

Ashton

A play

by

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CHARACTERS:

Principal Batson - Male, Early 40s, Principal of Hamilton High School.

Ashton - Male, 16 year old student at Hamilton High School.

Sabrina - Female, 16 years old; Ashton's sister.

*Ashton and Sabrina are not twins.

Nora - Female, Late 30s, Ashton and Sabrina's mother.

Setting: Inner city Detroit. Now.

AT RISE: Principal Batson sits in his office, diligently working through the mountain of paperwork on his desk. Degrees, awards, and certificates line the wall. There is a family photo on the desk. Ashton enters the office, looks around hesitantly, and takes a seat.

SCENE I

BATSON

Hi, Ash.

ASHTON

Don't call me Ash.

BATSON

I'm sorry. Didn't mean to offend you.

ASHTON

My dad called me Ash. I don't like anyone else calling me that.

BATSON

Called? As in past-tense?

ASH

Yeah. He's not around anymore.

BATSON

Would you want to talk about that? You do know about the resources we have here at Hamilton--

ASHTON

I'm good.

BATSON

Are you sure?

ASHTON

Positive. He died a long time ago. Cancer. Nothing to talk about.

BATSON

(Silence.) He. . . died? Right. I'm. . . sorry to hear about that. I don't mean to pry.

ASHTON

Then don't.

(BATSON gets up from his desk and looks at the audience as if he was looking out a window in his office. Long silence.)

BATSON

(Beat.) Do you know why I called you in here?

ASHTON

No.

BATSON

Your grades, Ashton.

ASHTON

Oh. . . right.

(BATSON circles back into his seat.)

BATSON

Have your teachers spoken to you?

ASHTON

Yeah.

BATSON

Have you done anything to correct course?

ASHTON

I'm doing my best.

BATSON

That's unfortunate.

ASHTON

What's so unfortunate about me doing my best?

BATSON

(Long silence. Beat.) We're not sure that Hamilton is the best place for you anymore.

ASHTON

Who's we?

BATSON

I know that might be--

ASHTON

(More forcefully) Who's we?

BATSON

(Beat.) Let's keep this civil.

ASHTON

Sorry.

BATSON

Your teachers and I. We know you're a bright student with a bright future ahead of you but it just doesn't feel like Hamilton is the school that's going to get you there.

ASHTON

If I'm so bright why don't you think Hamilton can help me? The smartest kids in Detroit go here.

BATSON

Smart is a subjective term.

ASHTON

That's what smart people say to dumb people.

BATSON

We're not calling you dumb.

ASHTON

Sure feels like it. Do smart kids get C's and D's? That's pretty loud and clear to me. I'm obviously not as smart as anyone here. (Beat.) I don't belong here, do I?

BATSON

That's not what I said.

ASHTON

I'm flunking out.

BATSON

We all want to see you succeed. I'm not against you, Ashton.
We're not antagonizing you.

ASHTON

It's hard not to feel that way.

(BATSON takes a notepad out from a
drawer in his desk and begins to take
notes over the following conversation.)

BATSON

(Beat.) Are you happy, Ashton?

ASHTON

(*Laughing*) C'mon Principal, don't get all Dr. Phil on me now--

BATSON

I'm being serious. Are you happy, here, at Hamilton?

ASHTON

(Silence.) I guess so.

(BATSON scribbles this down in his
notepad. ASHTON notices.)

ASHTON

What're you writing down?

BATSON

How are things at home?

ASHTON

(Beat.) That's none of your business. What'd you write down?

BATSON

Don't worry about it. Are you close with your sister?

ASHTON

Sabrina?

BATSON

Yeah.

ASHTON

Yeah. We're close. Best friends, even.

BATSON

She's doing well.

ASHTON

She's a genius.

BATSON

Maybe. Maybe not. Do you think you could be a genius?

ASHTON

No.

BATSON

Hmm. (Silence. Beat.) And why is that?

ASHTON

I don't really see the point of this conversation. You're not my therapist. (Beat.) I can't afford a therapist.

BATSON

Right. I'm sorry.

ASHTON

(Long Silence.) So. . . I'm flunking out. That's why you called me in here.

BATSON

(Beat.) I just thought you should be apart of the conversation. We're not convinced that Hamilton will be able to get you where you want to go.

ASHTON

And where is it that I want to go?

