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Visiting Hour

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CHARACTERS

MICHAEL MILLER, second son of Herman and Fay Miller, mid-30s, paramedic. Average looks and build, jogs and goes to the fitness center but always carries a few extra pounds—a reminder of his early life on the farm. Disinherited, knows it, and doesn't care any more. Gay and out, wears his masculinity easily. Is introspective, but can take charge when he needs to. He's worked through his early-life psychological crises and moved on. A survivor who can laugh about it, but generally does not spill his personal life after a couple of drinks.

HERMAN MILLER, father, 70s, retired southern Illinois farmer. A formerly large, robust man, who is gradually wasting away. He's a product of his generation: strong, self-made, arrogant, brutal; he served in WWII—the defining period of his life. He's done what he thinks society expects of men of his generation, but hasn't found it fulfilling. Here, he's a bully whose greatest fear is that he's losing his power to bully. His dialect is Southern Illinois: part flat Midwestern, part Southern drawl.

BERT MILLER, first son of Herman and Fay Miller, 40s, farmer. Ambitious, selfish, also arrogant, but dependent on his father for success; a cursory probe of his character will reveal insecurity. He carries around the pounds of too many early morning breakfasts of biscuits and gravy. He is the heir to all his father owns, physically, financially, and psychologically. Bert will be aged and double as his grandfather in the tableau during Michael's last monologue.

AUNT VIV, 60-something, widow of Herman's brother. Sharp, energetic, brassy. A chic-looking woman who moved to Chicago from the country and started a new life after her husband died. Tends to have younger lovers. Supportive of her nephew Michael. Still a country girl at heart.

BECCA, African-American 30-something, paramedic. Competent, strong, professional. A good friend of Michael, they work an ambulance together; they also hang out, have a beer after work, and call each other on days off.

BARRY, male CNA, mid-to-late 20s. Competent, but not committed to his job. Has ambitions, but hasn't acted on them. Gay, cute, parties hard. Always looking for a trick. He's not afraid of getting fired, not afraid of "inappropriate" behavior. His dialect is Southern Illinois drawl.

GUS, farmer, middle-aged, neighbor of the Millers. Has a college degree in Agriculture.

SAM, proud, crotchety, aggressive. A less affluent version of Herman.

Sam and/or the third farmer-neighbor can be doubled with Becca and even Bert (as long as Bert's appearance is sufficiently changed).

NOTE: The meeting between Michael and Herman is a boxing match. Herman is dying, but bored, and ready to spar with a worthy opponent one last time. The chance to fight revives him. Michael has been preparing for this fight for many years. He does not enter it with remorse or melancholy and is ready to land as well as take punches.

SETTING

The stage is divided into three areas. The center section holds the formal set, the hospital room. Stage left is bare—upstage right stays dark and has a sofa setting at an angle in a back corner, a straight chair sitting opposite, only three feet away.

The central set is a typical rural hospital room: two hospital beds, two night stands, (two straight chairs are optional). The room is worn, but clean. The room can be set up with the beds perpendicular to the front of the stage. There should be no backdrop at all; just a dark backstage.

Lighting is crucial here. When Michael and Herman are interacting, that part of the stage should be fully lit. However, when one of the characters breaks out of the scene and speaks to the audience, the set lights should be lowered a lot and a spot should be put on the speaker/s.

LIGHTS UP

(Herman is in a half-reclining position in the hospital bed, pillow under his head, hooked up to an IV and an oxygen tube, center stage, in the stage right bed; the stage left bed is empty and in a flat position. Michael enters from stage right and stays stage right; Bert enters from stage left and stays there. The lights are full on the two brothers, dimly lit on the father.)

Bert

(Pulls out a cell phone and dials. Michael is carrying a clip board for medical reports. Michael's cell rings, he pulls it out, and answers.)

Michael

Hello.

Bert

Hi. It's me.

Who? Michael

(in a gruff tone)
Your brother! Bert

Oh, the evil one. (short pause) I don't have you on my caller ID . . . Michael

(finishes his sentence--nasty)
. . . or you wouldn't have taken my call? Bert

Probably. (blasé—not about to be drawn in emotionally)
I really need to get call blocking. (pauses, then abruptly) Whadda ya want? Michael

Dad's in the hospital again. Bert

So? Michael

So this time he probably won't come out. Bert

Soooo? Michael

You need to come home. Bert

Because? Michael

Because he's your father. Bert

You gotta be kidding me. Michael

No matter what you think, Mikey, we 're family. Bert

Michael

(laughing)

That's one of the funniest things I've heard in a long time.

