

PLAY'S END

A one-act tragicomedy by
Jonathan Dorf

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

JOHN DOE, a middle-aged gun salesman.

JOHNNY DOE, 10, John's son (may be played by an older actor, particularly in a stand-alone production of the play).

NOTES

First produced by The Brick Playhouse, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Play's End was originally titled *Foreplay*. It may stand alone or play together with *Ticking* and *You're Next* as the third part of *Gunplay*.

(Late afternoon. The Doe family kitchen. The sound of a car pulling into a driveway. JOHNNY, 10, sits at the table and plays with a pair of toy soldiers. The soldiers battle, with Johnny making occasional sound effects. One soldier shoots the other. The wounded soldier falls. Beat.)

JOHN: Johnny, Jay – I'm home!

(Enter JOHN, on the early side of middle age, carrying a small suitcase and wearing an overcoat, from the kitchen.)

Hey sport. Shooting the enemy?

(John points at the toy soldier. Beat. John waves his suitcase at Johnny.)

See how light my suitcase is? Feel it. Go ahead.

(Johnny picks up the suitcase.)

See how light it is?

(Johnny tentatively waggles it.)

Go ahead. You can shake it.

(Johnny gives it a good shake.)

Empty. Absolutely empty. Sold the whole stock. You know why, Johnny? You know why? People are feeling unprotected. That is very good news for me and my suitcase.

(John takes a newspaper from inside his coat, takes off the coat and sits in a chair. He reads the newspaper.)

What did you learn in school today?

JOHNNY: *(Reciting:)* Oedipal rhymes with edible. George Washington is the father of our country. She sells sawed-offs by the seashore. Dinosaurs are extinct. Look both ways before crossing. Two plus two equals four. The meek shall inherit the earth. April showers bring May flowers. Mayflowers bring

pilgrims. The Yankees are even money against the Twins in Vegas. The times, they are a changin'. These are the ten things I learned in school today. By Johnny Doe.

JOHN: Did you say the meek shall inherit the earth?

JOHNNY: Uh-huh.

JOHN: Is that any way to answer Daddy?

JOHNNY: *Yes, Daddy.* We learned the meek shall inherit the earth.

JOHN: I'm glad they're teaching values in school again.

JOHNNY: *(Beat.)* Was Billy Fireman meek?

JOHN: Who?

JOHNNY: That's what Mr. Wright said.

JOHN: Your teacher.

JOHNNY: Uh-huh.

JOHN: Johnny!

JOHNNY: *Yes, Daddy.*

JOHN: Why did Mr. Wright say Billy Fireman was meek?

JOHNNY: 'Cause he inherited the earth. Mr. Wright says that when you die, you inherit the earth. That's what inheriting the earth means.

JOHN: Billy Fireman died? *(Beat.)* Oh, that was the boy who had the accident.

JOHNNY: *(Shaking his head:)* He didn't *have* the accident. Rachel Parker *had* the accident. Billy Fireman *was* the accident.

JOHN: I see. Yes, that was very sad. *(Beat. Face still buried in the newspaper:)* Does thinking about Billy Fireman make you sad, Johnny? You look sad.

JOHNNY: Something happened today.

JOHN: Something sad?

JOHNNY: I think so.

JOHN: Well, what was it?

JOHNNY: I don't remember.

JOHN: You should have written it down. *(Beat.)* Maybe what's bothering you is what happened to Billy Fireman.

(Lowers his newspaper.)

I'm lowering my newspaper.

(Puts it on the floor.)

See. You have my undivided attention.

JOHNNY: Why?

JOHN: So we can have a talk. I want you to tell me what happened to Billy Fireman.

JOHNNY: Why?

JOHN: You'll feel better.

JOHNNY: But that was last week. The thing I can't remember was today.

JOHN: And it bothers you that you can't remember. *(Beat.)* Sometimes it's better not to remember, if a thing's bad enough.

JOHNNY: I want to remember.

JOHN: I see. *(Beat.)* Sometimes, if you get your mind off it, the thing you're trying to remember will come back when you least expect it.

JOHNNY: Really?

JOHN: (*Nodding:*) So let's talk about Billy instead.

JOHNNY: (*Beat.*) It was on the playground. Billy wanted to copy Rachel Parker's homework.

JOHN: And you were with him?

JOHNNY: (*Shaking his head:*) I didn't even like him. I was playing on the merry-go-round.

JOHN: Aren't you getting a little old for that?

JOHNNY: I like to get it going real fast and make the other kids puke.

JOHN: Oh. (*Beat.*) So you push?

(Johnny nods.)

So you were pushing the merry-go-round, which is close by?

JOHNNY: Yes. Is "yeah" OK?

JOHN: You'd like to say "yeah" instead of "yes"?

JOHNNY: If that's OK.

JOHN: Sometimes or all the time?

JOHNNY: Just sometimes. I could say "yes" the other times.