BATSON

That's for you to answer.

ASHTON

(Silence.) You don't want me here, Principal Batson?

BATSON

I want to see you succeed.

ASHTON

Right.

(BATSON scrawls something, and then places the pad in his desk drawer.)

BATSON

I'm going to call your mom, set up a meeting.

ASHTON

Good luck with that.

BATSON

What do you mean?

ASHTON

She works so damn much I barley see her. Doubt she'll even pick up your call.

BATSON

Let me worry about that.

ASHTON

I'm guessing there's nothing I can do to change your mind?

BATSON

We talked about his last spring. We told you what the consequences would be if you didn't get your act together. I don't want any of this--

ASHTON

Sure you do.

BATSON

No, I don't.

ASHTON

But yet-- here we are.

BATSON

Consequences are consequences, Ashton. I stuck my neck out for you.

ASHTON

Lot of good that did me.

BATSON

(Beat.) I'm not asking you to be appreciative. I'm not asking you to thank me. Hell, I'm not even asking you to like me. I'm just asking you to get serious. This is serious.

ASHTON

Yeah, yeah. Can I go now?

BATSON

Yeah. You can go back to class.

(ASHTON gets up and exits. After a moment, BATSON stands and faces the audience, as if staring out the window in his office.)

BATSON

Cancer. . . Huh.

END SCENE I

SCENE II

(Several days later, back in Principal Batson's office. NORA enters, BATSON stands to greet her, motions for her to take a seat. The sole window in the room is gloomy, it is raining outside.)

BATSON

Nora. I'm glad you could make it.

NORA

Principal.

BATSON

You look great.

NORA

You don't look too bad yourself.

BATSON

(*Laughing*) Charming as ever.

NORA

Raising teenagers will do that to you. Preserves the mind.

BATSON

You have great kids, Nora.

NORA

How are things with your wife. . . Alice, was it?

BATSON

Ah, you remembered her name. I'm impressed. Things are. . . great. Can't complain.

NORA

Are you guys planning on having kids?

BATSON

(Beat.) Um. . . well. . .yeah--

NORA

I'm sorry. That was inappropriate

BATSON

It's fine. It's a fair question. We're putting it off at the moment. I've had some strange weight loss and backpain as of late so I'm more focused on that.

NORA

Oh. I see. Have you seen a doctor?

BATSON

No. It's probably nothing. Back pain is a bitch, though.

NORA

(*Laughing.*) Amen to that.

(Long silence. Beat.)

So you wanted to talk about Ashton?

(BATSON takes out his notepad.)

BATSON

Ashton. Yes.

NORA

How's he doing?

BATSON

Not great. Things haven't really improved from our last meeting. The administration wants me to take action.

NORA

Take action?

BATSON

Yeah.

NORA

What kind of action?

BATSON

The teachers are advocating to relocate him--

NORA

Relocate? You're kicking him out?

BATSON

We're not kicking him out. We want to see him succeed and want to direct him to the--

NORA

Jesus Christ I know the kid's grades aren't the best but does that really warrant kicking him out?

BATSON

Nora. You're being irrational. We all want what's best for--

NORA

I'm being irrational?

BATSON

Yes-- no. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Nora. I know this must be difficult.

NORA

You're kicking my kid out of school. This isn't difficult, it's fucking absurd.

BATSON

We spoke last Spring, Nora. All of us, including Ashton. We were clear that something needed to change.

NORA

Ashton does his best.

BATSON

I understand that.

NORA

Do you though? Do you really? Because you still want to kick him out despite that. That's cruel.

BATSON

It's not up to me.

NORA

Then who is it up to?

BATSON

The administration.

NORA

You're the principal!

BATSON

Which isn't the same thing as a dictator.

NORA

You're the leader of this school. You know that. The teachers know that. The administration knows that.

BATSON

I only have so much power Nora--

NORA

(Beat.) The thing about power, Principal, is people need to believe you have it. Otherwise, it means nothing.

BATSON

Are you saying my staff doesn't respect me?

NORA

No. . . it's not that. I know they respect you. This entire situation is a mess.

BATSON

(Long silence. Beat.) I think this is for the best.

NORA

You're on their side?

(BATSON shifts uncomfortably in his seat.)

BATSON

I'm on Ashton's side. And I think it's in his best interest that we find a school that fits his learning style.

