

# 'A TERRIBLE LIE'

A new play by Jim Reyland

1102 17th Ave South  
Nashville Tennessee 37212

Copyright 2007

All rights reserved

1-800-726-3612

Equal the World (5)

[www.reylandwords.com](http://www.reylandwords.com)

## A BRIEF SYNOPSIS

John took what didn't belong to him and there was a terrible lie inside.

## DIRECTORS NOTE

Consider producing a short film using old movie, stock or even original footage to create a visual of Charlie's story. Then use the film, projected through the actors onto a large screen when Charlie's story is being read aloud.

## THE CAST

### WALKER MAXWELL (AKA) JOHN BRIDGES:

A forty, semi-educated hack fiction writer who has trouble with the truth, the freedom of living with a pseudonym compels him to do things an actual human being wouldn't be comfortable with. He loves his wife but she's not first.

### CHARLIE CLARK:

An eighty-seven year old former security guard who could hang with Heidi or Hemingway, his writing is lovely and he is completely unaware. The burden of his life and his total and complete loss of support has brought him full circle. He'd finish on a high note and bring us together if he could.

### EMILY BRIDGES:

A mid thirties nurse who loves her husband and wants all the things that most wives want; she is a picture of Florence Nightingale with a broken wing and searches her life for answers and help to change those she loves.

### AGENT SID TRUMPER:

Is a fifties surprise. A man who has responsibilities to succeed but makes a choice that is right and true. His big city background makes him a bit hard but this life experience provides a soft landing.

### MARGARET AND FRANCINE SIMON:

The eighties something twins who look nothing alike; while they chide each other unmercifully, they are each other's greatest friend and partner in ridicule. The Simon Twins' carry a concealed weapon between their teeth; a razor blade shaped as a tongue. In a story full of lies, they are the brutal truth.

### GRACE:

Grace is kind at heart but struggling with Alzheimer's.

### DAD & WALKER MAXWELL

Charlie doubles as dad. Walker Maxwell on the phone could be pre-recorded.

**ACT ONE****SCENE ONE:**

A high-rise apartment in downtown Nashville, Tennessee...

**AT RISING:**

A couch is center with its back pointed downstage. Visible, a single female leg bounces over the right side of the couch and a single male leg bounces over the left.

**EMILY**

Rub some cream on it.

**JOHN**

I don't care what they say you can't touch it.

**EMILY**

When daddy had this; he couldn't walk for a week.

**JOHN**

Plenty of people go through it; it's not a big deal.

**EMILY**

Does it itch?

**JOHN**

This whole thing is a pain in my ass!

**EMILY**

Don't scratch it; you'll end up in the hospital.

**JOHN**

It's time somebody took care of me. I can get loud too!

**EMILY**

I'm not raising my voice.

**JOHN**

Plenty before me have had this problem and no one said a word, as far as I know.

**EMILY**

I'm worried about you. We all need help once in a while.

**JOHN**

Absolutely not, I'll work it out.

**EMILY**

Are you eating your vegetables? Do you remember Maureen Brady? She didn't eat her vegetables and now she can't.

**JOHN**

I'm falling apart.

**EMILY**

I love you.

**JOHN**

Liar!

**JOHN, wearing bad plaid pants, stands up and reveals he's having a cell phone conversation.**

You tell those over-stuffed book bastards that Walker Maxwell is a star! When Walker Maxwell is ready he'll deliver his new book, not before! You tell them that Sid!

**EMILY stands up and reveals she's having a cell phone conversation too.**

**EMILY**

I'm sorry about your psoriasis. Take your medicine and please don't scratch it.

**JOHN**

I can pick you up at the airport.

**EMILY**

Bye.

**JOHN**

Bye.

**JOHN and EMILY hang up simultaneously.**

How's your mom?

**EMILY**

Uncomfortable, how's Sid?

**JOHN**

Good, for an agent that's great for anyone else. Sid says my publisher thinks Walker Maxwell was a one hit wonder. Sid says he can't believe their balls; that's what Sid said.

**EMILY**

John, do you think the world is ready for another book about tattooed lust and trailer park love?

**JOHN**

Sid says thy want a better best seller in three months or they foreclose on our Air Stream. I don't consider that good, considering we're broke.

**EMILY**

Sid talks too much.

**JOHN**

I said "Sid we need more time" he said, "Art doesn't always imitate commerce, like with Wayne Newton."

**EMILY**

Is that all Sid said?

**JOHN**

No.

(Pleading)

I don't know if I can do it again.

**EMILY**

If you're talking about writing another doublewide epic that requires a shower when finished its fine with me.

**JOHN**

My God I'm sleeping with the enemy.

**EMILY**

Don't you want the truth?

**JOHN**

I write fiction Emily, the truth is over-rated. Besides when I'm consumed with crisis you're supposed to spout insincere platitudes about my inexhaustible talent. You're supposed to rub me while I wallow in self-pity.

**EMILY**

Since that book it's been like living with Elvis, without the jump suit.

**JOHN**

Wasn't it amazing; it flowed like a river of sleaze into an ocean of royalties? It grew from the middle, like your Uncle Roy.

**EMILY**

I should have poisoned the damn thing the day it raised its ugly head!

**JOHN**

But we're iconic heroes!

**EMILY**

To a legion of mobile park trailer wives, we can cut back on food, call your dad.

**JOHN**

What I know about my father and his fish business smells.  
(Thoughtful)

But the pressure to repeat "The Bootlegger's Stepson," numbers one, two & three on the New York Times list that might smell worse.

**EMILY**

We have a saying at the nursing home," Take your medicine or die."

**JOHN**

But Emily, there's more to worry about here than just me.

**EMILY**

How sweet.

**JOHN**

What about Walker? Walker Maxwell is an artist.

**EMILY**

He's a pseudonym.

**JOHN**

He has insecurities, questions. Why is he here?

**EMILY**

He's not here.

**JOHN**

Is Walker a genius or a no talent "cotton candy" hack? When you bite into Walker Maxwell is anything really there?

**EMILY**

Are you asking me?

**JOHN**

He's a wreck too; his heart and mind are practically void.

**EMILY**

So is his vocabulary but that's never stopped him.

**JOHN**

Pardon me but without that "book", we're all back in the trailer park and your mother has bigger problems than her psoriasis.

**EMILY**

My mother is old and sick and you agreed to help her.

**JOHN**

Sure, and how much can a little medicine cost?

**EMILY**

That's not the point.

**JOHN**

And what is the point of spending five thousand dollars a month on an eighty year woman who can't remember nineteen eighty?

**EMILY**

Because she's my mother, asshole!

**JOHN**

OK. But she'll have to stay in the state facility, we can't afford your place; she doesn't get to live better than we do.

**EMILY**

OK.

**JOHN**

OK? That's it, OK? No argument?

**EMILY**

You know best dear.

**JOHN**

Yes I do. Emily? You're driving through a parking lot in a golf cart and in the distance is a large caterpillar inching its way in front of you. Does it live or die?

**EMILY**

If you could destroy a defenseless caterpillar, you could do anything.

**JOHN**

What's for dinner?

**EMILY**

Fish; shall I set the table for two, or three?

**JOHN**

Very funny, but what you don't understand is that I need Walker. I need the Gun and Knife shows, NASCAR, women asking me to sign their breasts. I need that.

**EMILY**

Walker creeps me out. Like when he went to New York and wandered the subway in a loincloth with a tambourine?

**JOHN**

He was searching for Karma!

**EMILY**

He lost a loincloth and a perfectly good tambourine. And then he waited in line at his own book signing?

**JOHN**

Walker is a man of the people.

**EMILY**

And what about the time he ripped the cover from "Of Mice and Men" renamed it "Lenny and the Rat" by Walker Maxwell and sent it to his publisher?

**JOHN**

Big deal, it got rejected! The literary intern's assistant said it lacked dramatic irony and one of the characters was stupid!

**EMILY**

It's getting to be Jerry Springer time and I refuse to do that show.

**JOHN**

OK, you win. I don't care what you think.

**EMILY**

You should quit while you're ahead; or is that two heads?

(Pause)

Your dad's getting older; he could use your help.

**JOHN**

I can't go back to the fish; I've traded my grouper for groupies!

**EMILY**

What about the smell being worse?

**JOHN**

I'll hold my nose.

**EMILY snaps around to no one.**

**EMILY**

What do you think Walker?

**JOHN**

Don't tell her Walker!

(Pause)

Walker wants to write a second book, maybe a made-for-TV movie. Walker would like to meet Angela Lansbury and so would I.

**EMILY**

(Upset)

Is Walker brilliant or does Walker suck? What do you think about Walker Emily? Well Emily? How about it? Oh please tell me I'm good! Emily, Emily, Emily! You're driving me crazy!

(Calm)

I would honestly leave this room right now while Walker has unsafe sex with his muse if it'll buy me a moment of peace.

**JOHN**

How forward thinking of you...

**EMILY**

I will gladly give John Michael Bridges my time and my heart wherever and whenever he asks. But I will no longer share my life with Walker Maxwell. It's too confusing.

**EMILY exits. JOHN follows her in and out.**

**JOHN**

Emily, honey, we'll get you a pseudonym too. We can double date!

**EMILY re-enters.**

**EMILY**

You're neurotic; I'm going to help my friends.

**JOHN**

Walker's neurotic, I'm eccentric. Besides, soon all your friends will be dead and you'll be unemployed.

**EMILY**

There's plenty more where they came from. Is it your ambition to become like, king of the assholes?

**JOHN**

Please, if Walker and I can shovel four hundred pages of crap between two silk covers one more time it'll be good for my health, believe me. And you, you won't have to slave ten hours a day in that retirement home with that ridiculous slogan?

**EMILY**

"You can't take it with you so why not leave it with us?"

**JOHN**

Your mom can leave that discount rest home she's in and move to your community by Four Seasons. One more lie perpetrated on the American people and she's free.

**JOHN moves in close.**

What do you say? I can't do it without you.

**EMILY**

All right, I'll just lay here with my eyes closed.

**JOHN**

I'm close Em; I just need a little bit more.

**EMILY**

Well I hope you see the caterpillar before it's too late.

(Pause)

We've got a new guest at our place, Mr. Clark. Why don't you come down and join us for lunch? I'm sure he'd enjoy your company.

**JOHN**

Sorry. Emily, Sid also said there wouldn't be any more advances till there's a new book.

**EMILY exits. JOHN paces and types frantically.**

An African Safari, an outbreak of dysentery. No! Snow-covered mountains, Colorado, a drifter, he's new in town, working as a tour guide, an affable fellow named, Brian. And while affable Brian takes the tourist for a walk, his partner Sheri is working her fingers through their personal effects back at the chalet. She's a real looker, thirty with a slender approach, a noticeable limp and a strange odor! That sucks!

**JOHN pounds the typewriter and throws his papers then he dials his cell.**

**JOHN**

Jumbo, it's me, Bridges. What's the over under on Tennessee/Carolina? Can you give me a hundred? I'll get it buddy, don't worry about me, right? I want Chicago at home with the points too. I just started writing a new book. Yeah, why should you care? That's not nice Jumbo. That will not be necessary. How long have we been working together? I'm good for it trust me.

**JOHN sits with his head in hands.**

**LIGHTS**

**ACT ONE****SCENE TWO:**

A COMFORTABLE WELL-APPOINTED ROOM LATER THAT MORNING, Grace is sitting near a dim lamp as Emily enters.

**EMILY**

Why are you sitting in the dark? Did they bring you down or did you escape? Yesterday it was hot, today it's freezing. I wish these spring mornings would make up their minds. Are you cold? Here at the Four Seasons we want everything to be just right.