Bert

(Prickley.)

Don't be a prick. No matter what you say, blood's thicker than water.

Michael

Oh wow. We're at the family cliché stage already.

Bert

Alright. Come home or don't. I don't really care.

Michael

(impassive)

Why should today be any different?

(Bert hangs up, the lights dim on him, and he exits left.

Michael hangs up; the lights stay up on him.)

(The shift has just ended. Becca enters stage right carrying a clip board for medical reports.)

Becca

What was that about?

Michael

My old man's dyin'.

(Michael is trying to fill out his report sheet during this scene.)

Becca

So, you're going home?

Michael

No. Why should I?

Becca

Because he's your father.

Michael

Yah, I've heard that argument already today.

(pauses and looks at her)

Hey, you're not gonna tell me blood's thicker than water, are you? I heard that one today too.

Becca

This might be your last chance to see him to . . .

Michael

(He cuts her off.)

You've heard the stories—and not the worst ones either.

Becca

It just seems that

Michael

(He cuts her off again.)

Sorry, but I don't do death bed reconciliations.

Becca

(She forges on.)

But you could patch things up with him.

Michael

(getting a little annoyed)

I hate it when people say that—just because someone with the title of “My Biological Father” is dying doesn't make him a new and better person. If he wanted to be treated as a decent, caring human being, then that's how he should have lived his life--not just his last few days or hours.

Becca

You could give him a chance to make amends.

Michael

Can you make amends in an hour for a lifetime of brutality?

Becca

Ok, ok.

Let's trot out the old reliables: How about, forgiveness is a virtue?

Michael

Not in my family.

Becca

If you don't go, you won't give him the chance to (with emphasis on each word) “make things right?”

Michael

Darlin', just sayin' that shows you don't know my father at all. I'm confident that would never happen.

Becca

Ok, try this one: you'll regret it if you don't go.

Michael

(goes back to filling out his form)

I have a lot of regrets. One more won't make that much difference.

Becca

Alright, I give up.

(But she doesn't. A slight pause.)

Manny and I could cover for you—god knows, you've got enough unused leave.

Michael

I've got the M-CAT to study for.

Becca

Hell, Michael, you know more than most doctors do now; you'll get into med school.

(puts a hand on his shoulder, softly)

Go home. At worst, you burn up a few gallons of gas . . .

(He ignores her, continues writing.)

. . . or kill a couple of vacation days . . .

(She takes a new tack, cheerily.)

Hold on. I've got it, I've got it: Look on the bright side, you just might re-confirm your bad impression of your dad.

(the lights go down, Becca exits stage right)

(A strong spot lights Michael almost immediately. He speaks to the audience.)

Michael

I wasn't swayed by Becca's argument—well except maybe by that last part about reconfirming my bad impression; nevertheless, I started home that night. I hadn't been home in over 5 years, and I wasn't eager to see him again. It's not that we didn't get along—a lot of fathers and sons don't—it's just that we never were . . . (gropes for the words) neither of ever felt in any way, shape, or form truly connected. I'd left—not because of some childish temper tantrum—and it wasn't because of some macho pissing contest--I'd walked away to save my life. Over the last few years, nothing was left between us except the dimming memory of mutual contempt.

But I was learning that some ties can't be completely broken—even if you really try to break them--and I knew that even if I didn't go to the hospital, I'd be emotionally locked in that room with him anyway. So I headed home to see my dying father, hoping for a final emotional exorcism.

And as my car sped down the flat, monotonous Illinois interstate, I ran various versions of our father-son reunion through my head.

(Michael walks over to Herman at center stage. A spot light comes up on Herman in bed. The spot light follows Michael. Michael stands between the two beds and addresses the audience.)

As I rounded Kankakee, I conjured the Lifetime Television reunion.
(Michael turns and goes over to his father. Herman sits up and extends his arms.)

Herman

(syrupy and over-dramatic)

Son, I've missed you so much. I'm so sorry for the way I've treated you. Forgive me and let's start anew.

(Michael rushes over into Herman's arms and hugs him.)

Michael

(turns to audience, looks from Herman into the "heavens" above the audience, voice faux overwrought, broad arm gestures)

Oh father, I've missed you too. Forgive me for not being the son you always deserved.

Herman

(just as broadly and overacted, sits up a little)

No, let's not place blame. Together, we can build a new relationship. After all, today is another day.

(They hug each other again and then break apart. Herman lies back, still; Michael moves back to the foot of the bed; the spot follows him.)

Michael

(just a touch sarcastically)

Well, I knew that wasn't gonna happen—and if it did, after our long, dreary history, it would've been kind of creepy.

