

AFTER TARTUFFE

A Play in Two Acts

By Judy Klass

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Cast of Characters

GRANDMA: ORAL's mother. Sharp-tongued, quietly terrified of death; seventies.

ORAL: A prosperous, wide-eyed, oblivious but ultimately well-meaning Southern businessman; forties through sixties.

ALMA: ORAL's second wife, ten or twenty years younger than he is. Kind-hearted, stronger than he initially knows.

DANIEL: ORAL's son and ALMA's stepson. Introspective, brave: a daydreamer with potential to be heroic. In love with TYLER; eighteen or nineteen.

MARY-ANNE: ORAL's daughter and ALMA's stepdaughter. Sweet, pouty, timid around authority figures despite her visions of rock and roll rebellion. In love with VAUGHN; almost seventeen.

TYLER: In love with DANIEL, in awe of his intellect, and the person who comes closest to sharing his interests; early twenties.

VAUGHN: A serious, likeable young man, to the manor born, who has inherited a lot of money. In love with MARY-ANNE; late twenties.

THE REVEREND

CHADWICK PUSSEY: A hypocrite. Often syrupy smooth and overly friendly on the outside; thirties through sixties.

DOREEN: The maid in ORAL's household who tells it like it is. Not from a rich background. Her dress is a little low-cut but nothing shocking by today's standards; twenties through fifties.

Doubling is only possible if one actor plays both Vaughn and Pussey. Then, the play can be done with eight actors.

NOTE: IN THIS PLAY ALL WOMEN SHOULD WEAR FLOOR-LENGTH DRESSES AND HAVE KERCHIEFS ON THEIR HEADS AT ALL TIMES, UNLESS OTHERWISE INDICATED IN STAGE DIRECTIONS.

Scene

In ORAL's house during Act One; alternating between ORAL's house and VAUGHN and TYLER's house during Act Two.

Time

A possible future that's less than one century away.

AFTER TARTUFFE -- SYNOPSIS

This is a re-imagining of the Moliere play *Tartuffe*, set in a post-apocalyptic future America that has become a Christian Fundamentalist state. The population of our country has been decimated by the super-strain of the Avian Flu - stolen from a lab, probably by Fundamentalists. The nation is now ruled by Baptist Fundamentalists with the government situated in Selma, Alabama. Oral, a prosperous businessman, opens his home to a former megachurch pastor who has been disgraced in sex scandals: the Reverend Chadwick Pusser. Oral's son Daniel cannot feel free with Tyler, the guy he loves, with Pusser around, probably planting hidden cameras around the house. Daniel reads SF and alternate histories and suspects that his world is an aberration - a false history. He asks a website called oracle.net for the lost original draft of Moliere's play *Tartuffe* - the one that was banned, before Moliere watered the play down. Daniel thinks if he can get a pdf of the original, the universe will shift back to what it should be.

Tyler's older brother Vaughn is engaged to Daniel's younger sister Mary-Anne - but Oral decides to force Mary-Anne to marry Reverend Pusser, which horrifies the teenaged girl. Pusser tells Oral to control the women in his family; he cites Lot - who threw his daughters outside to be gang-raped, whose wife was turned into a pillar of salt for caring about her city, and who had sex with his daughters and fathered their children - as an example of the kind of upright man the Lord smiles on. Doreen, the outspoken housekeeper, and Oral's second wife, Alma, express themselves very differently, but both of them try to help Mary-Anne avoid the horrendous impending marriage.

Oral won't listen to Daniel when Daniel speaks up after Reverend Pusser makes a pass at Alma, or to Doreen, who denounces Pusser and tries to get Mary-Anne to stand up for herself. Mary-Anne surreptitiously listens to old rock music from our era, but she is timid - not the rock rebel she wants to be. Alma indulges in old Rodgers and Hammerstein movie musicals, and Doreen is partial to old sitcoms; they use these ancient, forbidden texts to help them interpret their world, as Daniel uses the things he reads on-line.

Daniel himself rejects a pass from Pusser, and tells Oral about it. Pusser claims to have taped footage of Daniel and Tyler having sex, but says he erased it - too painful for Oral to watch. Daniel says Pusser is lying, but comes out to his father, and Oral throws him out of the house. Alma convinces Oral to listen as she pretends to be interested in Pusser, Soon, Pusser is all over her. Oral confronts him at last. Pusser tells Oral the house is Pusser's now; Oral has given the preacher Oral's on-line banking password, and Pusser has dirt on the family. Things don't go quite as Daniel hopes, in terms of the Oracle, and thwarting Pusser in the way that Moliere's *Tartuffe* is thwarted ... Yet ultimately, Daniel is not without hope or a sense of purpose, and in some ways the whole family may be better off.

ACT ONE
SCENE ONE

(GRANDMA, energized by righteous rage,
is taking her leave of ALMA, DANIEL and
MARY-ANNE. VAUGHN and TYLER look on.)

GRANDMA

No need to hover 'round and make a show;
Just quickly say goodbye, and let me go.

ALMA

But we would love for you --

GRANDMA

Alma.
You have less right to speak than anyone
You're not what I'd have chosen for my son.
His first wife was obedient and meek;
She knew our sex is prone to vice, and weak
And kept her voice low, and her eyes downcast.
You're too obsessed with our benighted past.
Your only thought should be your husband's love,
And not the blighted age we rose out of.
You watch old movies, one after another;
You're nothing like these children's sainted mother!
Now you look pale, and play the invalid
But you can't teach them values like she did.

DANIEL

But, Grandma --

GRANDMA

Don't Grandma me, young man, with your fool friends.
(indicating DANIEL, VAUGHN and
TYLER)
The three of you don't know where childhood ends
And sober, manly dignity begins
I'd hate to read your catalogue of sins --
All of you gamblers, no doubt, heavy-drinkers
And radical, heretical free-thinkers.

MARY-ANNE

Really, Grandma --

GRANDMA

At last, the little shy one speaks! She thinks
She's guarding all her secrets like a sphinx,
And hopes we'll never guess what's underneath;
Her sweet smile hides rebellion, and sharp teeth.
(indicating VAUGHN and TYLER)
One of these gentlemen, forgive my crudeness
May already lead her to acts of lewdness,
And I'm not sure that you should tell me, Daniel
Why the other follows you like a pet spaniel.

DOREEN

Oh, leave them alone, they're nice kids --

GRANDMA

Be quiet! Will you never learn your place?
 Or stop your loud remarks, and shut your face?
 A housekeeper should give thanks on her knees
 For such a fine home, and a chance to please
 A master like my Oral. But you strut
 About in sluttish clothes, much too low-cut,
 And sound off on affairs that don't concern you
 A whipping is the thing that just might learn you
 To play the servant's role that you've ignored.
 We all are humble servants to the Lord
 And handmaidens in great homes, now, post-Plague, are
 Best off if they don't rebel, as Hagar
 Did, defying Sarah, wife of Abram.
 But Reverend Pusser is as strong as I am
 And he sees through you all. He's not afraid
 To search out sin, and call a spade a spade.

DANIEL

It's true, in this house Pusser has no fear;
 No matter what he does, he's in the clear.
 He tells us on the hour that we've sinned
 And lectures like the pompous bag of wind
 He is. Since Daddy found him in the lurch
 Immersed in scandal at that megachurch,
 And took him in, our home's become a hell
 You won't see it -- you're underneath his spell --

GRANDMA

The scandal was a lie! The man was framed!
 Those girls came on to him, and he got blamed.
 He never touched them once! It makes him weep
 To think how guilt must rob them of their sleep.

DANIEL

The lies he tells don't interest me at all
 And I don't care when preachers take a fall.
 What galls me is the scale of his hypocrisy!
 This house of ours was never a democracy.
 I do respect my elders. But when he
 Moved in, and chose to daily lecture me
 On purity of word and deed and thought ...
 He lost his pulpit! Three times he's been caught!
 He has no shame. Sometimes he makes me shake
 With anger. There's just so much I can take.

GRANDMA

Then learn humility and gentle ways
 Submit, and leave behind this teenage phase.

DOREEN

Ma'am, this whole house is ripe for revolution
 We can't put up with Pusser's persecution!
 He spies on us, with searching, nasty looks;
 He takes away our music, shows and books.

GRANDMA

Well, good for him! So, while my son is gone
 This house will not become a Babylon.

DOREEN

We're half afraid to laugh, or talk, or blink.
 He told me that it's dangerous to think,
 So I should "lose the habit." What a jerk!
 And then he tells me how to do my work,
 Expects I'll bring whatever he should want
 And orders food like it's a restaurant.
 He'll sermonize at me, and all the while
 I'm creeped out by his over-friendly smile.

GRANDMA

That's just because you're paranoid and vain;
 You've always got flirtation on the brain.
 The Reverend Pusser's love is genuine;
 That's why he gives you bitter medicine.
 You're all too young to see the stakes are high,
 To know you need this discipline, and why.
 I've seen the years go by, and I recall
 The way man lived in sin, after the Fall
 Before the birth of our Redemption State
 Praise God, we've managed to survive that fate!
 The Patriarchs speak true, and I believe
 We all were tainted by the sin of Eve
 And when Christ came and died in expiation
 The world did not accept that liberation;
 Too many lived as though they'd never heard
 The promise and the power of His Word,
 And those of us who heard Him, and were baptized
 Put up with a society half-capsized.
 They hated us, and mocked our being blessed:
Envious of the secret we possessed.
 Their decadence and arrogance were numbing.
 We thought, then, it would take the Second Coming
 To bring God's love to those it could not capture --
 Or maybe Armageddon, or the Rapture!
 Instead, the scientists who knew so much,
 Yet went through life completely out of touch,
 Who played with stem cells, and taught Evolution
 Without the slightest fear of retribution,
 Went too far -- as blasphemers always do.
 They bred a new strain of the Avian Flu
 Transmittable through air, and more contagious.
 Their license to play God then was outrageous!

GRANDMA (CONT'D)

The formula was stolen and was used
By enemies of mankind. Some accused
A pious group of Fundamentalists
But this was libel! Godless terrorists
Were perpetrators of the hideous crime
That stopped the world, and led to the End Time.
My memories of those hard years of Plague
Are shadowy, and changeable, and vague.
At seventeen, I watched my family die
In quarantine, and could not answer why
I had been spared -- me and my brother Bo --
Out of a clan of forty folks or so.
It seemed unfair. But years passed, and I knew
God's will placed me among the Chosen Few
Who braved the darkest night and saw the morn
In which our pure Redemption State was born.
I thank Christ I was present at the birth,
At long last, of his Kingdom here on Earth.
I've seen the lifting up of mortal men;
America itself is Born Again.
Our Patriarchs are wise, and govern well
And guide you younger fools away from Hell
Into which you'd plunge, eagerly and blindly!
They're patient, firm, compassionate and kindly
With human error, with each human flaw
As they translate the Bible into Law.
And men like Reverend Pusser do their bidding
Reminding you that Jesus wasn't kidding
When He demanded pious, righteous living.
Don't think that He is endlessly forgiving
Of cynical and scandalous behavior!
Now, here, reminding you all of our Savior
Is Reverend Pusser, enemy of Sin,
He'll watch you and, if need be, turn you in.
And that's the biggest favor he can do ya,
Praise be to God, and Glory Hallelujah!
I'd like to see my son, but I can't stay
I'm off to church, to bow my head and pray
And fling my hands into the air, and speak
In tongues, and let the Spirit make me weak
And strong. Tell Oral that I can't delay
With heretics who carry on this way.
I send him all a mother's love, and I'm
Hoping he'll call me, when he has the time.

(SHE sweeps out.)

END OF SCENE ONE

SCENE TWO

(DANIEL'S room. DANIEL sits at his odd, half-home-made computer. TYLER dozes on DANIEL'S bed.)

TYLER

You've spent an hour drifting through the ether.
Why not come over here, and take a breather?

DANIEL

I'm not tired, and I'm almost finished, thanks.
I'm learning things, and filling in huge blanks
With basic facts the outside world knows well
Of life here -- till the stained-glass curtain fell.

TYLER

Let me help you relax, put that behind you.

DANIEL

I'm sorry, Tyler, that I must remind you --
Say and do anything here that you'd like
Recorded by a camera and a mic.

TYLER

If there's a hidden camera in your room,
And you're watched all the time, as you assume,
Then why admit you're flaunting Selma's orders
And traveling the 'net beyond our borders?

DANIEL

My father knows I surf around on-line
I teach him things, I help him out -- he's fine
With it. But I'm afraid if he should see
Some other kinds of things -- he'd disown me.

TYLER

I'll try, then, to behave more circumspectly,
Since I can't even *talk* to you directly.

DANIEL

Not here, you can't. But isn't it fortuitous
That we can talk in ways that are circuitous?
My family's discourse is so eroded
We're safe, if our communication's coded.
Know in your heart that we remain close friends
As we were, far beyond the camera's lens.

TYLER

All right then. I'll let that thought keep me brave
And watch you as you surf the cyber-wave.
And once my brother's married to your sister
I won't hide what I feel in a tongue-twister;

TYLER (CONT'D)

You'll call on kin, here in your neighborhood
And stay with us, as a good brother should.

DANIEL

Yes. Just wait calmly till the honeymoon
Is over, and we'll be together, soon.

(turns to computer)

While I pour all my energy and passion
Into this box I update and re-fashion
With improvised parts, memory chips and glue
To make it do more than it's meant to do.
I'll grow into what once was called a slacker,
Combined with nerd, and renegade, and hacker.

TYLER

And what have you learned from barbarian
Lands, that say we're totalitarian?

DANIEL

I'm getting lost in speculative fiction
This universe feels like a contradiction
So counter-intuitive, so very wrong
So *not* the kind of place where I belong.
And as I read, I find that there's a fine line
Between this world and one by Robert Heinlein;
Revolt in 2100 is his book
Of crazed Christians in power. And a Canuck
Named Margaret Atwood tried to show how frail
Real rights were, down here, in *The Handmaid's Tale*.
They wrote their science fiction allegories,
About a future US, and their stories
Are what we're living now. The Patriarchs
While spreading fear of Sodom and Karl Marx
Destroyed our nation's greatest contribution:
The spark of freedom in its Constitution
The closest law has come to poetry --
Though they would call such feelings blasphemy.
It's like we're trapped in some nightmarish vision
Meant just to warn -- pure satire and derision --
As if this world were dreamt up by some asshole
Like Philip K. Dick's *The Man In the High Castle*
In which the Germans and the Japanese
Won World War II. Laugh at me if you please,
But even fiction helps give me a sense
Of what we've lost through Plague and violence.
There were some groups our first Redeemers smote
Like Mormons -- they held out -- that's all she wrote.

TYLER

Weren't they men who married many wives?