**EMILY walks behind GRACE.**

I have a blanket if you'd like.

**EMILY show's the blanket.**

It was a birthday present when I was a girl. See, it's cross-stitched with six doves, one for each year in yellow and white all in a beautiful circle. Birds that fly and fly but never arrive. In the middle of the circle is a single lavender dove with my initials EM. Isn't it the most wonderful thing?

**EMILY demonstrates and puts the blanket on GRACE.**

I'd run through the house, "The birds, the birds are flying!" I'd try and catch them, holding on as tight as my six-year-old fingers could manage. I didn't want them to go. I never wanted to be without them even for a moment. I felt safe when they were there. That's what love is like you said.

**EMILY kisses her mother.**

Mom, my birds are still here. I pray they won't go but I know they will.

(Pause)

I have good news; John said you could stay here with me as long as you like, no matter how much it costs, isn't that great? How's your leg?

**GRACE**

He doesn't know I'm here, does he?

**EMILY**

I was beginning to think you weren't here myself.

**GRACE**

Nobody ever comes to see me.

**EMILY**

That's not true, you don't remember sometimes. Besides he's very busy; Walker's writing a new book.

**GRACE**

I don't care about him if he doesn't come to see me.

**CHARLIE enters with a slight limp carrying notebooks and pencils.**

**EMILY**

Charlie, you're looking sharp in your blue blazer and cuffs, how are you feeling today?

**CHARLIE**

Good, for an old man.

**CHARLIE gives EMILY candy.**

**EMILY**

Thanks for the candy.

**CHARLIE**

It's a good day. I'll write my story today if it appears to me. You don't happen to it, it happens to you, it's like love.

**CHARLIE turns and stares at GRACE.**

Hello there sweet corn.

**GRACE just stares back as EMILY jumps in.**

**EMILY**

Charlie this is Grace. She missed your first day with us she wasn't feeling well yesterday. Grace was a schoolteacher and plays a mean hand of gin rummy.

**CHARLIE**

Then today will be my first day meeting a former schoolteacher and a darn good gin rummy player. Do you prefer suits or straights?

**GRACE stares. EMILY jumps in.**

**EMILY**

I'm sorry she gets a little tired.

**CHARLIE**

Tired, that's right, a five-letter word for fatigue.

**EMILY**

Charlie likes crossword puzzles.

**CHARLIE**

Twenty-seven down in the New York Times today; Grace, would you like to join me at my table in the cafeteria this noon?

**EMILY**

Grace, Charlie was a security guard.

**CHARLIE**

Retired from the old Falstaff brewery in South St. Louis?

**EMILY**

I'm sure Grace has never been to a real brewery.

**CHARLIE**

Forty-six years and I never drank a drop! I thought about it once in forty-one when the war started and then again on January eighteenth, nineteen forty-nine, the day I lost my dear wife Mary and our only child in childbirth, two good days to start drinking if you were so inclined.

**EMILY**

I'm sorry.

**CHARLIE**

The hurt, it runs shallow and deep. And you find out how quiet the world really is and how important friends are, new friends.

**GRACE**

I'm Grace.

**CHARLIE**

Charlie. I know we've just met Grace but I would like to propose.

(Pause)

That neither of us should break our new found trust by engaging in anything as irresponsible or ill advised as say, dying. That we should meet here each morning to share coffee and our concerns and to laugh and leave our troubles at the door for another twenty years. What do you think?

**GRACE**

I'm Grace.

**GRACE** shakes her head yes.

There's a man who thinks I'm not all here. But that's not my secret.

**CHARLIE**

I have a secret too; would you like to trade?

**ANNOUNCEMENT**

(Overhead)

"May I have your attention please; a certain husband is in the lobby and on his way up to the adult day care. Be on the look out for a certain husband that is all."

**EMILY** in a hurry turns and pushes  
**GRACE'S** chair toward the door.

**EMILY**

Grace, Mrs. Abernathy called and wants you to come up and watch "Jeopardy" with her.

**GRACE**

But I want to stay here with this interesting man.

**EMILY**

They're having a "Celebrity Marathon" and Columbo needs your help.

**CHARLIE**

(To Grace)

When will I see you?

**GRACE**

(To Charlie)

I don't know who you are.

**CHARLIE**

Then it will be our first time all over again.

**EMILY** wheels **GRACE** off. The Simon  
twins enter with their walkers.  
**GRACE** gives **EMILY** the blanket.

**GRACE**

It's hot in here.

**FRANCINE**

I don't care what they say; there is no damn "Z" in Bingo.

**MARGARET**

The fix was in - somebody shaved the cat.

**FRANCINE**

Come on, I'll race you over to that dead guy for twenty?

**The Simon twins race to CHARLIE.**

**MARGARET**

My artificial hip hurts like hell!

**FRANCINE**

That's because they attached it to your ass.

**MARGARET**

You can really fly when you're twenty percent plastic.

**FRANCINE**

I don't want to scare you but I think you dropped something.

**The twins sit next to CHARLIE.**

**MARGARET**

I need a drink.

**FRANCINE**

Maybe some cool formaldehyde.

**CHARLIE**

Hello there sweet potato.

**MARGARET**

I think he's sweet on you Francine?

**FRANCINE**

Yeah, well he'll need an implant then. Sitting there with his barn door open, choking his chicken, I bet he's looking for a Simon sandwich; the deli is closed, Marquis de Sade.

**CHARLIE**

I'm Charlie.

**FRANCINE**

I'm Francine, nice to meet you.

**CHARLIE**

You look nice today Francine.

**FRANCINE**

Yeah, I've been in this damn rest home for six months and I'm still tired. That's my sister Margaret; say hello Margaret.

**MARGARET**

Hello.

**FRANCINE**

Margaret has a forty point IQ and a prosthetic who ha.

**MARGARET**

How are you?

**CHARLIE**

I've never seen two ladies with so much spirit, such energy considering they're advanced...

**FRANCINE**

(FRANCINE interrupts)

Easy there Moses!

**CHARLIE**

Considering their advanced experience...

**EMILY enters.**

**EMILY**

Are you making new friends Charlie?

**CHARLIE**

Yes, would you ladies like to join me at my table in the cafeteria this noon?

**EMILY**

That's going to be a crowded table.

**CHARLIE**

Friends are like reservations; you just have to make them.

**MARGARET**

I'll be your friend.

**FRANCINE**

Me too old man, if you buy me something to eat.

**CHARLIE picks up his notebooks.**

**CHARLIE**

When I was a guard, my watch was solitary. I passed the time with my stories; they were my friends.

**EMILY**

Charlie, why don't you read us some of your stories? You'd like that wouldn't you girls?

**CHARLIE**

(Embarrassed)

Well, you all must have better things to do.

**FRANCINE**

And what the hell would that be?

**MARGARET**

I'd like to you hear a story old man.

**CHARLIE opens his notebook and puts on his glasses, trying to find his place.**

**CHARLIE**

All right...

(Explaining)

It's the story of a boy names Darius, who was born and grew up in a flat, mid-western square mile. With his widowed mother Janet, his older brother Pete. His father, drunk and dead left the family with no money and less hope. Young Darius feared he might become his father; it was his fear but not his fate.

**EMILY**

Does your story have a title?

(CHARLIE is silent)

Well, we'll call it "The Story of Darius."

**CHARLIE finds his place. As CHARLIE reads JOHN enters.**

**CHARLIE**

"I want my balls!" Five-year old Darius echoed from the kitchen, his arms waving madly, his face as red as a third degree burn. "I want my balls!" Again into the darkness, the walls around him covered with discarded food by now unrecognizable, at no time appetizing. Mephistopheles rattled the narrow hall; scaring the mice, "I want my balls now!"

**EMILY quietly crosses to JOHN.**

**EMILY**

(Whisper)

What are you doing here? I thought you were sorry?

**JOHN**

Remember that hundred-dollar bill I gave you and told you not to give to me no matter what I said?

**EMILY**

Yes.

**JOHN**

I need it.

**EMILY**

(Hard whisper)

I was going to use that for bills.

**JOHN**

This is more important than bills.

**EMILY**

And what would that be?

**JOHN**

Doesn't somebody I know have a birthday coming up?

**EMILY**

It's in my purse.

**EMILY retrieves the bill.**

That's Charlie, isn't he cute?

**JOHN**

Yeah he's cute.

**CHARLIE continues reading. JOHN waits, interested in CHARLIE.**

**CHARLIE**

The broken clock last registered nine fifteen, April twenty first, 1934. "I mean it Mother! I want my balls!" Undaunted, his barely thirty parent, blonde, alone, beautiful; sitting upright with a shapely kindness few cotton dresses have ever experienced; listening to her serial on the Atwater Kent. "I want my balls" Darius cried.

**FRANCINE**

Sounds like the little shit's got plenty of balls already!  
I like that kid!

**MARGARET**

Shhhhh! He's getting to the good part. Go ahead honey.

**CHARLIE**

"You hurt me acting like this?" His mother responded.  
"Your brother Pete is such a good boy." Silence was his  
return volley. "I want my balls," said Darius, this time  
with an air of defeat, a hint of ruin. "I've picked up your  
balls a dozen times son. I'm not coming in there anymore!  
Do you hear me? I want my balls," replied Darius.

**CHARLIE closes the notebook.**

I think that's all for now...

**MARGARET**

Don't leave us hanging!

**FRANCINE**

Ball, balls, balls! It sounds like Saturday night at the  
NCO club!

**CHARLIE**

I'll read more tomorrow.

**FRANCINE**

Tell us what happens now or get yourself a food taster.

**MARGARET**

Francine!

**CHARLIE**

Tomorrow I'll read more.

**FRANCINE**

What kind of crap is that? Is that foreign crap?

**MARGARET gives her a look.**

What?

**CHARLIE**

I'm from Illinois.

**EMILY steps up with JOHN.**

**EMILY**

Excuse me everyone; I'd like you all to meet John.

**The group says "Hello John"**

**EMILY**

John's a writer too Charlie. He struggles with writer things like motivation, inspiration, and salutations.

**FRANCINE**

You mean John doesn't know how to end a letter?

**JOHN steps forward.**

**JOHN**

Yes I do, sincerely I do. How are you ladies? Charlie.

**EMILY**

What did you think about Charlie's story John? Wasn't it great?

**JOHN**

I liked it. And while I found Darius to be a bit one-dimensional; I loved the spherical imagery. Is there more?

**CHARLIE**

Yes.

**JOHN**

They must grow writers and wheat in Illinois?

**CHARLIE**

I was born there.

**JOHN**

And your prose, was it inspired there?

**CHARLIE**

I learned from my brother.

**JOHN**

He was a teacher?

**CHARLIE**

He taught me.

**JOHN**

Taught you how to tell the truth?

**CHARLIE**

(Nervous)

Emily dear, do you think they'll be serving our lunch soon?

**JOHN**

That's the mark of an effective piece.

**CHARLIE**

I have several guests for lunch today.

**JOHN**

It's hard to write true, unless of course it is.

**CHARLIE**

It would be rude to keep them waiting.

**EMILY**

Girls, while the boys talk shop why don't we go and check on lunch?

**MARGARET**

I want to stay here with this interesting man.

**FRANCINE**

Come on, we'll undress the bus boys with our bifocals.

**EMILY exits, the SIMON twins stop and rest by the elevator.**

**EMILY**

That's the spirit.

**JOHN**

Bye ladies. So how long have you been here Charlie?

**CHARLIE**

Since yesterday...

**OHN**

It's a nice place. My wife's mother's in a nursing home too.

