS. COOK

Pilgrimage.

TOM

I've seen the world. And I'm on my way home.

MRS. COOK

Hmmm...

TOM

Just like in the Bible.

MRS. COOK

Hmmm...

TOM

I know how frightened you must be. Thank God you have your own little Jesus here.

MRS. COOK

J.?

TOM

To protect you.

MRS. COOK

Hmmm...

TOM

(Shaking his head:) *Transients.*

(Awkward pause.)

MRS. COOK

Well, I suppose. Well. I suppose.

(J. collects the dirty dishes and crosses into the kitchen. He uses the plates to cover his erection.)

Don't forget the soap.

(Pause.

Mrs. Cook stares at Tom.)

Mr. Norman?

TOM

Yes?

MRS. COOK

(She can no longer contain herself:) When is he coming home?

TOM

Who?

MRS. COOK

Jack.

TOM

You're real curious about that.

MRS. COOK

Of course!

TOM

I don't know.

MRS. COOK

What?

(Tom shrugs.)

He had you come here.

TOM

The flowers.

MRS. COOK

But he didn't...

TOM

He gave me a ride. That's all.

MRS. COOK

He told you everything else. The Hub. The lake. Why did he do all that if he didn't want...

TOM

He didn't say.

MRS. COOK

Where is he now?

TOM

MRS. COOK

There's something you're not telling me. I can tell in your eyes.

TOM

I don't know if I should.

MRS. COOK

Is he with someone else?

TOM

He's one of those men, Mrs. Cook. With nowhere to go and an eternity to get there.

MRS. COOK

No.

TOM

(Stage whisper:) *Transient.*

(She can't help but gasp.)

Fact is, pretty down on his luck. Even asked me for money.

MRS. COOK

A transient.

Tom

Fraid so.

(Mrs. Cook crosses to the end table and picks up the wedding photo.
Tom crosses into the living room.)

Beautiful safe.

(J., concerned, turns from the sink and watches from the kitchen.)

Mrs. Cook

Why, Mr. Norman?

Tom

Why?

Mrs. Cook

Why did he leave Starkweather?

Tom

I asked him the same question. The way he described everything here. The house.
The lake. The Hub....

Mrs. Cook

... he worked so hard to build....

Tom

... You, his beautiful bride. Why would he give all that up for fifty years of wandering
from place to place. Job to job. Lost and lonely. Not knowing where he'd get his
next meal. Nothing but a broke-down truck. Why would he give it all up?

Mrs. Cook

Tell me.

Tom

Told me you'd know.

Mrs. Cook

I don't.

Tom

That's what he said.

Mrs. Cook

Getting run over by a bus. Drowning in a lake. Getting kidnapped. Those all make sense. He wasn't like you, Mr. Norman. He didn't need to go on a pilgrimage. The Hub was his destiny.

TOM

Must have been something you did.

MRS. COOK

My fault?

J.

Tom.

(J. crosses into the living room and observes anxiously.)

MRS. COOK

I've kept everything he's created alive. Exactly as he planned. I've remained true in every sense of the word.

TOM

Must have been something. Man doesn't just leave a beautiful place like this. Important. Historical. Geographical center of North America for Christ's sake.

MRS. COOK

The pyramid.

TOM

What?

MRS. COOK

In the parking lot.

TOM

Pyramid?

MRS. COOK

A terrible argument.

TOM

Over a pyramid?

MRS. COOK

We didn't have enough money. Jack always had such big plans. He wanted to build it for the plaque. Kind of like that one on the back of a dollar bill, but instead of an eye, there'd be an eternal flame.

(She begins to search through the desk drawers.)

TOM

Come to think of it, he did go on about a pyramid. Couldn't figure out exactly what he was saying. Thought he was losing it.

(She removes a set of blueprints.)

MRS. COOK

The blueprints.

(Tom examines them.)

TOM

(Laughs:) I'll be damned.

MRS. COOK

Such a clever man.

TOM

What was he going to use?

MRS. COOK

Cement, I believe.

TOM

Not with a base like that.

MRS. COOK

No?

TOM

Too narrow. Crumble after a few years, even with rebar.

MRS. COOK

(A little hurt:) I guess I was right after all.

TOM

(Reconsiders:) Not necessarily.

MRS. COOK

Oh?

(Tom uses a pencil to trace on the blue print.)

TOM

If he had widened it, like this. And used field stones with mortar, it might have a snowball's chance.

MRS. COOK

How do you...?

TOM

(Scoffs:) No harder than barbeque I built for a guy in Denver. Why didn't he finish it?

MRS. COOK

He wanted to take a loan. But the banks. Just waiting to squeeze every dime out of you. May as well cast your savings to the wind. Such arguments we had.

TOM

That's it.

MRS. COOK

Why he left?

TOM

He's passed by The Hub a dozen times. And after all these years, you still haven't finished it.

MRS. COOK

He's been in Starkweather?

TOM

Didn't I tell you that?

MRS. COOK

No!

TOM

Seen you behind the counter. Hanging out your wash.

MRS. COOK

He didn't stop?

TOM

Mystery solved.

(Mrs. Cook is upset by this.)

J.

Tom.

Tom

Thanks for dinner, Mrs. Cook. Well. I suppose I better be going.

Mrs. Cook

You're leaving?

Tom

That's the best tater tot hotdish I've ever...

Mrs. Cook

... You come here. Get me all excited....

Tom

Nothing more I'd like to do than stay here a few more days. Put my pilgrimage on hold. But a man has to support himself.

Mrs. Cook

You can't leave.

Tom

If only someone could find a way to make staying here a spell worth my while. Someone who has been real smart with her money. Not let the banks take it and throw it to the wind.

Mrs. Cook

(Frowning:) Mr. Norman, if you think you can get me to...

Tom

(Changing tacks:) Now I know. I come here all wild-eyed and dusty from the road. Must have scared the bejesus out of you. Don't blame you for not letting me in.

Mrs. Cook

Barged your way in.

Tom

And you're right. I've seen things, Mrs. Cook. On my pilgrimage. Things that might make you think that we're all no better than a bunch of wild animals. Have your quick fun, grab what you want and run before they stab you in the back. Because they'd do the same to you. In a heartbeat. I've been a passenger on that long joyride to nowhere.

Mrs. Cook

Then why have you come here, Mr. Norman?

TOM

I came to the end of that road, looked around and saw that I had nothing... except the memory of the good man who sent me on my way to find myself. The best damn man in the entire Red River Valley. But that's all I had... memories. So I sat on the shoulder of some mile road middle of nowhere and cried my eyes out. I'd tried every dead-end in the entire North American continent... when what I was really looking for... was the one road... that led back home.

MRS. COOK

Prodigal son.

TOM

But look at me? All my stuff stolen by a low-down conman a few hundred miles back. Living in those abandoned shacks down to the highway. Who in their right mind would hire me even to dig a septic tank. How can I let him see me like this? Own flesh and blood. He sent me out to find my destiny. And look at me now.

MRS. COOK

Oh, Mr. Norman.

TOM

Then I remembered that promise I made to Jack on that trip from Bakersfield to Fresno. The lake. The flowers. And I came to your door all dusty and wild-eyed. No better than a... *Transient*.

MRS. COOK

...Now I didn't mean...

TOM

If only I had passed out on that altar. Up in that beautiful, historic mission church. If I had done that, maybe some fine Christian woman would see the real me and be my good Sumerian....

MRS. COOK

...Samaritan...

TOM

...and help me get back up on my feet, so I could go home... head held high and make my father proud. Wouldn't take much. Really.

(Pause.)

MRS. COOK

Mr. Norman... I have an idea.

(Lights out.

End of Act I.)

Act Two

Scene 1

(Lights up.)

Morning. The Hub. J. stands at the till. Tom carries a shovel as he crosses outside the window.)

TOM'S VOICE

(From offstage. Singing:) *Down in the valley. Valley so low. Hang your head over. Hear the wind blow.*

(Mrs. Cook enters from the museum carrying a stuffed bird.)

MRS. COOK

These wild guinea hens are filthy, J.

(Tom crosses outside the window, carrying a bag of cement.)

TOM'S VOICE

Hear the wind blow, dear. Hear the wind blow. Hang your head over. Hear the wind blow.

MRS. COOK

(Seeing Tom:) Isn't it exciting, J.?

(He yawns.)

(Shouting:) Mr. Norman, that one of the songs your father used to sing to you?

TOM'S VOICE

(From offstage:) One of a dozen or so.

MRS. COOK

How is it going?

TOM'S VOICE

Fine.

MRS. COOK

Are you sure you can do it?

(Tom enters and fills a bucket with water.)

TOM

Like I said. No tougher than a big-assed barbeque.

MRS. COOK

Such language.

TOM

Take a few weeks. (Looking up at her:) Well... Look at you...

MRS. COOK

What?