NORA

Have you spoken to Ashton already?

BATSON

(Beat.) Several days ago. I told him I would call you in for a meeting.

NORA

He didn't mention anything at home.

BATSON

He probably didn't want to stress you out. He's a good kid.

NORA

How's Sabrina doing?

BATSON

She's at the top of her class. I'm sure she'll have her pick of college's in a few short years.

NORA

And Ashton? Will Ashton get his pick at colleges?

BATSON

That's entirely dependent on him, and what he wants.

NORA

I wish I knew what he wanted.

(Uncomfortably long silence. Batson stares down at his notepad.)

BATSON

I hear Sabrina and Ashton are close?

NORA

Inseparable.

BATSON

Since their dad died?

NORA

(Beat.) What?

BATSON

Ashton mentioned his father died. Of cancer. I'm sorry. I don't mean to make you uncomfortable--

NORA

No, it's fine.

BATSON

I just hadn't realized their father died. I remember you mentioned that he ran off with another woman when we first met and you were enrolling the kids. . . but cancer. . . jeez. Wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy.

NORA

(Silence. Beat.) Some people have it coming.

BATSON

That's cruel.

NORA

You're one to talk. You're trying to kick my son out of your school.

BATSON

C'mon, Nora. I'm not the bad guy here. I'm looking out for Ashton. Like I have been since he started here.

(Long Silence. NORA and BATSON stare at each other. They are calmed by each other's presence.)

BATSON

How long after?

NORA

What?

BATSON

How long after he left? How long after did he die from Cancer?

NORA

I don't know. I don't remember.

BATSON

Do you ever think it was the universe, maybe even Karma, or God, or some other higher being?

NORA

What are you talking about?

BATSON

James, dying from cancer. Do you think it was his punishment?

NORA

I really don't know.

(Long silence. BATSON stares at NORA but she doesn't meet his gaze.)

BATSON

(Beat.) How old were the kids?

NORA

I don't remember.

BATSON

You don't remember how old kids were when their father died?

NORA

And you're supposed to be father of the year? How many kids do you have again?

BATSON

I'm sorry. I'm not trying to attack you.

NORA

Then stop it.

(Long silence. BATSON realizes that NORA is intentionally avoiding eye contact with him.)

BATSON

You must know how old the kids were. The death of someone you loved. No matter how badly a relationship ends, that's not something you forget.

NORA

It was a long time ago.

BATSON

Nora--

NORA

Thirteen. They were thirteen. Or twelve. Something like that.

BATSON

(Long silence. Beat.) Huh.

NORA

What?

BATSON

That couldn't have been more than a handful of years ago.

NORA

So what?

BATSON

When you were enrolling the kids, two years ago, do you remember that?

NORA

Yes.

BATSON

You came to my office, literally shoved your way in. Wouldn't take no for an answer.

NORA

I remember.

BATSON

We were at capacity for that freshmen class. We weren't taking any more kids.

NORA

. . . I don't see where you're going with this. I was under the impression that we were here to discuss Ashton's future.

BATSON

Ashton. You love him dearly, that much is clear.

NORA

I love both my children, equally.

BATSON

Oh-- I don't doubt that. Nor am I in a position, to doubt that.
(BATSON gets up, and stares at the audience as if looking out the window

in his office. He leans against his desk.)

We were at capacity but you were determined to get Ashton and Sabrina into Hamilton. I don't blame you, best high school in Detroit for the past 7 years.

NORA

I did what any mother would do.

BATSON

(Beat.) Right. You did. You came in here and told me a story that broke my heart into a million pieces. Do you remember?

NORA

I do. But I still don't get what any of this--

BATSON

I'm just. . . a little confused. Perturbed, even.

NORA

What are you talking about?

BATSON

It's just so strange, Nora.

(Nora gets up to leave, she gathers herself and walks towards the door.)

NORA

This was nice, Principal, but you obviously have some things to work through--

BATSON

He died.

(NORA and BATSON stare at each other, face to face. NORA is unable to break away from his intense glare.)