**CHARLIE**

What about your mother?

**JOHN**

She's dead. My brother is a shoe salesman and my sister's a Nun; they're both in the soul business. My father lives up north; we don't talk. It's nobody's fault. I don't want to talk about it. What were we talking about?

**CHARLIE**

You put your mother-in-law in a rest home.

**JOHN**

Yeah, but we couldn't afford a nice place like this.

**A nurse brings GRACE into the room,  
sees JOHN, turns and exits.**

She's in one of those state-run joints with the three-legged walkers. You're lucky; this place is great and the view isn't bad if you like that sort of thing.

**CHARLIE**

(More comfortable)

I don't have family, just good insurance. I guess I'll stay here until I die or until Vanderbilt wins a National Championship, whichever comes first.

**JOHN**

Hey, I know a little bit about fiction. Perhaps you've heard of a friend of mine, Walker Maxwell? He's a writer.

**CHARLIE**

Is everyone a writer?

**JOHN**

Yes or a liar.

**CHARLIE**

Which one is he?

**JOHN**

He's both. He wrote a little book called "The Bootlegger's Stepson."

**CHARLIE**

That was number one, two and three on the New York Times best-seller list; wasn't that a misprint?

**JOHN**

It was pretty popular. Did you know women like to have their breasts signed? It happens, Walker told me.

**CHARLIE**

I'd like to meet your friend.

**JOHN**

He's liable to show up when you least expect it.

**CHARLIE**

That's fine, I like surprises.

**JOHN**

Then I've got a surprise for you Charlie; I'm Walker Maxwell!

**CHARLIE**

You talk about him like he someone else.

**JOHN**

He is and he isn't. Walker is a pseudonym. You see John Bridges, that's me, I write the story and when it's published, Walker Maxwell's name goes on the cover.

**CHARLIE**

What's wrong with your name?

**JOHN**

Nothing and I'd like to keep it that way. When I'm Walker Maxwell I can do things that may be uncomfortable for an actual human being.

**CHARLIE**

I see.

**JOHN**

Pseudonyms are handy; we'll have to get you one. Say Charlie, do you mind if I borrow one of your notebooks?

**CHARLIE**

Borrow?

**JOHN**

You know, to show them to some friends of mine, in the biz?

**CHARLIE**

They're not finished.

**CHARLIE holds his notebooks to his chest.**

**JOHN**

Finished, what's that mean? Am I right? A pleasure meeting you, I'll stop by next week for a visit.

(Under his breath)

Don't die on me now.

**JOHN** crosses to the elevator and pushes the button repeatedly.  
**MARGARET** and **FRANCINE** wake up.

**MARGARET**

I like your pants.

**JOHN**

Thank you.

**MARGARET**

You know what they say, "One man's plaid is another man's nightmare!"

**JOHN**

Hello.

**MARGARET**

Did you know my sister and I won the Congressional Medal of Honor; we pulled a fry cook from a grease fire during the big one.

**FRANCINE**

Yeah, and while we're rolling around on the ground covered in pig lard and cook vomit, the son of a bitch tries to slip my sister the happy hand.

**MARGARET**

Can you believe that shit? Say, you're cute.

**FRANCINE**

You want to see it?

**JOHN**

What?

**FRANCINE**

Our Medal of Honor, raisin nuts! Margaret keeps it in her back pocket; go for it.

**JOHN**

No. No thank you.

**FRANCINE**

OK, suit yourself. Say, you some kind of game show host?

**JOHN**

No.

**MARGARET**

You got a jacket to go with those pants?

**JOHN**

No, I'm a writer remember; words mostly.

**FRANCINE**

I know what a writer is! What's your turf Shakespeare, speculative fiction or restaurant menus?

**JOHN**

Books, I mean book, I wrote a book. You two would like it.

**JOHN is pushing the elevator button.**

The elevator doesn't seem to be working.

**MARGARET**

It won't work unless you use the code.

**JOHN keeps pressing the button.**

**FRANCINE**

Hey, my sister said it don't work without the code; you got a plate in your head?

**JOHN**

You're sisters. How nice.

**FRANCINE**

Were twins, ass wipe! Born three days apart in different states but that won't help you get off this floor!

**MARGARET**

You need the code!

**JOHN**

A code? What code?

**FRANCINE**

The elevator code, pecker brain!

**JOHN**

Now look here, you don't have to be derogatory.

**FRANCINE**

I don't have to be incontinent but I am.

**MARGARET**

Back in the 40's, Francine and I worked the humiliation booth at the State Fair.

**FRANCINE**

Poor bastards lined up ten deep to have the Simon twins rip em a new one.

**MARGARET**

We were good too you bed wetter.

**JOHN**

Really, I saw some twins at the carnival once; they were joined at the tongue, was that you girls?

**MARGARET**

We're the Simon twins!

**FRANCINE**

Not the Siamese twins! Get a brain!

**MARGARET**

Please.

**FRANCINE**

Please!

**JOHN**

I'll just stand over here.

**MARGARET**

My sister knows the code to the sixth floor.

**JOHN**

Isn't this the second floor?

**FRANCINE**

Don't worry; we're saving our cigarettes so we can bribe the nurse with the fake tits. How much time you got?

**JOHN**

That nurse there?

**MARGARET**

Yeah, what about it?

**JOHN**

Her name is Emily and she's my wife.

**FRANCINE**

Shit!

**MARGARET**

Damn it Francine now we're going into the closet for sure.

**FRANCINE**

Can it, here they come.

**EMILY walks over to JOHN.**

**EMILY**

What are you staring at? I thought you left?

**JOHN**

I would have but I don't seem to have the elevator code.

**EMILY punches the number. The Simon twins strain to see. JOHN exits.**

**FRANCINE**

Did you get it?

**MARGARET**

Yeah, we go tonight.

**LIGHTS**

**ACT ONE****SCENE THREE:**

THE SAME HIGH-RISE APARTMENT LATER THAT AFTERNOON, John is sleeping on the couch. The muffled sound of a radio plays a sporting event beneath the blankets. John wakes and struggles under the covers to find the radio. SID enters with a suitcase. JOHN ends up covered on the floor.

**SID**

Did your tent fall down?

**JOHN struggles with blankets & pillows.**

**JOHN**

My entire camp has deserted me. I'm going back to bed.

**SID**

I need a ride to the airport, should I call a cab?

**JOHN**

Excuse me but can't you see the pain?

**SID**

You're right; a cab is like thirty bucks from here.

**JOHN**

The very people, who are supposed to care, don't.

**SID**

It doesn't matter; it would be impossible to get a cab now. Where's the Bloody Mary mix?

**JOHN**

Jumbo wants his money or my life. Emily wants peace and quiet; when you don't have electricity it gets pretty damn quiet!

(Pause)

Then there's you Sid, what do you want?

**SID dials the phone.**

Forget it, I'll call a limo but I'm charging it back to you.

**JOHN**

Sid, when you look at me, what do you see?

**SID speaks into the phone.**

**SID**

Kathy, could you send a shiny black car to 600 Church Street? That's right, downstairs in a half hour. Thanks.

**JOHN**

Well?

**SID**

Kathy is sending a car.

**JOHN**

What do you see Sid?

**SID fixes two large drinks.**

**SID**

I see doubt, and I smell fear like rotten fish. You can be afraid but start doubting yourself, shit. It's time to become what you've created; let's see a little redneck, a little Walker. When I look at Walker Maxwell, I see a guy who would do whatever it takes to be successful again.

**JOHN**

It's all about perception; that blonde you're standing next to at the ATM looks pretty good until she offers to blow you for a hundred bucks; then everything changes.

**SID hands a drink to JOHN.**

**SID**

Oh yeah, how so?

**JOHN**

Five minutes ago you take her home to momma; now what?

**SID**

Well, we are standing at an ATM.

**JOHN**

I know this writer, people said he was the next Mamet; trouble was he thought he was the next Tuna Christmas guy. The way others see us can be the opposite of how we see ourselves.

**SID**

How can a sane person deal with that?

**JOHN**

Sid, are you confident John Bridges can do what it takes?

**SID**

Absolutely!

**JOHN**

Do you really?

**SID**

No, I think you're fucked! Who gives a shit what I think? Just write the book and go home and make love to your wife. Want to know what I see? I see a big man John, a big man who's gotten smaller. What's to eat around here?

**JOHN**

I do have one small idea.

**SID**

Good, cause your publisher is getting impatient. I didn't want to say anything earlier with all the whining but consider the message delivered.

**JOHN**

Do I get a horse head with that?

**SID**

Johnny, there's a lot of money involved here.

**JOHN**

Should I have someone else start my car?

**SID**

New York has a huge investment in the brand; "Walker Maxwell" sells books!

**JOHN**

What if Walker can't write anymore?

**SID**

Twenty bucks says you can't beat six putts from right here?

**JOHN**

You'll just charge it back to me.

**SID**

Then they'll find someone else to write the book, someone who's not my client and put Walkers name on it.

**JOHN**

They can do that? You'd let them do that?

**SID**

Before I met your old man I never worked with writers. Thirty years, strictly Jockeys, that's it, no writers.

**JOHN**

Well you could have read the contract.

**SID**

I did, that's how I know it's in there.

**JOHN**

Oh for Christ's sake Sid.

**SID**

Your publisher said the Hardy Boys have been doing it for years. He's a real nice guy your publisher, Jerry. He had the wife and me up to his house in the Hampton's. Have you ever read that chick book "A Woman of Substance"?

**JOHN**

No you?

**SID**

No, but Jerry told me that Barbara Bradford is really an elderly Jewish guy named Morty who lives in Queens.

**JOHN**

No shit!

**SID**

Cross my heart, it's done everyday.

**JOHN**

My father, he called you?

**SID**

No.

(Amused)

But I swear to God you couldn't find an actual fish that smelled as much like fish as your old man. If your dad was holding a dead possum in each hand with a large wheel of Limburger cheese sticking out of his mouth, I promise you, you could still only smell the fish.

**JOHN**

It was a problem he had.

**SID**

It's the hottest day of the year; he's out on the rail, alone. I was there watching my boy in the fifth "Tiny Jack", working a two-year-old Philly from California named "Alabama girl". Your dad was in town for a fish convention, right; he never leaves the track once except to go to the window.

**JOHN**

It was another problem he had.

**SID**

He was betting on horses with fish names; Miracle Mackerel, Flounder's Folly, Dolphin Boy, like that.

**JOHN**

A dolphin is a mammal; it's not a fish.

**SID**

The horse doesn't know that! He had a system and he was winning. Then he started losing and I started losing and while we were both crying he told me about you. "My son's a writer," he said. "You're an agent." I might have let it slip. "You could help him, his name's John Bridges." He had some coffee stained pages of your book wrapped up in his racing form.

**The boys are getting drunker.**

**JOHN**

My mother sent them to him before she died.

**SID**

His enthusiasm was very convincing. Hey, I don't even know I'm doing and here I am doing it!

**JOHN**

The fish, hauling em from the boats, dragging em to his store, cutting em in the blood and the sweat and the smell that never left us, everyday until I was seventeen; you ever dealt with a real fish, real close?

**SID**

We kept Mrs. Paul's in the freezer.

**JOHN**

It says a lot about a man if he can handle a fish.

**SID**

Yeah, but what does it say?

**JOHN**

That you're not afraid to get your hands dirty...

(Pause)

To reach down and grab the oily bastard by the throat, flopping and fighting because it knows it's going to die. And it will too, because God made you stronger.