TOM

All spiffed up and looking as pretty as a big-city, department store model.

MRS. COOK

(Blushing:) Oh, Mr. Norman...

(J. laughs.)

Stay on task, J. Mr. Norman has his job and so do you. You have your checklist. Work the list, J. Work the list.

J.

Si, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

It *is* a new dress, Mr. Norman. Well. Almost. Changed the sleeves this morning.

TOM

Don't think I've ever seen anything so lovely.

(She smiles. J. yawns.)

MRS. COOK

J., you look tired. Are you tired?

J.

No, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

What's all this yawning then?

J.

Escusa me?

MRS. COOK

Sleep well last night, Mr. Norman?

TOM

Fine.

MRS. COOK

I don't think J. did. You sleep well last night, J.?

J.

Si, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

I wish I had another bed to offer you, Mr. Norman.

TOM

I don't mind sharing.

MRS. COOK

Is sharing still okay with you?

J.

Is fine, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

It's a perfectly fine couch. Better than sleeping on the dirt floor of one of the migrant worker shacks, Mr. Norman. I can't believe you were forced to stay there. Still think we should call the sheriff about finding that truck driver who took off with your things. Did you say that happened in Rugby?

J.

Is fine, Abuela. Tom want no trouble.

MRS. COOK

Mr. Norman, we just can't have J. dead on his feet all day, can we?

J.

Is fine, Abuela.

TOM

We'll go to bed earlier tonight. Okay, Mrs. Cook?

(Tom and J. smile at each other.)

MRS. COOK

About church tomorrow....

TOM

Church?

J.

Tomorrow, Abuela?

MRS. COOK

Feast of the Ascension.

TOM

It's not Sunday.

MRS. COOK

It's still a holy day of obligation. And that was our agreement. Salary – paid weekly – with room and board included. And church.

TOM

On Sundays.

MRS. COOK

It's a holy day of obligation. And when you think about all the things Christ and Mary and even God, for that matter, have done for us, devoting an extra hour every once in a while is the least we can do.

TOM

MRS. COOK

I know what you're thinking. You haven't been to church in a while and you're worried. But God knows about these things. He forgives. As long as he sees that you're trying. If you're concerned about your clothes, you can borrow some of Jack's. See? This old shirt fits you perfectly.

(Tom exits, whistling *Down in the Valley* a little angrily.)

Try to get more sleep tonight, J. dear.

J.

Si, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

No talking and laughing... and... and carrying on late into the night. Promise me. All you have to do is try.

J.

Si, Abuela.

(Lights out.)

Scene 2

(Lights up.

Evening. Kitchen. Dinner. They are listening to Tom tell a story.)

TOM

... All twelve of those stubborn, heavy-uddered bastards. Some I'd raised from a bottle and shown at the county fair. Running hell-bent for leather toward the sunset. The ring leader... Escape artist Agnes... leading the way.

MRS. COOK

(Laughing:) Oh, Mr. Norman.

TOM

There I was, bruised and dirty from running my fool head off. Hands bloody from dragging thirty feet of frayed barbed wire. Convinced when I got home I was going to get the licking of my life.

MRS. COOK

How old were you?

TOM

Ten or so.

MRS. COOK

All that responsibility.

TOM

There I was. Head down as I turned into the drive. And there he was, at the screen door. My Dad...

MRS. COOK

...Oh, dear...

TOM

...laughing his ass off.

MRS. COOK

He wasn't mad?

TOM

Couldn't stop laughing.

MRS. COOK

Why?

TOM

All twelve of those heavy-uddered idiots were lined up single file. Tip-toeing behind me down the drive. Grouchy old Agnes at the front of the line.

MRS. COOK

What did he say?

TOM

Done walking the cows, son?

(They all laugh.

Pause.)

MRS. COOK

Well. I suppose.

(J. takes the dishes to the sink.)

Did I ever tell you how I met J.?

TOM

Oh, yeah.

MRS. COOK

Thin as a rail. Passed out on the Altar of the Sacred Heart. "No send back. No send back." I could have, you know. Called the authorities. Have him sent back. Still could.

TOM

But you wouldn't.

MRS. COOK

Why not?

TOM

Because every year goes by, gets a little harder to stand on your own two feet. Chop.

MRS. COOK

Right off at the ankles. That's what they said. Poor circulation. Doctors. If they want to chop your feet off, they'll try every trick in the book. Don't even ask permission.

TOM

Chop.

MRS. COOK

Faith. It's the only thing that's kept me standing on my own two feet all these years.

TOM

What about The Hub?

MRS. COOK

What about it?

TOM

You get sick... CHOP... What happens to The Hub?

MRS. COOK

Well....

TOM

Think about the museum. How important that is to this community.

MRS. COOK

J. can help.

TOM

(Laughing:) How? He doesn't even know the combination to the safe.

(He's crossed a line. She glares at him.)

Not that I would ever tell you how to run your business.

MRS. COOK

I should hope not.

TOM

You being the proprietress of the town's leading business and all.

(She softens a little.)

Well... I suppose... I'll just go and...

(Tom helps J. dry the dishes. Mrs. Cook turns to look at the safe. She fiddles with her napkin nervously.

Lights out

Scene 3

(Lights up.

Evening. Mrs. Cook is in the kitchen preparing dinner. Tom, and J enter. The slamming screen door startles Mrs. Cook.)

MRS. COOK

Did you hear? The migrant worker shacks. Someone set them all ablaze. That's what that racket was all about this afternoon. It's a wonder the whole prairie didn't catch on fire. Delores Hackenburg came trotting down the hill to see if I was okay. We ran to The Hub to see if it was spreading up the road. We get there and The Hub is locked up tighter than a drum. During business hours. Waited 40 minutes. No one. Had to come back to start dinner. Very curious. Wouldn't you say, Mr. Norman?

TOM

Damn curious.

MRS. COOK

Why do you suppose that was?

TOM

What?

MRS. COOK

Why there was no-one at The Hub?

TOM

MRS. COOK

Where were you when the fire siren on top of the grain elevator sounded, Mr. Norman?

TOM

Out by the lake.

MRS. COOK

What were you doing all the way out there?

TOM

Looking for stones.

MRS. COOK

So while the prairie was practically consumed in hellfire, you were out by the lake chasing after stones?

TOM

Concrete is expensive. Stones are free. You want me to build this thing for...

MRS. COOK

J.? Where were you?

TOM

He heard the siren and ran out to see if he could help. Told me it took him and the volunteers a good hour of squirting and flogging to get it under control. He locked up The Hubb just in case.

MRS. COOK

(Patting J.'s arm:) Such a good boy.

TOM

Hero.

MRS. COOK

Delores's eyebrow rose higher than a cat's back when she saw The Hubb locked up. You've caused quite a stir in town, Mr. Norman.

TOM

What do they say?

MRS. COOK

I pay no mind to loose talk. You may be surprised to hear that I myself – a woman of stature in the community – have not been immune to the vagaries of improbable rumor. But once they know you, they'll see. I'll make an appointment at the salon tomorrow. Set everything straight.

TOM

How you going to do that?

MRS. COOK

I'll tell her the truth?

TOM

And what might that be?

MRS. COOK

That you are a Dakota boy born and raised, and when you were 16 years old, you had a terrible misunderstanding with your poor, widowed father and you ran away from home...

TOM

...I didn't run away from...

MRS. COOK

...Mr. Norman. There is no way your father... a good man...

TOM

...best man in the whole damn county...

MRS. COOK

... could have cast his son out like so much rubbish to fend for himself.

TOM

MRS. COOK

Now, I don't know exactly why you took off. Must have been something you don't feel comfortable telling us. But I do know whatever happened. When you took off. Must have broken his heart. That's something you don't get over. Staying behind.

(She reaches out and holds his hand.)

But you're going home. Isn't that what you said? That first night? Just needed a leg up first. Why I gave you the job. You're a good man. That's what I'll tell Delores. She's a god-fearing Christian woman. She'll understand.

(Tom exits up the stairs.)

(Calling after him:) Dinner will be served in a few minutes, Mr. Norman. J., dear. I know you meant well, but you could have killed yourself out there today and then where would we be? Hmm? We can't afford to close The Hub at the drop of a hat. Last three weeks business has been off for some reason. And Mr. Norman is expensive. \$10.00 a day and room and board is a hardship we won't be able to afford much longer. We need you to work.

(Lights out.)

Scene 4

(Lights up.

Later that evening. J. sits on the couch, watching TV. Tom paces in the living room. Mrs. Cook futzes around in the kitchen. Her glasses hang from a string around her neck. She removes a plastic bread bag from the freezer. She opens the bag, removes a bundle of food wrapped in newspaper and tin foil... opens it... sniffs it... tastes it... wrinkles her nose... then dumps the food and newspaper in the garbage. Tom watches as she smooths the used aluminum foil on the countertop. Washes and rinses the foil and potato chip bag. And sets them to dry on the dish rack.)