(He pauses a brief moment and continues.)

As I passed Rantoul, I pondered a *Star Wars* scenario.

(Herman removes his air tube and IV and pulls a toy light saber out from under his sheets; Michael grabs another saber from the foot of the other bed. Herman jumps out of bed and begins a sword fight with Michael in front of the two beds. They talk between strikes. Herman has no underwear on and flashes his butt occasionally to the audience as they duel.)

Herman

(breathing heavily and talking in a breathy, deep bass like Darth Vader.)

Mikey, you've come back. You must join me on the dark side.

Michael

(battling back emphatically)

No, never. I've escaped you father and your evil influence. I will only use the force for good.

Herman

(battling back)

But evil is more powerful than good.

Michael

No.

(pushing Herman back in the fight, each of the 3 words in the following sentence is said in conjunction with a sword strike)

Good . . . will . . . triumph.

Herman

Fah, Mikey, there's something you must remember,

(each of the first 4 words in the following sentence is said in conjunction with a sword strike, which beats Michael down)

I . . . am . . . your . . . father, and my evil is in you as well.

Michael

No. Nooo.

(He shrinks down onto his knees with every blow-word until he is beaten into submission.)

Herman

You are me!!

Michael

Noooooooo.

(The duel stops. Michael gets up and faces the audience. Herman returns to bed—flashing his ass as he gets back in. They casually stash or toss the swords aside.)

Hmmmm, don't like the way that one ends.

Around Mattoon, I conceived of the *Sopranos*' version: simple and to the point.

(Michael walks over to Herman's bed.)

Herman

(coldly)

I wondered when you'd show up.

Michael

(just as coldly, mechanically)

I should've showed up years ago.

(Michael goes up to the head of Herman's bed, close to the pillow.)

Dad. Let me fluff your pillow.

(Michael goes over and pretends to fluff for a second, then pulls the pillow out from under Herman's head, places it over Herman's face. Herman's arms and legs flail comedically as Michael impassively holds the pillow down. As Herman struggles, Michael looks up at the audience.)

Oh come on. Don't get all prissy and self-righteous with me. I'll bet most of you've thought about doing this to a parent—at least once in your life.

(Herman stops moving. Michael takes the pillow and puts it back behind Herman's head. As he says this next line, Michael moves a few steps downstage and towards stage right, just outside the sphere of the room.)

I had no illusions. I knew what to expect.

And as I drove down the streets of Effingham towards the hospital, I started regretting I hadn't listened to my Aunt Viv.

(Viv enters stage left, going through her purse looking for her compact and lipstick. Michael picks up a packed gym bag placed just past the last hospital bed and walks over to her.)

Viv

I've been wonderin' where you were. It's not like you to be late.

Michael

(brief half-hug)

Sorry, Aunt Viv, but something's come up. I can't do lunch.

Viv

(looking at the duffle bag, kidding)

An emergency at the gym?

You just robbed a bank?

I got it: a hot overnight date?

(leaning towards him conspiratorially)

Is he cute?

Michael

I have to go home—home to Altamont.

Viv

(taken aback)

Now, why the beejesus would you wanna do that? You've escaped. There's no need to return to that hell hole.

Michael

(drops duffle bag on ground)

Bert called . . . from the hospital in Effingham . . . dad's been admitted.

Viv

(takes compact, touches up her lipstick as she talks and listens)

Admitting him to a funeral parlor, now that'd be worth driving down to Altamont for.

Michael

They think it's his heart . . .

(preempting Viv, who interrupts her lipstick application and starts to speak but is cut off)

. . . I know, I know, who thought he had one?

(Viv smirks at their shared sentiment.)

Bert says he might not make it this time.

Viv

Don't tease me honey.

(checks her make up in the compact mirror, powders a couple of places)

Michael, you've started a new life up here—college, friends, a new family. You've got people who love you here. Don't get dragged back into your old life.

Michael

Are you going to say something poignant like "you can't go home again?"

Viv

(Let's go of his arms.)

No. I read that book, and I think he got it wrong: it's "you shouldn't go home again."

(concerned pause)

Michael . . .

Michael

(cuts her off; says in a tone meant to lighten the situation, hand gently on her arm)

Aunt Viv, thanks, but . . .

Viv

I know, baby. I know. You're gonna go.

Michael

I just have to. But I'll be back . . . and I'll be fine. There's nothing that could keep me down there.

Viv

They can mess with your head somethin' powerful.

Michael

It's probably too late to worry about that.

Viv

Ok. (pause, resignation) Ok.