**JOHN demonstrates.**

Grab it tight, hold it firm and push it between your thumb and your index finger. Then take your knife, try not to cut off your thumb, they can sew it back on but it still hurts like hell. Are you listening to me? Make eye contact with the fish show him whose boss. His beady little eyeball will try and poke a hole in you like a laser but don't back off. He'll try and get you to feel sorry for him; don't. It's his time and people got to eat. Hold him to the block and crunch out his little life and don't shed a tear; saw off its slimy fishy head in one quick stroke, like so.

**SID**

Isn't the fish already dead?

**JOHN**

It depends. You don't know shit about fish do you?

**SID**

I should, my uncle had a summer place up on the St. Croix River in Solon Springs Wisconsin. It had a few churches; a few more bars and a bakery only open four days a week.

**JOHN**

Keep your knife sharp. Working with a dull knife is like fucking with a limp dick; it's impossible, don't even try. Split him long ways to the tail and open him up like a savings account. He'll lie there but he won't be saying anything or looking at you anymore.

**SID**

Mostly we just stayed inside and drank.

**JOHN**

After school I'd ice the fish, sell em by the pound; smile to the customers as we locked the door behind them. My father would count the money, turn out the light and go to the track. I watched him put all our money in a pile, light a match and set it on fire; and all our tears couldn't put that fire out, so we stopped crying and we left.

**SID**

Cutting off your dad is like cutting off your foot; it hurts like hell and you're never really right after that. My old man used to kill his beer walking into the bar at 10:30 on Saturday morning. Behind him are his brothers, their wives, my sister and I, my mother, his mother and his grandmother. The whole family bellying up to double shot Bloody Marys and warm cream sodas. My Aunt Jane plays drinking games with my eleventh grade cousins while Uncle Bobby did shooters with one hand and saluted the Packer team photo with the other. Don't get me wrong, it's OK, unless you spend your whole life doing it and you teach your kids and they waste their lives and on and on it goes. Our parents teach us all kind of shit and when the time comes we reach back for it. Sometimes it's good stuff; sometimes we remember the bad. What do you see when you look at me Johnny? What time is it?

**JOHN checks his watch.**

**JOHN**

Eleven thirty.

**SID tips his drink back.**

**SID**

I hate flying.

**JOHN**

Sid, I'm getting a little low on funds.

**SID looks at JOHN through his tumbler.**

**SID**

You're upside down John.

**JOHN**

I was hoping you could?

**SID**

Get you some money? You'll owe the company till you're dead, and after you're dead; your family will owe.

**JOHN**

I invested in some sports ventures that didn't pan out.

**SID**

Jumbo, he wants to Gumbo your brains right?

**JOHN**

Emily's mother, she needs some very expensive medicine; it's keeping her alive but it's killing me.

**SID**

What are you going to do about the book?

**JOHN**

I have a plan. I'll get you some pages.

**SID**

Then I'll see what I can do. But take care of your money; you never know when your latest will be your last.

**JOHN**

Thanks, I'm sorry we have so much in common.

**SID**

Give my best to the wife.

**JOHN**

Sid, when I need to become what I've created, you won't tell anyone it's me will you?

**EMILY enters with flowers.**

**EMILY**

Sid, you're looking good, have you lost weight?

**SID**

Only if hair and fingernails actually weigh something, love the uniform I have one just like it at home.

**EMILY**

Can you stay for lunch?

**SID smiles yes.**

Great, we're having hotdog casserole. I'll set a place.

**SID holds out his hand to EMILY.**

**SID**

Nice seeing you again Emily how's your mother?

**EMILY**

Quiet, thanks for asking.

**SID**

Tell her I said hello.

**SID exits.**

**JOHN**

See ya Sid.

**EMILY**

Was he drunk?

**JOHN**

He's a master of misdirection; it's a talent.

**EMILY**

What did he say about the money?

**JOHN**

I'm not sure we can count on that.

**EMILY**

Then what can we count on John?

**JOHN**

Me. Count on me... I'll figure out something. Before you know it we'll be flashing hundreds to the help.

**EMILY**

We don't have any help.

**JOHN**

We'll get a Chinese gardener then.

**EMILY**

Or how about a Nanny with fat round arms we can fill up with babies?

**JOHN**

We don't have any babies.

(Pause)

We were going to wait.

**EMILY**

That's before I found out that the Braves and the Red Wings have more influence over my financial future than I do.

**JOHN**

I never bet on Hockey, it's a sucker bet.

**EMILY**

Suckers play games they can't win.

**JOHN**

Leave me alone.

**EMILY**

When I leave you alone, you'll know it!

**JOHN**

You can't count on life like toes; there aren't always going to be ten good ones waiting for you when you need to walk away. Where's Walker? The proposition is all risk? The chance to fail is certain success can't be more distant?

**EMILY**

John, are you drunk?

**JOHN**

I know what I have to do.

**EMILY**

Quit drinking and gambling; promise me you won't gamble anymore.

**JOHN**

It's not that easy.

**EMILY**

The ancient Egyptians believed that after you die, the God of the afterlife, Anubis, would weigh your heart against the feather of truth. If your heart were lighter than the feather, you'd live forever as a God.

**JOHN**

...And what if it weighs more?

**EMILY**

A creature that's part Lion, part Crocodile and part Hippo devourers your heart; but that almost never happened. The idea of doing the right thing because it's good for you has been around for four thousand years. Promise me you won't gamble anymore.

(Pause)

John I'm worried about my mom. I showed her the blanket she made when I was a girl; it was like she had never seen it before. Sometimes she doesn't even know who I am. I want her to see her grandchild. I want our kids to meet their grandfather.

**JOHN holds his nose.**

**JOHN**

If they're going to meet their grandfather, then we'll need diaper pins and a clothespin.

**EMILY**

I'm going to have that baby John; will you help me or do I call Walker?

**LIGHTS**

**ACT ONE****SCENE FOUR:**

IT'S THE NEXT DAY IN A WELL-APPOINTED ROOM. CHARLIE, FRANCINE and GRACE are wearing lobster bibs. FRANCINE is showing GRACE the newspaper.

**FRANCINE**

Commodities are for suckers. If the Japanese quit working while the Mexicans are taking a nap, you're screwed. I advise my clients to sell low, buy high and put money in their mattress. But don't let the boyfriend steal it; then you get screwed twice on the same mattress. Anything else?

**CHARLIE**

I'd like to know how many more times this week they're going to serve us Lobster.

**GRACE**

The steak was better.

**CHARLIE**

I wish Margaret were here; she's missing a good lunch.

**FRANCINE**

They're serving nothing in the cooler today.

**CHARLIE**

Good Lord, the cooler; you don't mean?

**FRANCINE**

Not the refrigerator, the cooler, the tank, the closet, the place they don't talk about, where the bad seniors go.

**CHARLIE**

But Margaret is such a nice person?

**FRANCINE**

Everybody falls off the goody goody wagon sooner or later pal; isn't that right Grace? Grace used to be a stripper.

**GRACE**

I was bad!

**FRANCINE**

You're not perfect are you?

**CHARLIE**

Me? No.

**GRACE**

What's your name young man?

**CHARLIE**

Grace, it's me Charlie; don't you remember?

**GRACE**

No, but I remember nineteen eighty. Were you in Baltimore then, you look like a man I knew there.

**CHARLIE**

And you; you favor my Mary.

**GRACE**

Mary?

**CHARLIE**

She was my wife.

**GRACE**

Where's Margaret, is she sick?

**FRANCINE**

She's not sick! She doesn't get sick!

**GRACE**

I do.

**FRANCINE**

She woke up last night in a delusional state, like Nevada. She says, "Francine I got the code, let's blow this hell hole! What, in our chenille bathrobes and fuzzy slippers?" I said. She looked right through me, grabbed my walker and broke for the door. Suddenly we were downstairs, outside in the back yard headed for the wall. Like a gazelle, Margaret was in the flowerbed, climbing six feet of peach painted cinder block, up and over so fast all you could see was bright orange "Go Vols" printed on the bottom of her underwear. I looked away. Then out of nowhere comes this asshole gardener, mud under his toenails, he reaches up and grabs Margaret by her begonias and wrestles her down to the ground. She put up a hell of a fight, but the son of a bitch got her because he didn't have any replacement parts.

**CHARLIE**

How does a gardener work in the dark?

**FRANCINE**

He was a special night gardener, OK?

**GRACE**

By the begonias, that must have hurt?

**FRANCINE**

We'd have been all the way to Knoxville by now if it hadn't been for the Jolly Green Giant's little helper.

**CHARLIE** grabs **GRACE**, dances with her wheelchair, **FRANCINE** with her walker.

**CHARLIE**

Well we're glad you didn't go; we would have missed you.

**GRACE**

The Simon twins scare me.

**FRANCINE**

Thank you dear.

**CHARLIE**

Grace, we've learned a valuable lesson here today.

**GRACE**

Put me down.

**CHARLIE**

Embrace each day, no matter how many days we've lived.

**GRACE**

Spin me till I'm dizzy, sweet meat.

**CHARLIE**

Be brave, take risk; go over the wall.

**GRACE**

Don't take crap from a night gardeners.

**CHARLIE**

Wear your favorite team on your fanny.

**FRANCINE**

But if it's Southern Mississippi Valley State, you got too much ass!

**CHARLIE**

I got a girl from Baltimore, street car passed right by her door, and her numbers forty-four, I've got a girl from Baltimore. Ta dada boom dia', ta dada boom dia', ta dada boom dia', ta dada boom dia', I've got a girl from Baltimore.

**They all laugh and dance and then sit down exhausted. Grace looks up.**

**GRACE**

Thank you Margaret...

**CHARLIE**

A moment of silence for our fallen friend...

**The group puts their heads down as EMILY enters.**

**EMILY**

It's a beautiful day we should be outside in the garden. Are we OK? You look tired. What this group needs is some exercise. Everybody up, come on now form a line. Hands over your heads... Help your neighbor. What do you think gang, should we invite Jane Fonda?

**CHARLIE, GRACE and FRANCINE stand and form a weak line. The group doesn't like Jane Fonda as they lethargically perform basic exercises.**

Stretch one two three and twist one two three. Somebody I know hasn't been getting enough sleep. Reach one two three and bend one two three. Francine your sister is feeling much better today; the doctor thinks it was just a little gas. I can take you up to see her.

**FRANCINE**

Maybe later when the air clears...

**EMILY**

Extend one two three, roll one two three.

**FRANCINE**

(To Charlie)

Margaret isn't really in the cooler.

**EMILY**

Stretch one, two, and three and bend one, two, and three. And that's enough for today. Everybody sit and cool down.

**GRACE**

I'd like to go and see Margaret. Can I get an ice cream sandwich?

**EMILY**

Sure, we'll take the long way through the kitchen.

**EMILY and GRACE exit.**

**CHARLIE**

Goodbye Grace.

**GRACE**

Goodbye sir, goodbye Simon sister.

**EMILY**

Mom, I'm so glad you're making friends, that Charlie is a cutie; only seventy-nine, you like those younger men?

**CHARLIE calls out as they are leaving but they're gone.**

**CHARLIE**

Grace, you've forgotten to tell me your secret? It's not a secret unless you tell someone. Otherwise it might be a lie, and who would know? Grace, can you hear me?

**FRANCINE**

You can't hold your ice cream at eighty the way you can at sixty.

**CHARLIE shakes his head yes.**

The older I get the harder it is for me to put up with stupid.

**CHARLIE shakes his head yes.**

If you're scared of me you're scared of yourself. True?

**CHARLIE shakes his head yes.**

Say something you old coot.

**CHARLIE**

Close your eyes.