TOM

What's she doing?

J.

Abuela no waste anything.

(She sprays an empty ice tray with non-stick aerosol, fills it with water and places it in the freezer.)

TOM

What's that about?

J.

No like sticky ice.

(The TV commercial ends.)

Abuela. Is on.

MRS. COOK

Oh.

(Mrs. Cook runs to the couch and sits down.)

J., could you turn it up just a touch?

(J. turns the volume up.)

My glasses!

(She searches for her glasses.)

My glasses.

TOM

Her glasses, J. Where are Mrs. Cook's glasses?

J.

Glasses, Abuela?

MRS. COOK

I can't find my glasses.

(Tom and J. try to suppress their laughter as they egg her on.)

TOM

Where are your glasses, Mrs. Cook?

MRS. COOK

My glasses!

J.

Purse, Abuela!

TOM

Hurry, Mrs. Cook. It's starting!

(She frantically searches through her purse.)

MRS. COOK

My glasses!

J.

Is starting!

TOM

Your glasses, Mrs. Cook!

MRS. COOK

My glasses!

(Tom crosses to her and picks up the glasses that hang from the string around her neck.)

MRS. COOK

There they are.

TOM

That's why I made you this string.

(She smiles ruefully and slaps his arm.)

MRS. COOK

Rascal!

(They cross back to the couch.)

Turn up the volume a touch, would you, J.?

(J. turns the volume up. It's pretty loud.)

(To Tom:) It's the best thing on television. We never miss an episode. Right, J.?

J.

Si, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

It's about a family. Not like those other families you see on TV. With their fancy houses and clothes and ways. This one is the way families are in real life. They have a lot of problems, but with a little love and faith, they always.... It's starting!

(They watch TV.)

Who's that?

J.

Good guy.

MRS. COOK

Oh, J., he can't be a....

J.

...Good guy.

MRS. COOK

How can you tell?

(The soundtrack changes.)

Here he is, Mr. Norman. The black sheep of the family. So misunderstood it just breaks my heart.

(The soundtrack changes again.)

And that's his father.

J.

He no the father, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

Yes, J. I'm quite certain.

J.

No, Abuela.

(The sound of argument.)

MRS. COOK

Oh, dear. He shouldn't have said that. He really didn't mean that.

(The soundtrack builds.)

Oh, my...

(A shot rings out. Mrs. Cook and J. are shocked.)

Don't worry, Mr. Norman. By the end of the show everything will be happy again. Because they love each other. All will be forgiven. Have faith.

(The soundtrack changes to bright, happy music.)

Wait. Who's she? Where did she come from?

J.

Is commercial, Abuela.

(Lights out.)

Scene 5

(Lights up.)

Later. Mrs. Cook is stretched out on the couch, snoring softly. Tom and J. are watching the end of the TV show. J. wipes tears from his eyes as he turns off the TV.)

TOM

Does it always end this way?

J.

Si. Is beautiful. Happy. Always.

TOM

You know that's bullshit. Right?

(Tom crosses to the window and takes the lighter out of his pocket. He flicks the lighter on. Then clicks the cap shut.)

She's losing it. Poor circulation? Ask me, it's affecting her brain more than her feet. (Toward the sleeping Mrs. Cook:) Chop!

(Mrs. Cook stirs. Then goes back to snoring. Tom laughs. Then crosses to the window. He flicks his lighter on. Then clicks the cap shut.)

Mission's all lit up tonight. Potluck or something. You ever think of going back home?

J.

My family work fields.

TOM

Maybe hit the road? Float from one bright light to the next.

J.

Why?

TOM

Because it's better than standing behind a till seven days a week... going to church every time a saint farts... better than breaking your back working a rock pile.

(J. covers Mrs. Cook with an old, ragged afghan. Then crosses to the foot of the stairs.)

J.

Is late.

TOM

Every place has a window. Gotta get in there, settle in a little, size it up. Then take what you need and get the hell out before it slams shut. This place has taken me a little longer than I thought, but the time has come. You want to be trapped here for the rest of your life?

J.

As good as any.

TOM

Bullshit.

J.

Abuela...

TOM

It's only a matter of time before she turns you in.

J.

No.

TOM

How long you think it'll take her to figure out why the till's been coming up short?

J.

You know who....

TOM

...Government sponsored trip south of the border. I can see you wandering around some Mexican desert.

J.

I no take.

TOM

Prove it.

J.

Tom.

TOM

That's what people do. They let you get close. Squeeze you dry. Then fuck you over.

J.

No.

TOM

What about your family?

J.

TOM

They found you with another boy and they kicked your ass out the door. Just like my dad and that bitch he took up with. She comes sniffing around. Selling cosmetics out of a pink Cadillac for fuck's sake. He falls for her shit. She moves in, takes everything that's mine. And he lets her. Nasty, two-faced whore. Not good enough to kiss my mother's feet. That's what they do.

J.

I no understand, Tom.

TOM

Money. You got it, no questions. You are the man.

J.

No, Tom.

TOM

You get out there and you'll see. First time you crawl out of a cardboard box at dawn. Your guts twisted in a knot because you haven't eaten in three days. Like I said this morning when we torched the shacks...

J.

...That was no me, Tom. You burn...

TOM

...I did it for you. All these fucking god-fearing people. With their money and their big homes. And that's where they made your family live? Dirt floor. Ten to a room.

J.

No Abuela.

TOM

Watch out for the ones who pray. They'll use their god to get whatever they want.

J.

She no like that. She let you stay here.

TOM

She's a slave driver. Practically has you scrubbing the gas pumps with your tooth brush. She says jump, you ask how high. And if you miss a hoop, god help you, she'll turn you in.

J.

She no mean it.

TOM

That museum. Has anyone paid to get into that shit hole since you've been here? And all that *God* shit morning, noon and night. Jack. Nit-picked at home. Nit-picked at the Hub. Nit-picked all the way up to the altar. Bet she picked him down to the bone. Hell, he didn't leave her. She picked at him till there was nothing left.

J.

She save me.

TOM

For five dollars a day?

J.

Starkweather as good as any.

TOM

Are you nuts?

J.

Why you come back?

TOM

Just a stop along the road.

J.

You say you come back...

TOM

...One last chance...

J.

... you go home soon.

TOM

(Laughing:) That hellhole?

J.

He miss you. He good man.

TOM

The window is closing.

(J. grabs Tom and hugs him. He won't let go.)

J.

No go. Please! Stay, Tom. We happy here. No go!

(Tom holds him for a moment. Then frees himself.)

TOM

(Laughs:) As good a place as any. Right?

J.

Si.

TOM

It was a joke.

J.

You tease me. Thas too much.

TOM

How could anyone leave all this history.

(Tom reaches for J.'s belt. J. stops him by holding his hand.)

J.

Late.

TOM

Yes.

J.

No tease me, Tom. Okay? Is no funny.

TOM

No funny.

J.

Abuela.

TOM

I'll wake her.

J.

Come to bed.

TOM

Let me make it up to you.

J.

Up to me?

TOM

Go upstairs. Strip. Get into bed and I'll give you a surprise. Something you're going to like. A whole lot. You're going to love it.

(J. tries to kiss Tom. He pushes J. away.)

You know I don't do that.

J.

Hurry, Tom.

(J. crosses up into the bedroom. He strips. Gets into bed. And waits. Tom crosses to the garbage can, removes the newspapers, picks up an afghan and drops them in a pile behind the couch. He takes the lighter out of his pocket. Flicks the lighter on. Clicks the cap shut. Flicks the lighter on. Then bends down and uses it to ignite the newspapers. They burn. Tom crosses to Mrs. Cook, asleep on the sofa.)

TOM

Mrs. Cook. Mrs. Cook. Fire.

MRS. COOK

What?

TOM

Fire.

MRS. COOK

Fire?

TOM

Fire! Quick! Get up! Fire! There's a fire! Quick!

(He helps her up. She sees the flames and smoke behind the couch.)

MRS. COOK

Oh! God in Heaven! Fire!

TOM

Quick! The safe.

MRS. COOK

Fire!

(J. jumps out of bed and starts to dress.)

TOM

Open the safe! Before the whole house goes up in flames! The money!

(He drags her over to the safe.)

Fire! Open the safe!

(Mrs. Cook runs into the kitchen and grabs a small extinguisher from under the sink.)

We don't have time for that. The money, Mrs. Cook. The money!

(She pulls the trigger on the extinguisher and shoots the fire retardant on the flames. J. runs down the stairs.)

J.

Abuela!

TOM

The safe, Mrs. Cook. Open... before... it's... too late...

(The fire is extinguished.)

J.

Abuela, is ok?

MRS. COOK

Lucky we weren't all killed. What on earth? Just a bunch of papers and my afghan....

J.

Tom!