BATSON

You came in here, sat in that chair, and told me this this spectacular story. A story about a family who survived shipwreck after shipwreck. A family that survived a deadbeat dad who walked out on his kids-- I mean what kind of fucking asshole does that, right? What kind of asshole walks out on his kids? *His kids?* (Long silence. Beat.) You said Ashton and Sabrina were never the same. That none of you were ever the same again. How

could you be? You moved around, city to city. You hopped from job to job. The kids from school to school. All because of a deadbeat. Because James ran off with some younger woman, leaving you guys with nothing. Until you ended up here. Hamilton High. Best school in Detroit. Hell, one of the best in the country. What a peculiar place to end up.

NORA

What are you implying. . .?

BATSON

It was quite the story. You got me.

NORA

I got you? What is that supposed to mean?

BATSON

You got me to accept Sabrina and Ashton. To take them into this school. (Beat.) Every kid in this school is my own. These are my kids. I look after my kids. I'd do anything for my kids.

NORA

I don't understand--

BATSON

You see, Nora, that's the thing. I don't understand, either. That story broke my heart when you first told it to me. I've dealt with a lot of kids in my time as an educator but I never felt so personally attached to a pair of students. That was your doing. Your creation. In a strange way, it was kind of a gift. It was refreshing. To be so intimately invested in a pair of students, to want to make a difference in their lives.

(Long silence. BATSON returns to his desk chair and takes a seat.)

But then a few days ago, Ashton, sat in that same chair, and said his dad died of cancer. A long time ago.

NORA

I should go--

BATSON

Of all the things your story did include, I wonder--

NORA

I don't want to talk about this anymore.

BATSON

I wonder-- how you forgot to mention that their father died.

NORA

I think I should call my lawyer.

BATSON

That won't be necessary. I just. . . hmm. How could you leave that detail out? I'm a sucker for storytelling, I really am--I was an English Major in college--so forgive me for being so detail oriented here. But that's a big detail. After Ashton left my office, I couldn't stop thinking about it. Cancer. Cancer. Cancer. Cancer. He died of cancer. But you only mentioned that he walked out on you. Yet here's Ashton, snapping at me for calling him Ash because only his dad is allowed to call him that. Strange, I thought. He only lets his dad call him Ash. His deadbeat dad. His, abandoned-the-family-for-a-younger-woman-dad. There's something ironic, almost poetic there, don't you think?

NORA

James died. Okay? What do want from me? You want me to apologize for not telling you that he died?

BATSON

Unless he didn't.

NORA

What?

BATSON

I don't think he died. I think you're lying.

NORA

You're insane. Certifiable. I'm leaving now.

BATSON

Like I said, I'll do anything for my kids. Ashton and Sabrina are my kids, just like every other kid in this school.

NORA

How noble of you. This entire meeting was about removing Ashton from this school.

BATSON

No. This meeting was about Ashton's best interests. Which is exactly what I have in mind. One of us has to be honest with him.

NORA

Excuse me?

BATSON

Either you lied to me when you were trying to enroll the kids here, or you've been lying to Ashton and Sabrina all their lives. I think I'm more disgusted by the latter.

NORA

You don't know anything about us.

BATSON

(Beat.) Apparently not.

(NORA walks out of the office, slamming the door behind her. BATSON sits at his desk, silent. The sound of rain drops beating off his office window is heard. Lights fade. Blackout.)

END SCENE II

SCENE II

(Lights up on Nora's living room, several days later. The room is scarcely decorated, largely lower middle class. Family photos hang on the wall. Lights are dim. The sound of rain beating against the window is heard. NORA is sitting on the couch drinking tea, Ashton enters and sits next to his mother.)

ASHTON

Tea?

NORA

Earl Grey.

ASHTON

Who's that?

NORA

It's the tea. It's Earl Grey.

ASHTON

When did you start naming your tea? That's weird.

NORA

No-- the brand-- the brand is Earl Grey. It's very good.

ASHTON

(Beat.) I know what Earl Grey is, mom.

NORA

(*Laughing*) Okay wise guy. Where's your sister?

ASHTON

Don't know. Probably still at school. She mentioned she had a debate thing.

NORA

She's on the debate team?

ASHTON

Yeah.

NORA

She didn't tell me.

ASHTON

Don't take it personally, Sabrina is always busy with something. It must be exhausting being that perfect.

NORA

She is perfect, isn't she?

ASHTON

Well. . .

NORA

What?

ASHTON

She's got a boyfriend.

(NORA takes a sip from her tea.)