**FRANCINE**

Oh yeah, it's about time stud, you going to slip me the happy hand?

**CHARLIE**

Close them tight.

**FRANCINE closes her eyes; her arms go up with a smile.**

**FRANCINE**

OK, take your best shot.

**CHARLIE**

Does the darkness frighten you?

**FRANCINE**

Everything frightens me.

**CHARLIE**

Some people feel trapped by the dark they need light. Others find quiet behind their eyes; their mind in the darkness is filled with peace.

**FRANCINE**

If you squeeze your eyes real tight, it's like a kaleidoscope.

**CHARLIE**

And kaleidoscopes are filled with possibility.

**FRANCINE**

Yeah so what?

**CHARLIE**

Grace.

**FRANCINE**

Grace huh?

**FRANCINE drops her arms and her smile.**

**CHARLIE**

She lives in the darkness behind her eyes but she's not afraid. She forgets my name but I know she knows me. With all of our differences our luck is we're here together. And that's no accident.

**JOHN enters standing behind CHARLIE.**

**JOHN**

Hello Charlie.

**FRANCINE**

Your luck just ran out.

**JOHN**

Hello Miss Simon says; some pretty caustic shit.

**FRANCINE**

Hello ass head how do you like walking on your hands?

**JOHN**

Fine, just fine, excuse us Charlie has an appointment.

**FRANCINE crosses and sits.**

**FRANCINE**

Nothing is by accident.

**JOHN**

In her day I bet she could suck a golf ball through a pixie stick.

**CHARLIE**

I don't gamble.

**JOHN**

So when's your birthday Charlie?

**CHARLIE**

Are you going to buy me a present?

**JOHN**

No, of course not...

**CHARLIE**

September the 25th.

**JOHN**

Nine twenty five. How old are you?

**CHARLIE**

Seventy-nine...

**JOHN dials his cell phone.**

**JOHN**

It's Bridges. Divide by two, plus twenty five, times nine . . . Jumbo; no don't hang up, I want the points and Cleveland. You are so right. I do owe you a lot of money but this time I have a well thought out plan. Trust me I'm back. Cleveland or I find myself a new business partner. Big dumb jerk...

**CHARLIE**

What have you done to my birthday?

**JOHN**

It's my system. Nine twenty five; the best writers are Virgo; my birthday's in March.

**JOHN picks up a notebook.**

So you wrote all this watching the beer?

**CHARLIE**

That's right.

**JOHN**

Ever sneak a little sip?

**CHARLIE**

No.

**JOHN**

Faulkner wrote his first novel working nights at a Mississippi power plant.

**CHARLIE**

He used a lot of words; some, three times in the same sentence.

**JOHN**

But he was famous, you're not, that'll hold you back. The first thing to remember is to always write what you know. When you reach back into true life your stories ring true; you mind?

**JOHN reads out loud from notebook.**

"It was a comfortable place for a boy, the subtle plains of the mid-west, the center of us all, months before the spring, weeks before the thaw." So you're a poet too?

**CHARLIE**

I write what occurs to me.

**JOHN**

"Ten year old Darius, slender and strong, having traded his highchair for a fire red Road Master bicycle with tire-white sidewalls and a confident chrome bell; of course there were still balls, basketballs, footballs, tennis balls and the most important, his baseball. For baseball was life; and the life of a boy was built on four diamond corners filled with his friends. They knew every field, schoolyard and old maid from Main to Victory Street. The neighborhood was their kingdom, they were masters of all."

**JOHN shifts pages.**

This is pretty good but your spelling is terrible! Bicycle only has one I.

**JOHN flips pages his interest grows.**

"Darius lived in Belleville, home to the fighting Lincolns, Illinois state baseball champions three years in a row. Until Johnny Rodgers, the best athlete ever to come out of St. Claire County got drafted into the Army. It was a big surprise, we were sure he'd be drafted by the St. Louis Cardinals. So sure we'd already made the sign, welcome to Belleville, home of Johnny Rodgers, Hall of Famer! 'It's a shame to think of Johnny throwing out hand grenades instead of runners at home plate, said Johnny's Coach Henry Boggan. It'll be a shame if he gets blown up, a damn shame."

(Pause)

Charlie, remember, when a writer first starts writing, everybody's better than him. But after you've had some success, nobody's better.

**JOHN skips ahead a few more pages.**

"Darius and his family shared a split-level ranch at the edge of a great field. The winds blew cold, the winter wheat stood there, naked. With only children to explore its rows and ruts, to carry its burs and stickers home on socks, like prisoners.

**CHARLIE**

Winter wheat looks like grass when it first starts coming up. It looks like they planted a field of grass.

**CHARLIE picks it up and reads.**

**CHARLIE**

"They were strong, not men not boys, dragging orange crates and pallets across dirt, building forts and castles. Playing in wooden castles among frame board cubes, twisting crab apple trees, tar filled roads stretching like mighty grids, leading everywhere and nowhere but home. They were kings; like minds; restless hearts; for there were bikes to ride past earth mounds and weeds to the edge of the tree line, to a secret place, a place where there were no rules."

**JOHN**

Hey that's good. To be a boy again just for a day, wouldn't that be thrilling?

**CHARLIE**

It depends on what day.

**JOHN**

Charlie, I'd like to see you take more chances with your alliterations. Something like, "That spring afternoon was as full as a spaghetti supper paper plate; and we drank in every moment like free iced tea."

**CHARLIE**

It makes me sick. I'm allergic to tomatoes.

**JOHN**

I like it; it'll work in there somewhere.

**CHARLIE**

"Leaving the stifling field and entering the clearing was like riding into a refrigerator. But the dust still rose, as the riders stopped, and in a single motion raised their heads as one. This was the place in our memory, the place of our dreams. And there above us all, hanging from the tallest tree, was the swing. No one knew where it came from; it fell to earth like a daring rescue. So high, so far from reach it was impossible to imagine how anyone could have gotten up there to tie it. 'I bet they died doing it!' Said Alex, 'He must be buried around here somewhere.' It was a mighty swing that rocked and curved and fell a mile to our knees, floating in mid air, inviting us to ride its enormous sway; to hold tight to its massive ropes; to climb aboard its hickory seat. And if you looked, there carved on the bottom side with a rusty nail was the seventh commandment, 'Do not steal.'"

**JOHN is getting frustrated.**

**JOHN**

There are a thousand pages with the same characters here. Did you write the same story for forty-six years?

**CHARLIE**

Write about what you know; I know Darius.

**JOHN**

How do you expect to compete with all this nice? People want some nasty; they want shock and awe.

**CHARLIE**

I'm sorry to disappoint you.

**JOHN**

Do you know what Hunter Thompson said about the music business? "It's a cruel and shallow money trench, a long plastic hallway where thieves and pimps run free and good men die like dogs. There's also a negative side." He wrote straight with crooked lines but what he didn't say was that the publishing business is a hundred times worse.

**CHARLIE**

Then maybe it's not for me.

**JOHN**

Being a writer Charlie is having the confidence to put your words on paper and know they're good, to live by your wits, rely on yourself and give the people what they want.

**EMILY enters with MARGARET.**

**FRANCINE**

Maggie, are you feeling better?

**MARGARET**

I've been where the bad seniors go.

**EMILY**

Can I have everyone's attention, there's going to be a short safety exercise.

**FRANCINE**

Margaret; did that doctor slip you a Mickey?

**MARGARET**

Yes he did.

**FRANCINE**

Shit! Don't close your eyes; the purple animals aren't really there dear.

**MARGARET**

I want to go back to my room.

**EMILY**

Unfortunately due to certification requirements, we all have to be in this room right now.

**CHARLIE**

Where is Grace?

**EMILY**

Charlie, Grace is; we've moved her to the hospital floor. Do you understand?

**CHARLIE**

I'd like to go to the hospital floor.

**EMILY**

You can't go up there right now; you need to stay here because . . .

**A Red light begins flashing and the fire alarm sounds.**

**EMILY**

. . of the fire drill... There's no reason to be alarmed, it's only a drill. There is no actual fire. Move toward the door and down to the ground level. Please move as quickly as you can. John, please, we need your help.

**JOHN**

OK. I'm right behind you.

**The room is dark with flashing red lights and a fire alarm sounding. JOHN picks up some of CHARLIE'S notebooks and exits in the stairwell.**

**LIGHTS**

**ACT ONE****SCENE FIVE:**

THE SAME HIGH-RISE APARTMENT A FEW DAYS LATER, JOHN is pacing, dialing the speakerphone, holding a notebook and reading; Sid is out on the street talking with him on his cell phone, making his way upstairs.

**SID**

(Street sounds)

Sid Trumper, talk to me.

**JOHN**

Hey Sid, it's me!

**SID**

(Through the speakerphone)

Who? I can't hear you.

**JOHN**

John!

**SID**

John who?

(SID speaks to someone else)

Stay here and keep the meter running.

**JOHN**

John Bridges, Walker Maxwell.

**SID**

Well why didn't you say so, I love Walker Maxwell!

**JOHN**

Did you get the pages I sent you?

**SID**

Yes; thanks pal, have a nice day; yes I did.

**JOHN**

I've got more. Listen to this. Darius, change that to Brian. "Brian led a rag tag band of boys from Village Drive. There was Johnny Rogers, the small and wise Alex and the newest member, Julian from New Jersey. It was Julian's new house that now sat on the neighborhood baseball diamond, conditionally admitted to the group even though his room was now sitting somewhere near second base.

**JOHN**

But not everyone in the neighborhood liked baseball; there were boys, despite our olive branch who refused to accept a peaceful coexistence. Physically strong boys; intimidating and disruptive; these boys led by their strongest and most insecure member, "Larry, last name "Damien" or the "work of the devil" as he was called, were known as The Bully Boys." What? Is that anything?

**SID'S voice comes through the door and the speakerphone.**

**SID**

I like it.

**JOHN**

If you liked it I liked it!

**SID**

It's snappy; it's got pull, punch, it's got POW!

**JOHN**

What do you really think?

**SID**

For some strange reason I still like it!

**JOHN**

Ladies and gentlemen, that's fantastic for anyone else!

**SID**

Open the door Johnny.

**JOHN opens the door. SID is talking on his cell phone his voice coming from the speakerphone. SID enters and goes to the bar to fix them both a drink.**

It's a bit of a departure for Walker, but it might work.

**JOHN**

I'm glad you like it.

**SID**

A neighborhood gang, troubled teenage boys in a sleepy Midwestern town; what do they do kill somebody?

**JOHN**

They're not troubled; I don't think they're troubled.

**SID**

What about the bullies; they sound like trouble to me?

**JOHN**

It's a coming of age story, boyhood friendships, like that.

**SID**

You want our readers to go from trailer park hookers to "Father Knows Best"? You better kill somebody. You better give the people what they want.

**JOHN**

Walker has approached this book differently.

**SID**

John, you know there is no actual Walker Maxwell?

**JOHN**

Walker is like Santa Clause; you have to believe.

**JOHN and SID clink glasses.**

**SID**

OK. I believe that Santa has given us all a gift, a best seller. It's going to feel like Christmas around here!

**JOHN**

That a boy Sid!

**JOHN and SID drink and celebrate.  
After a silent moment SID speaks.**

**SID**

So tell me John, where did you get it?

**JOHN**

What kind of question is that? Get what?

**SID**

I mean where did it come from, the story? You know, the inspiration, was it a lightning bolt?

**JOHN**

Yeah well you know; you're just standing there minding your own business and, there's nowhere to run.

**SID**

That's the way it is with the great ones.

**JOHN**

I guess so.

