

# **MORAL IMPERATIVE**

A Play in Two Acts

by

Samuel Warren Joseph

Revised: October 16, 2016

1541 N. Laurel Ave., #103  
Los Angeles, CA 90046  
(323) 650-8121  
E-mail: SamuelWJ@aol.com

## **SET**

The entire play takes place in the large STUDY of an old Victorian style house. Center stage is a door. Stage left are bay windows that lead outside. Next to the windows is a large antique wooden desk and chair. Filled bookshelves line the walls. Lamps, several comfortable chairs, a sofa and coffee table are spaced around the room.

## **CAST**

**SETH COLBY** - in his 50's to early 60's. Brilliant, witty, acerbic, a man of great intelligence, ego, and passion.

**MARY COLBY** - in her 50's to early 60's. A strong, smart, maternal woman.

**ROBERT SALINGER** - mid 30's. Intellectual, intense, vulnerable, handsome. Never really comfortable in his own skin.

**KAREN SALINGER** - mid 30's. Her plain self presentation conceals and belies her beauty. Sadness permeates her soul.

**OSCAR BRYANT** - in his 50's. Charismatic, self-righteous, arrogant, pontifical, condescending.

**DETECTIVE PAULINE JOHNSTON** - late 30's, attractive, edgy, with a bit of a chip on her shoulder.

## **ACT I**

Scene 1 - Night.

Scene 2 - Night, two days later.

## **ACT II**

Scene 1 - Night, two days later.

Scene 2 - Late Afternoon, one week later.

Scene 3 - Morning, five days later.

Scene 4 - Night, eight hours later.

Scene 5 - Morning, four days later.

Scene 6 - Afternoon, three hours later.

Scene 7 - Night, six hours later.

**Act I, Scene 1**

NIGHT. The SOUNDS OF A PARTY. Seth stands alone in the middle of the stage, a spotlight on him. The rest of the stage is black. Seth is talking to some of the guests at the party who we cannot see. The SOUND OF LAUGHTER.

SETH

Which reminds me. Many years ago, when I was still teaching, this beautiful young sophomore girl came to my office. Closing the door behind her, she sat down and looking very concerned, she said, "Professor Colby. I'm just having a terrible time in your class. I don't know what to do. I really need an A. I just think you're the best professor here at Briarton, and I'll do anything for you."

I said, "Anything?"

"If you'll give me an A, I'd be so grateful. I'd make you so happy. I couldn't deny anything you asked me to do."

"Anything?"

"Just ask me. I'll do anything you ask me."

(BEAT)

I said, "Would you study?"

LAUGHTER from the group. QUICK BLACKOUT. Then, sounds of people saying good night. The end of the party. A door shuts and footsteps come closer. Lights Up to reveal the entire set.

SETH and ROBERT ENTER, Seth's demeanor completely changes. He pours Robert a drink and one for himself.

SETH

I saw you talking to Leonard Thompson. What does he think?

ROBERT

The man is an idiot. He's not concerned about Oscar.

SETH

They're two peas in a pod.

ROBERT

He claims that we have nothing to worry about, because, get this...Oscar, is a virtuous man. Leonard says, "And I know virtue when I see it."

SETH

Didn't somebody say that about obscenity?

ROBERT

Indeed, society changes, and so does its morality.  
As Spinoza noted, nothing is inherently good or evil.

SETH

Leonard thinks Oscar is good, and we think he's evil. One isn't quite sure whether or not to make him a saint or burn him alive.

ROBERT

Too bad there's nothing short of that option.

SETH

Yes, it's too bad.

ROBERT

(upset)  
It's unbelievable that--

They are interrupted by KAREN, who  
ENTERS.

KAREN

Robert, we should be going... the baby sitter.

Karen is immediately followed into the  
room by MARY carrying a tray filled  
with cups and a pot of coffee.

MARY

Nonsense, Karen. The night is still young...

She motions for them to sit and puts  
the tray down.

KAREN

What a wonderful party. I don't know where you get the  
energy.

MARY

Oh, I enjoy it.

She goes over and kisses Seth on the  
head.

MARY (CONT'D)

Since we've been throwing these for thirty odd years, Seth  
and I have our game plan down.

KAREN

What's that?

MARY

I make sure there's plenty to eat and Seth holds court.

SETH

Wait a second. I noticed you flirting with that new biology professor.

MARY

We were discussing genetic engineering.

SETH

Any hope for me?