DANIEL

Some did. Some not. But some paid with their lives
 For not converting, locked in prison towers.
 Their leaders were called Patriarchs, like ours.
 They had one writer, named Orson Scott Card --
 The power of his prose caught me off guard.
 What characters, and what imagination!
 One story, set post-nuclear conflagration
 Has thieves raid a great Temple that once stood
 In Salt Lake City -- now it's gone for good.
 In this tale, it had sunk into the lake.
 The thieves thought it held treasure they could take.
 They dove down deep, but couldn't find the gold.
 For Card, it wasn't coins that hands could hold,
 But spiritual treasure of his tribe.
 I tell you, Tyler, it's hard to describe
 The pleasure my poor heart gets when it delves
 Into good books on foreign cyber-shelves.
 I glimpse imagined futures, and real past,
 My eyes start to tear up, my heart beats fast,
 I can't engage with my real life because
 I'm caught up in the Now that almost was.

TYLER

I won't make fun of you or get sarcastic
 I love it when you're so enthusiastic.
 (beat)
 Your grandmother sure kicked up quite a fuss.
 Bizarre, what she was saying about us.

DANIEL

Oh, good old Grandma, and her interference.
 She hates sin, yes, but also the appearance
 Of it: what just *sounds* filthy and immoral.
 Strange, for a woman who named her own son Oral.

TYLER

(laughs)
 It's nice to sit with you and shoot the breeze
 Even if I cannot take liberties.
 So, did your gran have reason to accuse
 Your stepmom of a love for what the Jews
 Of Hollywood once put up on the screen?

DANIEL

My stepmom has no use for what's obscene,
 Violent or scary. She likes old rom-coms
 And musicals aimed right at moms and stepmoms:
The Sound of Music, Gigi, My Fair Lady ...
 I find them on the web, there's nothing shady
 About them, crass, or anti-clerical
 No need for prudes to get hysterical.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

My sister likes old songs, ranging from doo-wop
 Right through a later form they once called hip-hop.
 I think that she might risk a family showdown
 To hang on to a music they called Motown.
 Girl Groups, and "Emo" make her happy -- very,
 And bland stuff called "Adult Contemporary."
 Again, I search for what her ears prefer
 And when I hear it, download it for her.
 The three of us have formed a strange alliance
 A passive, quiet, weak form of defiance
 The *four* of us I should say, since Doreen
 Loves sitcoms and old shows she's hardly seen.
 I read old books, they watch, and sing and dance
 It's like we're all caught up in the romance
 Of what was lost, and all that might have been.
 I know my father thinks of it as sin,
 Yet our loving obedience suffices
 To make him overlook these tiny vices.
 At least, it did when he was fair, and wiser
 Till Pusser moved in as his main adviser.

TYLER

It's odd to hear how you and Mary-Anne
 Hoard up all these condemned works while you can,
 Exclaiming over every pre-Plague fossil --
 When your mom was so pious and so docile.

DANIEL

My Grandma thinks she understood my mother.
 They never spent much time with one another.
 My mother knew that Grandma was a terror
 And hid from her all deviance and error.
 Gran turns on Mary-Anne, who bows and trembles
 Not out of cunning -- Mary-Anne resembles
 Our mom, who loved our father, as does Alma
 But secretly, Mom thought the men in Selma
 Were frauds who stifled our country's growth;
 She gave a love of learning to us both.

TYLER

I feel at last that I know the real you
 Through talking, since there's nothing else to do.
 Of course, with lights out, little need be said ...

DANIEL

And yet some cameras can turn infra-red.

TYLER

My house is yours, just bring your things and stay --

DANIEL

Pusser would know. My dad gets home today.
Pusser's persuaded him I should be hounded,
Watched, checked, and indefinitely grounded.

TYLER

Well, I don't envy you your Grand Inquisitor.
But I'm content, for now, to be your visitor.
So tell me more about the long ago
That Holy Rollers don't want me to know.
I like to hear you talk, give me a sense
Of those strange lands beyond our border fence.
We're thwarted here, but talk feels like resistance
So, let our voices reach across this distance.

END OF SCENE TWO

SCENE THREE

(ORAL has just arrived home. As HE takes off his coat, DOREEN and VAUGHN approach. DOREEN takes the coat.)

DOREEN

Sir, welcome home. I'll hang this on the rack.
The whole house will be glad to know you're back.

VAUGHN

It's good to see you here, sir, and if you
Have time, I'd like to speak a word or two.

ORAL

One moment, Vaughn. I hate to be dramatic
But my cell phone would give me only static
Each time I tried to call my family.
Doreen, do you have any news for me?

DOREEN

To tell the truth, your wife was very ill.
She's resting upstairs -- she feels tired still.

ORAL

And the Reverend Chadwick Pusser?

DOREEN

He showed her no concern -- maybe a smidge --
And stuffed his smarmy face with half our fridge.
He washed down cold fried chicken I had sliced
With red wine that he called the "Blood of Christ"
He sipped it first, but then he came to gulp it,
And sermonized like he was in the pulpit.
He wolfed a pot roast so fast, I said: Dang!
And, solo, put away a whole meringue
That I had baked for your return today.
Meanwhile, your wife grew hot, then cold as clay.
Two nights ago, not knowing what to do
About her fever of one-hundred-two,
I almost called an ambulance, but I
Know hospitals don't cure much now, and why.
The doctors take an oath that they won't harm a
Patient, but their first love is Big Pharma;
And drugs are hoarded to drive up their prices,
And patients are left to their own devices
As doctors say to trust the power of prayer ...
I couldn't wish on her that kind of care.

ORAL

Be careful, Doreen, you live in a nation
That's left behind all pre-Plague regulation.
Those checks on the free market are not missed;
You're sounding like a godless Communist.

DOREEN

I still say pain, from cancer down to cuticles
Deserves more than the games of pharmaceuticals.
I agonized, your wife's state was no joke --
Until, at 2:00 a.m., her fever broke.

ORAL

And the Reverend Chadwick Pusser?

DOREEN

He managed to tune out most of our drama;
It didn't seem to cause him too much trauma
He helped himself to fine cigars of yours
And through the night his belches and his snores
Went echoing along the upstairs halls
And, at their most explosive, shook the walls.
That's how it's been most nights he's been our guest
And that night was no different from the rest.

ORAL

And so he's happy here?

DOREEN

As happy as pig among the slops
His pious criticism never stops.
I'll tell your wife you're here, and how you care
So much. A love like yours is very rare.
She ought to know you showed so much concern
When I told you about her awful turn.

(DOREEN EXITS.)

VAUGHN

I think just now Doreen was being flip
She's always been one to shoot from the hip.
But really, sir -- I've known you all my life
My parents thought that you and your first wife
Were their most righteous neighbors. Forgive me
For speaking of the change in you I see
But your good judgement, kindness and strong sense
Of justice cannot *all* be in past tense.
If you permit this man --

ORAL

Vaughn, didn't you say
You'd like to talk, and then be on your way?

VAUGHN

Yes, sir. I meant no harm. Lately, I've tried
To ask when Mary-Anne will be my bride.
Without your help, we cannot plan a thing;
For three months she's worn my engagement ring --

ORAL

(avoiding looking at him)
I'll let you know what I decide, but I'm
Too busy now, I just don't have the time
For silly matters such as these.

VAUGHN

But sir,
You know her tender heart -- please, think of her
She talks to me of women's intuition;
She's now afraid you'll withdraw your permission.
You've changed so much within the last few weeks --

ORAL

Remember, it's your elder, Vaughn, who speaks
To you now. Stop your whining, and reflect:
You owe me deference, not disrespect.

VAUGHN

No disrespect was meant, just honesty --
A quality that you once prized in me.

ORAL

Well, young men think they're honest when they're rude.
I've come home from a trip, please don't intrude
Here any longer. Let these questions cease
Get in your car and leave my house in peace,
And if your brother's here, then take him with you
Go read about how Satan tempts, in Matthew.
My children need no boyfriend, and no buddy --
And all of you could use more Bible study.

VAUGHN

We'll go, but now my heart is full of dread.
I'm scared you'll break your word, just like she said.

(VAUGHN EXITS. ORAL speaks to himself,
in a kind of prayer.)

ORAL

Oh, Reverend Pusser, keep me on the path
So, I don't hear them, and forget God's wrath.

END OF SCENE THREE

SCENE FOUR

(MARY-ANNE is in her room, listening to something by Ellie Greenwich, produced by Phil Spector -- or that sounds like their work -- and dancing to it. Her kerchief is off her head. There is a curtain or screen blocking off part of her room. There is a KNOCK at her door. SHE hurries to a wall switch, to turn the MUSIC OFF, and puts her kerchief on.)

ORAL (O.S.)

Mary-Anne?

MARY-ANNE

Just a moment, Daddy.

(The MUSIC is OFF.)

MARY-ANNE (CONT'D)

Come in!

(ORAL ENTERS)

ORAL

What was that ghastly noise that I was hearing
Like savages beating bongos in a clearing?

MARY-ANNE

Oh -- that was Alabama's All-Girl Choir
Their worship songs have set the world on fire!
They raise God's temple up on holy ground
With something that they call a "Wall of Sound."

ORAL

I doubt the truth of your last few remarks.
The Selma Council of the Patriarchs
Would outlaw such crude music, I believe.
I fear that you're too trusting and naive,
Too eager to respond to your five senses
And let in tempting outside influences.
Someone gave you that rock abomination
And you bought his smooth, pious explanation
That it was legal, Godly and legit;
You don't see Satan's handiwork in it.

MARY-ANNE

No, Daddy, no one outside --

ORAL

Never mind.
Let's leave our talk of false friends far behind.

ORAL (CONT'D)

You always were a good girl, Mary-Anne
And now I need to know if I still can
Depend on you to listen and obey,
Without back-talk, whatever I may say.

MARY-ANNE

I like to make you happy --

ORAL

That's well said.
You're almost seventeen, you should be wed
To a man who hates all pre-Plague heresy.
Until you're his, the job belongs to me
To save you from yourself and be your shield;
A girl is a weak vessel, and may yield
To punks, or creeps -- a gambler or a cusser ...
Tell me -- what do you think of Reverend Pusser?

MARY-ANNE

I -- don't think of him much, I must confess.
I'll say what you would like me to, I guess.

ORAL

Yes, see it my way, let the new thoughts in
Turn your back firmly on a life of sin.
Womanly virtue will bring you a sweetness
That drowns old memories in its completeness.
Now, tell me you'll renounce your former life
And live in grace and glory, as his wife.

MARY-ANNE

As whose wife? Dad, I'm sorry, but I find
I'm way confused -- or else I've lost my mind.

ORAL

My love for you has led me to decide
You'll be the Reverend Chadwick Pusser's bride.

MARY-ANNE

But, Dad, you know that I'm engaged to Vaughn.

(DOREEN is now visible
listening behind the curtain
or screen.)

ORAL

I fear those plans were prematurely drawn.
Vaughn doesn't fight to see temptation skewered
He isn't fit to be your guide and steward.
No, it's the Reverend who deserves to be
The newest member of our family.

ORAL (CONT'D)

So, tell me now you aren't disappointed
To join in holy bonds with the anointed.

MARY-ANNE

Why would you have me say something untrue?
In such a moment, should I lie to you?

ORAL

I want you to be truthful and sincere
When you tell me the words I ask to hear.
(Becomes suspicious, finds
DOREEN behind the screen or
curtain)
This is outrageous! Tell me what you mean
By spying and eavesdropping here, Doreen!

DOREEN

No, sir, it's just I've heard this ugly rumor --
It's growing like a pustule or a tumor --
That you're so cruel and crazy now, you plan
To hand that Pusser creep our Mary-Anne!
I came here for a chance to hear you scoff
At all that stupid talk, and laugh it off.

ORAL

Each day you grow more insolent, and bolder.
But yes, they are engaged -- I just now told her.

DOREEN

No, seriously, she's easily upset
She doesn't know you're messing with her yet.
Fun's fun, okay, but can't you see she's freaking
Out from all this bull crap you've been speaking?

ORAL

(points out of the room)
Enough! Go clean your stove, or wax your floor!
Don't sass me, I won't listen anymore!

DOREEN

You're good, sir, quite an actor, quite the joker
And if you played the godless game of poker
Your face would not betray you -- but I know
You're not some snake who'd lay his daughter low.
Deep down, you sense how evil that old goat is.

ORAL

Tell me, is this your way of giving notice?
Would you like to live back among the masses,
In fear and hunger, with the lower classes?

ORAL (CONT'D)

You think my patience with your talk is endless
 But you could end up penniless and friendless,
 Fighting for scraps, part of the unwashed mob,
 So mind your tongue, if you value your job.
 I'm marrying her to Pusser! It's quite true.

DOREEN

Forgive him, God. You know not what you do.
 Are you *that* cold, to hand your only daughter
 To Pusser, like a lamb off to the slaughter?
 Her mind and love and sweetness gone to waste
 What makes you think that this girl will stay chaste?
 She can't be loyal to that pile of slime
 He'll gross her out, she'll stray -- just give it time.
 'Cause when a girl's romantic dreams are drowned
 She gets tough. Pretty soon, she sleeps around.

ORAL

No! Girls need men of faith to guide their ways
 I don't see Vaughn in church enough these days
 I've heard that he plays games with cards and dice;
 I'll save my daughter from a life of vice.

DOREEN

Vaughn may not wear his faith upon his sleeve
 But that's not how you tell what men believe;
 A good man doesn't wave his inner soul
 Like it's a flag, or run it up the pole.
 Smart, thoughtful people wrestle privately
 With faith, and talk to God in privacy.
 The flashy style of guys who make a splash
 Should clue you in -- they're two-faced, low-life trash.
 That preacher will spout scripture like a spigot
 And Mary-Anne will squirm free of that bigot.

ORAL

You're so annoying, I feel almost violent!

DOREEN

I love you too much, sir, to remain silent.
 When dads like you force teenage girls to wed
 It leads to sin, so be it on your head --

ORAL

Shut up! One more word and I'll lose my temper.
 Mary-Anne, I hope, like the Marines, you're Semper
 Fi. Your answer still remains unspoken.

MARY-ANNE

Please, don't talk to me now. My heart is broken.

ORAL

But you know where your duty lies, I trust.
Of course, I'll give you time to readjust ...

(Uncertainly, HE LEAVES.)

DOREEN

You wimped out, so I spoke up in your place
But now you have to get up in his face
And tell him that he's wrong -- don't be a pussy!
No woman ever won by being wussy.

MARY-ANNE

That's not a thing that I can do, Doreen.
I have friends who were married at fourteen
To deacons and rich men, not men they chose.
I never thought I would be one of those
But my dad finds this preacher so inspiring
It's blinded Dad, it's messing with his wiring,
And what he thinks love is -- I can't get through --

DOREEN

So, let *him* marry Pusser then, not you!
Be obnoxious, forceful, *fight* when things get hairy --
You've got to be a Rhoda, not a Mary.

MARY-ANNE

How can I disobey my father's word?
His mind is all made up, as you just heard.