MRS. COOK

Who...?

TOM

I was out on a walk. Thank god I came back when I did.

MRS. COOK

This was no accident. Who could do such a thing?

TOM

We better clean this up.

(Tom begins to clean up the ashes.)

MRS. COOK

(Forcefully:) Who did this? Mr. Norman?

TOM

I can't say

J.

Tom.

TOM

I didn't see it happen.

MRS. COOK

Mr. Norman?

TOM

Don't make me say it.

MRS. COOK

Tell me.

TOM

J. did it.

J.

Tom.

MRS. COOK

Why would J....?

TOM

Just tonight he told me he was leaving town. Begged me to go with him. I took a walk to think things over. When I came back – fire. What were you doing upstairs, J.? Packing?

MRS. COOK

J.?

J.

No.

TOM

What's the big surprise? Five years standing behind that till sun up to sundown. Watching the minute hand crawl around the clock. For five dollars a day...

MRS. COOK

... Room and board, Mr. Norman....

TOM

... Living in fear if he ever complained, you'd turn him in. You call that Christian charity? I call it slavery! You should be ashamed of yourself...

MRS. COOK

...What do you know about Christian...

TOM

...Who do you think's been skimming from the till?

MRS. COOK

What?

TOM

... or burned down the shacks by the road?

MRS. COOK

The migrant worker huts?

TOM

I saw him take a gas can from The Hub. I ran after him, but I was too late.

MRS. COOK

No.

TOM

He wanted to get rid of everything that reminded him of this hellhole. The shacks. Now this house. What was next, J.? The Hub?

J.

Tom.

TOM

Gotta kick him out. Call the authorities. He's dangerous.

J.

Tom, no.

TOM

He's one of those men you told me about. It's not safe here. I can't stay. So, if you could open the safe and get me what you owe me, I'll be on my way.

MRS. COOK

I know my little J., and there is no way....

TOM

Open the safe and give me my money.

MRS. COOK

You can't fool me with all your fancy talk. What a foolish, stupid thing to do. I can't believe I trusted you. All those stories. Jack. The flowers. Lies. Get out of my house! Get out or I'll call the authorities.

J.

No, Abuela!

MRS. COOK

Get out!

J.

No, Tom. Stay. I do it.

TOM

What?

J.

I set fire. Belief me...

MRS. COOK

J., it couldn't have been you.

J.

What Tom said. Is true. All. Till. Shacks. Fire. He try stop me. He is good guy. I no mean hurt you. I sorry. Please.

MRS. COOK

J.?

J.

Is my fault.

MRS. COOK

You didn't...

J.

...Si. I do.

MRS. COOK

I don't believe you.

(J. kneels and places his hand on the prayer book.)

J.

I swear on bible.

MRS. COOK

J.!

J.

Was me. Tom is good guy. No send back.

MRS. COOK

After all I've done for you....

J.

Please. I sorry.

MRS. COOK

I don't believe this.

TOM

Throw him out, Mrs. Cook!

MRS. COOK

To start a fire.

J.

I never do again, Abuela. I promise.

MRS. COOK

And those shacks down by the road...

J.

All my fault.

MRS. COOK

I didn't know you were so unhappy. Why didn't you tell me? I would never have turned you in. Oh, Mr. Norman, what you said...

TOM

What?

MRS. COOK

You're right. I've driven him to this. With the things I've said and done. I did this to you. Didn't I?

J.

No, Abuela. My fault.

MRS. COOK

Horrible things. Unchristian. Oh, J. I'm sorry.

J.

My fault.

MRS. COOK

We have to pray...

J.

...Si, Abuela....

MRS. COOK

...and beg forgiveness.

(She kneels next to J.)

Oh my god, I'm heartily sorry...

MRS. COOK & J. IN UNISON

...for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because I dread the loss of Heaven, and the pains of Hell...

MRS. COOK

Tomorrow. The mission. We'll go and pray for forgiveness.

J.

I no do again.

MRS. COOK

It's the only way.

J.

I promise.

MRS. COOK

Oh, J...

J.

I sorry Abuela.

MRS. COOK

No more shenanigans?

J.

No.

MRS. COOK

Dangerous, J. A terrible way to act out. We could have all been killed.

J.

I sorry.

(He sniffles.)

MRS. COOK

Come here.

(She removes an old handkerchief stuffed into her sleeve.)

Blow your nose.

(He does. She places her hand on his forehead for a moment. Then smooths his hair back in place.)

Bad, J. Bad.

(She gives him a stern look that quickly melts into concern. Then pity.)

Oh, Mr. Norman. Look what I've done to him. (To J. :) Are you going to be okay?

J.

Si.

MRS. COOK

Go to bed now.

J.

Tom?

MRS. COOK

I have to talk to Mr. Norman. He'll be up in a minute.

J.

No go, Tom. Abuela, tell him. No go.

MRS. COOK

He'll be right up.

(J. crosses up the stairs to his room. Tom stands in the middle of the room, not knowing exactly what went wrong with his plan. A little disturbed by what has witnessed. Few of his life experiences have prepared him for what he has just seen. But J.'s confession and Mrs. Cook's forgiveness has begun to work on something deep inside.)

Mr. Norman, you've said some things tonight that have filled me with shame. And I've said some things that I regret. I'm sorry for not believing you. I hope you forgive me.

(He nods.)

You have to help me look after him. Make sure he doesn't get into any more trouble.

(He nods.)

He's very special to me.

(Mrs. Cook notices the safe and stops for a moment.)

Why did you want me to open the safe?

TOM

This place goes up in smoke, what would you have left?

MRS. COOK

Wasn't much of a fire. Could have stomped it out with one foot.

TOM

I panicked.

MRS. COOK

Mr. Norman. Look me in the eye.

(He does.)

Did you set that fire?

TOM

No, Ma'am. I didn't.

MRS. COOK

Those eyes... Can't tell if I see an angel or a devil in disguise.

TOM

Why would J. lie?

MRS. COOK

...Mr. Norman...

TOM

...Swore on the bible, Mrs. Cook.

MRS. COOK

If you've lied... If everything you've told me. About Jack... The pyramid...

TOM

I didn't do it.

MRS. COOK

Mr. Norman. I want you to do something for me. If you're telling the truth, I want you to go up to bed, tuck yourself in and tomorrow we'll start another day, put all this behind us, and get back to work on the pyramid. But if you've lied to me. If everything you've told me... (She shudders.) I want you to go up those stairs grab the old suitcase in the hall closet, pack three of Jack's shirts and pants and march through that door and out of our lives. Because I never want to see your face again. Do you understand?

TOM

MRS. COOK

I'll leave this between you and God. I'll be down here. Waiting.

(Tom crosses up the stairs and enters J.'s room.)

J.

You no go.

TOM

You lied.

J.

Si.

TOM

And she forgave you.

J.

You no understand people, Tom.

TOM

You could have turned me in. She would have believed you.

J.

No go, Tom.

TOM

I fucked you over. And you... you idiot. You lied for me.

J.

I know you, Tom. You no mean it. You are good guy.

TOM

I'm getting the fuck out of here.

J.

You can no go. You been sent to me, Tom. I pray for five years. I tell him... "you no like me, keep me alone." For five years. Alone. I almost give up. And you come. He send you. So is ok. He love me. He love me the way I am. He love you too. See?

(Tom collapses to the floor, leans his back against the bed, buries his face in his hands and growls in anguish. He can't decide what to do.)

TOM

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

J.

You are sign. You belong here. He send you. For me. We can be happy here. Stay.

(J. sits on the edge of the bed and embraces him.)

(Singing:) *Down in Valley. Valley is low. Hand your head over. Hear wind blow.*

(Tom looks up. He's been crying. He grabs J. and looks into his soulful brown eyes.)

Tom

(Quietly:) You stupid little shit.

(He kisses J.)

J.

No go.

(They kiss gently. Beautifully. Tom separates from J. and crosses down the stairs. J. follows.)

Tom!

Tom

(To Mrs. Cook:) I set the fire.

J.

No make him go, Abuela. Please.

(Lights out.)

Scene 5

(Lights up.

Next morning. Mrs. Cook stands at the mirror. She still can't decide between the same three ratty black hats. She crosses to the desk and searches through the drawers. She digs around inside her purse. Tom sheepishly follows J. down the stairs. They wear their Sunday-best. Mrs. Cook crosses to the closet and searches through the coat pockets. J. crosses to the end table, picks up the prayer book and hands it to her. She smiles and kisses him on the forehead. She looks at Tom. Her smile dissolves into a stern frown. Tom looks down. She fixes Tom's tie. He looks up at her and smiles shyly. She can't help it. Her frown turns into a wry smile and she shakes her head. They exit.

Pause.

Tea kettle sings.