JOHN: (*Trying to be chummy:*) Yeah. I think you could do that. (*Beat.*) So you were pushing the merry-go-round...you didn't ride on the merry-go-round...

JOHNNY: (*Trying it out:*) Nah?

JOHN: Like "yeah." The opposite of "yeah." Good for you. So you didn't ride?

JOHNNY: Nah.

JOHN: And then...

JOHNNY: I heard a shot.

JOHN: She shot him.

(Johnny nods.)

And that's it?

(Johnny nods again.)

JOHNNY: Not counting the ambulances and stuff.

JOHN: Do you remember the thing you forgot yet?

(Johnny shakes his head.)

Doesn't surprise me at all. It takes more than talking about something else for 10 seconds to get your mind off what you're trying to remember. How could you get your mind off it? You barely told me what happened to Billy. One second, he's alive. The next, he's dead.

JOHNNY: That's what happened.

JOHN: Do they teach you in school about telling an anecdote?

JOHNNY: What's an anecdote?

JOHN: A story.

JOHNNY: They tell us stories.

JOHN: What stories do they tell?

JOHNNY: There was one about loaves and fishes.

JOHN: Bible stories. Good. Glad to hear it. Do you like those stories?

JOHNNY: Yeah. I guess.

JOHN: And do you know why you like them?

(Johnny shrugs.)

Because they're good stories. With a beginning, a middle, and an end.

JOHNNY: (*Beat.*) In the beginning, Billy wanted Rachel's homework. In the middle, she shot him. In the end, he died.

JOHN: That's fine, son, but a good story needs to be longer than that.

JOHNNY: Why? I thought it just has to have a beginning, a middle and an end.

JOHN: (*Not so nice.*) Do you want to remember this thing or not?

(Johnny looks ready to cry.)

I'm sorry, Johnny. Sorry. You're right. It does just have to have a beginning, a middle and an end. But the thing is, you can't get to the middle right after you tell the beginning.

JOHNNY: I don't understand.

JOHN: OK. In the beginning of your story, you want to tell us who's in it.

JOHNNY: Billy and Rachel.

JOHN: Now what else about Billy?

JOHNNY: He didn't do his homework. (*Catching on.*) And he had to turn it in right after recess!

JOHN: Good! That's the idea!

JOHNNY: And Mr. Wright doesn't like Billy very much!

JOHN: Didn't. Didn't like.

JOHNNY: And Mr. Wright didn't like Billy very much.

JOHN: So if Billy didn't turn his homework in, Mr. Wright might want to shoot Billy himself! (*An uncomfortable pause.*) Now what about Rachel?

JOHNNY: She's got boobs.

JOHN: Johnny!

JOHNNY: She let Billy feel them. So Billy thought if she let him feel her boobs, she'd let him copy her homework.

JOHN: I stand corrected. That's good storytelling. Good detail. What else about Rachel?

JOHNNY: She's eleven. She stayed back a year. And she had a gun – (*Scolding himself:*) duh – she had a gun in her bookbag.

JOHN: Good. You're adding color to the story. We've arrived at the middle.

JOHNNY: He went up to her.

JOHN: And he said...

JOHNNY: Can I copy your homework?

JOHN: I feel like I know these children. Do I know these children?

JOHNNY: (*Shaking his head:*) So Billy asks –

JOHN: And she says no?

JOHNNY: Daddy! Let me tell it!

JOHN: Sorry.

JOHNNY: He says, "Can I copy your homework?" And she says, "No."

JOHN: No? Just like that?

JOHNNY: Oh – first she says, "What will you give me for it?"

JOHN: For the homework.

JOHNNY: Yeah. So he says, "How's about my rabbit's foot?"

JOHN: She tells him no?

JOHNNY: He gave her the rabbit's foot last week so he could feel her boobs.

JOHN: He tried to give her something that was already hers?

(Johnny nods.)

The kid's a con artist. He had it coming. So then what does he try?

JOHNNY: He'll do her homework for a week. Only everybody knows he never does *his* homework.

JOHN: So she says no?

(Johnny nods agreement.)

See the way this story is building?

JOHNNY: What's building?

JOHN: Getting more interesting; the last part is the best part.

(Johnny nods.)

When does she take out the gun?

JOHNNY: I'm getting to that part.

JOHN: Sorry. You've got me on the edge of my seat. (*Leaning forward:*) See. You're telling such a good story I'm on the edge of my seat.

JOHNNY: We're still in the middle.

JOHN: Don't leave me hanging, Johnny.

JOHNNY: So recess is just about over. The little kids are lining up already.

JOHN: Did you make any of them puke?

JOHNNY: Just one. But he puked all over his pants. Anyway, the little kids are lining up to go in.

JOHN: Billy doesn't have much time to get the homework.

JOHNNY: Daddy, are you gonna' let me tell this?

JOHN: Sorry. Keep going.

JOHNNY: Billy says, "If you give me your homework, you can feel my willy." I'm saying "willy," but that's not the word Billy used.

JOHN: I appreciate your sensitivity.