DOREEN

Of course! I didn't realize you were hot
To get hitched to the Reverend. Like as not,
You're tired of Vaughn, you want somebody older,
Warmer on the outside, inside colder,
Syrupy smooth, self-righteous, full of shit!
You *want* to be joined to that hypocrite
And be his helpmate, bed-mate, bear his spawn.
Could any man compete with that? Not Vaughn,
Although I've heard you tell me, now and then
That Vaughn's the one you love, above all men.
But now I know it's time for celebration
You're ripe and primed for your Pusserfication.
Forget your love, your promises and kisses
Just get psyched up to be the Reverend's missus.

MARY-ANNE

Don't torture me! It's Vaughn who has my heart
I ache for him each day that we're apart,
And now we'll spend a life-time unfulfilled.
You *know* this, it's to you I've always spilled
My hopes and secrets, so why would you mock me?

DOREEN

Because your whiny, lame excuses shock me.
So terrified of incivility,
So full of maidenly humility ...
Your father's playing without a full deck,
And you're not burning mad?

MARY-ANNE

I'm mad as heck!

DOREEN

Then don't submit and leave him in control!
You haven't learned a thing from rock and roll.
Fight back! Before he chains you to that louse
You should kick out the lights! Burn down the house!
(beat)
Forget it, you know what? I can't stay here
And watch you let your future disappear.

(SHE heads for the door.)

MARY-ANNE

Doreen, I can't oppose my father's will!
I'll kill myself: OD on Benadryl.

DOREEN

Oh, *that's* constructive, that's how to combat
Life's problems. So long, lots of luck with that ...

MARY-ANNE

(crying)
Doreen, don't go! Please tell me what to do.
I wish I could be half as tough as you.
I'm not, I'm scared, I wish I had a friend;
My life's become a nightmare that won't end.

DOREEN

(relents, returns)
Okay, okay. I'll help you. Here's some tissue
Let's try to get an angle on this issue
That we can work -- now dry the other eye.
As Frankie Valli said: "Big Girls Don't Cry."

MARY-ANNE

I wish my life was like an old rock song
I wish I could be fabulous and strong,
Instead of such a doormat and a victim.
But how can I defy my father's dictum?

DOREEN

Well, stall for time. Tell him you want a year
To plan the big day, and to engineer
The dresses for the bridesmaids, perfect flowers ...

DOREEN (CONT'D)

Bore him with girlish chat, go on for hours,
And meanwhile, we and Vaughn have time to plot --

MARY-ANNE

It should be Vaughn who tells my dad what's what.
It's not my job to put this right, it's his!

DOREEN

Look, kid, you really can't blame Vaughn for this.
He's courted you and waited, patiently;
It's not his fault your father's off his tree.
But there's a chance Pusser could be exposed
And some of his hypocrisies disclosed
So clearly that your dad would get a clue.
Till then, we'll stand by you and see you through.
Now take a deep breath. Steady on your feet
We know the enemy we have to beat.
That Big '80s song you played me, Mary-Anne,
Said: "Don't mess with a missionary man."
That's good advice, the words she sang were true.
Let's find a way that *he* can't mess with *you*.

END OF SCENE FOUR

SCENE FIVE

(ORAL joins PUSSER in a comfortable study.)

PUSSER

It's good to see you, friend, but you look sad.
I know that as a husband and a dad
Those under you pull you in all directions
And play upon your kindness and affections.
If there's some trouble that you want to share
I'm here to help, and join with you in prayer.

ORAL

Oh, Reverend, it's like you just read my mind!
My family says I'm out of touch, and blind
To their needs -- just an old deluded fool.
I'm even thinking that it might be cruel
To marry Mary-Anne to you because
She dotes on that boy Vaughn the way she does.

PUSSER

Sometimes you're too soft-hearted, and too nice.
But tell me, would you value my advice?

ORAL

Yes, please! Until you speak I never see
The outlines of what God has planned for me.

PUSSER

Well then, I'll say it would be a mistake
To cause strife in your home just for *my* sake.
But what's at stake here now is your position
As patriarch-protector. It's my mission
To save the Christian family, and each soul
Must understand it plays a different role.
Your leadership here was ordained by Heaven
Says Paul, in First Corinthians 11.
Our sweet Redemption State has disinterred
The beauty and the meaning of the Word,
And women all wear kerchiefs as a sign
Their place is not the same as yours and mine.
Before the Plague, foul secularization
Had women seen as equals in this nation,
They reveled in this hideous distortion
Indulged in drugs, and partial-birth abortion
And no-strings, casual, contraceptive whoring;
They found the role that God chose for them boring.
They'd masquerade as senators and teachers
Or stand up before congregants, as preachers!
But now, with men back firmly in control
We calm the female mind, and save her soul.

PUSSEY (CONT'D)

Some still say male and female are the same
 And girls should go bare-headed, without shame
 As they once did, but men of God now know
 That Christ is above man, God wills it so,
 As man is above woman. Man was made
 In God's own image. So, don't be afraid
 To rule those fashioned from a rib! Believe
 That Adam sinned through listening to Eve.
 A man's a fool to think a woman's wiser
 And let her play the role of his adviser;
 Man's moral sense is libertine and shoddy
 If he lets woman control her own body.

ORAL

Sure, but -- my daughter's rather shy and gentle
 Full of romantic notions, sentimental.
 These plans of ours, they just seem to nonplus her.

PUSSEY

Please, Oral, listen here to Brother Pussey.
 I know it's hard -- when so many refute
 The truth -- to go on, strong and resolute.
 But God affirms the man who's not distracted
 By thoughts like these: a man who's not impacted
 By such emotional considerations.
 No, build your house on more solid foundations
 Like Lot! Recall how Abraham asked God
 To stay His mighty hand, and spare the rod
 If ten clean-living, righteous men were found?
 Abraham's nephew was the only one around.
 God sent two angels, and Lot took them in.
 And all around his house there rose a din
 Of wicked sinners! "Send them out," they cried!
 They would have raped those angels, once outside.
 Those men of Sodom were vile as can be
 This story's one more proof that sodomy
 Is loathsome to our Lord, offends his eye.
 But back to Lot. Now, what was his reply?

ORAL

I don't remember. I'll have to re-read.

PUSSEY

He didn't let his fatherly heart bleed.
 He heard the threats and cat-calls, harsh and loud
 And gave his virgin daughters to the crowd
 To do with what they wanted and gang-rape:
 A fate he knew the angels must escape
 For as a host, he owed it to a guest
 To save him from a mob out to molest.
 Now, shielding those two angels from the horde,
 In this way, was most pleasing to the Lord.

PUSSEY (CONT'D)

He let Lot and his family quickly pack
 And leave the city -- but Lot's wife looked back.
 Perhaps she heard the agonizing screams
 From her town ripped asunder at the seams
 As friends and neighbors, citadel and spire
 Were burned and choked in brimstone and in fire.
 That disobedient female was at fault!
 So God turned her into a pillar of salt.
 The story goes on: in a mountain cavern
 Lot's daughters got him drunk, as in a tavern
 And lay with him, thinking no other men
 Were left on earth. Now, I ask you again:
 If you believe the Lord's will should be done,
 And Lot was Sodom's only righteous son,
 And God didn't mind his drunken fornication
 With his two girls, which led to procreation --
 For one's son was Moab, and one's Ben-Ammi --
 While God dealt very harshly with their mommy,
 Then what more proof could you search scripture for
 That women's whims are things we must ignore?
 The Lord rewards the man who's firm and steady
 So if a female's out of line, be ready
 To cut her loose, or show her who's still boss.
 And that's the best advice I'll give you, Hoss.

ORAL

Wow. I've got so much to think about ...
 I've got to mull it over, work it out.

PUSSEY

Well, take your time, have doubts if you're not sure.
 It isn't easy, Oral, to be pure,
 When all around's the casual ubiquity
 Of profane thoughts, uncleanness and iniquity!
 My condemnation of rank sins like these
 Is why I have so many enemies.

ORAL

I know it. And it fills me with disgust
 To hear those fools accusing you of lust.

PUSSEY

They couldn't quite destroy me, though they tried
 They hate me because I'm so sanctified
 And I will not make peace or compromise
 With sin. I act -- I don't apologize.
 And that's what each of us has got to do.
 God's told me there are tests ahead for you
 To see if you can spot sin, and condemn
 Your children when it's manifest in them.
 I don't speak of the girl but of the boy;

PUSSER (CONT'D)

I know his quick mind fills your heart with joy
 And pride, so you indulge him, give him scope
 To bend the law on-line because you hope
 He'll prove to be a genius and a leader.
 But Oral, any serious Bible reader
 Knows there are some abominable acts
 God will not tolerate -- that's just the facts.
 I've hinted to you, though it gives you pain
 That your son's "friendship" may be so profane
 With that guy Tyler, one way or another --

ORAL

Yes, I sent Tyler packing, with his brother.

PUSSER

That may not be enough. You were away
 A week, and meanwhile, nearly every day
 Both men came to the house and they were closeted
 With Mary-Anne and Daniel. God deposited
 Me in this house to guide your tough decisions.
 He speaks to me through prayer, He sends me visions
 And I grab on and hold them tight and fast.
 That Tyler might could be a pederast;
 If your son Daniel willingly takes part
 In foul acts that could break a father's heart,
 Then you must cut him off just like a cancer
 And, when he pleads with you, give him no answer.

ORAL

But there's no proof of this -- it's still not clear ...

PUSSER

Prepare yourself, in case proof should appear
 For you may have to shut him out for good.
 A son has value as no daughter could
 But still may be what you must sacrifice
 To show you love the Lord, and abhor vice.
 God is the judge, the way, the revelator
 Your offering to Him is all the greater
 When it hurts you to sacrifice that lamb.
 Recall the tale of Father Abraham
 Who knew God's grace was infinite and blinding!
 And when the Lord demanded Isaac's binding
 Then Abraham stood ready with the knife!
 To do God's will may mean we take the life
 Of sons of ours, and sons of other men.
 The Patriarchs have heard, time and again
 The call of those who want to end the War,
 Who wonder what our boys are fighting for
 Across the Caribbean, where they raid
 And battle in a glorious Crusade!

PUSSEY (CONT'D)

Catholicism, Communism, Voodoo
 Are purged from our backyard, and, tell me, who do
 Those peaceniks think they are to criticize
 Our fight to save souls and evangelize?
 If talk of those we massacre disturbs
 Then we should pray to be more like the Serbs
 Who raped and cleansed things in the 1990s
 And mowed down Bosnian Muslims, 'neath the pine trees.
 Those Serb Christians were fierce! Bad to the bone!
 Their stand at Srebrenica stands alone;
 They rounded up eight thousand men and boys --
 Then bullets stopped their "Allah Akbar!" noise.
 God must have thought those Serbians did well --
 Though Serbs ain't Baptists, so they're bound for Hell.
 We have to understand that evil-doers
 Deserve death at the hands of their pursuers,
 Yet some would call our ruthlessness ungodly --
 And on some islands, our fight's going badly.
 It's true: in Cuba and in Port-au-Prince,
 The natives fight so fierce, it makes me wince.
 They hate our freedoms, so our mission drags,
 And our own boys come home in body bags.
 We've conquered Grenada! But in Port-Au-Spain
 The casualties are heavy, and the pain
 The Council feels is great. Still, they love truth;
 Like Abraham they offer up our youth,
 To show the world we're mighty, like before
 The Plague. They may bring back the draft once more,
 And if so, there will be a noble beauty
 In how they hold back tears, and do their duty.
 You watch and see. And are we so above
 Our leaders in how much we feel and love?

ORAL

I don't claim I feel more than leaders can
 But I'm not strong, I'm just a simple man,
 My children are the ones that I love most --

PUSSEY

More than the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost?
 Just listen to yourself, and understand
 Why you must bow your head to God's command
 You'll face some holy trial he's invented
 So you can show you truly have repented
 Of tolerating sensual abuses
 And rank debauchery -- no more excuses!
 It hurts to love the Lord, it hurts to grow
 Close to him, but work through it, and you'll know
 That you're a man the Devil can't deceive
 A man to whom no wicked thing shall cleave,
 You'll cut it off! As in Psalm 101.

(beat)

PUSSER (CONT'D)

God loved the world, and gave his only Son
Although it hurt Him, and it may hurt you
But if you're called to do it, you can, too.
I'm here to help make sure that you don't falter
When you place your burnt offering on the altar
And prove that you're a loyal son of Zion
And you know you've got my shoulder to cry on
When it gets hard for you to persevere,
Remember God loves you and sent me here
To be your buddy and your moral guide
Until you're safely on the other side
Of that old cold and muddy River Jordan:
As close as man can get now to the Garden.
So, pray with me, and have faith, and exhale;
The Lord God will provide, and will prevail.

END OF SCENE FIVE

SCENE SIX

(DANIEL is at the computer in his room. TYLER ENTERS. DANIEL stands, delighted to see him.)

DANIEL

Tyler!

TYLER

Sssshhhh!

DANIEL

(whispering)

How'd you get here? Dad made you a pariah.
As I'd greet the return of the Messiah
I'm glad you're back -- but I did not expect it.

TYLER

There's a mistake -- Doreen hopes to correct it.
She smuggled Vaughn and me by the back stair.

DANIEL

"Mistake"? Now Pusser's made my dad declare
Marriage will place that crook near my dad's wallet
"Catastrophe" is more like what I'd call it.
Poor Mary-Anne's distraught, she cries all day
But I'm afraid that scum will get his way.
She's never been assured or self-reliant,
She doesn't have the nerve to be defiant
And she expects that Vaughn will take a stand
And Dad take back his terrible command.

TYLER

And Vaughn is angry at her passiveness
They both may feel offended -- it's a mess.
We've got to find a way for you and her
To be yourselves, at our place, as you were.

DANIEL

It's true -- while we're trapped here we sulk, and seethe;
It's only there that we relax, and breathe.

TYLER

Have you devised a clever strategy
Or are you mired in hopelessness, like me?

DANIEL

Neither of those two sensible reactions.
I've lost myself in fanciful distractions
(returns to computer)

DANIEL (CONT'D)

And you would laugh to know what strange digression
My thoughts went off on -- now it's an obsession.

TYLER

Don't tell me you just play with your computer
While Mary-Anne has that dirt-bag as a suitor!