(she digs in her purse)

Here, take some mad money.

Michael

Viv, really, I . . .

Viv

Now just stop with that. You ain't got much cash, and I've got too much. That's one good thing about having a dead husband from the insurance business. Besides, you never know when you'll need to get out of Dodge fast. You take this.

(He takes the money.)

Michael

Thanks, Viv.

Viv

And maybe you'd better take my Baretta. (She digs in her purse again and pulls out a handgun.)

Michael

Viv!

Viv

It's ok. I have a license. They're a nasty bunch; you'll need protection.

Michael

I don't need a gun.

Viv

You're right. They're a bunch of bloodsuckers after all. Maybe a crucifix instead. There's a church just down the street . . .

Michael

Viv!

Viv

Alright, alright.

But I'll be up late, and if I don't hear from you by suppertime, I'm drivin' down to rescue you—and I'm bringin' my gun.

Michael

Thanks, Viv. Thanks for everything. I love you.
(hugs, kisses her on cheek)

Viv

I love you too, honey.

(Viv exits stage left. Michael moves to center stage into the next scene. Lights down on stage left.)

(As the lights come up full on the hospital room, Michael moves into the room and stands by Herman's bed. Herman has replaced his tubes.)

Michael

(matter-of-factly)

Well, I see you're not dead yet.

Herman

(gruffly, but not rising to anger; he's a little short of breath in long sentences)

Yah, I'm not about to make your day.

Michael

Day? Hell, if you'd kick off, you'd make my decade.

Herman

(disinterestedly)

Well, I've missed you too.

Michael

Are you in pain?

Herman

No.

Michael

Ah . . . that's too bad.

(There's an awkward silence, then Michael eases back from Herman and sits on the bed opposite.)

Has Bert been in today?

Herman

He comes in every day—like a devoted son.

Michael

Devoted to what? Your cult of sado-masochism?

Herman

I don't know what you're talking about. You never make any sense. Your brother's a good boy.

Michael

Call me when he becomes a good man.

Herman

(adjusts his sheet; sarcastically)

So, to what do I owe this honor?

(Michael looks away and doesn't answer; Herman takes the offensive; he rallies somewhat as he provokes.)

Come to rehash old grievances? Get one last shot in before the old man dies?

Michael

No, I really don't care about that anymore.

Herman

(incredulous and provocative)

Oh really?

Let bygones be bygones?

Kiss and make up?

Michael

(flatly)

I don't wanna fight. I just came to see how you were doin'?

Herman

(trying to bait him)

Not gonna accuse me of knockin' you around, humiliating you, of ruining your life?

Michael

I'm not playin' this game today, pop.

Herman

(more to himself and the audience)

Well, we'll see about that.

(pauses only to grasp a breath before kicking into gear)

So, you're gonna take the martyr route today, eh? Hang yourself on a cross and suffer silently for all to see?

Michael

(annoyed but holding back)

No. No one can ever take the place of mom. You made sure she tacked herself up good and tight.

Herman

Don't you sully your sainted mother's memory.

Michael

The patron saint of doormats. You wiped your feet on her everyday.

Herman

How dare you. I loved her. I gave her a home and a family and everything she needed.

Michael

(Michael is visibly annoyed, hops off the bed and takes a step towards Herman, who has risen a little from his bed-ready and eager for a fight)

If you try to get sentimental with me about mom, I'll come over there and cut off your air tube.

You beat her down. You may get away with telling your lies to outsiders, but you can't lay that shit on me.

Herman

I can lay any shit on you I want.

Michael

You treated her like a servant. She was just another piece of property to you—you crushed her spirit—just like you tried to crush me.

Herman

Waa, waa, waa. I never hit her . . . not once . . .

Michael

You can beat someone without touching them . . .

Herman

(with glee)

I never got tired of smacking you. You needed it; you deserved it.

Michael

I deserved to be beaten?

Herman

Someone had to make you a man.

Michael

(heatedly)

My biggest regret is that I didn't beat the shit out of you—just once.

Herman

And just once I might've had some respect for you.

(An uncomfortable pause. Then out of breath, spitting the words out hoarsely but victoriously)

No, you don't wanna fight . . .

(the CNA, BARRY, enters from stage right and looks at each of them suspiciously; he has a thermometer and stethoscope; he moves to the stage left side of Herman, the bed between him and Michael.)

Barry

Soooo, having a nice visit, Mr. Miller?

Herman

Just charming. (sarcastically)

Michael

(stepping back, regaining control, realizing that he's been sucked into Herman's game; also sarcastic but calm again)

It's just that you bring out the best in me, pop.