**SID**

I never doubted you for a minute Johnny. I'm off.

**SID starts to exit.**

**JOHN**

Sid wait, we've got to plan our next move. There's press to do and pictures; you can't leave before.

**SID stops cold.**

**SID**

Johnny, you better sit down. I have an idea, a crazy idea. It'll take some convincing; those bastards in New York have no imagination. But if we can pull it off it'll set the publishing world on its spine. It's radical and its genius.

**JOHN**

Do we have to kill somebody?

**SID**

(Pause)

We put out half a book.

**JOHN**

Please, haven't we gotten past the cheap shots!

**SID**

No. We publish the first half of Walkers book first! We wait until the readers are whipped into frenzy, then we print part two; it's brilliant! It creates a huge demand; it's a license to print books, twice.

**JOHN**

Will that work?

**SID**

Of course, so what are you calling this thing?

**JOHN**

I call it "The Story of Brian," you like it?

**SID**

Sure, whatever. We'll make history my friend. When this is over, the whole world will remember John Bridges. OK. I'm really off this time.

**JOHN**

You want a ride to the airport?

**SID**

Johnny, if I float my idea and they go for it, can I count on you to deliver part two?

**JOHN**

Sure.

**SID**

And If I find out that you pissed this money away on the spread instead of buying your wife a house, I'm giving you up.

**JOHN**

Sid? Before you go, you're driving through a parking lot in a golf cart and a large caterpillar crosses your path, does it live or die?

**SID**

The worm never did anything to me.

**SID exits. JOHN dials his cell phone.**

**JOHN**

Yeah it's me. We're back in business. But first say you're sorry. That's right; say you're sorry for trying to kill me. Good. I told you I had a plan. Now I want a thousand on each of the favorites this Sunday, across the board Jumbo. Do it.

**EMILY enters slowly with her blanket  
JOHN quickly hangs up the cell phone.**

Honey, call your mom; the days of three legged walkers and liver mush are over. We got the advance.

**EMILY**

That's great dear; my mother died this afternoon.

**JOHN**

I'm sorry.

**EMILY**

She went to sleep. I wasn't there to say goodbye.

**JOHN**

That's how I want to go; no car wrecks, no terrorist.

(Pause)

Your mother was a wonderful woman. She loved you very much.

**EMILY**

Charlie was right; the hurt runs shallow and deep. The birds have flown away. I wanted my mom to tell me everything was OK. I wanted her to eat her vegetables; now she can't!

**EMILY cries on JOHN'S shoulder and falls asleep.**

**JOHN**

Sometimes I find you in the dark and kiss your cheek. You don't wake up, you don't move except for your angel thin smile. It fills your face like the glow of a sunset fills the western sky and I know that you love me without words. I don't have any words except I'm sorry. I'm sorry about your mom; I'm sorry about your life; I'm sorry I'm so weak.

**CHARLIE sits alone in a spot light.**

**CHARLIE**

I'm waiting for a friend; it's not like her to be late. We have an understanding; we've agreed to meet here today like friends do. I told her that I could see her daughter Emily in her face; she smiled and then she knew me. For a moment there was joy in her eyes. Joy is uncommon. Perhaps she's decided to visit another friend today. Pity, you would have liked her.

(Sing/Talk)

I had a girl from Baltimore, street car passed right by her door, and her numbers forty-four; I got a girl from Baltimore. Ta dada boom dia', ta dada boom dia', ta dada boom dia'; I got a girl from Baltimore.

(Pause)

Well, this kind of thing can happen when we take a chance on friends. When we live and love we're bound to lose. It's a strange game we play with the outcome already decided; still we must tolerate it, we have no choice; it's the players we love; the ending we fear. I'll just wait here a little while longer.

**LIGHTS**

ACT TWOSCENE ONE:

AN UPGRADED MODEST HIGH-RISE APARTMENT SIX MONTHS LATER, SID and JOHN are putting around furniture, smoking cigars and looking prosperous.

**JOHN waves papers in the air.**

**JOHN**

The New York Times, The National Book Review; holy dangling participle here's a telegram from Oprah Winfry.

**JOHN opens it and reads.**

"If the second half is as good as the first, I want a book club selection and an exclusive interview with Walker Maxwell."

**SID is lining up a putt.**

**SID**

That is gold my friend.

**JOHN**

There are hundred's of E-mails, dozens of telegrams, flowers, every one of them raving about "The Story of Brian," no way!

**SID**

It's gold; everything you touch is gold!

**JOHN**

Tiger Woods wants to play golf, with me!

**SID**

Silver and gold!

**JOHN**

(Reading)

He was inspired by my transparent honesty; he has room for Walker Maxwell in his foursome anytime. "Hurry and put out the second half of your masterpiece, the world is waiting," Tiger.

**SID**

I never doubted you for a minute Johnny. OK, that's one from the elevator, two down the hall off the Marigolds, three off the front door, four past the blue plastic Sphinx, five into the living room, six around the table and seven, under the couch to glory.

**SID prepares to putt.**

**JOHN**

You can't putt under the couch; it's out of bounds!

**SID**

It's only out because you didn't think of it.

**JOHN**

So now you're making up rules as you go along?

**SID hits his ball under the couch and into a large vase.**

**SID**

That is a seven my friend; you'll need Tiger to beat that!

**JOHN'S ball is wedged between the floor and the carpet.**

**JOHN**

One from here is a six; six beats seven even by your rules.

**SID checks out JOHN'S ball.**

**SID**

Shit, it's at least two putts from there, that's a terrible lie John; go for the tie.

**JOHN**

Walker would do whatever it takes, no matter how bad the lie.

**SID**

It's only for lunch, take a drop; you'll break something.

**SID covers his eyes as JOHN strikes the ball and it skips off the carpet.**

**JOHN**

Golf is a funny game. I play my own version of it.

**SID**

I've seen your version; it doesn't resemble any golf I know.

**JOHN**

I have a little secret for you Sid.

**SID**

That's beautiful, you giving me a golf lesson.

**SID realizes JOHN'S not talking golf.**

**SID**

Secret? No, don't tell me. I don't want to know. I'm not responsible for whatever it is you did if I don't know about it.

**JOHN**

It's not a secret unless you tell someone.

**SID**

I'm not listening. I can't hear you.

**JOHN**

Otherwise it could be a lie; then who'd know the difference?

**SID**

What kind of secret?

**JOHN**

"The Story of Brian" is really the story of Darius.

**SID**

OK, it's "The Story of Darius," big deal.

**JOHN**

The secret is I didn't write it; Walker didn't write it; we borrowed it from an old man we met at the nursing home.

**SID**

An old man?

**JOHN**

A really old man.

**SID**

What's his name?

**JOHN**

What difference does it make?

**SID**

Humor me.

**JOHN**

Charlie, Charlie Clark. So what?

**SID**

How old?

**JOHN**

Old, no family; the chances of anyone finding out are a million to one. I couldn't come up with anything; my life was in danger, so I took the odds.

**SID**

Why are you telling me this?

**JOHN**

I just thought you should know.

**SID**

That's bullshit! I think you're tired of carrying it around! It's getting heavy for you so you laid it on good old Sid!

(Pause)

Fuck! Define borrowed.

**JOHN**

Word for word . . .

**SID**

That's a little thing they call plagiarism sport. That's bad.

**JOHN**

Nothing is bad if nobody ever finds out. I remember someone suggesting I become what I've created? "Let's see some redneck; Walker would do what it takes!"

**SID**

Oh but this isn't it. No way. This lie; you're over the top with this one pal!

**JOHN**

No one will ever know; it's the perfect crime.

**SID**

Every time you see that book you'll know. Every dime you make belongs to someone else. Don't you know right from wrong Sparky? Didn't your parents socialize you?

**JOHN**

Parents teach us all kind of shit remember? When the time comes we reach back for it. Sometimes it's good; sometimes we reach for the bad.

**SID**

You can't lie about this John; the world won't tolerate it.

**JOHN**

What is a lie Sid?

**SID**

You just know it.

**JOHN**

What are the acceptable limits between the truth and a lie?  
Is there a formula, a chart?

**SID**

And if you ever meet someone who doesn't know it, run like hell. I'll see you around.

**JOHN**

What about the bank teller at the drive up window?

**SID**

What about her?

**JOHN**

The one you swap fantasies with; muster expectation for, with your smile and fake recognition; giving each other just a little bit more through the glass? Is that a lie?

**SID**

How do you know about that?

**JOHN**

You lie every time you pull up to the glass and rocket your deposit through the phallic tunnel of love!

**SID**

I thought you couldn't write fiction?

**JOHN**

Then one day you pull up in your cruiser only to find out she's been transferred to another branch where rich white men spend glances like hundred dollar bills. It's sad, but you'll find a new lie, we all do, everyone.

**SID**

You don't think Alice will find out do you?

**JOHN**

Metaphors rarely squeal Sid.

(Pause)

What about agents?

**SID**

Jockeys never did this kind of shit!

**JOHN**

They never fixed their weight, never fixed a race.

**SID**

No way anyone will ever know?

**JOHN**

Not unless you tell them.

**SID**

What about Emily? She'll read the book and put it together.

**JOHN**

I'll handle Emily; hell I'm doing this for her. She wants a house and a baby; that costs.

**SID**

What about Charlie? What if he hires a lawyer?

**JOHN**

Charlie's an old man with no money, no family, and even less future. What's he going to do to me?

**SID**

I guess you're home free, as long as you can live with it.

**JOHN**

I have no choice. Come on I'm so close; I just need a little more. Have you ever been to a hockey game when those kids come out on the ice and throw stuff into the crowd? People diving on top of cripples for trinkets they end up leaving under their seat. They just want to stand out, get on the big screen, temporary instant celebrity. We all want to do something better than anyone else. When I wrote that book, I found what I could do better; and it was sweet for a while but now it's forgotten. I'm under the seat Sid. You can't blame a guy for wanting his dream to last a little longer.

**SID**

I need to meet this collaborator of yours.

**JOHN**

No problem. We'll go see him after lunch. He's always there; where's he going?

**SID**

What if he won't give you the rest of his story?

**JOHN**

Then I'll write it myself.

**SID**

Have you even read this? It's thoughtful and complex; everything you're not. You couldn't write this guy's obituary.

**JOHN**

Let's hope I don't have to.

**LIGHTS**

**ACT TWO****SCENE TWO:**

A SMALL MULTIPURPOSE ROOM THAT SAME AFTERNOON, the elevator door opens, JOHN gets out. EMILY puts down her book and crosses to meet JOHN with a kiss.

**EMILY**

Hi champ, is there something you want to tell me?

**JOHN**

(Nervous)

Is Sid here yet?

**EMILY**

Sid? Is he checking in?

**JOHN**

No. I told him about the notebooks, he wants to meet Charlie.

**EMILY**

Really, Sid is interested in helping Charlie?

**JOHN**

Not likely.

**EMILY**

Wow, seventy-nine and suddenly an author? I'm proud of him.

**JOHN**

What about me? Are you proud of me? Are you proud of Walker?

**EMILY**

Sometimes I'm proud of you, but there is no Walker. He's a figment of your imagination; a wall you've built around yourself. Stop talking about him like he's real; it's creepy.

**JOHN**

He is real, as real as you.

**EMILY**

I doubt it.

**JOHN**

All right, how about a little wager?

**EMILY**

You promised John, no more gambling.

**JOHN**

It's just a friendly bet, if you win, if there is no actual Walker Maxwell then I will . . .

**JOHN whispers in EMILY'S ear.**

**EMILY**

How big?