MARY

Not yet. I noticed you speaking French to that woman from the consulate. What were you two talking about?

SETH

Food and sex. What else do the French talk about?

KAREN

Seth, I heard you speaking Spanish, too.

SETH

Si, Senora. Hablo bastantes idiomas.

KAREN

Cuantas idiomas habla?

SETH

Ah, you also speak Spanish.

ROBERT

After college, Karen spent two years in the Peace Corps in Central America.

SETH

What were you doing there?

KAREN

I taught English to children.

SETH

You never told me that. That's quite extraordinary. Did you know that about Karen, Mary?

MARY

Of course.

SETH

All these years I've known you and I never heard this.

MARY

That's because the world revolves around you, dear.

SETH

You're right. That's why we have a happy marriage.

(To Karen)

Tell me about this experience.

KAREN

It taught me how blessed I was, no matter what happened in my life. The violence and poverty I saw...and the beauty of the people...that they could withstand that. So, when little Betsy died -- I think about the suffering I saw...and knew I needed to see the blessings, no matter what. Last Friday would've been her third birthday.

(Takes a breath; then to Seth)

So, how many languages do you speak?

SETH

Five fluently, including Latin...a truly great language which is why nobody speaks it.

MARY

What makes the parties so stimulating is the amazing amount of intelligence and ego gathered in one place. You never get bored.

SETH

And if they only spoke Latin. Carpe Diem.

MARY

And all the students who come back to see Seth. You know what I'm talking about.

ROBERT

Yes, I do.

Mary goes over to Seth and kisses him.

SETH

You know, you're still sexy for an old gal.

MARY

That's because I know Latin, too.

SETH

What do you see in an old guy like me?

MARY

Amor Vincit Omnia.

SETH AND MARY

Love Conquers All.

Mary gets up, pours herself some coffee.

SETH

Mary, I think we did well tonight. Grace under fire. A celebration party that seemed more like a funeral.

MARY

I think people had a good time despite the news.

ROBERT

People are scared. If the faculty had anything to say about it...it would've been you, Seth. That was clear tonight.

MARY

It's been clear all along.

Robert picks up the newspaper on the table, begins to read from it.

ROBERT

"Teachers...from the most esteemed professors to new instructors, must be held accountable. That is why I intend to do away with tenure at Briarton. Responsibility will be my motto."

SETH

And who will hold him responsible when the leading members of the faculty defect to our competition? No major university can function without tenure...everyone will be terrified to disagree with him for fear of losing their positions.

MARY

He reminds me of a surgeon.

KAREN

How?

MARY

Most of them seem to think they're God. This man has that flavor. Truth be told, he knows what he knows, and it's not as much as he thinks.

SETH

You've been saying that about me for years.

MARY

And I've been right.

SETH

You know, I may seek another physician.

MARY

Darling, I wish you would.

SETH

I could never do that. You're the only one who really understands what ails me.

MARY

Is that why I've seen you reading all my medical textbooks lately?

SETH

I just want to know what you're teaching your students.

MARY

And I thought it was because you were depressed.

SETH

That, too.

They smile warmly at each other. Robert continues reading.

ROBERT

He's planning on starting a hockey team. "Hockey builds character. I played hockey in college and it made me the man I am today."

SETH

Brain damaged.

ROBERT

Maybe we'll get lucky and he'll have another heart attack.

KAREN

Robert, that's terrible.

ROBERT

Sorry.

(Continues reading)

And he wants to start a hotel management school.

SETH

Briarton University, fifteen Nobel Prize winners, six Pulitzer prize winners, five Supreme Court Justices, Senators, Congressman, captains of industry... That's why we need a hotel management school...where our students of today will become the leaders of tomorrow, by learning to take reservations.

ROBERT

The man has no vision.

SETH

Oh, he has a vision all right. Oscar Bryant sees himself part CEO, part spiritual advisor.

(MORE)



SETH (CONT'D)

He sees Briarton as his own little fiefdom to carry out his bizarre, half-baked social experiments. I knew him in graduate school here. So did Mary.

Robert continues to read.

ROBERT

"We live in a world that wants to deny these distinctions, where truth is seen as just a matter of opinion and everyone's opinion is valued the same. Is that what we want to teach our leaders of tomorrow? That there are no absolutes?"

SETH

The man claims to believe in absolutes. Then why is he on his third marriage? I guess those words "until death do us part" meant..."until I got tired of the old cow."