DANIEL

Tyler, you know I think our age's curse
Is we got trapped in this false universe
Somehow -- the right one's still out there, somewhere.
I read about a man named Moliere
Quite unafraid to call a fool a fool --
He lived during Louis XIV's rule
And lampooned every fool, and fop, and quack,
And then they'd all demand he take it back.
His plays caught the discerning ear and eye
Of that fab king, resplendent at Versailles
But one play caused such fuss that even Louis
Could barely throw this poor Moliere a buoy
And save his skin. The play was called *Tartuffe*.
What shocked the world was, it was a reproof
Aimed straight at those impostors masquerading
As holy men; it showed how they're degrading
To real faith, and to honest souls they dupe
But this theme got the playwright in the soup;
He wasn't Christian -- that was the suspicion
The Church had, in that age of Inquisition.
Abbés and bishops spread outraged malarkey
That this work mocked the whole Church hierarchy.
The play seemed lost -- Moliere might have to can it.
For some time, Louis even had to ban it
Though he enjoyed it when it played his Court.
He said folks of the less discerning sort
Might take it the wrong way and come unglued
If what it had to say were misconstrued.
Moliere, to save his play and please the Crown,
Reworked the piece by watering it down
And excised bits the Church found most offensive;
The price to keep them in was too expensive.
Moliere had wisely made the king the hero
Who saves the day when hopes are less than zero
And so *Tartuffe* survived, first, on the page,
Then in salons, and, unbanned, on the stage.
The play we have today's that later draft,
And, even as I've read it and I've laughed
I've longed to read the first, which was more pointed.
But I can't, unless time is double-jointed.
I've come to think time's out of joint because
We cannot know that play the way it was.
After *Tartuffe* was changed, the universe
Began backsliding toward this bad-to-worse.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

But if, somehow, the play could be restored
As it once was, the Council that has whored
Our nation, and the Reverend Pusser's kind
Would be a nightmare we could leave behind.

TYLER

I'm sorry, Daniel, I can't quite work out
What it is you've been worrying about.
It sounds as if you think that there's a chance
That some old play, lost long ago in France
Will magically appear, and in so doing
Give our world a revisionist renewing?

DANIEL

Look, I'm a little crazy, you know me
And full off odd ideas, and OCD ...
This hope may sound post-modernist and weird
I didn't know how loony it appeared
Till I tried to explain it all just now
But there's a site on-line that's showed me how
To dream big, as I've never dreamed before
And entertain the thoughts that most ignore --

TYLER

Don't let it sell you penis-growing pills --

DANIEL

No, not that kind of site. This site distills
The secrets tucked in every nook and cranny
Of my mind, in a way I'd call uncanny.
I find my every wish, thought and regret
Anticipated -- at oracle.net.

TYLER

Oracle.net? Is that from overseas?

DANIEL

It won't answer those questions, only tease
My brain with riddles I can't quite apply;
I don't know if it's hackers, or A.I.
Or foreigners who want to overthrow
The forces over here that run the show ...
Or, when it says things wise and allegorical,
I think that it might *really* be the Oracle!
The one that spoke at Delphi, long ago.
I've wrestled with my doubts -- I just don't know --
Faith has a music to which I'm tone-deaf,
And yet -- I've asked it for a pdf.

TYLER

A pdf of what?

DANIEL

The play he wrote.
 The way it was when it first rocked the boat.
 The later draft has bite, still, in its spoofery
 And Nietzsche always used the term tartufferie
 For fakes, but if we want this "Now" exploded
 We need the first draft, locked and fully loaded!
 Or so I tell myself -- maybe, I guess,
 So I don't have to face my helplessness
 And uselessness, in helping Mary-Anne
 I dream, since I don't have a clue, or plan.

(DOREEN ENTERS)

DOREEN

Well, here's a way to help her if you want --
 If these two are to enter a detente,

(MARY-ANNE and VAUGHN, both sullen,
 FOLLOW HER into the room)

DOREEN (CONT'D)

They need a place where they can talk things out.
 Her room's no good -- too many folks about.

DANIEL

You're welcome, but I'm not entirely sure
 This room's not watched by some creepy voyeur.

DOREEN

The same could be said now of every room.
 (to VAUGHN and MARY-ANNE)
 Come on, you two. Talk like a bride and groom.

VAUGHN

How can I be a groom? She's acquiesced.
 She'll form the union that her dad has blessed.

MARY-ANNE

And what do you think I should do instead?

VAUGHN

Marry the man. It's clear our love is dead.

MARY-ANNE

That's your advice? That's all I mean to you?

VAUGHN

You wouldn't ask me if your love were true.

MARY-ANNE

Vaughn, you're a man, at least I thought you were
I'll give up on our love, if you prefer
Because a man is free to speak and act
To right a wrong, defend a sacred pact
Or save someone -- that's *if* he has a spine.
You're spineless, or you just don't care -- so, fine.

VAUGHN

A girl can also speak up if she cares
And stand by all the promises she swears
But you, you're into meekness and obedience.
I see those as the optimal ingredients
To make a preacher's wife, and so good luck.

MARY-ANNE

Thanks. I'm glad I found out that you're a schmuck
Before we had a chance to tie the knot.

DOREEN

All right, you two, now I'll tell you what's what.
Vaughn, the one that *she* loves is you, only
And, Mary-Anne, this man is hurt and lonely.
Now stop this foolishness, 'cause time is short
And there's an ugly plot we have to thwart.

VAUGHN

Mary-Anne, it isn't easy to forgive
The way you've acted, but I guess I'll live.

MARY-ANNE

You think I should be grateful, but you're wrong.
It's like that old Aretha Franklin song
She spoke of R-E-S-P-E-C-T
And you can find out what it means to me!

VAUGHN

I'll find out what? I guess I've lost the thread
Of whatever you think that you just said.

DOREEN

Now stop this, both of you! Give me your hands.
(puts their hands together)
Now hold each other's tight, like wedding bands.
Lovers are nuts, it's been well-documented
But there's a wedding that must be prevented.
Let's look for a way out, 'cause we're in deep;
How do we show your dad Pusser's a creep?

(ALMA enters, and looks around)

ALMA

I heard your voices, so I came exploring.
I've been too long in bed, and it gets boring.

ALMA (CONT'D)

I'm feeling better, and I have a sense
Of what's been going on, and why you're tense,
But you can count on me not to betray
Your cause. I'll help you out, if there's a way.

DANIEL

It's good to see you, Alma, you're the kind
Of stepmom that is often hard to find.

DOREEN

Your husband's coming down on noncompliance.

ALMA

But I still want to join in your alliance.
Though I love Oral, as I think you do
In this my sympathies are all with you.
To force this girl to marry that old phony
Would be to mock the bonds of matrimony.
I can't believe that things will go that route.
The six of us should work this problem out.

END OF SCENE SIX

SCENE SEVEN

(MARYANNE sits in her room, sadly listening to music. This time it's not joyous rock and roll. It's something wistful and contemplative by Norah Jones, Carole King, Carly Simon, Janis Ian ... ALMA KNOCKS, carrying magazines featuring models with heads covered.)

MARY-ANNE

(sullen, turning OFF MUSIC)

Come in.

ALMA

(forced cheer, ENTERING room)

I found some pictures in some magazines
And articles meant for romantic teens
That talk about new wedding banquet favors
Look! Hand-pulled candies, in five different flavors.

(shows her a picture)

Each nestles in a hand-embroidered bag
That we can fill with other wedding swag
Like dyed, teased ribbons, doilies made of lace ...
We'll get to work and set a steady pace,
And by the time you say that you can wed
That creep will match with someone else instead.

MARY-ANNE

I don't see much point even to begin;
Daddy and Pusser won't be taken in.
They'll see right through this wedding prep pretense --

ALMA

No, Doreen's idea makes a lot of sense.
Girls your age often make a major fuss
When they are brides. Between the two of us
We'll find some ways to drag this out forever.
Now, where's your sewing kit?

MARY-ANNE

I wish I never
Met Vaughn, and found out that love was real;
Then I wouldn't have to feel the things I feel.
I *would* like a white dress and a bouquet;
I'd like a lovely, magic wedding day,
My friends arrayed behind me as I walk ...
I'd like to dream out loud with you, and talk
About the gowns and colors -- you and Doreen.
To plan this bogus wedding is obscene:
To sew and baste, and work embroidery
When every stitch feels like it's mocking me!
My love of Dad and Vaughn have both gone south
And all my dreams are ashes in my mouth.

ALMA

It's true we're messing up the fairy-tale
 But love is more than white silk and a veil.
 Your love for Vaughn should brace you for adventure
 So, while you're here, just serve out your indenture
 And take things as they come, and don't ask why.
 When Curly had to fight and kill Judd Fry
 Aunt Eller handed Laurey this advice:
 Life don't always turn out so neat and nice,
 And love means you get strong, and grow up quick
 Through seasons rich and poor, and well and sick;
 Be hardy, and take what life dishes out!
 The frills are not what marriage is about.

MARY-ANNE

I guess Vaughn loves me. I wish I was sure --

ALMA

He loves you, and his impulses are pure,
 And when he says to flout your dad's command
 It's just a sign he doesn't understand
 The way things work around here -- recently.

MARY-ANNE

Alma, I wish that you'd explain to me
 How you love Daddy, as I know you do
 When "recently," he's been so harsh to you,
 Ignoring you! Doreen told of your fever
 And says Dad almost seemed not to believe her
 Or care, now Pusser is his sun and moon.
 The way Dad's dancing now to Pusser's tune ...
 I think that my respect, and love, and trust
 For Vaughn, in such a case, would turn to dust.
 Why is your love for Daddy not affected?
 My whole life, he's the man that I respected
 Most, and now he's acting like a fool!
 I don't say this to hurt you, or be cruel --
 It's just ... please tell me how you take in stride
 The way Dad's turned so mean and sanctified,
 Oblivious to everything that matters?

ALMA

Sometimes your vision of somebody shatters,
 And if you're honest, you admit you see
 That he is less than what he means to be,
 But you don't let the door to your love slam;
 You take it like a lady from Siam
 Who said: Don't turn your back upon a king
 Because he tries too hard at everything.

(with a "Something Wonderful"
 cadence)

He has a thousand dreams that won't come true --
 Believes in them, and that's enough for you.

ALMA (CONT'D)

You go along, protect him when he's wrong ...
 I think there's wisdom in that show and song.
 The point is, Mary-Anne, that women's lives
 As mothers, and as stepmoms, and as wives
 Mean we help others out, we've got their backs;
 We live in shadows, hide within the cracks
 Of life, when we're not goods showcased on shelves,
 Yet we must save our husbands from themselves
 With gentle, loving patience, as we try
 To curb their weirder habits, by and by.
 Sometimes men's sense of self can need a boost,
 And so they stride around and rule the roost
 In heavy-handed ways, and act all tough;
 They don't think being human is enough.
 It's *certainty* they crave, in all they do,
 The way, you'll notice, they crave barbecue.
 They have to feel that those who put their trust
 In them believe they've got all problems sussed
 And look to them to always lead the way;
 They want things black and white, without the gray.
 Now, I don't like it when women get bashed,
 Or how health-care for moms keeps getting slashed,
 And --

(looks around, fearful, whispers)

I've heard Patriarchs make proclamations
 On TV that ... Let's just say my expectations
 Were not quite met.

(louder)

But when you're in a couple
 You've got to be more flexible and supple
 About this power stuff. You wear a ring --
 And so you let your man act like a king.
 They've *always* felt a need to matter more ...
 Since Adam first rode on a dinosaur!
 I bet Eve had to crown him as a winner
 Each time he speared a T-Rex for their dinner!

(SHE and MARY-ANNE laugh)

ALMA

I'm glad to see I've gotten you to laugh.
 But -- that's how I cope with my better half.
 A man like Oral wants so much to lead,
 To raise you kids right, he has such a need
 To make his mama proud and do his duty
 As a Christian man ... I see the beauty
 Of what he aims to do, though it falls short.
 And I see how a Pusser can distort
 The best in such a man, till it's the worst,
 Hand him a poisoned cup to quench his thirst
 For blessed, sweet salvation ... So I grit
 My teeth, and do my best to deal with it.

MARY-ANNE

Your strategy is different than Doreen's.

ALMA

We may reach the same ends by different means.
Doreen is not afraid of confrontation;
She goes in for direct communication,
But she helps others, maybe more than me;
And she could write the book on loyalty.

MARY-ANNE

I'm glad I had this chance to talk with you.

ALMA

Good! Let me know whatever I can do
To help you through this scary time. For now
We've got these glossy pages, so let's plow
On through. I give my word that I'll help you sew
A ton of fancy doodads for your trousseau,
And dainty gloves, and wedding souvenirs ...
We'll plan a wedding that will take five years.

END OF SCENE SEVEN

SCENE EIGHT

(DOREEN is sweeping the room where the play started. PUSSER ENTERS.)

PUSSER

Doreen, I couldn't speak to you before
When you were saying something at my door,
'Cause I was lost in prayer and meditation;
When God talks, it's a private conversation.

DOREEN

I'll bet. But I was just the messenger --
The missus hopes you'll have a word with her.

PUSSER

With pleasure! I've been hoping for a chance
To counsel her at length, and to enhance
The qualities in her that suit her best.

DOREEN

I'm sure she'll be thrilled by your interest.

PUSSER

(looks at her, then away)

Oh! Quickly, Doreen, take this handkerchief
So we two aren't compromised --

DOREEN

As if!

PUSSER

Cover your bosom, rising, round and bare
Before some Godly man is shipwrecked there
By wicked thoughts. A maid of your maturity
Should put more stock in modesty and purity.

DOREEN

The way you lecture me sounds almost fresh
It's funny how you're tempted by the flesh
So strongly, you want me to wear this rag.
(hands back handkerchief)
If I saw you butt-naked, I'd just gag,
So I guess I'm less lustful and less frail
Than guys like you: the average pious male.
To make sure not to tempt that kind of jerk, a
Girl would have to wrap up in a burqa.

PUSSER

If you remain so brazen and so rude,
I'll have to leave.

DOREEN

No, I'm gone. Later, dude.

(SHE EXITS, as ALMA enters.)

ALMA

Reverend Pusser?

PUSSER

Ma'am! My prayers are answered, thank the Lord
It's good to see you looking so restored.
Your cheeks, that were so pale, are pink and flush;
A man might get the feeling that you blush.

ALMA

Yes, I'm much better, thanks.

PUSSER

I'm glad.

ALMA

That's sweet.
Let's talk about a few things. Have a seat?

(They sit.)

ALMA (CONT'D)

There's a strange circumstance in which we've landed --
All of us here. I hope you will be candid
And tell me what you're thinking, honestly --

PUSSER

I've longed to do what you're asking of me.
I've waited for us two to be alone,
To find a private, candid comfort zone.

ALMA

I know you fear for my eternal soul
And wish to teach me virtue and control,
And I will listen to your counsel, soon.
But let me speak a word, this afternoon,
For Mary-Anne, who's forced to hold her tongue.
She's scared, romantic, vulnerable and young,
Not quite a woman, on the brink, in between
(with a Sound of Music cadence)
She is sixteen going on seventeen --

PUSSER

Who's Mary-Anne? Her face, now, is a blur.
With you right here, how could I think of her?
The first time I saw you, hot passion blazed
Within my heart --

(DANIEL ENTERS, and watches, unseen by
both)

ALMA

But, Reverend, I'm amazed
To hear a man of God say such a thing!
I can't believe that you're imagining
That I would ever welcome this advance --

PUSSER

I'm such a fool for you, I took a chance.
I prayed on it, I tried hard to resist
Those full, ripe lips that I have never kissed;
I shut erotic thoughts out, in God's name
But your wild, luscious beauty is to blame.
(grabs her hand)
You're all the Heaven His grace will allow
A mortal man on Earth --

ALMA

That hurts me! Ow!