Barry

Ok, Mr. Miller, let's take your temperature and pulse.

(Michael steps back; Herman lies back again. Barry goes through his routine, chatting as he sticks the thermometer in Herman's mouth and takes Herman's pulse.)

And who's our company today?

Herman

(Still trying to provoke a fight, he pulls out the thermometer.)

Yah, this is my second son—you two got a lot in common—he's a fudge packer like you.

(Michael starts to respond but Barry grabs the thermometer and takes charge.)

Barry

Well Mr. Miller, if you want to behave like this, I'll go get the rectal thermometer, and believe me, it'll be your fudge that gets unpacked today.

(Herman lies back; Barry sticks the thermometer back in; Michael relaxes. Barry looks Michael over carefully.)

Michael

(overly friendly)

Hi, I'm Michael.

Barry

(mischievously)

Barry.

So, you're a fudge packer?

Michael

Yep, born and raised right here in Effingham county, fudge-packing cross-roads of America.

(Herman chokes at this, takes out the thermometer, but Barry shoves it back it.)

Barry

(laughing)

God bless truck stops and rest areas.

(The two young men grin broadly. Barry pulls out the thermometer, glances at it.)

Michael

Amen, brother.

Herman

(trying to sit up some)

Now see here . . . I don't need to hear . . .

Barry

(putting his stethoscope in his ears, placing it on Herman's chest)

Quiet, Mr. Miller. Breathe in and hold.

(Herman complies.)

(Talking to Michael) Effingham! If a faggot can't get laid here, he can't get laid anywhere.

Michael

That's the truth.

Barry

(to Herman, who's struggling to hold his breath.)

Ok, let it out. Again: breathe in and hold.

(Talking to Michael, taking one plug of the stethoscope out of his ear. Stethoscope on Herman's back this time.)

I mean, the guy may not be pretty, but you can get off.

(They both laugh again. Herman continues to hold his breath as the two chat; they ignore him.)

Michael

Do you know Joe Harvey?

Barry

Sure do. We're good friends.

Michael

Joe and I used to run around together—I guess it's been a few years.

Barry

(Herman still holds his breath--but struggling.)

Come to think of it, I think he's mentioned you. Are you the paramedic in Chicago?

Michael

Yah, that's me.

Barry

Well, it's nice to finally meet you. I've heard stories about you and Joe and truck stop cowboys.

Michael

There're a lot of 'em . . . and they're all true.

Barry

(Herman struggles more broadly.)

Don't I know it. And Joe ain't slowed down a bit.

Herman

(wiggling a lot)

Mmmmmmmmmmm.

Barry

(Barry finally notices Herman.)

Oh, yah . . . you can breathe again.

(Herman let's out big breath. Barry gets ready to leave.)

So, Michael, you gonna be in town for a while?

Michael

(Smiling broadly)

A little while.

Barry
I'll stop by later and see how you're doin'.
(Michael walks a few steps with him.)

Michael
That'd be great.
(Barry exits, stage right.)

Herman
(exasperated)
You faggots make me sick.

Michael
(stares daggers, turns, to the audience, in a cold,
mechanical voice)
Dad. Let me fluff your pillow.
(As Michael steps towards his father, Aunt Viv enters
stage left, speed dials her cell, and remains stage left as
Michael's cell phone rings. He answers, sits on the
opposite bed again.)

Hello.

Viv
Darling, you make it down there ok?

Michael
Aunt Viv! Fine, just fine.

Viv
You seen that pencil-dicked freak yet?

Michael
Yah, I'm with him now.

Viv
Tell him I'm confident he'll be tortured in hell.

Michael
Viv says hi.

Herman
(mustering palatable disdain)
That bytch!

Michael

Yah, dad says hi too.

Viv

So, I guess the asshole isn't dead yet?

Michael

No, the asshole isn't dead yet.

Viv

Well, that's a shame.

Michael

I think it's a shame too.

Herman

(mumbles loud enough to be heard)

She always thought she was better than we were.

Viv

I heard that. You tell him that I always knew we were better than HE was.

Michael

. . . than you were, dad, Viv says that she always knew she was better than YOU were.

Herman

Dime store cooze.

Viv

Sleazeball.

He still cussin me?

Michael

Yah, he's still cussin' you.

Viv

He's still pissed 'cause I told your mom about him hittin' on me at your uncle's funeral. Imagine, groping your brother's widow in the middle of the Lord's Prayer. How'd I marry into such a family?

Michael

(laughs lightly)

How'd I get born into one?

(Viv laughs too.)

