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END TIMES

[EXCERPT]

a play
by

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CHARACTERS

PENELOPE, a teenager

This actress also plays SECONDBORN DAUGHTER and AUNT RAE (second appearance).

QUENTIN, a teenager

VERA, Penelope's mother, mid 30s

This actress also plays OFFSTAGE VOICE, AUNT RAE (first appearance) and FIRSTBORN DAUGHTER.

JESS, Quentin's uncle, 50s

A DOCTOR, 50s or so

This actor also plays a GUARD and a NURSE.

STACKHOUSE, about 40

This actor also plays LOT.

All actors also play HAZMAT ANGELS (angelic figures in grimy hazmat suits) as needed.

SETTING

Various locations in and around Wheeler Bend, a refinery town.

Note: In Uncle Jess' soliloquys, the lines in brackets and italics are to be spoken; the typography is meant to indicate different voices in an internal conversation.

SCENE:

(An ANGELIC FIGURE in a grimy hazmat suit regards the audience. It gestures. Music begins. It gestures again. Lights up on PENELOPE sitting, writing in a notebook. Occasionally she pauses and looks up, at first expectantly, then impatiently, then worriedly, as the HAZMAT ANGEL sings.)

HAZMAT ANGEL

(sings)

DOWN WHERE THE STREAM
TAKES A TURN INTO THE REEDS
I WILL FALL DOWN ON MY KNEES,
DROWN MY PRIDE

(QUENTIN enters. From a distance he observes PENELOPE, who is unaware of him. For a moment he appears indecisive, then turns to leave.)

HAZMAT ANGEL

UP IN THE TREES,
THE SUN, IT SHINES DOWN THROUGH THE LEAVES
SPARKING OFF OLD MEMORIES.
THRICE DENIED

(The HAZMAT ANGEL extends an arm into QUENTIN's path, blocking him. QUENTIN stops, not seeing the HAZMAT ANGEL, but still sensing some presence in his way. He turns and starts to approach PENELOPE.)

ONE DAY THE HEAVENS WILL FALL
ONE DAY A GREAT WIND
WILL BLOW DOWN EVERY WALL

(The HAZMAT ANGEL gestures one last time. Lights out on the ANGEL, and as the music ends we hear a mechanical droning in the background. PENELOPE, now aware of QUENTIN's presence, closes the notebook and puts it away.)

PENELOPE

You came.

QUENTIN

You sound surprised.

PENELOPE

When I asked you, you seemed... I don't know. You find it okay?

Followed the river, just like you said.

QUENTIN

I was starting to think...

PENELOPE

What?

QUENTIN

You changed your mind.

PENELOPE

No. No. I... went the wrong way first.

QUENTIN

You almost missed it.

PENELOPE

Missed what?

QUENTIN

You'll see.

PENELOPE

...

...

QUENTIN

Do you want to sit?

PENELOPE

Yeah.

...

...

So, this is your spot?

PENELOPE

I come here most days. If it's not raining. Or too cold.

QUENTIN

It's nice.

PENELOPE

...

QUENTIN

...

(QUENTIN sniffs.)

PENELOPE

What's wrong?

QUENTIN

Do you smell something?

PENELOPE

No. Do you?

QUENTIN

Rotten eggs. Oil, fire. Lucifer.

PENELOPE

Lucifer?

QUENTIN

I mean, you know, like sulfur. Burning. Maybe it's coming from over there. That refinery.

(PENELOPE sniffs.)

QUENTIN

You really don't smell it?

PENELOPE

No.

QUENTIN

Huh. You live here your whole life?

PENELOPE

Fourteen years.

QUENTIN

Maybe that's why. There was this kid at my old school, Timmy Dougherty. Had B.O., real bad. You'd be like "Dude, use some deodorant," but he'd just look at you, like you were speaking Chinese. I guess he'd lived with his own smell so long he couldn't smell it anymore.

I'm not saying *you* have B.O. You smell nice. You smell... pretty.

PENELOPE

Um, thanks.

QUENTIN

...

Did you see that? The refinery lights just flickered.

PENELOPE

Someone just got the chair at Slocum. That's what everybody says around here when that happens. Whenever someone's executed at Slocum Prison, it draws the current, and the lights flicker all up and down the Crescent.

QUENTIN

They still use the chair at Slocum?

PENELOPE

Dunno. It's what people say.
You're from Jefferson?

QUENTIN

Uh-huh.

PENELOPE

Do you miss it?

QUENTIN

A little. My friends.

PENELOPE

Why'd you move?

QUENTIN

My dad got called up. He's overseas, in the war. And my mom's gone, like passed away, so I had to move in with my uncle.

PENELOPE

I'm sorry. About your mom.

QUENTIN

...
So, when does this thing happen?

PENELOPE

Soon. It's worth the wait.

QUENTIN

...
What does your dad do?

PENELOPE

He's out of town. He's in, um, Dubai.

QUENTIN

Wow. What's he doing there?

PENELOPE

Business. He works for... I mean, he owns the refinery.

QUENTIN

I thought like a corporation owned it.

PENELOPE

He owns the corporation.

QUENTIN

...

My uncle used to work there. But then he got hurt. A pipe or something exploded. Now he's on disability. I mean, he can walk, but he has a limp. And he's always in pain.

PENELOPE

That's awful. How's he doing now?