PUSSER

Oh. Sorry.

ALMA

I'm sorry I let you get this far.
I ought to tell my husband what you are.

PUSSER

I trust you to be merciful and kind,
To know that men are weak, and love is blind.
And if you made my happiness complete
Then I would be both tender and discreet.

ALMA

Well, I urge you to try to recollect
The faith you claim to uphold and protect.
I won't tell Oral you felt the need to try
This crap, but take your hand off of my thigh!
And swear you'll stop the crisis you began
When you came between Vaughn and Mary-Anne.

PUSSER

You're threatening me with blackmail?

ALMA

Possibly.

PUSSER

You're too hot for your threats to bother me
I'm burning up here, in your atmosphere.

DANIEL

(stepping closer)

Well, don't fear her, but hear *me* loud and clear.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

I'll tell my dad I witnessed this burlesque
You're such a twisted liar, it's grotesque!
He'll see the crook who's caused him to ignore
His sense, and us, is rotten to the core.

ORAL

(ENTERING)

What's going on? Why are your voices raised?

DANIEL

And now I get to tell you. God be praised.
This guest of yours, this disbarred fallen shepherd
Cannot change his spots; he's the kind of leopard
Who preys on those who kindly take him in
Then licks his chops, and lectures about sin.
He preys on gentle souls, then prays out loud
As if he held the precepts he's avowed.
His claim to be your friend is an atrocity!
Just hear how he's repaid your generosity:
A few moments ago, I heard and watched
Him coming on to Alma. This was scotched
By her firm "No," which she had to repeat.
Now take this bum and throw him in the street!

ORAL

I'm overwhelmed. I don't know what to do.
Reverend, could the things he says be true?

PUSSER

It's true -- that I am nothing but a sinner.
And all my life I've wrestled with my inner
Demons -- a Christian man could do no less.
So I am more than willing to confess,
Though I have never lusted in my heart
After your wife, I know that there's a part
Of me that's flawed, and mortal, and unfit
For God's sweet grace -- in fact, I will admit
To any vice you name -- no, I won't grumble.

(sinks to his knees)

A minister must stay abject, and humble.
Call me a horse thief, meth head, or the Devil
In some way, it may be true on some level.

ORAL

Get up, please, friend. How could I ever doubt you?
Or listen to such vicious lies about you?

(to DANIEL)

And you, do you hate righteousness so much,
And manly virtue, that you have to clutch
At vile, flimsy lies and accusations?

DANIEL

No, I am like his last few congregations
 And see him as he is, not some mirage.
 How can you not see through this camouflage?
 How can you not believe I speak the truth?

PUSSER

Please, Oral, don't be too hard on the youth.
 He's just a boy, he knows not what he does.
 I love him. I don't hate his lies because
 I take as gifts my times of pain and loss
 As Christ did, at each station of the cross.

ORAL

You're too good, and it burns me up inside
 To see you so abused and vilified
 By my own son, who I should now disown --

ALMA

Oral, don't, please, leave the boy alone.
 I don't want a big circus or a scandal
 What happened was a thing that I could handle.
 And if the Reverend puts right what's amiss
 Then never again will I speak of this.
 But if he doesn't --

PUSSER

Listen, Brother.
 The boy came stumbling in and found me here
 Confiding in your wife about my fear
 That I would have to give you awful news
 About your son's decision to abuse
 The sacred vessel given him by God.
 Your wife was hoping you would spare the rod,
 And Daniel, perhaps scared I'd say too much
 Yelled out about adultery and such.
 Poor Alma, wanting only to protect him,
 Enabling the vices that infect him,
 Now backs his tale. She's lax, and I know why
 She watches a film called *The King and I*
 From pre-Plague times, and that's her education;
 It celebrates alien lands, and miscegenation,
 As its bareheaded teacher heroine
 Bosses a heathen king, then draws him in.
 They dance a polka, stirring and obscene
 Of course by Jews: Rodgers and Hammerstein
 Their names are. With this filth inside your walls,
 Why blame your wife when she stumbles and falls?
 Why blame the boy? Real love is genuine.
 We never hate the sinner, just the sin.
 And now, let me go back to my room, please.
 I feel a need to shower, and hit my knees
 Once cleansed, and talk to God. The way I see it

PUSSER (CONT'D)

If He should call me Home tonight, so be it!
It's not for me to question or rebel;
He is my fortress and my citadel.
I'm His to teach, to chastise, bless or kill
Whatever comes, I celebrate His will.

(PUSSER EXITS.)

ORAL

You hear that? You've both made him feel unclean
And yet he stays forgiving, and serene.
He'll go upstairs and wash away the taint
Of this, and bless your names. The man's a saint.
I only wish my goodness was as boundless,
Since I know his suspicions are not groundless
When he says, Daniel, that you've lost your way,
And stoop to --

DANIEL

What?

ORAL

(looks away)

We'll talk another day
About those things. I guess I'm not so brave.
For now, since I still hope your soul to save:
I fear that you've grown far too ecumenical
With all your fancy theories -- smug and cynical.
Do you admit you embrace atheism?

DANIEL

No. But I hate biblical literalism.
The Patriarchs say they play by the Book;
That's not true, when you take a closer look,
And you become bewildered and perplexed
At how selectively they use that text.
Our felons publicly are hanged and shot,
But Biblical chastisements those are not.
Too many harsh mandated acts are done
These days, and yet we don't do every one.
We subjugate the poor but we don't own them,
We *jail* non-virgin brides, but we don't stone them,
Fine those who work on Sundays, but that's all --
There are no sins for which stones fly and fall
Though if they did, some zealots wouldn't mind.
For now, we still do not forbid the blind
And nearsighted from sitting near a pulpit;
I guess we figure they have some exculpa-
Tory value, with their flaws, as people ...
The Bible wants them banned from 'neath a steeple.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Leviticus and Deuteronomy
 Crave deaths. Yet churchmen claim autonomy
 To speak out against being vain and selfish,
 But not the vicious act of eating shellfish,
 Which we all know is an abomination!
 It never seems to earn a peroration,
 And many who find comfort in a psalter
 Don't leave burnt offerings on a holy altar.

ORAL

Sure, clever young men think it's fun to mock
 The shepherd along with his holy flock.
 They and their jaded friends hunt through the Book
 And twist things 'round, until their faith is shook.
 But Christ brought change, Paul told us all that men
 Can miss some old commandments -- just not ten.

DANIEL

And yet one of the Ten Commandments seems
 To call for stoning any who blasphemes.
 So far none has been so strongly chastised,
 Though when that law comes, I won't be surprised.
 It's not law now, but I still haven't mastered
 Why God tells us to persecute a bastard.
 God is God -- God the Father did not change
 When He exults in war, I find it strange.
 When Israelites fight Amalekites, or Og,
 Why does it always seem the epilogue
 Is smiting, raping, killing babes and sucklings,
 Mowing them down like rows of arcade ducklings?
 Why does God wax wroth when any are spared?
 I'd like to praise a moral God, who cared
 For human life. Or, how do you contrive
 To think God wrote Deuteronomy 25?
 Wherein we read in language most majestic
 That if men fight, and a wife grab the testical
 Of her husband, to shield him, then that hand
 Of hers must be chopped off. Please, understand,
 Dad, I don't sneer. I want your certainty.
 But -- when I read those things, they baffle me.

ORAL

Why should Alma hear such foul obscenity?

DANIEL

Oh, but it's from a Book full of serenity.

ORAL

You ought to talk to our guest, and repent;
 He'll tell you what those Bible stories meant.

DANIEL

Dad, I can't really talk to Reverend Pusser
He's more a lecturer than a discussor
And though you don't believe what my eyes saw
I do. His shamelessness sticks in my craw.

ORAL

Your Godlessness plain stabs me through the heart!
There's such a thing as too schooled, and too smart.
You argue like a Philadelphia lawyer
And I don't let those slick types past my foyer.
As for burnt offerings, boy, though I don't leave them
I read the Holy words, and I believe them!
And someday soon, faced with a grave offense,
(looks away from DANIEL)
I -- might sacrifice for God's law, in a sense.

DANIEL

(missing his meaning, happy)
In a *sense*, yes, take it symbolically!
That biblical approach makes sense to me.
A book that old, composed by many men
Demands we use our minds, and think again,
Read scripture as a metaphor, or poem --

ORAL

As long as you are living in this home
You'll fear the Lord, respect his living Word,
Ignoring lies that, no doubt, you have heard
From some smooth, sly, insinuating demon
If you think I'll put up with that, you're dreamin'!
I'm not afraid to shake you, or to slap
Or, as with little children, use the strap
To save my son from worldliness and doubt --
But if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out.
And if thy son offend thee ... Listen, son;
It's true that Deuteronomy 21
Calls for the stoning of a stubborn child
It won't come to that -- but if you stay wild
And willful, then I surely will disown you
And cut you dead -- as if I've never known you.

(ORAL EXITS)

ALMA

That Pusser's like a pustule on his brain
He isn't quite himself -- he's not quite sane.

DANIEL

I'm not the son he wants; I'm part of why
He's taken in by that smooth-talking guy.
I'm one more source of terror and confusion;
He soothes himself with Pusser's Grand Illusion.

ALMA

Daniel, I only wish you really knew
How infinitely proud he is of you,
Of your intelligence, and all your promise!
He's just scared you've become a doubting Thomas.
I'm sorry that I didn't speak up more
And back your story in that scene, before.
I wanted Pusser to lay off your sister ...
We've got to lance him, like a fever blister
Somehow, before he ruins all our lives.

DANIEL

You're still the best of stepmoms and of wives.
How can you fight that bully when he rips
Into your love of classic movie clips?
It certainly would lighten all our loads
If our pustule/blister man explodes
And all his lies burst with him. While he festers
Dad won't believe the people that he pesters
And all our conversations are distorted,
And love and truth and happiness -- all thwarted.

ALMA

Well, Mary-Anne's still here. We haven't lost her.
I sew with her, to put off that impostor
Twelve bridesmaid bonnets for the wedding feast --
That ought to take us two more weeks at least.

DANIEL

I'm scared there's less time to expose that preacher;
Each day he makes Dad more and more his creature.

END OF SCENE EIGHT

SCENE NINE

(PUSSEER KNEELS, his head bowed in prayer.
HE is in the space that HE and ORAL
were alone in before. ORAL enters, and
watches reverentially.)

ORAL

Reverend?
Again, I only can apologize
For all that, and for listening to their lies.

PUSSEER

Disloyalty's a very human vice
Peter loved Christ, and yet denied him thrice.

ORAL

Well, I am shamefaced for denying you.
Please tell me if there's something I can do.

PUSSEER

(gets up)

Just stay here, and we'll sit and talk a spell.
I hope your soybean sales are going well?

ORAL

The foreman sent me word from the plantation;
The latest crops are nearing maturation.
The sales of my soy protein cakes are high --
In some ways, I'm a very lucky guy.

PUSSEER

Except on this front. I don't mean to probe
But you must feel as put upon as Job
When it comes to that loud housekeeper hellion,
And daughter, son and wife all in rebellion.
Remember, though, with everything you're feeling,
That Dr. Jesus offers instant healing.

(beat -- they sit in chairs)

And I'm so glad your product's really hot;
Be proud of that fine business head you've got.

ORAL

Well, I'm not sure that too much praise is merited.
My land, my soybean crops -- they're all inherited.

PUSSEER

You're doing by the Lord the way you should
And that's the reason why business is good.
He helps not one who's arrogant, or cursed.
Their vats shall overflow, their barns shall burst
Who honor and obey the Prince of Peace
And give him the first fruits of their increase.

PUSSER (CONT'D)

That's what it clearly says in Proverbs 3.
 It's myth, that God hates wealth, it's fantasy.
 Cash is God's way of telling you "well done."
 He blessed King David and King Solomon
 With fortunes so vast, we can hardly grasp it!
 When He gifts you with treasure, you should clasp it.
 The Communists and Socialists and such
 Think treasure is all stolen, it's too much
 To have a thousand times more than the poor --
 Who always are with us, who will endure,
 Who squander many gifts of charity;
 We might as well see facts with clarity.
 You worked hard to be where you are today.

ORAL

Well --

PUSSER

Your soy cakes help the poor in their own way.

ORAL

For cheapness and nutrition, you can't beat 'em,
 Though I'll admit, I wouldn't want to eat 'em!

PUSSER

Your marketing is strong, your land is arable ...
 In Luke 19, Lord Jesus tells a parable:
 A noble gave his servants one pound each
 To use for trade while he was out of reach.
 When he returned, two men showed interest
 That they had earned -- but one did not invest;
 His feeling about money was, why make it?
 The nobleman might come home soon, and take it.
 That servant's assets quickly were passed on
 To one now rich. A moral can be drawn:
 To him that haveth, giveth even more
 From him with little, take his meager store.
 I think the poor sense God wants more from them;
 In my last church we had an ATM
 And I made sure that when we passed the plate
 They forked cash over, at a good, high rate.
 Some foreign fools think wealth needs an apology;
 They practice a pinko "liberation theology"
 And say God calls the rich into account.
 Those Commies love the Sermon on the Mount!
 They say Christ walks with poor men, and the meek
 And twist around some words they've heard Him speak.
 They'll re-think that in hellfire, when they're writhing.
 Now, Oral, are you keeping up with tithing?

ORAL

Yes, sir. Each year I take out ten percent
 Of earnings, to send to the government.

PUSSEY

Good for you! And we've just gone over facts
 That show why poorer men pay higher tax.
 It shouldn't seem unfair, corrupt or odd;
 They're wanton, lazy and less close to God.
 High on the list of acts that are God-pleasers
 Is: Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's.
 Of course today, the Church and State are one;
 When you pay Uncle Sam, you pay the Son
 Of man at the same time. But have you thought
 About how much more grace might could be bought
 If you gave of your riches even more
 To the army, or the missionary corps?
 Your heart is big, your pockets are quite deep,
 And you know: as you sow, so shall ye reap.

ORAL

I'd be glad, if I knew how to invest
 More in the Lord's work. Reverend, you know best;
 I'd be so grateful if you'd take a look
 At this year's budget in my counting book.
 My son's computer program always planned it;
 He tried to teach me -- I don't understand it.
 So, I put figures down on a hard copy
 To have two records, in case things get sloppy.
 The biggest favor you could do for me
 Is: let me help you in your ministry.
 Let me fund your pet projects and your dreams,
 So my wealth in my unworthiness redeems.