NORA

Oh.

ASHTON

Captain of the football team.

NORA

He's popular?

ASHTON

Yeah, captains of football teams tend to be popular, mom.

NORA

(Beat.) Good for your sister.

ASHTON

Yeah.

(Silence except for the sound of rain drops beating on the window. NORA takes a sip of her tea.)

NORA

I spoke to Batson.

ASHTON

Oh.

NORA

It's not looking good, Ashton.

ASHTON

I'm flunking out.

NORA

I know.

ASHTON

It's my fault. I know that. It's my fault.

NORA

No, sweetheart, no it's not.

ASHTON

It is my fault, mom. I know times have been tough around here and money has been tight, but Sabrina still manages to do well. There's no excuse for me.

NORA

Honey, you're too hard on yourself.

ASHTON

Not hard enough. People have been busting their ass for me my entire life. You fought to get Sabrina and I into Hamilton and how did I repay you?

NORA

Ashton--

ASHTON

By flunking out. That's how. . . Dad would be disappointed in me.

NORA

Your father?

ASHTON

Yeah. I've been thinking about him.

NORA

He wouldn't be disappointed in you.

ASHTON

Yeah he would. He was perfect. He served in the military. Went to college. He did everything. He's everything I wish I could be. . . Do you think about dad?

(ASHTON tries to make eye contact with NORA but she stares down at her cup. Silence.)

NORA

Me?

ASHTON

Yeah. I mean, Sabrina and I were couldn't have been more than 3 or 4 when he died. But you knew him. You actually knew him.

NORA

I thought I did.

ASHTON

What?

NORA

I. . . I uh-- try not to think about your dad anymore. It's too painful.

ASHTON

Oh. Right. I'm sorry, mom. I didn't mean to upset you.

(NORA takes a contemplative sip from her tea. Silence.)

NORA

Do you know when Sabrina will be home?

ASHTON

Probably late.

NORA

(Beat.) Oh, okay. Good. Ashton?

ASHTON

Yeah, mom?

NORA

I miss your father. I try not to admit much these days. But I do. Every day. I think about him every day.

ASHTON

I know mom, but he's in a better place now.

NORA

(Beat.) Right-- right. Do you think you're flunking out of Hamilton because of your dad?

ASHTON

What? No-- of course not. It's my fault. No one else's. Only mine. I'm taking responsibility for that. Don't blame dad.

NORA

I'm not blaming your dad-- it's just. . . Do you think you're trying to live up to your dad's image?

ASHTON

Uh, yeah, of course I am. I guess. Me and Sabrina both. All those stories you told us about him, how he was a hero, of course we tried to emulate that. Sabrina is better at it than I am, though.

NORA

What do you mean?

ASHTON

Well-- dad dying hurt us all. Bad. Things were never the same. Sabrina and I may not remember much about dad but we do know

that. Times got tough. We had to move around. You had to take on multiple jobs. But that entire time, it's like it was a blessing. Dad was gone, sure, but we had each other. We needed each other. We grew closer together as a family. Dad did that for us.

(NORA takes sips from her tea. Ashton watches his mother. He notices her hands shaking slightly.)

ASHTON

Sabrina takes it upon herself to make it up to dad. To her, it's always the next thing. Maybe the next award, or trophy would make Dad proud. She's always trying to make dad proud. Even today. It's been so long that we don't even remember what dad smelled like. What he smelled like when he would tuck us in at night. When he would hold us. We don't remember what he smelled like. But Sabrina still does her best. I wish I was like that.

(Silence. Only the sound of rain drops are heard.)

NORA

You've made your dad proud.

ASHTON

No. I wish I did, or that I could. Or that I will someday. But he's gone. It's cruel. It's not fair. He was supposed to teach me how to dribble a ball. How to shave. How to talk to girls. But he never did. He was never able to. The universe just up and decided that I didn't need a father. That I was supposed to learn everything the hard way. I was unworthy of him. I still am. That's why he died.

NORA

Ashton.

(NORA's hand is shaking so violently that some of the tea spills out of the cup. ASHTON notices, but doesn't know what to make of this. NORA puts the cup down, and looks her son in the eyes.)

ASHTON

Yeah?

NORA

I want to tell you something.

ASHTON

You can tell me anything, mom. You know that.

NORA

But you have to promise you'll never tell your sister.