JOHNNY: My what?

JOHN: Your not saying the word Billy used in front of me.

(Johnny nods – a glimmer of understanding.)

So then she shot him?

JOHNNY: Daddy!

(John makes a "zipped lips" sign.)

Then the whistle blows for the older kids to come in from recess. And Rachel says, "I don't do things like that." But Billy says she does. So Rachel takes out the gun.

JOHN: Her father's?

JOHNNY: Uh-huh.

(Sharp look from John.)

Yes.

JOHN: I do know *Sam* Parker. Has quite a collection, numerically speaking. Good man.

JOHNNY: (*With some distaste:*) It was a Saturday night special.

JOHN: I don't like your tone.

JOHNNY: But you always say Saturday night specials are for poor people.

JOHN: I said *I* don't sell them to my customers. For business reasons. (*Beat.*) When I sell a rifle, my customer needs to accessorize.

JOHNNY: Accessawhat?

JOHN: Accessorize. It means the customer can't just buy the rifle. He needs accessories: a scope, perhaps—extra money for your father. Maybe a silencer. Some collectors even want a bayonet—an authentic one is very expensive. I also think rifles are nicer looking than some of those handguns or sawed-off shotguns, but that's not why I do it.

JOHNNY: I'm sorry for the tone of voice I used.

JOHN: Come give me a hug.

(Johnny gets up and hugs his father, maybe sits on his lap.)

JOHNNY: I still can't remember.

JOHN: It'll come to you. So are we through with the middle now?

JOHNNY: I guess.

JOHN: That just leaves the end.

JOHNNY: She pulled out the Saturday night special.

JOHN: Yes?

JOHNNY: She says "Take it back, or I'll shoot you." He says go ahead. He doesn't think it's loaded. So she fires. She says "bang." 'Cause she doesn't know it's loaded either. So she

thinks it's gonna' make a "click" sound. That's why she says "bang." 'Cause if she doesn't say "bang," then all there'd be was a click.

JOHN: Was she surprised?

JOHNNY: She wet her pants. That was gross. And she drops the gun right in the pee. *(Beat.)* Is the story over now?

JOHN: *(Nods.)* You did a good job.

JOHNNY: Do I remember the thing I forgot now?

JOHN: Do you?

(Johnny shakes his head.)

Did it happen at school today?

(Johnny shakes his head again.)

After school?

JOHNNY: *(Thinking:)* Maybe. *(Beat. He tries to remember:)* School ended...I came home.

JOHN: How did you get home?

JOHNNY: Mommy picked me up.

JOHN: Maybe you forgot Mommy picked you up.

JOHNNY: *(Thinking:)* No. I came home —

JOHN: Where's Mommy now?

JOHNNY: Back at work?

JOHN: There you go!

JOHNNY: That's not it. I came home...I came home...

JOHN: A snack. Did you have a snack?

JOHNNY: I had a snack.

JOHN: Cookies and milk?

JOHNNY: Oreos. Double-stuff with chocolate milk. But that's not it.

JOHN: Did it happen after the snack?

JOHNNY: I think so.

JOHN: But before I came home. (*Johnny nods, still trying to remember.*) After the snack but before I came home.

JOHNNY: I can't remember.

JOHN: Don't worry. It'll come to you.

(Beat. Johnny furrows his brow, holds his breath trying to remember.)

Holding your breath won't help.

(Johnny still holds his breath.)

Stop it. You'll turn blue.

(Johnny looks at his hands, still holding his breath.)

Your face. Your face will turn blue.

(John smacks Johnny's back. Johnny lets out his breath.)

There. That's better. I have an idea. How would you like to help me clean and load my rifle?

JOHNNY: (*A spark of a connection:*) Rifle...

JOHN: No more trying to remember.

JOHNNY: (*Beat.*) Remember what?

JOHN: That's the spirit.

(He gets up and pulls a rifle from some hiding place in the kitchen – or it could be discreetly leaning against the wall.)

Let's have a good clean and load. We're all men here. I used to love having a good clean and load with your Pop-Pop. Go get my cleaning kit.

(Johnny picks up a gun cleaning kit from the floor next to John's chair.)

JOHNNY: It's right here.

JOHN: Always keep your cleaning kit close, Pop-Pop used to say. Yep, nothing like a good clean and load with Pop-Pop.

JOHNNY: Grandpa?

JOHN: Pop-Pop. Grandpa was Mommy's daddy.

JOHNNY: I get them mixed up.

JOHN: Pop-Pop died in the hunting accident.

JOHNNY: When I was little.

JOHN: That's the one.

JOHNNY: Twenty-two.

JOHN: Normally one of my favorite guns. But Pop-Pop was old.

(They open the cleaning kit and clean the gun together.)

JOHNNY: How old?

JOHN: I don't remember exactly. But he was very old. And he was going strong right up until the accident.

JOHNNY: *(This triggers something:)* Accident...

JOHN: You don't think Mommy shot him on purpose?

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