PUSSEY

Well, I am moved. My friend, just let me say
 The Reverend Chadwick Pussey's seen a day
 That he's prayed for. Your old life's in the dust.
 It warms my heart to see such simple trust
 And faith, in one to whom much has been given.
 I'll tell you of a few pet dreams. I'm driven
 To set up a small factory, to sell
 The vials of holy water you know well.
 Since, as I walked, the Holy Ghost rocked me
 By that stream flowing through your property,
 I've sent this holy water to the sick --
 It sells on-line, and people get well quick!
 Your mother found no scientific answer
 And yet, she says, this water cured her cancer;
 Now she won't die -- an angel told her so!
 It goes to show there's not much doctors know.
 One lady found it cured her rheumatism,
 An old man, who had a brain aneurysm
 Is paralyzed, but almost comes to grips
 When his wife puts this water on his lips,
 She wrote. You know, I could go on and on.
 My store of small glass vials is almost gone;
 If I could pack the water, at a plant,

PUSSER (CONT'D)

We could cure thousands! Who's to say we can't?
 And if I buy some ad time on TV
 America will get real used to me.
 We'll move a lot of product, friend, and I'm
 Sure I can get my own show, on prime-time.

ORAL

A prime-time show's the least that you deserve!
 A chance to reach the people that you serve,
 And minister to each lost, broken soul
 As you have mine, and make them sound and whole.

PUSSER

Now tell me -- this program that your son uses:
 Is it just on his hard drive?

ORAL

No, he chooses
 To update everything on my hand-held.

PUSSER

So, you can move funds, should you feel compelled
 To do so, without Daniel's interference?

ORAL

The password's mine, and no one else has clearance
 To act for me in making a transaction.
 I'll give it to you, when it's time for action.

(They stand.)

PUSSER

Well, Oral, you've sure cheered me up -- and how!
 You've shored up my faith in mankind just now,
 And more than made up for that incident
 Downstairs. You'll know that your wealth is God-sent
 When you soon see it furthering God's glory;
 I'm here to help you spend it -- end of story.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWOSCENE ONE

(DANIEL, alone in his room, sits at his computer and talks to himself -- and the computer.)

DANIEL

Spam, and more spam! My inbox filled to bursting
 With useless mail, and all the while I'm thirsting,
 Knowing the Oracle alone can quench
 My need. I swear that I will master French
 To translate that first draft when it arrives;
 And once it's true that manuscript survives --
 Theocracy implodes! The universe will shift
 And those of us now hopelessly adrift
 Will find our strength and stride. After *Tartuffe*
 Returns, no longer will we fear reproof.

(dreamy, spins in chair)

There once was a land where people could vote
 Where students thought, and did not learn by rote
 Where women and men were honest, strong and free
 And spoke and wrote and lived life candidly ...

(angry)

Until a crazy Christian group, desirous
 Of total power, stole and spread a virus
 And killed two thirds of our population
 Rendering us a scared and backward nation.
 Us Baptists took control, and we were hostile
 To Quaker, Methodist and Pentecostal.
 Most Plague deaths were in once-great urban centers
 And nowadays our rulers and tormentors
 Cling to a backwoods mind-set, and suspend
 The Bill of Rights that was our truest friend.
 They moved the seat of power further south
 And taught each citizen to watch his mouth
 And back, and speak a holy platitude
 Rather than risking giving latitude
 To cogent, secret thoughts. The law of greed
 Now reigns, and it has come to supersede
 Consumer rights we once had, long ago
 Which First World countries guard -- like Mexico.
 'Round these parts, those who rule in Alabama
 Create a very different panorama
 The hatred of science and real education
 Cherished by Selma's dull administration
 Are why our products suck, and lack design
 And quality control. We're in decline.
 To hide it, the Patriarchs hold big parades
 And stadium prayer events, and launch Crusades
 Against our tiny neighbors. Some we plow,
 And some can hold their own against us now.
 At home, the church cops try to stop the rumbles
 Of misery, while the infrastructure crumbles.
 A seething sea of those in poverty

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Is dotted by us men of property.
 The poor choke down the soy cakes my dad sells,
 And thank their pastors for their magic spells.
 He who rebels gets whisked away to prison;
 The state absorbs all money that was his'n
 While, shouting songs of praise, the Holy Rollahs
 Are basically just like the Ayatollahs
 Who once had total power in Iran,
 Which now holds big film festivals, like Cannes
 And shows the world democracy makes sense ...
 While we all rot behind our border fence.
 I can't live in this nightmare! I suspect it
 Is a cosmic lie, and I reject it!
 I curse my life of hiding, compromising --
 And wistful, Hamlet-y soliloquizing.
 Much good it does me -- sitting here reduced
 To waiting games, till one old play is loosed.

(HE uses his computer. PUSSER ENTERS.)

PUSSER

Daniel?

DANIEL

(spinning, surprised)

Reverend Pusser!

PUSSER

I wish that you would call me Reverend Chad
 And see me almost as a friend or dad.
 Your future will get easier, you'll see
 If you just trust and open up to me.

DANIEL

Sir, really, we have nothing to discuss
 I know you use my dad, you spy on us,
 You hit on Alma -- you're just worthless scum.
 You can't think I'd trust you; you're not that dumb.

PUSSER

My wish for friendship's not all that outrageous;
 It could be mutually advantageous.
 A young man needs the guidance of a rector
 To be his comfort and his close protector.
 I don't hate you -- I think that you're delicious
 And I can help if your dad gets suspicious
 About the "direction" in which you're leaning --
 I'm guessing that you'll understand my meaning --
 I can make sure that things don't get unpleasant;
 I'm your best bet to handle him, at present.
 And as an older man, I know a lot!
 I'm more than glad to give you what I've got.

DANIEL

Now, wait a second. Things just got surreal.
This time it isn't anger that I feel.
Just dizziness. I'm awestruck. Can it be
That you would really make a pass at me?

PUSSER

I save souls when I can, but in your case
I'm sensing qualities I can't erase.
If you can't beat 'em, join 'em, that's my motto,
So, let's drink Blood of Christ, until we're blotto,
And I'll give you more than that Tyler can.

DANIEL

You eat our food. You're taking Mary-Anne
Against her will, but you don't give a crap.
You tried to catch my stepmom in your trap
And now you're after me. I have to say
You've really taught me something here today
About the nature of a psychopath
Who hides behind a big smile and God's wrath.

PUSSER

Now, Daniel, since you're growing up you know
This world contains a lot of quid pro quo
And more and more, your daddy's given me
A king-sized role, and the authority
To make things nice or nasty here for you,
So let's just stop and think what we should do
Before we call names, or we judge or blame --
You scratch my back, I'll more than do the same.

DANIEL

I read a lot of pre-Plague history
And there are pillars of hypocrisy
Who stand out -- great showmen like Jimmy Swaggart:
Jerry Lee's cousin, a lecher and a braggart,
Or Marcus Lamb, another pious faker
Who chased ass, like Coy Privette and Jim Bakker.
But the worst filth, secular and holy,
To my mind, were figures like Mark Foley
Or Senator Larry Craig, or Eddie Long
Men who called homosexuality wrong
Denouncing it before a congregation
Or else in office, backing legislation
That took the rights of gay men, just like them.
It makes some sense that you're that kind of phlegm
In human form, I shouldn't be so staggered;

DANIEL (CONT'D)

You're a pathetic fucker like Ted Haggard
 Paul Barnes or Lonnie Latham -- pleasure seekers
 Epitomized by that George Alan Rekers
 Who took a rent-boy on a Europe spree
 When his game was conversion therapy
 And telling kids they weren't born that way:
 That they should try to "pray away the gay."
 Is it self-hatred that's the common link
 For men like you -- does it cause double-think
 From early on, and send you on a mission
 Against self, as preacher or politician?
 If only you were funny, you'd be jokes ...

PUSSER

Conversion treatment works for lots of folks.
 I've helped to lead it; I've been quite inspired
 When sissy-boys, with God's help, get re-wired.
 And if you seek it, someday you will find it --
 There's lots of darn good science facts behind it!
 But that's not for you now, it's manifest
 So, why not let me make you my conquest
 In love, if not in Christ? I tell you, son
 Life's short, and we could have a lot of fun.

DANIEL

Take one more step toward me and I'll be sick.

ORAL (O.S.)

Daniel?

DANIEL

Is that you, Dad? Come here, quick.

(ORAL ENTERS)

DANIEL

I'll tell you what just happened, though I fear
 Again, you won't allow yourself to hear
 A word I say. This pious friend of yours,
 Pillar of faith, one of its guarantors,
 Just propositioned me, as with your wife;
 That's how he thanks you, now he runs your life
 And your estate. I'm saying this to you
 Because I value trust between us two --
 Or valued it, when I felt it existed,
 Before our home life turned so dark and twisted.
 I'm still your son, and I will play that role
 Whatever this creep's doing to your soul.

PUSSER

Well, Oral, my poor friend, I might have known
 He'd find some reason why we were alone
 And change things 'round, so my motives look bad

PUSSER (CONT'D)

But still, I'm stunned. Son, this is really sad.
I understand you're desperate, but to think
Your daddy would believe that I would sink
As low as you -- that's some deep criminology.
Is this what smart boys call reverse psychology?

(to ORAL)

What happened was I told it to him plain:
As much as I would hate to cause you pain
Or Daniel trouble, 'cause he's a nice kid
I had to tell you about things he did
With his corrupter Tyler -- not quite rape;
My hidden camera caught it all on tape.

DANIEL

What tape? I'd like to see that. Show us both!
First, I would like my dad to swear an oath
That if no tape exists that shows this scene,
You'll finally consider what I mean
When I say Reverend Pusser lies, and lies,
While any trace of love and honor dies.

PUSSER

The truth is, Oral, I had to erase
That hideous tape. I watched. You couldn't face
Such images -- they'd sear and burn your eyes
Forever, when you'd sleep and when you'd rise.
I told Daniel as much, so it makes sense
He's yelling now to see the evidence.
But if you glance at that chink in the wall
(points)
You'll see the secret eye that saw it all.

DANIEL

So, that's where you've got your spy set-up hidden.
I knew this place was bug and camera-ridden.
I have one more request. I'd like to see
The footage of us talking, you and me
Before my father heard me call, and entered.

PUSSER

Boy, why be so dishonest and self-centered?
You're really set on brazening this out?

(to ORAL)

Yeah, that's another thing we talked about.
I told him that the camera was shut down
While, privately, I asked him to leave town.
I said I'd keep his secret if he went;
This show-down's what I wanted to prevent,
But if he stays, you need to be alerted
Their sex scene was disgusting and perverted.
This child that you love is now quite bent;
I fear the damage may be permanent.

ORAL

(to DANIEL, near tears)

There's nothing you can say that will not sicken
Me now. You've got me gasping, heartbroke, stricken!
No more lies, please, your voice fills me with shame.

DANIEL

(also near tears)

If I speak lies or truth it's all the same
To you now, but it's truth that I prefer.
He went to Alma and came on to her,
And he came on to me, and fabricated
This story of a tape he's just related.
The only truth in what he had to say
Is what you've known a long time now. I'm gay.
I've wanted to come out to you, for years;
I couldn't get past either of our fears.
This wouldn't be the moment that I'd choose
To tell you, but there's nothing left to lose,
So why not? There, between us like a wall
Was that one lie -- so why not let it fall?
I love you, Dad. And what is best in you
Could let me be myself, and love me too.

ORAL

Enough. You've ground my dreams into the dust.
I close my heart to you, and your foul lust
And deeds. I have no son! Or, when this man
Becomes one with your sister Mary-Anne,
Then he will be my only son and heir.
For you, I do not even have a prayer
To spare. My heart is hardened, it won't thaw,
If Reverend Pusser saw the thing he saw.

PUSSER

Friend Oral, I sure wish that I could fix
Boys called out by Romans 1:26.
What I saw was unspeakable, and graphic.

ORAL

(to DANIEL)

If you leave soon, then you can beat the traffic.
I'll tell Doreen to come and help you pack.

DANIEL

I'll only take the shirt that's on my back
And my computer. Can I take my car?

ORAL

Of course.

(reaches into his wallet)

Here's cash for gas --

DANIEL

(shakes head)

I won't go far.

My friends are waiting, and when I get there
Tyler and Vaughn will lend me things to wear.

(HE picks up his computer.)

ORAL

(Yelling)

Confirmed! You'll go to their house -- ain't that nice!
Just run to Tyler, wallow in your vice!
Disgraced before the Lord, just like he said!

(MARY-ANNE and ALMA have ENTERED)

DANIEL

Why should that matter to you now? I'm dead.
Remember? Please, Dad, just let me get by.

(Sees MARY-ANNE)

Oh. Hey there, little sister. Don't you cry.
Goodbye, and may God bless your heart, so good.
I swear that I would save you, if I could.

(HE leaves.)

ORAL

It's true. He's dead to me. He has no right
To be my son, if he's a sodomite.

ALMA

Oral, call the boy back while there's time.
You're breaking your own heart, and that's a crime.

ORAL

My heart is closed to him, by God above!

(MARY-ANNE holds her hand up to ORAL,
like a traffic cop -- or a Supreme.)

MARY-ANNE

Stop it, Daddy, in the name of love!
You're always telling me to think of Mother;
She'd want us to be good to one another.
You say these days you're feeling like a new man
But what you just did isn't even human.
If being "saved" means acting like you've lost
Your decency, then that's too high a cost.
I know you say a girl should just obey
And I have tried to live my life that way;
You were the one I looked up to, and trusted,
But now it's like what's good in you got busted.
There's no one who loves Daniel more than you --

MARY-ANNE (CONT'D)

Why hurt him, for something you always knew
Deep down inside? Make peace with it at last.

ORAL

Do you think I'll just stand here and be sassed
By you, young miss? Well, least said, soonest mended.
(with a nod at PUSSER)
It's time you said your vows with your intended.

MARY-ANNE

(frightened glance at PUSSER)

No, Daddy, there's too much I have to plan
I'm finishing it up, fast as I can.
Already I have something old, it's true
And Alma's helping me sew something blue,
I'll buy new shoes, but I still have to borrow --

ORAL

Quit stalling, girl! You'll marry him tomorrow!
(to PUSSER)
As God is my redeemer, you're my rock.
You shielded me, then helped me through this shock.
In twenty ways, you've proved yourself my friend --
The only one on whom I can depend.
Tomorrow we will change up the accounts;
Not only will I give you large amounts
Of cash for more commercials on TV
But as you'll soon be in our family,
This house and all that's in it should be yours.

PUSSER

I like to help you soldier through the wars
Against the devil and his disguised minions
You know I always give you my opinions,
But I don't want your warm heart over-reaching
In gifts to me, just 'cause you like my preaching.

ORAL

You've earned more than each penny I can give;
You give me strength, you show me how to live.
Beside this house we'll build your factory
For Holy Water.

PUSSER

Well, it seems to me
If it's a comfort just to have me by you --
I wouldn't be a Christian to deny you.