Viv

Well, you think he's gonna die any time soon?

Michael

No, I don't think there'll be a funeral this week.

Herman

I wouldn't give either of you the satisfaction.

Michael

There's a shot at next week though. He's breathing hard; his color isn't good.

(Herman gives Michael the finger.)

Viv

Well, honey, when that bastard finally kicks off, you remember to tell the undertaker I'll pay for an extra foot of dirt on the grave—just to make sure he don't get out.

Michael

Yah, Uncle Earl's gonna pay extra for a stake in the heart too.

(Michael gives a fake smile to Herman.)

Herman

Earl, that whiney little fuck.

Viv

Well, Earl's a sweetie. How you two can be related to those people I'll never know. When you comin' home?

Michael

(turns away from Herman)

I was gonna drive home tomorrow morning, but I think I'll stay around an extra day or two.

Viv

Is he cute?

Michael

Yah, he's pretty cute. He works here at the hospital.

Viv

Michael, you sure know how to attract men—like lint to a bellybutton. When you get home, call me. We'll do cocktails—go to supper—you can tell me all about your latest—and I'll tell you about mine.

Michael

Viv, you gotta a new man?

Viv

And he's a doozey. He knows exactly how to bang my pans. We can compare notes.

Michael

That sounds great Viv. I look forward to it.

Viv

Well, I gotta go honey. Gotta get all gussied up for the new beau. Play safe. I love you lots.

Michael

You too, Viv. Love you lots.

(They both hang up. Lights down, Viv exits left.)

Herman

(nastily)

She wags her ass for any dick that snakes by.

Michael

Except you, dad? She wouldn't wag her ass for you? Is that why you hate her so much?

Herman

Don't you talk to me like that. I may be dying, but I'm still your father.

Michael

(sarcastically)

Yah . . . you're my father—there's something to be proud of. I thought we'd covered this father shit already.

(Herman tries to rise to the fight, but is too tired out. As Barry enters from right, Herman falls back against his pillow.)

Barry

(carrying a water carafe)

So, are we still having fun? Mr. Miller, I've brought you some fresh water.

Herman

(sarcastically)

I'll remember to send your nomination to the Nobel committee.

(Barry walks in between the two beds, stares at Michael seductively, and sets the water on Herman's stand.

Herman regroups.)

You want me to leave so you two cocksuckers can be alone?

Barry

(to Herman, annoyed, but taking charge)

I'm fascinated, Mr. Miller, by the fact that you're so interested in your son's cock suckin'. Is there some little revelation you'd like to share with us—some hidden desire you'd like to confess?

Herman

(nonplussed)

Well . . . uh . . . uh . . . I mean . . . I don't . . .

Barry

Yah, I didn't think there'd be any big revelations today.

(fluffs the pillow roughly, checks the IV and the air tube,
etc. as he talks)

And for the life of me, I can't figure out why all you so-called straight guys care about what I do in bed. If you're so straight, why aren't you just apathetic about gay sex? Why do you have to make a big deal about it?

Herman

Because you fags have to throw it in our faces.

Barry

(exasperated)

Good god. There ain't one hour of one day that you breeders don't throw heterosex in our faces. I can't go to the mall, walk down the street, or watch a TV show without you throwing your sex in my face. And if two guys kiss or hold hands, oh my god, all you big, tough, macho guys get all hysterical.

Herman

No one wants you flauntin' your faggoty shit in our faces.

Barry

You want flauntin', I'll give you flauntin', and you won't even have to go online and pay for it.

(Barry grabs Michael and starts kissing him, pulling him over and on top of him on the empty bed. They make out passionately. Herman pulls out the IV and oxygen tube; the set lights dim a lot; a spot comes up on him. He looks at the two disgustedly, shakes his head, and comes forward, speaking to the audience.)

Herman

See what I have to put up with?

(Michael lays on top of Barry, lips locked, motionless while Herman speaks. Herman isn't weak or sick here, but his old self.)

(animated, to the audience)

How would it make you feel to see your son sticking his tongue down some pansy's throat?

(shakes his head again)

I knew from the time he was 4 or 5 that Mikey was gonna turn out queer. He was nothin' like his brother. His brother--even as a little kid--(proud) he was a manly boy. He pushed other kids around, beat up the school yard bully, never took shit from anyone. But this one (pointing over his shoulder), he just didn't have it in 'im--readin' books, hatin' sports, avoidin' fights, (outraged) playin' with girls and dolls for Christ's sake. I had to do somethin'; I had to toughen 'im up--(emphatic) I had to make a man out of him. So sure, I knocked him around. If you knock a boy around enough, he'll turn into a man--or else he'll die--and either way, it's for the best.