Mrs. Cook re-enters. Crosses to the kitchen and turns the burner off. She crosses herself with relief. She scans the room uneasily. She's

sure something else is not quite right but she can't put her finger on it.
After a moment, she gives up and crosses out the door.

Lights out.)

Act Three

Scene 1

(Lights up.

The Hub. One month after the end of Act 2. Tom and J. enter. Tom crosses to the photo booth and reads the directions.

Lights up stage left.

The Mission Church near the Altar of the Sacred Heart. A rack of offertory candles and novena cards and an old-fashioned confessional with a red curtain. Mrs. Cook enters the mission and lights one of the candles in the offertory rack.

Back in The Hub, Tom hits the open button on the till and removes 8 quarters.

J.

Tom...

TOM

Two bucks. Relax.

(Mrs. Cook drops a few coins into the offertory slot of the candle stand. She enters the confessional. As she kneels, the red light above the curtain turns on.

After he deposits the quarters into the payment slot, the red light above the photo booth turns on. Tom and J. enter the booth and close the curtain. There is a bit of a scuffle.)

J.

(Giggling:) Tom. Thas too much! Tom!

(J.'s shirt flies out of the photo booth.)

TOM

Hold still, Niño.

J.

No. You should respect myself!

The heavy breathing winds down. After a few moments there is stillness behind the curtain. It looks like Tom has sat back on his haunches. The red light above the photo booth turns off.

Tom

Good, boy, Niño.

(As Mrs. Cook rises from the kneeler, the red light turns off. She parts the curtain and exits the confessional.

J. pulls up his pants as Tom parts the curtain and exits the photo booth.

Mrs. Cook makes the sign of the cross.

Tom wipes his mouth.

Mrs. Cook crosses to the rack and examines the novena cards.

J. exits the booth. His hair is mussed and he looks spent, elated, bewildered, satisfied and slightly guilty. He grabs his shirt from the floor and quickly puts it on. A strip of five photos spit out of the machine. Tom grabs them.

Mrs. Cook chooses one of the novena cards and reads the back.)

J.

Tom, thas too much. We say photo. I din know you go and...

Tom

(Laughing:) The last one's the best!

(He tears it off the strip. And hands it to J. J. examines it for a moment. And then smiles. He looks to Tom. Tom returns his smile.)

See? I told you.

(Tom and J. laugh.

Mrs. Cook places the novena card in her purse and exits.

Lights out The Hub. Lights out Altar of the Sacred Heart.)

Scene 1

(Lights up.

The Hub. Tom, whistling Red River Valley, removes the plaque from the wall and exits. He reappears in a lighted area stage right. He places the plaque on the stage as though he were setting it in wet cement.)

MRS. COOK'S VOICE

(From offstage:) Mr. Norman?

(She enters.)

MRS. COOK

J. said you wanted to see me.

TOM

Don't you look pretty this morning...

MRS. COOK

(Blushing:) Well....

TOM

Fresh as a wild prairie rose.

MRS. COOK

What you got there? The plaque. Oh! Is it done?

TOM

Just got to lay it in good and solid.

(She's very excited. Her eyes well up with tears.)

MRS. COOK

It's so beautiful. After all these years. His plans. Finally complete. You've worked so hard these last weeks. Like a demon. Oh, Mr. Norman. You must be so very proud. Are you sure it will work?

TOM

The flame? Gotta wait for the mortar to dry. 'Bout a week or so, but....

MRS. COOK

No, Mr. Norman. The pyramid. Will it work? You know... *Jack.*

TOM

I don't know.

MRS. COOK

What do you mean?

TOM

It depends.

MRS. COOK

You told me...after that misunderstanding about the fire... you told me everything you said about Jack was the truth. And I believed you. But if you're telling me now that....

TOM

Maybe it's not such a good idea to bring him back.

MRS. COOK

What?

TOM

Maybe you don't really want him.

MRS. COOK

Of course I want him.

TOM

After he left you like that?

MRS. COOK

I forgive him, Mr. Norman.

TOM

A lot can happen in fifty years.

MRS. COOK

My love for him hasn't changed.

TOM

He's done some things he's not proud of. Hurt people. Made them suffer. He's one of those men, Mrs. Cook.

MRS. COOK

It doesn't matter.

TOM

He doesn't deserve it.

MRS. COOK

This is his home. That doesn't change. What are you trying to tell me, Mr. Norman?

(Her words have unexpectedly moved him.)

TOM

Prove to me you'll forgive him. That you'll take him back. Hold him in your arms and tell him everything will be all right. That you're sorry for driving him out the door, down the road, and out of your life. Forcing him to wander. Cold, hungry, and lonely. Prove to me that you still love him, Mrs. Cook. Despite everything that he's done.

MRS. COOK

Of course I'll forgive him. How could I not? You don't understand, Mr. Norman. That night. The fire. I forgave you, didn't I?

(She's very upset.)

TOM

You forgive him for leaving?

(She nods her head.)

You would do that?

(She nods again.)

Give me your hand.

(He guides her finger in tracing the following words in the wet cement.)

MRS. COOK

"Jack. You are in my heart always. Mary."

TOM

Now he'll know. Jack will come home.

(She hugs him. He returns the embrace.)

MRS. COOK

Mr. Norman, you are a godsend.

(She laughs as she wipes her eyes. He's surprised by his own emotions. He tries to hide them, but she notices.)

You're...

(She decides not to embarrass him.)

Imagine. A complete stranger comes to town and builds a pyramid for a foolish old woman he barely knows. Why would he do that?

TOM

The money.

MRS. COOK

You didn't do this for the money.

TOM

No?

MRS. COOK

You did it because you are a good man. Oh, I know... All the things you've seen and done. That little fire back at the house was probably the least of it. You are a man of the world. A fast-talker who knows how to charm his way into all kinds of shenanigans. I'm sure you've left a trail of ruin and heartbreak as you've crisscrossed the country. Am I right?

TOM

MRS. COOK

See, Mr. Norman? I'm not as naïve as all those busy-bodies up at the beauty salon think. You're just like Jack. What a handful. That's probably why you got along. I could tell that about you. Maybe not from the start. But once I looked close enough...

(He can't meet her gaze.)

Look at me.

(He does.)

You are a good man.

(He smiles.)

TOM

Dumbest thing I've ever done.

MRS. COOK

The pyramid?

(He laughs. She looks at it again. Then laughs.)

It is a little odd. But that's why it will work. Can't miss it from the road. Turn my business around. Oh. I have such plans for this place.

TOM

Plans.

MRS. COOK

What a glorious day. We must do something special to celebrate.

TOM

Do you still have that old parasol?

(Lights out.)

Scene 3

(Lights up.)

Noon. Lake. Mrs. Cook sits, leaning against a boulder. Barefoot, she rolls her pant legs up.)

MRS. COOK

Such a beautiful day. Mr. Norman? Don't go too near the water. It's so thick you could walk on it. Hasn't been a fish caught in that lake in 25 years. Wild ducks won't even go near it. Lordy, that sun is bright. Wish I had my parasol. J. dear?

J.'S VOICE

(From offstage:) Yes, Abuela?

MRS. COOK

Where is my parasol?

J.'S VOICE

I doan know.

MRS. COOK

I couldn't find it. What are you doing with your pants, Mr. Norman?

TOM'S VOICE

(From offstage:) We're going swimming.

MRS. COOK

What?

TOM'S VOICE

Come join us.

MRS. COOK

That water's dangerous, Mr. Norman. Very dangerous. Extremely dangerous. It isn't safe at all.

(Trying not to look, she covers her eyes. But she can't resist. Two splashes are heard.)

TOM'S VOICE

Come on in, Mrs. Cook!

MRS. COOK

J. dear, don't drink the water, it's bad for you.

J.'S VOICE

Tom. Gif me a break.

MRS. COOK

Mr. Norman, you don't have to grab J. like that. He can swim by himself.

J.'S VOICE

Tom. Thas too maach.

TOM'S VOICE

Hold still, Niño.

MRS. COOK

Put J.'s underwear back on him. There's laws against that here.

(J. runs on stage, pulling up his underwear. Tom follows, wearing only boxers. Tom jumps on J. They wrestle.)

Be careful, Mr. Norman!

J.

Tom. Thas too much.

(They wrestle.)

MRS. COOK

Mr. Norman, it's not fair. J. is much smaller than you.

(Tom flips J. on his back and pins him to the ground. J. tickles Tom, pushes him off. and pins him.)

J.

I am the man!

(Tom pushes J. off, runs off stage and quickly returns with cupped hands full of water.)

(Covering head:) Stop. Stop. You should respect myself.

(Tom passes J. and pours the water on Mrs. Cook's legs.)

MRS. COOK

(Enjoying the sensation:) Ahhhh...

TOM

Just like old times.

MRS. COOK

(Laughing:) You rascal, you. Water does feel nice.

(J. goes through the picnic basket.)

J.

Sandwiches.