END OF SCENE ONE

SCENE TWO

(DANIEL lies on a couch or bed at TYLER and VAUGHN's place, reading *Elmer Gantry*. TYLER ENTERS. It is the morning after DANIEL's arrival. They are easy, open and loving with each other. TYLER moves to DANIEL, puts his arms around him and kisses him.)

TYLER

Did you sleep? It's mostly rest you're needing.

DANIEL

Not really. I've been thinking some. And reading.

TYLER

I hope you're drinking in big gulps of freedom
We'll get you things you don't have if you need 'em.
You might feel guilty with your father's dough.

DANIEL

Well, soy cakes aren't people --

TYLER

Even so.
Are you still checking email every minute,
Hoping there's something messianic in it?

DANIEL

Guess what? I got an update! Don't forget
There's reasons I trust oracle.net.
It's not a battering ram, but it's a splinter
Of hope -- please don't mind, I used your printer.

(Unfolds a square of paper.)

TYLER

What does it say?

DANIEL

(reads)

Dear Oddball Supplicant,
We comprehend the work you would transplant
From its own time-line, to disrupt the next.
We're weighing your desire for this text
With other matters, known to one who hears
The cosmic cries, the music of the spheres.
We'll send you "yes" or "no" soon, but not neither.
Be patient. Ciao, from this end of the ether.

TYLER

You really think that's from some ancient god?
I have to say, I'm not so over-awed.
If that website sends email from Apollo ...
I'm thinking that the sound of it rings hollow.

DANIEL

I don't know what it is, but I feel hope.
It's calming me right now -- it helps me cope.
I think they have the play, if they would give it;
There is a better life, and we could live it.
I want that pdf, I need it bad!
Perhaps I love illusions, like my dad.

(DANIEL lies back, cradled by TYLER.)

TYLER

Ya think? It's sad, but also kind of sweet:
Rather than fight, or lie down in defeat,
You're sure a play's the way out of this crisis.

DANIEL

In that way, I'm a bit like Dionysus
In Aristophanes' comedy *The Frogs*;
With Athens at war, going to the dogs
That god, mostly concerned with wine and ladies
To save the city traveled down to Hades
To bring a tragic playwright they had lost
Once more over the lake of death he'd crossed.
It was a snarled thread by which Athens dangled;
A wordsmith just might get it disentangled!

TYLER

You rage like a cultural Mad Max.

DANIEL

(reaches up, plays with TYLER's
hair)

Mmm. Brekekekéx-koáx-koáx.

TYLER

What?

DANIEL

Nothing.
Just showing off one of our great cacophonies:
I know the croaking chorus from *The Frogs* of Aristophanes.
But you, you only love me for the Wi-Fi
I've brought, which means that you can watch old Sci-Fi.

TYLER

I love you for that, and many another reason
And I don't give a damn that love is treason.

DANIEL

You saved me from Charybdis and the Scylla.
I love you, too. Today, let's watch *Godzilla*.
To maybe cheer him up, let's invite Vaughn.

TYLER

He's too upset your sister's still a pawn --
 (feeling DANIEL pull away)
 Like you, at times, but hearts can't go on bleeding ...
 Let's change the subject -- tell me what you're reading.

DANIEL

A book from the black market, second-hand;
 There's no work that's more resolutely banned.
 I didn't search on-line -- I was afraid
 The name would trip a wire, and cause a raid.
 I'm reading *Elmer Gantry* by Sinclair
 Lewis. And once again, it wasn't fair
 The way that this work got reconstituted;
 Like Moliere's *Tartuffe*, it was diluted.
 They made a film with the great Burt Lancaster
 Who played Gantry as a dishonest pastor
 But in the movie, he's an aberration.
 To Lewis, he's more of a demonstration
 Of how a pious man *must* be a sham
 And organized religion's all a scam.
 I don't think Moliere would go that far,
 Or me. I don't believe all Christians are
 Fakers and fools: slick swindlers and their marks.
 There's more to it, beyond the Patriarchs,
 The Church cops and the Pussers. All alone
 Some people find the courage to atone
 For hurtful acts by reading in their Bible.
 Some frightened souls find strength, and some are liable
 To feel such faith, they take on anything!
 The distance between Martin Luther King
 And Pusser shows the range of what's conceivable
 For men of God. The ideal is achievable,
 If rare. And, as his story ran its course
 Christ in the Bible triumphed over force
 As it consumed him -- that's a stirring thought.
 We never teach the Bible as we ought,
 But it sticks up for those most kicked around
 And helps them lift their heads up off the ground.
 I've even seen how Christian faith enlightened
 My dad, once -- he wasn't bigoted or frightened.
 It's just -- the showmen roll out the red carpet
 And hype faith up, and limit it, and warp it.
 They claim to speak for God, they claim to know
 What's meant by every word writ long ago,
 Insinuate themselves, demand control
 Over how each man's struggles in his soul ...
 They leave no room for quietly communing
 Destroying sweet, soft music with false tuning.

TYLER

Your idealism sure leaves me perplexed
 In such a moment, given the context.

TYLER (CONT'D)

The Church hurts you so much, how can you speak
Such words?

DANIEL

I guess I'll turn the other cheek.

TYLER

It's odd you're so forgiving, but it's hot;
You're noble in a way I guess I'm not.
Strangely, you tempt this cynic with the apple
Of Christian virtue. I think we should grapple,
And, as I get much closer, we can see
If some of your ideals rub off on me.

DANIEL

Again? For you, two times were not enough?

TYLER

You're here. The novelty has not worn off.

DANIEL

I know. It's bliss. All right then, let's get cooking
I'm so glad now Big Brother isn't looking.

(They embrace.)

END OF SCENE TWO

SCENE THREE

(DOREEN and MARY-ANNE quietly move through the room where PUSSER propositioned ALMA. They carry suitcases and they're headed for the door. ORAL ENTERS, and blocks their way.)

ORAL

Well, look at this! I guess I might have known
 In this house, discipline is overthrown,
 And all that's left is chaos and ingratitude.
 Doreen, of course I know about *your* attitude,
 But Mary-Anne, I never would have thought
 That you'd forget the lessons you were taught
 By your sweet mother, may she rest in peace.
 By rights, I ought to call the Church police!
 Just tell me, please, where do you think you're going
 Without a pass I sign -- without my knowing?

DOREEN

Where do you think? You know perfectly well
 She's trying to escape out of this hell
 You've made here. Blame me, I talked her into it.

ORAL

I'll bet. You're just the hussy who could do it.

DOREEN

She lives by her real feelings, and you hate 'em;
 I told her to reject your ultimatum --
 Your view of love as something you can ration --
 And stand up for romance, and honest passion!
 She's sweet and wholesome, like the *Gilligan's Island*
 Mary-Anne always was, except on dry land --
 She's too much of a good sport, and a cringer;
 I wish she was more wild and bold, like Ginger.
 Still -- so *hideous* is what you've planned today
 That she agreed to make her get-away.

ORAL

Well, she didn't get too far -- you're plan's a dud.
 I'll nip this brash rebellion in the bud.

(to MARY-ANNE)

But even if you got away, you'd fail;
 The Church police would take you off to jail
 And Vaughn -- if he was part of what you pulled.
 If you got married, it would be annulled
 Without a dad's permission, so you see
 It's mighty good luck you ran into me.

MARY-ANNE

Daddy ...

(puts down bags, throws herself
 at ORAL's feet)

MARY-ANNE (CONT'D)

Oh, Daddy, please, don't carry out your threat
To make me marry Pusser. I'm young yet --
Please give me time, please, give him all my share,
All my inheritance, I just don't care.
The sight of him makes me feel sick, and nervous
Let me go into missionary service
Or help the poor, or do most anything
Except this horror you're imagining.

(ALMA has ENTERED)

ORAL

(trying not to be moved)

This -- isn't like you, honey, all this drama
I thought that you were calmer, like your mama.
Doreen, I'm blaming you, and you alone.
Unpack her bags, and then go pack your own.

DOREEN

I'm glad to leave this house now. You amaze me.
I liked you, sir, till you went bat-shit crazy.

ORAL

You unnatural hell-cat --

ALMA

That'll do.
Oral, I have to say a thing or two.
I didn't want to publicly discuss
The things I've sworn to you, when it's just us,
But now I need for both of them to know:
Pusser came on to me, I've *told* you so
Time and again, it's just as Daniel said;
You kept that snake and tossed your son instead.
If you're so sure of Pusser's explanation
Then why not let me try a demonstration
Of what you don't believe? Or do you doubt him?
I guess, if you're not really sure about him,
You'll be afraid to put him to the test --
You're chicken, so you'll put off my request.

ORAL

I don't doubt Reverend Pusser for a minute.

ALMA

Then take my bet, like you're in it to win it.

ORAL

Your bet? I miss your meaning by a mile.

ALMA

Mary-Anne, go lie down and rest a while.

(MARY-ANNE goes.)

ALMA

I've issued you a challenge: either take it,
Or, Oral -- as a couple we won't make it.

ORAL

He'll pass whatever trick or test you've got.

ALMA

We'll find out if you're sure of that or not.
Doreen, please tell the Reverend I'm down here
And need him --

ORAL

Alma, I've just made it clear
Doreen's no longer someone I employ --

ALMA

Well, hold that thought, until your golden boy
Has passed my test.

(to DOREEN)

Could you please bring him, now?

DOREEN

I'll go get Mr. Holier Than Thou.

(DOREEN EXITS. ALMA points to a table
with a long table cloth.)

ALMA

Get under there, he won't know you're around
Be careful not to move or make a sound
But when you're really sure what's going on
Please break it up, 'cause I'll want that guy gone.

ORAL

You're ordering me? Who are you talking to?
You scare me, Alma -- what's got into you?

ALMA

I'm trying to save this marriage, if I'm able.
Now, keep your word! Get underneath that table.

(HE complies, and SHE talks as HE does
so.)

ALMA (CONT'D)

Don't be shocked if I'm talking like a ho
And using words you didn't know I know.

ALMA (CONT'D)

I find your sleazy pastor most disgusting
But still, I've got to act as though I'm lusting
After him -- I'll say some crazy stuff.
Please, rescue me, soon as you've heard enough.

(DOREEN clears her throat at the door
and announces:)

DOREEN

The Reverend Chadwick Pusser.

(PUSSER ENTERS. DOREEN EXITS. ALMA puts
on a big smile.)

ALMA

Reverend!
My husband has just gone out for a walk;
I thought this was a good time for a talk.
As days have passed, I've fought not to reveal
The power of the way you make me feel.
Though I said I was one you couldn't coax
You've lit a fire that smolders as it smokes.
I tried to act offended, shy and stern
When all the time, your touch made my blood burn.
I knew you were attractive long before
But now I find I want you even more
And I can't hold it back.

PUSSER

Well, I'm surprised.
You seemed so scared of being compromised,
And wouldn't let me kiss you, and came very
Close to siding with that little fairy
When he came at me with those accusations ...
And now you say that we can have relations?

ALMA

When Daniel spoke to Oral, I felt guilt!
It was as if the truth had all been spilt,
Including feelings I was still denying.
I panicked, and of course I still was trying
To end your engagement. I was overzealous
Not for the girl's sake -- really, I was jealous.
Your body spoke to mine; it wasn't fair you
Soon would take her, and I'd have to share you.
Why would you choose that schoolgirl over me
When I'll act out your every fantasy?
But still, you're all I want, my heart affirms
And so I'll take you now on any terms.

PUSSER

It turns me on to hear your sweet confession.
I'm longing for a bit of decompression
Before the stress of marrying the kid --
I think I'd like to see, and raise, your bid,
And stoke you, so your smoldering fire flares --
Should we do it on the floor, or go upstairs?

ALMA

(coughs significantly)

My goodness! You're so quick and so direct!
Don't you have any fears this might affect
The way things go down on your wedding night?

PUSSER

Oh, I'll be up for more fun then, all right!
But right now, honey, you look so bodacious,
Your body so enticingly curvacious
So many ripples that I want to smooth ...
And when you give it up to me, you'll soothe
My last few fears you're somehow double-dealing --
So, show you're feeling what you say you're feeling.

ALMA

(moves away from him, coughs,
glances at table)

I'm hot for you, and yet the guilt remains.
I can't help feeling once a woman stains
Her honor, she has lost a precious treasure.
You're wise and holy -- how can we seek pleasure
So shamelessly, then turn to God in prayer?

PUSSER

Now, that's a useless train of thought right there.
Hon, there's a simple trick the mind can do
You'll learn it as I minister to you.
It has to do with sorting thoughts like shoes
You put the reds with reds and blues with blues;
You don't confuse the God talk with the fun time
You'll see, it's easy; just give in this one time
And next time you won't sweat the rights and wrongs.
Let's feast on love, as in the Song of Songs,
As Solomon told a wife or concubine:
Come, kiss my mouth, your love is better than wine.

(HE's all over her; SHE's coughing
significantly, and trying to fend him off.)

PUSSER (CONT'D)

My beloved is like frankincense and myrrh
Her ointments are the perfume that is her
Behold, for she is comely with clothes off --
Are you still sick? That's sure a nasty cough.

ALMA

I'm worried that this might be a relapse;
Perhaps we ought to let some time elapse.
I could have germs, and you don't want to risk it --

PUSSER

Aw, baby, you're my chicken and my biscuit
And if we have to do without the kissing
There's stuff that can make up for what we're missing.

ALMA

Is Oral back? Did that front door just slam?
Please check -- I feel so jittery!

PUSSER

Yes, Ma'am.
If he's back, we'll just sneak up to my room
Make it a hothouse and let our love bloom.
Don't worry, I'm the one he trusts the most;
He's a sucker, bless his heart, dumb as a post.
I'll look around for spies but, honey, soon
You're gonna have to let me at that poon.

(HE EXITS. ALMA lifts the table-cloth
and ORAL crawls out.)

ORAL

My ears ring with his words. I can't believe it.
My mind cannot entirely conceive it.

ALMA

(furious)

Of course, I sympathize with your confusion!
You wouldn't want to jump to a conclusion.
Right at the start you couldn't get the gist;
There might have been some subtle point you missed.
You had to watch that whole performance, surely,
To make sure not to judge him prematurely.
Why not wait *longer*, till he jumped on me
And knocked me up, or shared an STD?
Ten minutes I was pawed at by that skank,
And my own husband's who I have to thank!

ORAL

The man's a devil! I showed him my soul
And now he's swallowed up my future -- whole!

ALMA

He's coming!

(ORAL hides behind the table now, not
under it. PUSSER ENTERS.)

PUSSER

He isn't in the house or driving up.
Now, come upstairs and fill my loving cup --

(ORAL stands)

ORAL

Hold that thought. It's just as I suspected
You figured you could play games undetected
With *me* around? Well, buster, you're mistaken,
You daughter-marrying, wife-grabbing, Godforsaken --

PUSSER

Brother Oral! I guess this looks funny ...

ORAL

Yeah, it sure does, but I'm not laughing, *honey*.
Now, pack your bags and *git*, I mean today.