QUENTIN

He just sits at home, mostly. Watches TV. Goes to the library, writes e-mails to people about the refinery. Says it's held together with masking tape and chewing gum. He says someday it'll go up in a big ball of fire.

PENELOPE

God. I'm really sorry. I mean, he doesn't *own* it, my dad. He owns stock or whatever in the corporation. I can tell my dad to talk to someone. Make sure your uncle's taken care of.

QUENTIN

You don't have to do that. You don't have to lie.

PENELOPE

About what?

QUENTIN

Your dad. I know where you live. I followed you. Yesterday, after school. I was just curious. I know it's like... It sounds... I mean, I liked you. I do like you. I just wanted to know.

PENELOPE

You could have just asked.

QUENTIN

Would you have told me?

PENELOPE

...

QUENTIN

I don't care if you're not, like, rich. I'm the total opposite of rich. So whatever the deal is with your dad, I don't care. Forget I said anything.

Do you want me to go?

PENELOPE

No.

I don't know him. My dad. I've never even met him.

QUENTIN

Who is he? Or is he, like, gone?

PENELOPE

You mean dead? My mom says he is, but I don't believe her.

QUENTIN

What does she say about him?

PENELOPE

Almost nothing. He's like a date, like B.C. or A.D. Like "Before I met that sonofabitch," or "Since that sonofabitch went away." She says she'll tell me more when I'm ready.

QUENTIN

When'll that be?

PENELOPE

Dunno.

QUENTIN

Wow, that's... That's sad. I mean, it is sad, isn't it?

PENELOPE

It's like somebody rubbed an eraser over half my life.

QUENTIN

...

Thanks. For telling me, about your dad.

PENELOPE

You would've found out sooner or later anyway. Everyone knows. At school. In town.

QUENTIN

Still. Thanks. You ever try to track him down?

PENELOPE

I don't know where to start. My mom won't tell me who he is. Nobody else seems to know.

QUENTIN

But your mom does, right? What if she had to tell you?

PENELOPE

I can't make her. I've tried, but I can't.

QUENTIN

But what if she had no choice? At my old school, that kid, Timmy Dougherty, for the longest time he didn't know who his dad was. He kept asking and asking. His mom wouldn't tell him, and if anybody else knew they wouldn't say either. Guess why. It turned out his father was his uncle.

PENELOPE

His mother's *brother*?

QUENTIN

Uh-huh.

PENELOPE

Ew.

QUENTIN

I know, right? So nobody ever said anything, until this one day when they couldn't keep it a secret anymore. His mom had to tell him when they found out that—

PENELOPE

Hold on. It's starting. Tell me in a minute, but now you have to look. Do you see? The sun setting behind us, the refinery in front. See the steam, the smoke, flowering from the stacks, streaking the sky? And the sky's changing, darkening blue. The clouds are fading. The sky's starting to look solid, like a sheet. Smooth, unbroken steel. See the refinery lights through the steam? What do they look like?

QUENTIN

Stars?

PENELOPE

Yeah, stars. Not distant stars.

QUENTIN

Like really close ones. Stars in a cloud.

PENELOPE

It's like a nebula, right? Soon the sun'll be gone. We'll lose the sky, the ground, the line of trees, the horizon. We could be floating in space, watching a nebula, giving birth, to stars.

QUENTIN and PENELOPE

...

...

(QUENTIN sniffs.)

PENELOPE

What?

QUENTIN

The smell. It's gone. I don't smell it anymore.

PENELOPE and QUENTIN

...

...

(PENELOPE shifts a little bit—but just a little bit—closer to QUENTIN.)

...

...

QUENTIN

Wow. That was...

PENELOPE

Wasn't it?

QUENTIN

Yeah. I see what you mean.

PENELOPE and QUENTIN

...

PENELOPE

So. You were telling me how that kid found out who his father was.

SCENE:

(JESS. Just his face. The clattering of a computer keyboard.)

UNCLE JESS

Dear sir
Dear sir or madam

To whom it may concern. I write regarding conditions of...

perilousness?

[no]

impending disaster?

[sounds crazy]

...regarding unsafe conditions requiring your immediate attention. Until recently, I was a safety inspector at DWD Refinery just outside Wheeler Bend. Said employment terminated due to an...

incident?

[yes]

...incident at the plant. A catalytic unit exploded. Four men were caught in the blast; I was the only survivor. My successor at the plant reported it as an accident.

However,

further investigation has...

[what?]

revealed?

[yes]

...revealed that this was no accident, but a deliberate attempt on my life.

Let me explain.

A week before the

[quote]

accident,

[unquote]

I detect dangerously high levels of sulfur in the crude. I file a report.

A week later, I am performing an inspection. Out of nowhere, an explosion.

Curious, isn't it? A safety inspector the victim of an accident,
so called,

left lame, unemployed

[em dash]

(From offstage, a VOICE)

Sir?
indeed
 [comma]
unemployable

Sir?
 [em dash]
mere days after filing a report.

Sir.

Yes?

Your time's up.

Just a minute.

It's the library. You have to share.

I'm almost done.
 Bitch.

Coincidence?

I think not.
I have reason to believe I was drawing close to a truth which certain... forces did not want known.

Sir, if you don't stop right now, I'm pulling the plug.

More to come.

Awaiting your reply,
A Concerned Citizen

OFFSTAGE VOICE

UNCLE JESS

OFFSTAGE VOICE

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