

All My Sons Summary

All My Sons, a play in three acts, is set in a small town several years after World War Two, and begins with Jim Bayliss, a doctor, and Joe Keller, head of the Keller family, sitting in Keller's backyard, reading the paper. A storm the previous night has shorn in half a tree that is revealed to memorialize Larry Keller, one of two Keller children—the son who did not survive the war. Chris, the other Keller son and a junior partner in the family manufacturing business, comes outside and tells his father, Joe, after Jim leaves, that the family cannot continue leading on Kate, Joe's wife, in the belief that Larry is still living. Frank Lubey, another neighbor of the Keller's (along with his wife Lydia Lubey), is using astrology to determine if Larry is alive, and he brings this information to Kate later in the play, but for the most part, Chris believes that all in the town have come to the same conclusion: that, after three years, Larry will not be returning to the small town, that Larry's plane crash in the war was fatal.

Chris also tells his father that Annie, Larry's former girlfriend who is visiting the Keller's from New York, is there because Chris intends to propose marriage to her. Joe has no real problem with the idea in itself, but Joe fears that Kate will not permit it, since Annie is "Larry's girl," and to give Annie to Chris would mean that Larry is really dead. Kate comes outside, as does Annie, and a series of strained conversations ensue, in which Chris attempts to demonstrate his affection for Annie, and Kate tries to emphasize that Larry is not dead and Annie is not "Chris's girl." Slowly, throughout the first act, it is revealed that Annie's father, Steve, was a former employee of Joe's at the manufacturing company during the war, and that Steve apparently OK'd the production of faulty plane parts, which were shipped to American planes, and which caused the death of 21 pilots in plane crashes. Steve went to jail for his negligence, but Joe was released, arguing in court that Steve acted alone, and that Joe did not force him to ship the defective parts.

Joe and Kate worry that Annie has come to stir up trouble in the Keller family regarding Joe's guilt in the manufacturing affair, and this, too, complicates the possibility of Chris and Annie's wedding. Chris also tells Annie that he has a hard time navigating the moral complexities of post-war life, and he relates a story from the war, in which a soldier gave him his last pair of dry socks, as an indication of the moral simplicity of battle.

George, Annie's brother, calls long-distance, from Columbus, where Steve is imprisoned, saying he, too, is going to visit the Keller home that evening. Annie worries that George is coming with revelations about the Joe-Steve manufacturing affair, and Kate tells Joe to prepare himself for George's questioning. George arrives, in a huff, and though Jim and Chris attempt to calm him, George accuses Joe of knowingly inducing Steve to "take the fall" for the manufacturing failures. George believes Steve's story, that Joe himself told Steve over the phone to shellac over the defective parts. George believes that Joe feigned sickness that evening to keep from going into the plant, thus retaining distance from the events, which enabled Joe to place the blame entirely on Steve. Joe denies these accusations to George, who leaves the house, but as Annie runs after him, Joe announces to Chris, and in front of Kate, that in fact George's story is true.

Chris is aghast, not just that this father produced the defective parts, but that Joe lied to put Steve in jail, and proceeded to make a fortune from the factory in the post-war boom. Chris feels

complicit in his father's immorality, and goes for a drive that evening, while Joe and Kate weep on the house's back porch.

At the play's end, it is two in the morning the following day, and Chris returns from his drive to find Annie, Joe, and Kate outside. Annie, who wants Kate to believe that Larry is truly dead so that she and Chris can be married, shows to Kate a letter Larry wrote her the day before his death, in which he said his plane would "go missing" in an act of suicide, out of the shame Larry feels for Joe's and Steve's guilt. Joe, who for a long time had comforted himself with the idea that he was not responsible for his own son's death, realizes, when Chris reads the letter aloud, that he has not only killed 21 pilots—he has also killed, indirectly, his own son. Joe remarks that "all the soldiers . . . are his sons," and goes upstairs, feigning that he will turn himself in to the small town's jail. But a gunshot is heard; Joe has killed himself in the house, and though Chris tells his mother, outside, that he didn't intend for this to happen, Kate tells Chris and Annie, calmly, to go far away and start a new family elsewhere, since the guilt that has ravaged the Keller family can bring them nothing but harm. The play ends.