ASHTON

(Laughing) Is this some kind of joke?

NORA

I'm being serious, Ashton. What I'm about to tell you, you can never tell your sister. If you love her, you won't tell her.

ASHTON

What?

NORA

You can't tell her.

ASHTON

Mom-- cmon' you're freaking me out. You know I can't keep things from Sabrina. She's my best friend.

NORA

You will. I know you will. You'll keep this from her. Because you love her too much.

ASHTON

Mom you're being crazy--

NORA

Whiskey.

ASHTON

What?

NORA

You said you forgot what your father smelled like when he used to tuck you in.

ASHTON

Dad didn't drink.

NORA

He did.

ASHTON

No he didn't. He was in the military for 4 years. He was completely straight edge--

NORA

Whiskey, sometimes vodka, almost always alcohol. That's what he smelled like.

ASHTON

I don't understand.

NORA

He didn't hold you, often.

ASHTON

What are you talking--

NORA

You or Sabrina. He rarely held either of you. He wasn't even there when you were born.

ASHTON

Lies. These are lies. Why are you saying this?

(Silence.)

NORA

Because you need to hear it. Because I've been living with this lie for so long I'm starting to believe it. It's comforting, really. Not having to confront it head on. Better dead than a deadbeat, right?

ASHTON

What are you saying?

NORA

Your father wasn't the man you think he is.

ASHTON

Almost everything we know about dad--

NORA

Came from me. Exactly. Ashton, your dad isn't dead. He's alive. He was never in the military. He didn't go to college. None of that was true.

ASHTON

Wha-- what? Why would-- how could. . . I don't understand, mom. Dad's alive?

NORA

You father walked out on us when you and Sabrina were babies. You were 4, Sabrina just turned 3. (Beat.) It was her birthday. The night he left. It was Sabrina's birthday. I begged him to stay-- I told him I loved him-- that I would die for him. It was no use. I begged him to stay for you guys. He didn't love me anymore but how could he shun his own kids, right? How could anyone do that? But there was another woman. A younger woman. A more beautiful, woman. And he left.

ASHTON

Oh god. . . You're serious. . .

NORA

I haven't heard from him since. He left us. The man left us. He's not the hero I made him out to be. You two were so small, so little, you were just babies. I couldn't stand to break your heart. So you grew up believing your father was a hero. That he was devoted to his family. That he loved us. It was a beautiful fiction. But no more--

ASHTON

Dad used to call me Ash.

NORA

He did. He ruffled your hair on his way out.

ASHTON

That fucking prick--

NORA

Ashton. Do you understand why I'm telling you this?

ASHTON

What I don't understand is how you could keep this shit from us for so long.

NORA

Please, try to understand. I was trying to protect you. To shield you from the monster that your father really was. You needed to hear this. So you could stop blaming yourself. So you could stop aspiring to this golden standard that's just a

figment of our imaginations. You are your own man. You owe nothing to your father.

ASHTON

It's been more than 10 fucking years.

NORA

I'm telling you this because I think it will save you. Ashton, getting kicked out of Hamilton is only the tip of the iceberg. You're spiraling out of control. And it's my fault. Your entire life you felt like you didn't deserve your dad. That couldn't be further from the truth. He never deserved you.

(Long Silence Ashton continues to pace around the living room. He calms himself and takes a seat.)

ASHTON

You're not going to tell Sabrina?

NORA

We can't.

ASHTON

Are you fucking insane?

NORA

It would crush her. It would destroy her. You know that.

ASHTON

(Beat.) She has the right to know.

NORA

You said it yourself. Sabrina is who she is because of how she thinks her father--

ASHTON

Yeah, but none of it's true. It's a fucking joke. A sick joke.

NORA

No. I needed that image of your father just as much as you did. But I told you this because it will set you free. Your father is a prison you couldn't escape. Now you're free.

(ASHTON stares blankly ahead. Silence. Nora takes his hand.)

NORA

She can never know.

ASHTON

I'm free.

NORA

Yes. And so am I. But your sister was never in a prison. Let's not put her in one. Do you understand, sweetheart?

ASHTON

I do.

(The sound of beating rain drops intensifies as the lights fade darker and darker. Complete darkness. Only the sound of the rain can be heard for a long while. Then, silence.)

END PLAY