And he did get tough, I could tell--fightin' back against his brother; fightin' back against me.

(Stage right, three middle-aged men come out, and sit in two of three chairs around a small table. They have coffee cups. Two wear seed corn caps; one wears a Cubs cap. Herman walks over. Puts on a DeKalb seed corn hat and sits with them. He narrates this scene, but the other actors do their dialogue. These characters can be doubled with actors from other roles.)

One mornin', I was at the coffee shop--listenin' to all the neighbors lie and gossip--and then Sam Kershaw--his son Kevin was one of the toughest, nastiest kids around--after my boy Bert, that is--well, Sam starts gettin' on my case, all indignant:

Sam

Damn it, Herman, your boy jumped my Kevin last night and beat him up.

Herman

And I says, "Well, everyone knows if you mess with Bert, he'll fuck you up . . ."

and Sam starts whinin',

Sam

"No, it wasn't Bert; it was Mikey."

Herman

And I was just flabbergasted. My old high school buddy--Gus, he's a know-it-all--looks at me and says,

Gus

"Well, everybody in town knows about it."

Herman

I just looked at him in disbelief, and he says,

Gus

"Seems Mikey was with some of his gay friends in Effingham, walkin' out of a movie at the Village Square Mall . . ."

Herman

Gus even used the word “gay” ‘cause he was the liberal in the group—had some college, even voted for Clinton—well, he says,

Gus

“Kevin comes over to Mikey and his friends and starts makin’ fun of ‘em . . . callin’ ‘em fags, askin’ ‘em to suck his dick. Mikey tells Kevin to leave ‘em alone, but Kevin pushes the one guy so hard that he falls, and says, oh yah, make me, and Mikey turns around, hits Kevin in the nose, then grabs him by the shirt and knees him in the balls. Kevin falls down in a heap. Mikey calmly collects his friends, and as he walks away he says to Kevin, if you ever fuck with me and my fag friends again, I’ll kill you.”

Herman

Gus says,

Gus

“Everybody’s heard about it,”

Herman

and everybody at the table nods. And Sam Kershaw starts up again:

Sam

“Your boy ain’t got no right to . . .”

Herman

but I shut ‘im off sayin’, “You just knock it off, Sam Kershaw; if I was you, I wouldn’t keep remindin’ people that my faggot son made your son his butt boy,” and he shuts up.

(The farmers exit stage right, taking the small set props with them. Herman walks back to center stage, talking as he goes.)

I was never so proud of him. And he never told me about it.

Later that mornin’, I saw his busted knuckles and asked, what’d ya do to your hand, and all he says was, I hurt it changin’ a tire.

I was crushed. He never shared with me.

(Herman calls out, plaintively)

Mikey, you proved yourself to me. You were a real man; you were my son. We could’a come together, but we lost our chance.

(At the start of Herman’s last line, Michael slowly gets up off Barry--as if awakened into consciousness. Barry remains still. A spotlight comes up on Michael as gets on his knees on the end of the bed, faces the audience. Michael and Herman are not actually addressing each other, but inner demons. The lines are accusatory, animated, trying to make a case with the audience.)

Michael

I always knew I was different; I didn't know how or why, but he made sure I felt like a freak.

Herman

He was an odd boy.

Michael

I was only a little kid.

Herman

I was embarrassed by him. He was soft—and sensitive. He'd cry easily.

Micheal

He made me cry often. He made my world cold and brutal.

Herman

The world is harsh and brutal, and if you're different, you're done for. Nature gets rid of her mistakes. I made 'im tough, tough enough to survive.

Michael

He made my life a living hell. A father should protect and comfort his child, not torture him.

Herman

Fathers have a responsibility to make their sons men. Period.

Michael

He never understood what a father should be. He never understood what a real man was.

Herman

A father should be able to expect more from his son.

Michael

A son should be able to expect more from his father.

Herman

He broke my faith.

Michael

He broke my heart.

Herman

And he blamed me--he still blames me, and for what? for doin' my best.

Michael

He never once thought that what he was doing was wrong.

(Dueling monologues, more urgent, pressing their cases to the audience. The two characters start by alternating lines here—rapidly—but quickly escalate into stepping on each other's lines, creating an incoherent din. Michael starts.)

Michael
What's wrong with fathers?

Herman
You don't know how hard it is to raise a son.

Why do they have to make it so hard?

When a son's born, you have all these expectations, you have these hopes . . .

He should have been a role model, someone I could look up to.