(J. lays his head on Tom's lap and eats a sandwich. Mrs. Cook observes as Tom gently strokes J.'s hair. She is uncomfortable at first. But as she watches, something changes. She looks Tom in the eyes and smiles. This quiet moment of understanding lasts a beat. Then she looks off in the direction of the lake.)

MRS. COOK

(Sighing:) You know, Tom, that lake is loaded with history.

TOM

Shocking.

MRS. COOK

Oh, yes. Legend has it that the Indians once set out to cross it. A whirlwind whipped up. All perished. Why they call it Miniwauken – or “Spirit Waters”. They figured their god had it in for them. We just call it Devils Lake.

TOM

Easier to pronounce.

MRS. COOK

(Pointing:) That bay. That’s where the missionaries used to baptize the Indians. And that point over there is where the Mexicans used to do their laundry. (To J. :) Don’t fret, J. I’m sure your family will come back. (To Tom:) I keep telling J. that his family didn’t mean to throw him out. It was just one of those misunderstandings that all families have. They’ll remember this place. Working the fields. They’ll get a sign from God and they’ll come back with open arms and take him back. Then I’ll have my chance. To ask them for forgiveness. For all that we have done... this whole town. How we treated them. God’s own children. Things like that happen, Mr. Norman. When there isn’t a shred of hope. Faith will see you through.

(They eat sandwiches.)

MRS. COOK

Did I tell you how I met J.?

TOM

Oh, god.

MRS. COOK

Mission. Thin as a rail. Nearly dropped my beads. Job. Poor circulation. Chop. Right there in that mission church. Almost a hundred years old. People will come and go. But that church. It’s like a beacon on the prairie. There are some eternal. Besides your flame, of course. (Sighs.) Indian Summer. Can’t last much longer. Soon the wind will have a bite. A thin film of ice will spread across the lake. Then it will hit. Colder than an iceman’s heart. Air so cold, spit will freeze before it hits the pavement.

TOM

I’ll be leaving tomorrow.

MRS. COOK

(Shocked:) Leaving? J., Mr. Norman says he’s leaving.

(J. rolls over and wraps his arms around Tom.)

(Hurt:) Why would anyone want to leave Starkweather? Where are you going?

TOM

Arvilla.

MRS. COOK

(Suddenly brightening:) Oh, Mr. Norman. I've been praying for this for months. The return of the prodigal son. Such a beautiful day.

(Lights out.)

Scene 4

(Lights up.

Morning. The Hub. Mrs. Cook hands Tom a bus ticket.)

MRS. COOK

This ticket is a round trip fare. The bus will get you back here by noon next Friday and then we'll start the festivities. The whole town has been invited. And so is your father. He'll be so proud of what you've created.

(Tom looks uncomfortable.)

Of course, I'm sure he's very busy this time of year, with the harvest and all, so it's perfectly understandable if he can't make it. We wouldn't want to pressure him. The pyramid will be here for a long time. It holds an eternal flame after all. (Suddenly serious:) I am so glad you and J. became friends. Before you came he was very unhappy, you know. He would come home from work, sit in front of the TV for a few hours, go upstairs, and cry. I could hear him through the door. Tried everything. Told him to put his faith in God. Mexicans are very Catholic, you know. I said, "The Lord has a plan and you're part of that plan. Like a tiny cog in a giant wheel. No matter how fast it spins, you just got to hold on for dear life." He prayed, but it didn't seem to work. Of course, his English isn't too good. But then, clear out of the blue, you came and now he's different. So it must have worked. Promise you'll come back?

TOM

(Embarrassed:) Okay.

MRS. COOK

If you're like all the rest, in two shakes of a lamb's tail you won't remember the name of the town, let alone the road back. But you're not like all the others, are you, Mr. Norman.

TOM

(Quietly:) I'll bring you a parasol. And we'll go wading... in Devil's Lake.

MRS. COOK

You rascal, you.

(J. enters.)

Where were you, J. dear?

J.

The mission.

MRS. COOK

(Patting J.'s cheek:) Such a good boy. I have something for you. To keep you safe on the road. A prayer card to St. Christopher. He's the patron saint of travelers. See? That's him carrying Jesus across a raging flood. Jesus was just a tyke back then. Which would probably explain why he couldn't walk over the water just yet. Of course, nowadays people think St. Christopher is a myth. One of those discredited saints. But who's been keeping all those travelers safe from harm all these years? Got to be someone.

TOM

"Cease. The heart of Jesus burns within me. Sacred Heart of Jesus, Heavenly Family, thy Kingdom come. 300 days each time."

MRS. COOK

That's 300 days absolution every time you say the prayer. Which isn't a long time for purgatory, but every little bit helps.

(Tom laughs. Suddenly serious, Mrs. Cook slaps his arm.)

Mr. Norman. I know you think this little card is stupid.

(He tries to say something, but she stops him.)

And I know all those Sundays the only prayer you ever uttered up in the mission church was for the service to end as quickly as possible. But this card. That you just laughed at. May not look like much. Just a little picture with some words on the back. But you're wrong. It reminds us of all those poor, lonely, persecuted people

who sacrificed everything. Not for money, riches or fame. Because none of that matters. They sacrificed their lives for others. People they may not have even known. When we look at this card, we honor their sacrifice. And when we read these words, we come just one step closer to redemption. No matter how low we've fallen. Or how much we've suffered. Do you understand, Tom?

TOM

(Nodding his head:) I'm sorry.

MRS. COOK

(She can't help but smile:) You rascal. I think J. has something for you.

J.

Is photograph we took in photo booth.

(They both laugh.)

When you are on road and lonely, look at photograph and you know.

(J. turns the card over. There's writing on the back.)

TOM

(Reading:) "*You are in my heart. Always.*"

J.

Jess.

MRS. COOK

Don't forget to pray. It works. It brought me my little J. Did he tell you?

TOM

What?

MRS. COOK

I'm not quite as young as I look, Mr. Norman. I come from sturdy stock. But... well, one never knows.

TOM

Chop.

MRS. COOK

It's time J. took on more responsibility. I've checked with the government and they're going to make a special allowance. When I die, it's his. The Hub. The house. All of it. Isn't that wonderful?

(Mrs. Cook crosses to the window.)

Here it comes. Go flag down the bus, J. Hurry, or it will drive right on by.

(J. exits.)

Now, Mr. Norman. Things might be a little rocky at first. Especially if that woman is still there. But he's your father and he loves you. He may not always be able to say the things he really feels, but he'll find other ways. Just like God, Mr. Norman. You never really hear his voice, but you can see his love everywhere. You'll have to look for the signs.

(The sound of an approaching bus. Air brakes. J. re-enters.)

J.

Is here.

MRS. COOK

Don't forget about the grand unveiling. Next Friday.

TOM

Good-bye.

(Tom kisses Mrs. Cook on the cheek.)

MRS. COOK

Dear boy.

J.

Come back.

(Tom crosses to J. and kisses him on the mouth.)

MRS. COOK

Mr. Norman. You'd better hurry or the bus will drive off without you!

(Tom exits.)

He'll come back, J. Don't worry. He'll come back.

(Lights out.)

Scene 5

(Lights up.)

Mid-day. The Hub. Two weeks later. Red-white-and-blue bunting hangs from the walls. The floors are swept and washed. A large sign on the window says, "Grand Re-Opening!" A new sign over the museum door says, "Museum of the Northern Planes. [sic.] \$4.00 entry. Restrooms Free!" A large sheet cake lies on the counter with a sign that says, "Free Cake!" Mrs. Cook stands behind the counter, dusting a stuffed wild guinea hen. Standing on a ladder by the door, J. tacks one corner of the bunting to the cornice. They are excited and happy – working together like never before.)

MRS. COOK

Higher. Higher. Lower. That's a boy. Are you sure about the cake?

J.

Jess, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

(Unconvinced:) We baked as big a cake as we could. Wasn't that fun?

J.

Jess, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

When we run out, we'll just have to take the sign down. Oh, this is so exciting. Starkweather hasn't seen anything like this in years. Not since... not since a very long time. (Suddenly animated:) We've got to hurry, dear. Put the ladder away. Quick now!

J.

Jess, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

Do you see anyone coming? Delores Hackenburg and her girls from the salon?

J.

No, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

The announcement in the church bulletin said noon, but you know how people are. Always want to be first. Look at this place, J. Has it ever been lovelier?

J.

Beautiful, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

All the flags in the parking lot. The shiny nozzles on the pumps. Such a wonderful job of scrubbing those, J. dear. And look at the pavement. Aren't you glad that I asked you to sweep the lot? We've worked very hard. Haven't we? Together? It's better that way.

(He smiles at her.)

J.

Is tight.

MRS. COOK

And that pyramid. It's just... (Getting choked up:) It's just what Jack would have wanted. If he could just be here to see it. Of course he wouldn't look the same as he did then. But if he walked up the road right now, I'd know him instantly. Tom will be coming, though. What do you suppose Mr. Norman's father will be like? Do you think he will be as handsome as his son?