**JOHN**

Very big! But if I can prove to you that Walker Maxwell is flesh and bones, then you have to . . .

**JOHN whispers again.**

**EMILY**

I'm not doing that!

**JOHN**

Why?

**EMILY**

I don't do that!

**JOHN**

Oh I get it; its fine while we're dating; or maybe for like six months after we're married but then it's.

(Mocking)

"I'm not doing that!"

**EMILY**

I'm not doing that!

**JOHN**

You like it when I do it!

**EMILY**

That's different; it's you doing that.

**JOHN**

Then I'm not doing it anymore either.

**EMILY**

Oh please, this is stupid; you can't prove Walker's real; it's an impossible bet.

**JOHN**

Yes I can.

**EMILY**

No you can't. Let's talk about something else.

**JOHN**

Aren't you the least bit curious?

**EMILY**

(Begrudgingly)

No I'm not. OK.

**JOHN**

It's a bet.

**JOHN** shakes **EMILY'S** hand, grabs the phone book; spots a phone number and dials the speakerphone on the desk, stepping back as the phone answers.

**WALKER MAXWELL**

Hello.

**JOHN**

Hello, who is this?

**WALKER MAXWELL**

This is Walker; Junior is that you?

**JOHN**

Walker you say; Walker who?

**WALKER MAXWELL**

Walker Maxwell, who the hell is this?

**JOHN**

Tell me Walker Maxwell, is that your real name or did you make it up?

**WALKER MAXWELL**

Junior, if that's you, it better not be you.

**JOHN**

Walker, are you a wall I've built around myself?

**WALKER MAXWELL**

If this is one of them trailer park queers calling about that faggot with my name; the one that put out half a book; I'm coming right through this phone and I'm gonna bring hell with me!

**JOHN and EMILY run to the other side of the room.**

**JOHN**

(Yelling across the room)

Are you a figment of my imagination?

**WALKER MAXWELL**

I'm going to kick your imaginary ass! Louise this son of a bitch is making fun of me! Can I kill him? Please! You can't hide from me asshole! If I ever find out where you are I will . . .

**JOHN reaches to click the speakerphone off, smiling.**

**JOHN**

Walker lives in Mt. Juliet. I landed on him in the phone book a few years ago. Sometimes I call him and we chat.

**EMILY**

I didn't know; I'm sorry.

**JOHN**

That's OK.

(Pause)

...But now that you know?

**EMILY**

I'm still not doing that.

**JOHN**

I won the bet.

**EMILY**

You tricked me.

**JOHN**

Where I come from they don't take too kindly to belchers.

**JOHN takes off his shoe and sock.**

**EMILY**

I'm not a belcher; Oh please don't do that! Oh! I won't do it. I refuse to clip those big old rusty toenails one more time. It makes me sick; your disgusting yellow deformed male toenails; do it yourself, I'm not doing it!

**JOHN**

There's a certain honor among gamblers, a code you obviously don't know anything about?

**EMILY**

You know what, I'm at work right now; I've got the white hat on, the stockings, a nametag; I'm going back to work.

**JOHN holds up his bare foot.**

I didn't need to see that.

**JOHN**

I didn't need to see a three hundred pound woman voiding her nostrils at the bus stop this morning but I did.

(Screams)

Ah!

**EMILY**

You take the bus?

**JOHN**

It's research.

**EMILY**

What happened to the money from Sid? You could buy a bus.

**JOHN**

Things haven't been going so well at the office.

**EMILY**

At the office, what office, when you're not sleeping or here with Charlie you're on the phone.

(Pause)

John have you been gambling?

**JOHN**

No. Yes. I have previous commitments from a past life.

**EMILY**

You promised me.

**JOHN**

It wasn't a promise, it was more like a, I'll try.

**EMILY**

Now you're lying.

**JOHN**

I am not!

**EMILY**

When two people promise each other and one of them breaks that promise; they're liars!

**JOHN**

Well excuse me, my name is John and I'm a liar! OK! You have no idea about promises un-kept. You have no idea what I've been through.

**EMILY**

I know more than you think I do.

**JOHN**

What's that supposed to mean?

**EMILY**

That you've been pissing all our money away on bets...

**JOHN**

That's all behind me now; I've got a good thing going, I just need a little more time.

**EMILY**

...To do what? I read your book; it was word for word from Charlie's notebooks. No wonder he's your new best friend. How could you do that to him?

**JOHN**

I did it for us.

**EMILY**

You didn't do it for me! You have to make it right John. There's no other way. Give Charlie the money and the credit; apologize. You can't go to jail, I need you, you have to try and change.

**JOHN**

My Italian grandfather used to say, "If you were born round, you can't die square." Good things come to those who take action. I'm sorry about your expectations but I've got a few of my own.

**EMILY**

I'm going to have a baby John.

**JOHN**

You are?

**EMILY**

We are.

**JOHN**

When?

**EMILY**

There's still time.

**JOHN**

(Disoriented)

Kids; they're always testing their boundaries. Use your inside voice; put on your listening ears. They have a language of their own. What are we going to do?

**EMILY**

What are you going to do John?

**The elevator door opens enter SID, FRANCINE and MARGARET; SID is holding a paper sack with a bottle, tipsy. JOHN is nervous again, pacing.**

**SID**

You girls sure do know what buttons to push.

**FRANCINE**

Sid baby! You have a nice butt!

**MARGARET**

Yeah he does!

**SID**

Thanks, I have a butt buster at home, my wife! Would you girls like a drink?

**SID drinks from his bag.**

**EMILY**

Sid, how are you?

**SID**

I don't know; what have you heard? Johnny; what's new?

**EMILY**

What brings you here?

**SID**

(Whispers)

You invited me.

**SID holds up his paper bag.**

It's agent outreach day; sack lunches for the elderly.

**JOHN**

I see you've met the Simon Twins. They can rip you a new one and you won't even have to stand up.

**JOHN lights a smoke, EMILY takes it from him and puts it out.**

**FRANCINE**

No, those were the old Simon sisters.

**MARGARET**

We're the new, kinder gentler Simon twins. Charlie said we could attract more flies with honey.

**JOHN**

Watch your back.

**SID**

I think they're charming.

**FRANCINE**

I want to have your baby, mountain man.

**MARGARET**

Me too!

**JOHN**

So what brought about this change of Depends; you two find religion?

**FRANCINE**

My sister Margaret was ill, for the first time since birth we realized we might be separated.

**MARGARET**

I don't know what I'd do without my sister.

**FRANCINE**

We started thinking about all the time we wasted being mean.

**MARGARET**

From now on we're going to be nice to everyone.

**FRANCINE**

That includes you Mr. Bridges.

**MARGARET**

Charlie said self-deprecating humor is charming.

**JOHN**

Where is Charlie; will somebody please tell him we're here?

**The group gets quiet.**

**MARGARET**

Since Grace died, Charlie has been very sad. He doesn't come down much anymore.

**JOHN**

What's his room number; we'll go upstairs and cheer him up.

**EMILY stops them.**

**EMILY**

I'm sorry but non-residents aren't allowed on the upper floors on Tuesdays.

**JOHN**

What, since when?

**EMILY**

Since Monday...Sid, would you like to read Charlie's story? He's the one I was telling you about. It turns out he's a gifted writer; maybe you could give him some advice?

**SID**

Sure.

**EMILY looks through her papers.**

**EMILY**

I was going to see if I had any of his notebooks. John, do you have a copy of Charlie's story we could show Sid?

**JOHN is stricken and EMILY finds a notebook.**

**EMILY**

Here we are. Charlie gave this one to me on his first day with us.

**JOHN**

Let me see that.

**JOHN tries to grab the notebook.  
SID gets it first and begins  
reading from the notebook.**

**SID**

May I?

**JOHN**

Sure.

**SID**

"The Bully Boys were a constant threat to those who lived on dirt brick roads, riding cracks, jumping ramps; who on Saturdays preferred the cool of their clubhouse clearing to the warm sunshine of the magnificent day. 'Those Bullies are a pain' said Johnny whistling toward the woods. 'We should knock those guys down a peg!' We were by nature kind at heart but the events of recent days had hardened our resolve to stand up to our persecutors. 'We'll go to their hide-out,' said Julian. 'I know where it is.' We all knew where it was; a dark place near the edge of the wheat fields, nothing more than holes in the ground with make shift boards stolen from us, staked around the outside with room for a single boy to crawl under. 'We'll burn them out! They'll come back to a smoldering pit! That'll teach them.'" It ends there.

**JOHN**

(Nervous)

Let's go upstairs and see if Charlie's at home.

**EMILY stops them again.**

**EMILY**

I'm sorry; you'll have to wait here until he comes down.

**JOHN brings EMILY close.**

**JOHN**

I'm the father of your child.

**EMILY**

I could get fired. We're going to need this job.

**JOHN**

When was the last time you saw him?

**MARGARET**

A week ago, maybe two...

**JOHN motions SID over.**

**SID**

Excuse me girls.

**JOHN**

We've got to get up there and get the rest of this.

**SID**

You're right.

**JOHN**

If we wait much longer, something could go wrong.

**SID**

Relax; you'll get it.

**JOHN**

I don't have all day! Emily, Emily and I are having a baby.

**SID**

No kidding; today?

**JOHN**

No, I don't know when, sometime. Now what are we going to do about the pages.

**JOHN and SID sit while the conversation switches to the ladies.**

**FRANCINE**

Emily.

**EMILY**

Yes Francine.

**FRANCINE speaks quietly.**

**FRANCINE**

Do you think a girl could hurt herself, taking a turn against her nature after so many years?

**EMILY**

Are you switching sides?

**FRANCINE**

(Upset/builds)

No. It's all this kindness crap; I want to puke my freaking guts out! If I can't speak my mind, I could lose it. I don't care what Charlie says; it's not me, you understand? I'm too old for this shit! I'll hurt myself!

(Calm)

What do you think I should do nurse?

**JOHN walks over to the girls.**

**JOHN**

So girls, you're driving through the parking lot in a golf cart and a large furry red caterpillar is inching its way in front of you. Does it live or die?

**MARGARET**

I'm sorry but I'm a bowler. I like bugs though; they remind me of my first husband, he had a thyroid condition.

**FRANCINE**

I say die caterpillar die! Because getting old sucks; I have pain in places I can't find; everything I got is sagging and only thing I know is nagging. I can't eat, I can't sleep, I can't see, I can't walk, I can't screw; I can't even cry. And now some asshole on late night TV makes a pill so you can live till you're a hundred and fifty; I don't want that! I just want to raise hell!

**MARGARET**

Francine gets a little tired.

**FRANCINE**

And after I'm gone you tell them Francine Simon was a pistol; a straight shooter who went out with her guns blazing! You tell them that!

**MARGARET**

It's all right now dear.

**FRANCINE**

Emily, could you accompany my dear, dear sister and me to our room?

**EMILY**

I'd be happy to ladies.

**MARGARET**

We have an appointment.

**SID**

Ladies, it's been a pleasure.

**JOHN**

When you're born round; you can't die square.

**FRANCINE snaps around and yells.**

**FRANCINE**

I heard that Howard's Johnson!

**MARGARET**

You're dumber than a pan of piss!

**THE SIMON TWINS**

Oh that felt good.

**FRANCINE**

Hey Mountain Man; call me.

**EMILY**

See you tomorrow gentlemen.

**THE SIMON TWINS**

Yeah, see ya tomorrow.

**EMILY and FRANCINE and MARGARET exit.**

**JOHN**

What are we going to do now?

**SID**

Well I'm not calling her.

**JOHN**

No, what about the rest of the book?