PUSSER

You have no right to speak to me that way.
This is my house, and you're a parasite
I'd keep around here, if you were polite.
But since you're not, you all can just clear out;
I've got real threats and plans to think about
So, by tomorrow, I don't want to see
A trace of you, or your damned family.

ORAL

I made you my heir -- I can take it back.

PUSSER

Your money's mine. Now hush up and go pack.

(PUSSER EXITS)

ALMA

What did he mean by that?

ORAL

I don't quite know.
I wish he didn't have my password, though,
Or my hand-held, or --
(upset)

I showed him some files ...
I sure feel freaked out by the way he smiles.

END OF SCENE THREE

SCENE FOUR

(DANIEL and GRANDMA are now alone in that same room.)

GRANDMA

Daniel, I hear that you're a fornicator.

DANIEL

It happens to us all, sooner or later.

GRANDMA

No, it does not. Some of us bless the bond
Of holy marriage, and never look beyond.

DANIEL

Marriage to Tyler would be a lovely option
And raising children, either through adoption
Or each of us could have one -- I realize
You saw that civilized world, with your own eyes.

GRANDMA

When I was young I had to contemplate
The world of sin that our Redemption State
Redeemed. God settled things on His own terms.

DANIEL

Not God. Just crazy Baptists with some germs.

(ORAL, ALMA, MARY-ANNE and DOREEN
ENTER.)

MARY-ANNE

Daniel! You're back! I knew that you'd come through!

DANIEL

I'm here to say there's nothing I can do.
I got in Dad's accounts, though I was blocked;
I saw he's cleaned out -- now the whole site's locked.
Doreen asked for my help; I couldn't refuse
But I wish I was bringing better news.

ORAL

Daniel -- this is hard for me to say:
I guess you think that you were born this way ...
I'm so confused -- I know you go with men ...

DANIEL

You're trying to say that I'm your son again?
Or should I disappear now that you know
I can't save you from this financial blow?

ORAL

I'm saying that I owe you an apology.
I got all twisted in that man's theology
And now I think the whole thing is a crock:
God, and all faith -- I'm reeling from the shock.

DANIEL

There's more to faith than Pusser's kind, by far.
I think your faith helps make you who you are.

ORAL

I don't know who I am, or why I'm living
And I don't see that I'm much worth forgiving.
Among the lost things I'd like to retrieve
Is my son -- who I just would not believe ...

(They embrace.)

DANIEL

You got him. And that thief who's made life squalid
Can't know how strong we are, now that we're solid!

MARY-ANNE

(bad, happy attempt at Sister
Sledge)

Yes! We are family
I've got everybody and me ...

GRANDMA

Restrain yourself!

MARY-ANNE

(laughs)

I thought you said I act too shy.

GRANDMA

Now you seem almost giddy!

MARY-ANNE

Can you guess why?
My head's been lifted off the chopping block!
I'm gasping with relief, laughing from shock
To know my body won't receive a mauling
From someone who sets all of my flesh crawling!
Woohoo!

ALMA

At least now Daniel's back, and this girl's free.

ORAL

I'm mighty proud of this here family.

GRANDMA

Oral, you appall me with this change
It's like you're now a stranger, you're so strange.
How can you doubt the Reverend Pusser's love
When he's been sent to us by God above?
I'm sorry you made him angry, but when you
Humble yourself, I'm sure he'll soften too.

ORAL

Mama, don't ask again -- you've rubbed me raw.
The man's a low-down fake; I heard and saw.

GRANDMA

He wouldn't try to seduce your wife, he's good!
She set him up, and you misunderstood.
There was some lesson that he contemplated
Teaching Alma, so you should have waited
And if the fault was hers, we should have stoned her!

ORAL

You're saying I should have waited till he'd boned her?
I *know* what happened -- you say it's untrue!

DOREEN

(to ORAL)

Now you know what we had to take from *you*.
Looks like no truth is truly verifiable
When Reverend Pusser's word is called reliable.

GRANDMA

You're all wrong, and you're all going to Hell!
His holy water cured me, and I'm well!

ORAL

Mama, don't let's argue more about it.
We had a good life -- now we'll do without it.

(PUSSEER ENTERS)

PUSSEER

You're all still here? You'd best turn tail and run.
I see you've welcomed back the prodigal son.

DOREEN

Yeah, he's home, and if you make one more pass
The bunch of us will kick your sorry ass.

DANIEL

(to PUSSEER)

The government will never let you fleece
A good man like my dad. Just leave in peace.

PUSSER

This is my home, and all of you infest it.
The state hates sin; the Patriarchs detest it,
And those who harbor traitors reek of sin;
I'll be commended as I turn you in.

(points at ORAL)

You, "Brother" Oral, helped a poor relation
Who made a most repulsive accusation
Against a Patriarch -- he fled abroad,
And yet you have the nerve to call *me* fraud?
The file I saw, that otherwise you hide
Is now in Selma and marked "classified."
You thought God would forgive your guiltiness
And turned to me to secretly confess,
But now you've turned on me, and come unhinged
Well, God protects His own. He'll be avenged.

GRANDMA

Oh, Reverend, please, it's a misunderstanding
Oral helped my brother Bo to a soft landing
In Mexico, I swear that he was cheated
By a Council member, and terribly mistreated.

PUSSER

(pointing at ORAL)

He broke the law! The laws of God and men.
If you think laws are playthings, think again.
He hid his deviant son -- helped his immersion
In sin, instead of battling his perversion.

DANIEL

You've got your story down, we're out of luck;
Hell hath no fury like slime I wouldn't fuck.

ALMA

Me neither!

MARY-ANNE

That's right!

DOREEN

They wouldn't be your bitches.
But tell me, won't you drown in all your riches?
And stumble, as you're striding 'cross the floor
Of people who don't live here anymore?
So you're "movin' on up," you've got the bucks
How can you claim this life that's so deluxe?
This man gave you a place to lay your head;
You stab his back, and turn him out instead?
You'll build your snake oil factory on his land
Spend his money, and not even lend a hand
To the family whose future you've destroyed?
Do you believe in God? Or just a void?

PUSSER

My God is good. I know that I was sent
 To be His servant and his instrument
 And when the shrieking infidels attack me
 I know that my avenging Lord will back me.
 He knows the bed of temptress Jezebel
 And those who follow her down into Hell
 Who watch the way her body moves and sidles
 Who let her teach, and eat food left for idols.
 I understand His ways, in all Creation:
 The tribulation seen in Revelation;
 I know He watches all things from the skies:
 The Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes.
 I've looked into His face, bright and intense
 Amidst the prayers that rise with the incense.
 An ominous future He slowly reveals!
 Four beasts look on, as He opens the seals.
 I know that He is calm, serene and focused
 As He prepares each scorpion and locust.
 I've seen the sun of sackcloth, moon of blood --
 You'll face the pit, a worse fate than the flood.
 I and the Saved will look down with cold sternness
 As you cry out and burn, deep in that furnace,
 Thus, you -- who call me *slime*, and *psychopath* --
 Shall meet with justice from the Lamb of wrath.
 That day will come, when you face that abyss;
 For now, the Lord bequeaths me all of this.
 God meant for all these riches to be mine
 Things happen for a reason, by design;
 God put words in my mouth, like Jeremiah,
 And taught me how to speak for the Messiah.
 Like Jeremiah, I root out and destroy
 The forces that the Devil may deploy;
 Like Jeremiah, I build up, and I plant
 And do the things that lesser people can't.
 I'll sell my soy cakes to the wretched masses
 And blessed holy water to all classes,
 While eating, wearing, driving all the best
 The world can give, and knowing I am blessed.
 Then I will go to glory when I die --

DOREEN

Smooth as a camel through a needle's eye.
 You think your God talk puts you far beyond some
 Final reckoning -- but you're just pond scum.
 You've twisted ministry until it's hateful;
 You turn on those who dare to be ungrateful,
 And cherry-pick the Bible for what's scary --
 But empty threats are all that your words carry.
 You think God hates the folks you're out to slam?
 And you control the nature of the Lamb?
 There's no monopoly on real religion;
 The State is godless -- you're just its stool pigeon.

DOREEN (CONT'D)

My faith is strong, and can't be undermined,
Even by bogus Christians of your kind.
My God believes in humor, love and fun
And human bodies, bare, warmed by the sun.

(DOREEN rips her kerchief off her head.
GRANDMA gasps.)

DOREEN (CONT'D)

So, make your threats, and rattle your old sabre;
My God's always believed in "love thy neighbor."
He won't shut out the ones who doubt, or cuss,
He's never been about Them vs. Us,
He has no time for hypocrites and haters.
To Him, girls aren't only incubators
Or chattels to buy, or sources of temptation;
My God's not into rank discrimination,
But swords beat into plowshares! He gets no blame
For those who march and murder in His name.
He's with the poor, He cheers for women's rights --
The God you've made in your own image bites,
And those with open hearts will look right past you
And glimpse the God of love, who will outlast you.

PUSSER

One hour. Take a few more things apiece
From your rooms -- then I'll call the Church police.

(HE EXITS.)

DANIEL

Dad, right now things are looking pretty grim.
I'll ask a few friends how to deal with him
And if there's some appeal, approach or angle
That we can use to get out of this tangle.

(HE EXITS in a different direction than
did PUSSER.)

GRANDMA

Oh, Oral. Son, please catch me. I might fall.
Quite suddenly, I don't feel well at all.

(HE helps her.)

END OF SCENE FOUR

SCENE FIVE

(TYLER anxiously checks messages
on a hand-held. DANIEL ENTERS,
looking grim.)

TYLER

You're back!

(beat -- sees his face)

That bad? Is every good thing gone?

DANIEL

Not quite. Tonight, Mary-Anne will marry Vaughn.
My dad will give his blessing, we'll be out
To all -- so there's some things to cheer about.

TYLER

That's it?

DANIEL

That's it. Pusser's victory is complete
And we are left to scatter in defeat.
A comedy like *Tartuffe* is always tending
To hand its audience a happy ending
But our fate is sadder, more complex;
In this case there will be no deus ex
Machina to undo the disaster.
The Patriarchs have made Pusser a pastor
Once more. They'll restore him to his perch
Before the faithful in his megachurch
He handed them some dirt on us he scored;
Getting re-sanctified is his reward
It gives him endless pleasure to convict us
He's dead inside -- that smile is a rictus
His TV ads have proved most opportune;
His prime-time worship show's debuting soon.
Tartuffe was thwarted by Louis Quatorze
But Pusser's free to turn us out of doors.
His lies and pretense will have no debunking;
We're not ruled by a wise, discerning Sun King
But by fools with the same pious façade
As Pusser -- who, like him, claim to speak for God.

TYLER

How can you be so calm, with your dreams broken?

DANIEL

One dream remains.

(holds up his own hand-held)

The Oracle has spoken.

TYLER

You got the pdf?

DANIEL

No, not what Moliere wrote.
All I got was another cryptic note:

(reads)

Dear Exposer of Dom Juan, Sweet Misanthrope
The gods find they cannot fulfill your hope.
You may be right your universe needs shifting
But you yourself must do the heavy lifting.
Moliere's lost draft is lost; what's done is done:
Go out and write a *Tartuffe* of your own.

TYLER

It's just a hoax, it's not a magic thing.

DANIEL

No doubt, but then, why am I tingling?

TYLER

They told you to get lost!

DANIEL

Either that, or
They said to be the one I'm waiting for.
Don't wait for the Messiah -- that much I know.
Or Moliere, or Lefty, or Godot.
I'll help a world that needs to be befriended
And write the play that Moliere intended --
The play that *I* intend, as best I can
And fight hard, as a writer and a man.
I'll try my best to reconstruct the banned scenes
Though I won't write my play in Alexandrines.
As in that Dickian novel, instead of sniping
And waiting, I'll be in my high castle, typing.

TYLER

Well, if you need a castle, or an ark
To shelter you, work here and make your mark.

DANIEL

I can't stay here. At dawn I have to flee
To Mexico with my poor family.
My father's left no dowry for his daughter;
But Vaughn will smuggle us out onto the water
Where we will travel 'round the border fence
And find a wider world, where things make sense.
Dad's been a first-class fool, and there's no knowing
Why -- but even Doreen says she's going
Because we're so incompetent and clueless.
She says she'll wear fun clothes at last, and do less.

TYLER

But you don't have to go -- your place is here!
The world is cruel to poor men who are queer,
Your father threw you out, you came to me;
He has no claim now on your loyalty.

DANIEL

And yet somehow he has it, just the same.
I'm still his son, I carry on his name
We'll build a new life, burying the past
While he acknowledges who I am, at last.
It must be interesting to be hurled
From a backward land right into the First World.
Perhaps I'll fight to set our nation free
And put a Guy Fawkes mask on, as in V.
I'll see some other forms of Christianity
And other faiths, and learn about humanity ...
For all the persecution and the lying
That Christians do, the killing and the trying
To impose what they think, believe and feel
On others with a missionary zeal,
I have a sense there's something at the core
Of faith that I could love. I'll find out more
While I'm abroad.

TYLER

It's just some wild quest?

DANIEL

My folks are lost, now, kicked out of the nest.
Dad's shell-shocked, counting on my scrappiness --
And Mary-Anne and Vaughn deserve real happiness,
Instead of persecution from the State
Because they shelter us from outside hate.
Our passion's known; if Pusser blows the whistle
Trouble will find us like a heat-seeking missile.

TYLER

Why value only hetero romances?
I love you. I'm prepared to take my chances.
Is Mary-Anne the only one who matters,
So it's okay to leave, as my heart shatters?
She's not some fragile, helpless little waif!

DANIEL

I'm her big brother. I'll make sure she's safe.
Vaughn says, indoors, she doesn't have to wear
Her kerchief -- and she has such pretty hair.
He'll sign a travel pass, so Mary-Anne
Can live more like a person -- like a man.
I love you, too -- and, Tyler, this is hard
But there are things I just can't disregard.

TYLER

I can't let you be ripped from me again
 And send my Daniel to the lion's den.
 I'll come with you --

DANIEL

You know you weren't made
 To live life on the run, poor and afraid.
 Nor was I. I'm a lover, not a fighter ...
 (HE kisses TYLER, then steps
 away)

The Oracle says I must be a writer.
 There's no sense living as a fugitive,
 For years, unless your family has to live
 That way. Yours doesn't, unless we bring you down;
 For now, at least, I'm heading out of town.
 I'll write to you. And, breathing that free air
 I'll try to take a page from Moliere:
 To call the world on all its contradictions,
 Hold up a truthful mirror with my fictions:
 Mischievous, honest, cynical and smart --
 I'll be a writer after his own heart.
 If verses have the power to conquer hate
 We may meet in a new world I create.
 Be happy for our siblings, please -- don't cry
 And say *vaya con dios*, when it's time
 To say goodbye.

LIGHTS DOWN

END OF PLAY