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THE JUNIPER TREE
[EXCERPT]

a play in one act

adapted from the Brothers Grimm
by
Robert Kerr

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CHARACTERS

INA, a young woman
ANNEMARIE, her daughter
GUNTHER, her husband
HANS, her stepson

The EVIL ONE

A BIRD (played by the same actor playing HANS)
A GOLDSMITH (played by the actor playing GUNTHER)
A COBBLER (played by the actor playing ANNEMARIE)
A MILLER (played by the actor playing INA)

SETTING

Germany, a long time ago

Gunther's home and the yard outside

In all publicity for any production of the play (including the programs) include the following:

"THE JUNIPER TREE was written and developed with support from the Jerome Fellowship program of the Playwrights' Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota."

SCENE ONE

(The yard. Clothes and white sheets hanging from clotheslines. INA is taking down the wash. ANNEMARIE is playing, running back and forth between the sheets.)

ANNEMARIE

I'm in a hallway, Mama! A hallway leading to heaven!

INA

What do you see?

ANNEMARIE

I see clouds, and people in white robes, and angels playing their harps.

INA

Do you see anyone we know?

ANNEMARIE

There's Uncle Johann!

INA

Is he happy?

ANNEMARIE

He's as happy as could be, playing his harp. He's got a bunch of angels dancing around him. I'm looking down now, leaning over the edge of the cloud. I can see you, miles below me, taking down the wash. I'm leaning so far over that I'm losing my balance. Now I'm falling! I'm falling off the cloud! Aaaaaahhhh!

(ANNEMARIE lands on her back, out of breath.)

It was beautiful, Mama! I wish you were there.

INA

You were only playing, dear.

ANNEMARIE

For a moment I saw it! Really! Have you ever seen heaven, Mama?

INA

No. But I hope I will, someday.

ANNEMARIE

I hope so too, Mama.

(GUNTHER enters, looking for somebody.)

Father!
ANNEMARIE

Hello, child. Have you seen your brother?
GUNTHER

No. Guess where I just was.
ANNEMARIE

Not now. Ina, have you seen Hans?
GUNTHER

He's not home from school yet.
INA

Oh. I thought he'd be home like a shot for his birthday supper.
GUNTHER

No matter. I haven't started cooking it yet.
INA

If you did, maybe the breeze would carry the smell of supper to his nose and lead him home.
GUNTHER

I haven't even had time to buy the meat.
INA

(Pause while INA works. GUNTHER is struck by something about INA and gazes at her intently.)

Father?
ANNEMARIE

Sh.
GUNTHER

(INA grows uncomfortable as GUNTHER watches her, and concentrates more and more on her work.)

My darling. Always working. The wash, the floor, the cooking, the cleaning. All without end.

There's much to do.
INA

Just once I'd like to sit with you for an afternoon. Just look at you, in the sun. My darling Le--
GUNTHER

Ina. My name is Ina.
INA

What did I say?
GUNTHER

Her name.
INA

Oh. Slip of the tongue.
GUNTHER

Whose name?
ANNEMARIE

Nobody's.
INA

I must have been preoccupied.
GUNTHER

Tell me.
ANNEMARIE

INA
Listen. The angels are calling. They want you to play.
(ANNEMARIE moves away.)

GUNTHER
I've decided. Today's the day I'll tell him.

INA (indicating the tree)
About...

GUNTHER
That's right.

INA
Gunther, please. Not yet. We don't know how he'll take it.

GUNTHER
He'll be glad to know.

INA
We're all so happy now, the four of us. Telling Hans could upset everything. Just wait one more year.

GUNTHER
Today Hans is seven years old. It's time he knew.

INA

Gunther--

GUNTHER

Now Ina, I want you to close that pretty little mouth of yours. If anything would upset Hans, it would be all this chatter. Let me know as soon as Hans gets home.

(GUNTHER exits.)

ANNEMARIE

Mama, what's Papa going to tell Hans?

INA

Nothing concerning you, darling.

ANNEMARIE

Everybody knows but me. I feel left out.

INA

Don't feel that way, Annemarie.

ANNEMARIE

Is it something to do with his birthday?

INA

It... Yes. It is.

ANNEMARIE

Is it a present he's getting?

INA

In a way.

ANNEMARIE

What is it?

INA

I can't say.

ANNEMARIE

Is it better than what I got for my birthday?

INA

One can't really compare what--

ANNEMARIE

Is it?

INA

You got to ride a pony for your birthday.

ANNEMARIE

It is better, isn't it?

(Beat)

INA

Your father's going to tell Hans a story.

ANNEMARIE

Do I get to hear it?

INA

Not just yet.

ANNEMARIE

When?

INA

When you're old enough.

ANNEMARIE

You hate me!

INA

I don't--

ANNEMARIE

You all hate me!

INA

We don't. You mustn't say that.

ANNEMARIE

It's true!

INA

No, it's not. Annemarie, stop crying. Please.

If you stop crying I'll tell you the story.

ANNEMARIE

You will?

INA

Yes. That's better. Now the story is: Once upon a time there was a woman. When she died she was buried in our yard, under the juniper tree.

ANNEMARIE
That's all?

INA
Mm-hm.

ANNEMARIE
What a stupid story. You're lying.

INA
No, I'm not.

ANNEMARIE
Yes you are. Hans is getting a horse, isn't he?

INA
What gave you that idea?

ANNEMARIE
He's getting a horse and a cart and and and a room full of toys.

INA
He's getting nothing of the kind.

ANNEMARIE
And I don't get anything at all.

(Off, we hear HANS whistling.)

INA
Shush. Here he comes. Don't spoil his birthday.