J.

Si, Abuela.

(Mrs. Cook takes the stuffed bird into the museum and then quickly returns.)

MRS. COOK

The museum is all present and accounted for. You did a wonderful job with the new sign, J. dear. I told you all that reading at breakfast would start to pay off. Do you think anyone will notice about the entrance fee?

J.

No, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

Quite a few years since Starkweather has seen a celebration like this. Anyone coming down the hill?

J.

No, Abuela.

(J. finishes washing the window.)

MRS. COOK

Hmmmm... Well, you know how polite people can be. Never want to be the first at a party.

(Mrs. Cook stops suddenly. She hears something.)

What's that?

(A diesel motor can be heard in the distance.)

J.

Is coming, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

What?

J.

Bus.

(The diesel engine sound is approaching.)

MRS. COOK

Mr. Norman. He's coming!

(Mrs. Cook gestures to the large switch on the wall behind the register.)

Quick. We need to turn on the switch.

J.

Si, Abuela.

(J. crosses to the switch.)

MRS. COOK

What if it doesn't work? I want this to be perfect for him. (Excited; pleading:) The switch. Throw the switch before it's too late.

(J. throws the switch.)

MRS. COOK

Oh. Oh, my. It's huge! It must be five... ten feet high. Exploding out of the top of the pyramid.

J.

Si.

MRS. COOK

Like something out of the Old Testament.

J.

Si.

MRS. COOK

Thank you, Mr. Norman. Here it comes, J. The bus is coming. Can you see him?
Can you see him?

J.

Too far away, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

Wave, J. Wave. Here it is.

(The diesel engine sound reaches its peak. Then begins to fade. Until it is gone.)

It didn't stop.

(Mrs. Cook and J. stare out the window.)

Where did it go? Maybe he fell asleep and didn't remind the driver to stop. We should have put up the passenger signal. That must have been it. J.?

(J. stares out the window. He is devastated.)

Anyone coming down the hill?

J.

No, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

Don't worry, J. Have faith. He'll come back.

(Lights out.)

Scene 6

(Lights up.)

Evening. Prairie house. A lit jack-o-lantern peers out through the window. J. is seen kneeling in front of the safe. He spins the combination. Mrs. Cook stands behind him, mouthing the numbers as he spins the combination. He opens the safe.)

MRS. COOK

Good boy.

(He puts money in the safe. Then closes the door.)

I'm so proud of the way you're learning. Now go have dinner.

(He crosses to the table and begins to eat, keeping his head down.
The happiness from the previous scene is gone.)

Tatertot hotdish. Your favorite. And in the freezer there's leftover seven layer bars from the Altar Society meeting. Just one. Let it thaw before you eat it.

(She crosses to the mirror and tries on one of her black hats.)

Don't forget to give the children the treats when they come to the door. We'd hate to have them play a trick on us. I remember one time Jack and I made caramel apples. The whole town showed up on our doorstep.

(She crosses to the bureau and searches through the drawers.)

Some even came twice.

(She searches through her purse.)

No one's ever had cause to soap our window, or tip over that old outhouse, or any of the other shenanigans people with too much time on their hands get up to when you give them any old excuse.

(She crosses to the closet and begins to check the pockets of each jacket. She carelessly lets a few fall to the floor.)

Of course, not many come anymore. But that is bound to change. Someone will come to the house this year. They have to go somewhere, after all.

(The mission bell rings.)

I'd wish you'd start going to church again, J. All Hallows Eve Vigil. Very important. I really do wish. J.

(J. eats the tatertott hotdish. She searches the drawers again. She gives up and stares at J.)

My prayer book. My prayer book. I can't find my prayer book.

(He doesn't look up. She slowly crosses to the door.)

Are you sure?

J.

(Mrs. Cook exits. J. eats. Mrs. Cook re-enters and checks the gas dials on the stove.)

MRS. COOK

All those spooks prowling in the dark. Such a lonely walk up that hill.

(She exits.

Lights up stage left.

Tom is revealed standing outside the house. He flicks his lighter on. Then clicks the cap shut. Flicks the lighter on. Clicks the cap shut.

Lights out house interior. Lights out stage left.)

Scene 7

(Lights up.

Night. Bedroom. Tom sits on the window ledge. J. wakes, sees him and jerks the blankets up to his neck.)

TOM

Look like you've seen a ghost, Niño.

J.

(Happily:) Tom!

TOM

Only been a few months.

(He kisses J.)

J.

You come back. I no think...

(They kiss. J. laughs and tries to pull Tom back into bed.)

TOM

We don't have time.

(Tom places a backpack onto the bed. He begins to throw clothes from the dresser drawers onto the bed.)

Shove as much as you can into the bag.

J.

Why?

TOM

If this is going to work, it'll have to go like a steamroller from here on out.

J.

Tom....

TOM

Just do it, Niño.

J.

(Upset:) Put them back, Tom.

TOM

It's gonna be tough, but we all gotta do it one time or another.

(Tom pulls J. out of the bed.)

J.

Tom!

TOM

We'll have to be quiet or she'll wake up.

(He pulls J. down the stairs.)

Nothing to get sentimental over. Time to cut yourself free and move on.

(He drags J. over to the safe and kisses him tenderly on the mouth.)

Open the safe.

J.

What?

TOM

(Softly:) Open the safe.

J.

I can no.

TOM

I watched you do it this evening.

J.

No, Tom.

TOM

We won't take much, Niño. Just enough to let us live a little for a change.

J.

No.

TOM

Hell of a lot easier here than anywhere else.

J.

No.

TOM

You'll think different in a few days when we're in the middle of nowhere. Frozen to the bone.

J.

No.

TOM

Just spin the combination, Niño.

J.

TOM

Open the safe.

(He grabs J. roughly by the shoulders.)

She'll never use all that money. She dies tomorrow, what good will it do her?

J.

No, Tom.

TOM

Then tell me the combination, and I'll do it.

J.

I can no.

(He pushes J. to the ground and straddles him.)

Why you do this?

(J. begins to struggle.)

TOM

Every day counting off the number of grain trucks that pass on the highway.

J.

Was wrong, Tom?

TOM

You're suffocating!

J.

What happen, Tom?

TOM

She's thrown her web out and trapped you.

J.

Tell me what happen.

TOM

In three months the neighbors will notice a rotten smell coming from the house and they'll find you in the attic, wrapped in plastic and dangling at the end of a rosary.

J.

You no mean that.

TOM

Tell me the combination, dammit. Tell me!

(He beats J.'s head against the floor.)

J.

Estop! Tom! Estop!

(Mrs. Cook appears at the top of the stairs. Wearing a white nightgown, she carries a lit candle.)

MRS. COOK

The power is off. J.? Is that you?

(Tom stops beating him and puts his hand over J.'s mouth.)

Who's down there? If this is some horrible Halloween prank....

(She stops at the foot of the stairs and sees Tom's back.)

(Very frightened:) Please don't hurt us. Take anything you want, just don't hurt us.

(Tom stands and faces her. The candle light barely illuminates his face. She can't see J. huddled on the floor.)

(Surprised, joyous:) Oh dear lord! It's you. You've found your way back. I knew you would. I had faith and prayed and now you've found your way... I kept everything the way it was. The Hub. The house. I did it all for you. All those years, standing in the window... staring out across the prairie... hour after hour... every day of the week... waiting for you. I missed you so much, sometimes I could barely...

(She reaches out to hold Tom's hand.)

I found the parasol. Tomorrow, we'll stroll down to the lake and go wading. Like the old days. Only it's cold now. We'll have to wait for summer. Still so young. Like the day you left. How...?

(She trembles suddenly.)

You've come for me, haven't you? I can see it in your eyes. It's my time and you've come for me. To take me. With you. What else could explain it? Dear, merciful Jesus... I'm ready... I'm ready.

(She tries to embrace him. He grabs her shoulders and pushes her back. J. stands, bleeding from a cut on his forehead.)

J.

Abuela.

MRS. COOK

(Seeing J. for first time:) J.? (Shocked, embarrassed:) Mr. Norman! Oh. Oh, dear. You've come back. Yes, I see. You've come back. J.?

(Mrs. Cook points to Tom.)

Mr. Norman. I told you he'd come back. A Halloween treat. How nice.

(Pause as she regains her composure.)

Did you see The Hub, Mr. Norman? The Pyramid? I hope you're not upset. The eternal flame. The city made us turn it off. Too dangerous, they said. Against county code. Police came down and asked all sorts of questions. Crazy things. Well, you know a small town. A small town with a beauty parlor. Nothing better to do than make up wild rumors about you. But we set them straight. Didn't we J.? We told them that you are a good man. That you weren't responsible for that fire

and all the other... And the pyramid. We put up a fuss. Put my foot down, but... Well... It's beautiful on its own. Without the flame. You missed the grand re-opening. Shame. It was... very... pleasant. (Pause.) You've come back. Dear boy. (Cautiously:) And... how was your... trip... back home? Was it lovely?