**SID**

We sit here and wait for Charlie.

**JOHN**

Great!

**SID**

It's all-good. No stress, no radio, no cable.

**JOHN**

Plenty of mature copies of Modern Maturity

**SID has a drink from his bag.**

**SID**

We'll bond. Play some cards. What's to eat around here?

**SID and JOHN play cards and get vending machine food, wait. The lights fade as hours pass; the lights come up on a disheveled SID and JOHN.**

**SID**

This is getting old.

**JOHN**

And you're starting to smell.

**SID**

Where's the bathroom?

**JOHN**

Over there, it's the one with the solid gold lid.

**SID exits. JOHN puts head down and CHARLIE enters. JOHN wakes up smelling something bad. JOHN talks with his dead father played by CHARLIE still standing in the shadows.**

**JOHN**

Man, what died?

**DAD**

Did you ice the fish? If you don't ice them they go bad and I don't pay you.

**JOHN**

You never paid me anyway? And that whole thing about the smell wearing off after a while; that was a lie. I'm forty years old and I still stink.

**DAD**

You can't blame it all on the fish. Try using milk.

**JOHN**

Now you tell me.

**DAD**

I couldn't tell you anything. You had a stubborn streak that showed right through your clothes.

**JOHN**

What are you doing here dad? Shouldn't you be bludgeoning a bluegill?

**DAD**

I don't do that anymore; I've moved on.

**JOHN**

What, got another family to screw up?

**DAD**

Can't do that either, I'm dead...

**JOHN**

Oh, you're dead, well that's good.

**DAD**

They don't let you do that stuff here.

**JOHN**

What do you mean they, what do you mean dead?

**DAD**

I slipped on the dock. I'm dead, as of this morning. I thought I'd stop by and see you one last time.

**JOHN**

Is it some kind of requirement? You need a reconciliation merit badge before you can go on?

**DAD**

Yeah, something like that.

**JOHN**

Did you visit everyone else, or am I supposed to bring greetings from dead old dad?

**DAD**

You're a funny boy; you're just like me.

**JOHN**

What's that suppose to mean?

**DAD**

Your brother and your sister figured out a way around their legacy. But you, you couldn't escape it.

**JOHN**

I think St. Peter likes his tenants to have a little humility?

**DAD**

I'll have to let you know.

**JOHN**

You'll let me know, how?

**DAD**

How about just when you think you won't cover the spread, they'll be a miraculous scoring drive with a Hail Mary pass; that'll be me.

**JOHN**

Emily and I are having a baby dad, no more gambling.

**DAD**

Congratulations! I said the same thing when you were born; it didn't stick.

**JOHN**

Well this time it will! I won't be like you one minute more than I have to.

**DAD**

I hope you're right. I may have been a rotten husband and father but I never took anything that didn't belong to me.

**Dad starts to leave.**

Well if you need anything boy, anything at all.

**JOHN**

That's rich! Name one thing you've ever done for me.

**DAD**

That Sid fellah from the track, he called you right?

**JOHN**

Yeah he called me.

**DAD**

Your mother, she sent me what you wrote. I thought you might make big money and take care of me in my old age.

**JOHN**

Too bad mom never made it that far.

**DAD**

So a lot of people never make it that far chief. Be glad for what you got; it's over in a slip.

**JOHN**

I'll sew that on my pillow.

**DAD**

It's too late to save your ass after you're dead. That became clear to me as I was floating like a rockfish to the bottom of the bay. Sew that on a pillow buddy boy. I know you never thought much of me; I wish I could say I tried.

**JOHN**

You didn't

**DAD**

Do me a favor?

**JOHN**

Sure.

**DAD**

Try and get over it. I'm not around to hate anymore. Find something, anything about me that makes you smile and hang on to it, life is a lot better that way.

**DAD gets up to leave.**

**JOHN**

Where you going?

**DAD**

These things got a time limit. I'm sorry I was who I was. I never believed I could change. Don't make the same mistake.

**JOHN**

I can honestly say I am who I am today because of you.

**DAD**

That sucks, but who are you going to be tomorrow?

**JOHN**

See ya dad. Say hi to mom.

**JOHN puts his head back down and CHARLIE steps in from the shadows takes his notebook and reads out loud.**

**CHARLIE**

(Reading)

"We gathered our matches and we rode to the bully place at the edge of the wheat fields. We looked, we scouted and no one was there. We poured our gasoline carefully and lit our fire and stood to watch. This was an epic display. The fire grew, engulfing the modest structure; the wind kicked wildly from the south, amplifying its energy. We stood silently and stared, the fire climbing quickly higher, still higher, out of control, jumping wider until it crossed out of our sight igniting the drying wheat beside it. What had started as a simple prank was now slipping away. We were helpless to control our indiscretion. The field was burning now and it would not stop, not even for us. Row upon row of crackling wheat, so dry the fire laughed. We ran, we rode, we cried at the horrible prospect of our destruction. Until Alex, small quiet Alex stopped us all in our tracks. His sweat, ruined shirt and suet-covered face became as wise as we had all hoped. 'The fire will just burn itself out when the field ends short of the houses.' He said. 'Fire needs fuel; once it gets done with the field, all the fuel will be gone and so will the fire.' We wanted Alex to be right; and on a calmer day he would have been brilliant. But this day the wind was whirling, turning, churning like the pits of our stomachs."

**CHARLIE speaks from memory.**

"Again we rolled toward the sun. I was first, then Julian, Johnny Rogers and Alex. We rode with purpose; the sheer force of our adolescence would have carried us skyward if not for the gravity of our situation."

**SID returns JOHN wakes up.**

**SID**

Well, you must be Charlie; I'd recognize your prose even in the dark. My name is Sid Trumper. It's nice to finally meet you.

**CHARLIE**

Sir...

**SID**

I think you know John? Enjoyed your story; can't wait to see what happens.

**CHARLIE**

It's sad.

**JOHN**

Listen Charlie, Sid and I; we'd like to read the rest of it so we can, you know evaluate it.

**CHARLIE**

I don't understand.

**SID**

John, he liked your story too.

**JOHN**

Yes I did; I liked it very much and that's why.

**SID**

(Interrupts)

He's been stealing your soul, page-by-page, word-by-word, and because we didn't know about it, I mean we didn't have any idea; we published it all under the name Walker Maxwell.

**JOHN**

Sid likes to kid around. Did Emily put you up to this?

**SID**

And the bad part is he's been keeping the money. Did Johnny ask you his little survey question? It's cute; go ahead and ask him.

**JOHN**

I don't want to.

**SID**

Sure you do; you've asked everybody else; you want Charlie to feel bad? Go ahead.

**JOHN**

You're driving through the parking lot in a golf cart and a caterpillar crosses your path. Does it live or die?

**CHARLIE**

What color is it?

**JOHN**

What difference does that; it's red; it's a red bug.

**CHARLIE**

If you destroy it, you'll deprive the world of a beautiful butterfly.

**SID**

Now why don't we tell Charlie the truth; we're all friends here.

**JOHN**

There's nothing to tell. We've been working on this project and Charlie has really been improving.

**CHARLIE**

Can you do that? Take someone else's soul?

**JOHN**

That's not what I did; you know that.

**SID**

He took your soul Charlie and he told the world it was his.

**JOHN**

That's just not; not really what happened.

**SID**

So I came here today and waited, God knows how long because I wanted you to have it back.

**JOHN**

What's going on here Sid?

**SID**

The way I see it; if I go public with this my career is ruined, but if I don't, then I'm ruined. Charlie, the truth is you're the only one who can decide. Do you want John here to own you, to take your story and keep your money? Or do we go to the company together and tell them what happened?

(Pause)

Charlie, do you want to be Walker Maxwell?

**CHARLIE**

But Mr. Bridges is.

**SID**

No! No he's not! Walker Maxwell is not an alter ego or a figment or a wall or a best friend!

**JOHN**

He lives in Mt. Juliet.

**SID**

He's a pseudonym; an image different from reality and the reality is neither of them wrote this book, you wrote it. You're the reality, you're the truth and as far as I'm concerned from now on you're Walker Maxwell.

(Pause)

I may be a drunk but I'm not a liar. Think about it and let me know.

**SID gives CHARLIE a card and exits.**

**CHARLIE**

Sir...

**JOHN**

I hadn't really planned on us being here like this, but since we are, what are we going to do now Charlie?

**CHARLIE gives JOHN a notebook; JOHN is reticent to take it.**

**CHARLIE**

Here, you take it.

**JOHN**

No that's OK.

**JOHN finally opens it and reads.**

"The wind pushed our fire towards the fuel, closer and closer to the edge of the neighborhood. From every home came an army of brave mothers in Capri pants and paisley housecoats armed with garden hoses to hold the fragile line, 'You kids go stand out in the front yard! Get away from the fire!' At the edge of our yard, between the property line and the burning field stood a hearty row of poplar trees. There were thirty, three feet apart, twenty feet tall, towering, swaying.

**JOHN**

As the fire grew closer, the flames leaped; the trees began burning, one catching the other and then another until the whole row was on fire. It looked like; it was a wall of fire. Mother and the others were in full retreat, my brother Peter with his good intentions, unaware and inexperienced, rounded the corner with a single bucket of water; a thimble of redemption for the fires of hell."

**JOHN closes the notebook shaken.**

Pete was your brother?

**CHARLIE**

Pete was Darius's brother.

**JOHN**

You were Darius?

**CHARLIE speaks from memory.**

**CHARLIE**

Yes. "Pete flung his bucket toward the fire and ran as fast as his feet and his fear would carry him. But before he got far one of the burning trees lost its fight and began to fall, thundering around him, trapping Pete with its weight. Some of the neighbors saw what had happened and rushed over to help, they used shovels to free him but he was already burned.

(Emotional, to tears)

By the fire we started, by our mistake! We were boys not men, assassins! Playing a horrible game! The day, it plays in my mind like a terrible movie! The kind you would never go back to; that never goes away!

(Calm)

The ambulance came, the fire went out and we went to bed. The next day they lined us all up, the sheriff walked up to us one by one. 'I guess you boys know about the fire we had here yesterday? It burned twenty-five acres of wheat, Mr. Ashley's barn and a young man from the neighborhood got hurt pretty bad. If anybody here knows how that fire got started, I wish you would step up right now and tell me.' It got quiet, quiet as God. The Bully Boys slumped with disdain; my friends and I stood very still. 'Darius, you know anything about that fire?' 'No sir.' 'Are you sure, your brother Pete's in the hospital.' No sir, I was playing baseball. We were all playing baseball. 'You're not lying are you son?' 'No sir!' Those words were so dreadful, the lie so terrible."

**CHARLIE coughs.**

**JOHN**

Would you like some water?

**CHARLIE**

Thank you.

**JOHN**

What about Pete?

**CHARLIE**

He died at twenty-four but I've lived a long time. I've lost two toes to diabetes; the doctors say that I'll go blind but I've loved the same woman most all my life; they don't have a disease stronger than that.

(Pause)

I'm old, and I've run out of ways to say I'm sorry.

**JOHN**

What about your friends?

**CHARLIE**

They're all dead.

**JOHN gives the notebook back to CHARLIE.**

**JOHN**

I don't want this.

**CHARLIE**

It's yours now.

**Charlie walks away. JOHN is alone.**

**LIGHTS**

THE END

**'A TERRIBLE LIE'**

BY JIM REYLAND  
1102 17th Ave South  
Nashville Tennessee 37212  
Copyright 2008 All rights reserved  
1-800-726-3612  
Equal the World (5)  
[www.reylandwords.com](http://www.reylandwords.com)