(HANS enters.)

Hello, Hans. Happy birthday.

HANS
Thank you, mother.

(A beat.)

INA
Annemarie.

ANNEMARIE
What?

INA
Wish your brother happy birthday.

No. ANNEMARIE

Annemarie. Say it. INA

Happy birthday. ANNEMARIE

That's a good-- INA

I HATE YOU! ANNEMARIE

Annemarie! Your own brother. Don't say such things. INA

I HATE YOU! I WISH YOU WERE DEAD! ANNEMARIE

(ANNEMARIE runs off.)

Annemarie! Oh, Hans. She didn't mean it. Don't pay any attention to her. Just sit quietly and wait for your father. INA

Look, a butterfly! I thought they'd all gone with the summer! HANS

(HANS chases the butterfly.)

Careful, Hans. Mind the wash. INA

What a beautiful day for a birthday. HANS

I see storm clouds, just over the horizon. INA

I hope it doesn't rain. HANS

HANS

(sings)

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME
SAID THE DOG WITH THE FLEA
I'M FEELING SO HAPPY
WHAT A GREAT WAY TO BE

INA

How clever.

HANS

Do you want to hear another one?

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME
SAID THE SHIP TO THE SEA
I'M FEELING SO WAVY
LIKE I'M STUNG BY A BEE

Wasn't that clever?

INA

Very.

HANS

Another butterfly! They're everywhere!

(HANS runs in and out of the sheets.)

INA

Hans, please. I'm trying to take the wash down before it rains. I can't do it when you're running around like that.

HANS

Sorry.

INA

Sit still and wait for your father.

(HANS sits. Pause. HANS whistles.)

Hans--

HANS

Sorry.

INA

There's never a moment's peace when you're around. Always a Hans in every corner. You'll drive me mad someday.

(Pause. HANS scratches an itch.)

Hans!
INA

Sorry.
HANS

(Beat. INA hums as she works. GUNTHER enters.)

Hans! Happy Birthday!
GUNTHER

Thank you, father.
HANS

Careful! You'll knock the wash off the line.
INA

Let him play, Ina.
GUNTHER

I spent the afternoon up to my elbows in the cold stream getting it clean, and he's making it dirty again.
INA

Silly girl. It hasn't fallen.
GUNTHER

It was about to.
INA

Is something upsetting you?
GUNTHER

I... No. Let me work.
INA

Raise your nose from the grindstone, just for today. For Hans' special day.
GUNTHER

It's about to storm. The wash needs to go inside.
INA

After the wash, then.
GUNTHER

Then I have to make dinner.
INA

GUNTHER

After dinner.

INA

Then there are the dishes.

GUNTHER

Leave them. Or have Annemarie do them.

INA

We still need meat for the stew.

GUNTHER

I'll go to the butcher's. You'll rest. Say, when Annemarie came to fetch me she was crying. She wouldn't say why.

INA

Oh.

GUNTHER

I thought you might know.

INA

Maybe she stumbled, running to the house. Poor girl.

(INA exits with the laundry basket.)

GUNTHER

Hans, come over here. Join me under the juniper.

HANS

I always feel so happy whenever I sit here.

GUNTHER

Well, I know a story which might explain why. You see, once not very long ago there were a man and a woman who lived in a cottage where our house now stands. They were happy and so in love that they thought they had everything. But by and by they came to feel that the great love they shared wasn't enough, and the little cottage started to seem somehow empty. What they needed was a child to fill the empty space. They waited and prayed every night for a whole year, and then waited some more. But no matter how much they waited and prayed, no child joined them in their empty home.

Then, one night in the dead of winter, the woman stepped outside to eat an apple. Even though it was so cold that her teeth chattered, she would rather stand out in the wind and snow than sit inside the empty cottage. She stood right here, under the juniper, as she peeled the apple. As the peels fell away onto the snow she sighed and said to herself, "I wish I had a child white as snow and red as blood." While she was lost in these thoughts, the little knife slipped and cut her finger so that three drops of blood landed in the snow among the apple peels.

GUNTHER (cont.)

The pain in her finger lasted only a moment, and then she felt so happy, as if a voice inside her told her without words that her wish would come true. The cottage that had seemed so empty only moments before now looked warm and happy with the light from the windows spread out like a golden blanket. Eating her apple, she went back inside.

A month later, the snow melted away, and after two months green filled all the corners where white had been. In the third month, flowers bloomed everywhere, and in the fourth leaves appeared and the forest swelled with the sounds of thousands of birds. Five months later the woman stood under the juniper where she had cut her finger, and she was so overcome with joy that she fell to her knees. After six months, when all the fruit had become quite ripe, the woman spent all day in her bed. Seven months later she picked the berries from the juniper and ate them so ravenously that she became sad and ill. One night in the eighth month, as she lay awake next to her husband, she said to him, "If I should die, bury me under the juniper tree." Then, nine months after she cut her finger under the juniper, she had a child white as snow and red as blood, just as she had wished. When she saw the child, she died of happiness.

The man remembered what his wife had asked of him and buried her here, with the juniper as her headstone. When he finished filling in the grave all his grief disappeared, for something told him that his wife was at peace. He went into his cottage and started the next chapter of his life with his new son.

The man was myself. The child was you. And the woman was your mother.

HANS

But Mother was just here, taking down the wash.

GUNTHER

Ina is your mother now. But the mother I just told you about was your true mother. The one who gave you life. Maybe that's why you're so happy here, because this is where it all began for you.

She could smile and make the lilacs bloom in the depths of December. She was quite a woman, your mother.

[END OF EXCERPT]