TOM

Lovely.

MRS. COOK

And Arvilla. Was it just as you remembered?

TOM

Just.

MRS. COOK

The town. The valley. The soil. So pure, so fine, it runs through your fingers... like....

TOM

... black water. So rich you could eat it in a cereal bowl....

MRS. COOK

... for breakfast. Your farm, Mr. Norman. Was it as you remembered? Had it changed?

TOM

How could it?

MRS. COOK

(Very cautiously:) And your father? He's well... I hope?

TOM

You were right, Mrs. Cook. Everything was happy again. All was forgiven.

MRS. COOK

Beautiful.

TOM

He didn't mean for me to leave. He told me he was wrong. Didn't mean to hurt me. He waited for me. I'm his son.

MRS. COOK

(Eyes welling up with tears:) Faith, Mr. Norman.

TOM

Then he told me he loved me. And held me in his arms. Just like old times. Since the day my mother died. And I felt safe. And happy. And everything was beautiful. Just like you promised.

(Tom grabs her elbows.)

(Angrily:) Even when there was no hope left. You said all I needed was faith.

MRS. COOK

(Whimpering:) Mr. Norman...

TOM

I believed all your shit. I believed you enough to get on that bus. Ten miles out of town I snapped to, looked around and said what the fuck just happened? Six months of bullshit. Working a fucking rock pile. What the hell am I doing? He doesn't give a shit. He threw me out because I fucking deserved it. And I was going to ride that bus til they threw me off. But then we entered the valley and I saw the grain elevator. The faded letters: ARVILLA. And something unwound inside my head. Wound so tight for so long. And I started to remember. The farm. The smell of wheat chaff. The rot of beets left behind after harvest. The howl of the ten o'clock train hauling grain to the mills out east. Like nothing else. Nowhere else. And then I thought about him. Making dinner for him. The haircuts he gave me. How he'd sing me to sleep. I'd wake up and he'd be standing there. At the screen door. Looking out into the night. I thought about him standing there. Looking out. Waiting for me. And I believed you. All over again. I believed you enough to get off that bus and start running. Down that country road as fast as I could. I was going home.

(The room begins to glow with a red light shining through the window.)

The sun was setting when I walked up the drive... but there was no lights on in the kitchen... no livestock in the barn. He wasn't standing in the door, waiting. Nothing. Nothing but the sound of the cold Autumn wind blowing the screen door on its hinges. The moan of the windmill turning on its rusty hub.

A neighbor bought the fields. An auction for the furniture, tractor, and truck. No one sprung for the house or barn. I guess he figured they could just rot where they stood. I took care of that. Last anyone saw, he was heading east on Highway 2. Sitting in the passenger seat of a pink Cadillac. That bitch behind the wheel.

MRS. COOK

Mr. Norman, I'm so....

TOM

You said he would be there for me. Happy to see me. Proud of all I'd done. That he'd spent the last ten years regretting everything. He didn't wait. He doesn't give a shit about me. You were wrong.

MRS. COOK

I prayed so hard. Why did he leave?

TOM

Because sometimes you've got to cut your losses and get the hell out of town. Burn everything behind.

MRS. COOK

But the farm. The land. The family....

TOM

Just strings tying you down.

MRS. COOK

All those years. The history...

TOM

It's not enough. That's why he left Arvilla.

MRS. COOK

No.

TOM

And that's why he left you. 50 years ago.

MRS. COOK

What?

TOM

You weren't enough. That's the real reason Jack left. It hurts a little at first, but eventually you have to do it. You gotta cut yourself free. Chop, Mrs. Cook. (Louder each time:) Chop. Chop. Chop.

MRS. COOK

(Upset:) That can't be true, Mr. Norman.

TOM

Chop. Chop. Chop.

MRS. COOK

What else is there?

TOM

Chop. Chop. Chop!

MRS. COOK

Then why did you come back to Starkweather?

TOM

Just passing through long enough to find a weak spot.

(The red glow begins to shimmer.)

MRS. COOK

You came back because this is where you belong, Tom.

TOM

This place is the geographical center of nothing.

MRS. COOK

I was wrong about your father. I'm sorry. But I didn't trick you. You let yourself go back because deep inside you knew. That's what you needed. And that's why you came back here. To be with the people you love.

TOM

(Shaking head:) It's not enough.

MRS. COOK

All those empty cities and towns. Where else have you found that? We love you, Tom.

TOM

You can't.

MRS. COOK

Of course we can.

(Tom falls to his knees and covers his face with his hands. Mrs. Cook kneels and holds him.)

You can only float so long, Tom. You need a place to land. Starkweather isn't much. But it's a good place. Where people love you. We love you, Tom. (Singing:) *Down in the Valley. Valley so low. Hang your head over. Hear the wind blow.*

(He embraces her.)

You're home now, Tom.

TOM

I'm home.

MRS. COOK

J., Tom's come back to us. He's come home.

J.

Si, Abuela.

(Tom embraces J.

A siren is heard in the distance.)

MRS. COOK

The siren on top of the grain elevator. Fire. There must be a fire.

(She crosses to the window, her face lit up with the red glow.)

Someone lit the pyramid. Mr. Norman. Your flame.

(She looks to the left.)

Oh good Lord. The mission. It's on fire!

J.

Tom!

TOM

You're free, Niño. Free.

MRS. COOK

Exploding with fire.

J.

Tom. No.

TOM

The Altar of the Sacred Heart.

MRS. COOK

Oh, Holy Mother. The sky has opened up and it's raining fire. Oh good Lord.

J.

(Shaking head:) No, Tom.

TOM

I set you free, Niño.

J.

No.

MRS. COOK

People running down the hill. Screaming.

TOM

I'm sorry, J.

MRS. COOK

The sky, red with fire. This must be a sign.

J.

They come for you, Tom. They know what you do.

MRS. COOK

The end. Judgment day!

J.

I no lie for you, Tom. No this time. I can no lie.

MRS. COOK

My prayer book...

TOM

I'm sorry.

MRS. COOK

My prayer book...

J.

They will come.

MRS. COOK

Where is my prayer book?

J.

Go, Tom.

MRS. COOK

The end. Oh dear god!

(Mrs. Cook falls to her knees.)

TOM

Niño, come with me.

MRS. COOK

It's the end. Judgment day.

TOM

I'm sorry!

J.

Is no enough. They take you away. Go. Go, now.

MRS. COOK

We must pray, J. Where is my prayer book?

(J. grabs the prayer book from the desk drawer and kneels beside Mrs. Cook.)

J.

Is fire, Abuela. Just fire.

(Mrs. Cook puts her head on J.'s chest.)

MRS. COOK

Oh, J. The mission....

J.

Is just fire. Accident. Thas all. No end. Just fire.

MRS. COOK

(Seeing prayer book:) My prayer book. Thank you, J. dear. We must pray.

(She frantically flips through the prayer book.)

J.

Si, Abuela.

TOM

I'm sorry.

J.

They come, Tom.

TOM

I'm sorry!

J.

Is no enough. Go. Hurry, Tom. They come.

TOM

I'm free.

J.

Go!

TOM

Free.

(Tom exits. J. looks after him.)

MRS. COOK

Here it is. A prayer. To Cecilia, patron saint of fires. Your head. You're bleeding!
What happened?

J.

Is fine, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

(Looking around:) Mr. Norman... He's... Where did he go?

J.

Gone, Abuela.

MRS. COOK

Gone?

J.

Si.

MRS. COOK

But he just came back. Where did he go?

(Tears run down J.'s cheeks.)

J.? (Noticing J.'s tears:) Oh, J.... He'll come back. Have faith.

J.

No, Abuela. He go. Never come back.

MRS. COOK

He will, J.

J.

He will no.

MRS. COOK

He will!

J.

Is gone, Abuela!

MRS. COOK

No, J. He will come back.

J.

When?

MRS. COOK

We haven't lost him.

J.

When, Abuela?

MRS. COOK

When?

J.

When?

MRS. COOK

When we look at that pyramid...

J.

Si?

MRS. COOK

When we laugh. When we cry. When we pray.

J.

He come back?

MRS. COOK

He'll be here. With us. In our hearts.

(Mrs. Cook holds J. Tears run down his cheeks.)

Lights up stage left.

Tom runs into the circle of light. He breathes heavily as he pulls the photograph of J. from his shirt pocket. He lights his lighter and holds the flame to the photo. But then stops. He can't burn it. He drops the lighter and stares at the image of J. smiling at him. Falling to his knees, he holds the photograph to his chest and closes his eyes and cries.

Blackout.

End of play.)