. . . that he'll look up to you, be proud of you, and you'll be proud of him, and then he just crushes them.

All I ever wanted was a kind word, a pat on the back once in a while.

And he doesn't care.

Why can't they just accept their sons?

What does he know of the world? Nothing . . .

Why do we have to live up to their image of the world?

. . . but what can you do?

I only ever wanted him to be proud of me.

You do what fathers have done to their sons for generations.

Sure, maybe he had a hard childhood, but why must we suffer for the sins of their fathers?

(As he moves into the last part of the following line, Michael rises up on his knees and stretches his arms out, palms to the audience, forming a cross)

Michael

How many sons must be crushed? (in a loud frustrated voice)

How many families must be broken? (borderline despondent)

How many relationships must die? (softer, exasperated)

Herman

I raised him the same way my father raised me.

Michael

Must the sins of the fathers be passed on?

(Michael sits back on his legs, folds his arms across his abdomen, bends his head and pauses for a moment--in meditation. Then he raises his head.)

I forgive you father, though you know not what you've done.

(As Michael comes down off the bed and stands in front of it, a couch and chair upstage right, the chair facing the sofa, are dimly lit. The actor playing Bert comes in and lies down on the sofa; he plays his and Michael's grandfather and can be made up as an aged Bert. Herman goes upstage and sits in the chair, his back to the audience. This tableau stays dimly lit. The actors don't speak during Michael's monologue—but the grandfather-Bert animates when Michael repeats the grandfather's line. Michael addresses the audience. The spot light follows him.)

Michael

My grandparents lived across the road from our house—my dad's folks that is—my grandmother had been dead for some years and my grandfather was in poor health, so we took care of his two milk cows and few layin' hens for him. One day, when I was about 16, I saw my dad's truck pull in at my grandfather's house, so I walked over to see if I could help him unload the feed supplement. When I saw dad wasn't at the truck, I went to the house. As I opened the back door, I heard a loud angry voice. I stepped in, gently closing the door, and quietly made my way through the kitchen. I heard my grandfather's angry voice rise again:

(the grandfather-Bert animates for this line and only mouths the words)

“You're a fuck up and a disappointment; you've never been any good.”

(the grandfather-Bert mimes blistering Herman)

I peeked around the corner into the living room, and saw my grandfather lying on the couch heatedly browbeating my dad, who sat on the edge of a chair, meekly taking the verbal beating like a timid school boy. My grandfather blistered him with all the words my dad had often used on me. I listened for a while and then slowly backed out of the house.

I didn't know what to feel. I ran down to the barn, climbed up into the hayloft and I sat on the highest stack of bales, almost touching the roof, and I cried. I cried for my father; I cried for me.

I cried for all the sons and all the fathers who had lost their way. And when I came down from the loft, I vowed to make a new start with my dad: I'd break this vicious family cycle.

(Herman stands and faces forward, motionless.)

In the next few weeks, I tried to talk to him, tried to find some common ground, to forge a new relationship, but it didn't work. After that day he was even more brutal and remote. And I learned a hard lesson: understanding means nothing without connection.

(Herman does not move.)

You always had the power over our relationship, pop. The only power I ever had was to walk out.

(Herman goes back to his hospital bed; grandfather-Bert exits right; Michael goes back to the bed and gets on top of Barry. The set lights come up and the characters reanimate. Michael gets off of Barry and off the bed. He extends his hand and pulls Barry up.)

Barry

I get off at 8.

Michael

How about some supper?

Barry

Love to. The Green Lantern, about 9?

Michael

Sounds great. See you there.

(Barry exits right, taking Michael's hand and giving him a small kiss as he passes. Michael sits on the bed. Herman stares forward. Michael stares across Herman's bed. Neither looks at the other. There's a long silence.)

Michael

(breaks the silence and gets off the bed, only glancing once at Herman)

Well, I guess I'll get goin'.

Herman

(sarcastic)

Leavin' so soon?

Michael

I've had enough fun for one day.

Herman

Don't let the door hit you in the ass.

Michael

(doesn't turn around; doesn't look at or address Herman)

Don't worry. That door hasn't hit me in the ass in a long time.

(Michael slowly walks away, stage right. Herman shows no emotion. Michael pauses and slowly turns around, but Herman is motionless, eyes closed. Michael turns back around and pulls out his cell. He presses speed dial.)

Hey Becca. I won't be back in town tonight; can you feed Tallulah? The food's where it always is.

Yah, I've got a date tonight . . . he's pretty cute

Yah, he's still alive.

No. (pauses, listening)

No. (pauses)

It is finished.

(and exits, lights down)