Seth's intensity and anger has made everyone a little uncomfortable. Karen changes the subject.

KAREN

Robert and I were just saying how many times you've had us over...that it has always felt like going over to our parents' house.

SETH

I don't know if we should take that as a compliment.

KAREN

Without all the baggage.

SETH

I always have found it interesting that in the world of psycho babble, it's the parents who are considered baggage. Why can't children be considered baggage?

MARY

You can take it from that remark that Seth still isn't talking to Daniel.

SETH

And I'm barely talking to my daughter as well. So, what kind of father does that make me?

KAREN

Sad.

SETH

Disappointed.

MARY

I'm sure the feeling's probably mutual.

SETH

Are you disappointed in me?

MARY

Yes...and I'm disappointed in them.

SETH

At least she's honest.

MARY

But I love you. I don't think there's anything you could do to change that.

SETH

Force of habit. Comes after 37 years of marriage.

MARY

Somebody once said, "All marriages are happy. It's living together afterward that causes all the trouble."

Laughter.

KAREN

When did you two know you were in love?

MARY

(To Karen)

On our second date when he told me that he found me sexy because I was smarter than he.

KAREN

That's so sweet.

MARY

Of course he was lying. Seth doesn't think anyone is smarter. He was just trying to get me into bed.

SETH

And it worked!

Mary gives him a playful punch.

KAREN

And you didn't mind that he lied?

MARY

It was such a sweet lie.

ROBERT

(To Seth)

And when did you know Mary was the one?

SETH

Right away, of course. Never has this planet seen such a combination of beauty and brains. It was a "no-brainer".

MARY

You see? Nothing's changed. Seriously, in the end you have to be able to trust each other. Otherwise, it will never work. I always know that I can trust this man, no matter how ornery he might get.

SETH

Another partial compliment. By the time the evening's over, I should have enough to make a whole one.

MARY

(teasing)

Then you just might get a big head.

SETH

Any chance of that occurring was killed this week.

ROBERT

What were the trustees thinking?

SETH

That a best-selling author would make a better symbol as a university president.

ROBERT

Rather than somebody who could actually do the job... somebody the faculty wanted.

SETH

I'm trying not to let my disappointment get in the way of seeing Oscar's positive points.

ROBERT

I'm sorry, but the only thing I see is a man who wrote a bunch of homilies on ethics and values and suddenly he's an expert on the nature of civilization.

KAREN

I kind of liked his book.

ROBERT

Karen--

KAREN

I mean, I think you should have been named president. You're the Provost. You really know this place.

SETH

What did you like about his book?

ROBERT

She didn't--

SETH

She's entitled to her opinion. What did you like about it?

KAREN

That it comes from a Christian point of view, that we have an obligation to take care of the poor.

SETH

I see.

KAREN

I know you disagree with a lot of his philosophy. But he has some things to say about being grateful. Seeing your life for what you have, rather than for what you don't.

SETH

So, rather than acknowledge your own failures, you find a way to chalk them up as victories.

KAREN

Your life is what you want it to be, what you see it as.

SETH

Some people would call that rationalization.

KAREN

I don't want to argue with you.

SETH

I'm not arguing. This is a discussion.

MARY

You're arguing.

SETH

I'm arguing a point...as part of a discussion. What did you think of the book?

MARY

I found it trite. Well-written but trite.

SETH

Isn't that a contradiction?

MARY

Of course. It was well written and superficial which is exactly why it was a best seller.

SETH

That's my gal talking.

KAREN

I guess if you all feel that way, maybe I'm wrong.

MARY

You're not wrong to have your opinion.

KAREN

I just liked its positive outlook.

ROBERT

Karen always looks for the positive in everything.

KAREN

You know, when you teach kindergarten, there is one thing that you learn. How you start the morning with the children will affect how they act the rest of the day. What a person does, how a person acts, has an effect on much more than themselves.

SETH

Very well put.

KAREN

Thank you, Seth.

ROBERT

Karen's a wonderful teacher.

MARY

It's a good attitude towards life. I think that it's not getting what you want. It's how you get what you want. If you get what you want, but lose your soul...what do you have?

SETH

Faust...or a politician.

KAREN

(kidding)

Or a lawyer.

SETH

Same thing.

MARY

I'm serious. There are people who seem to have everything, but they really have nothing. Sure, a rich man may have people being nice to him because of his money, but behind his back he's trash to them.

SETH

But does he care?

MARY

He should. Everyone should care what others think.

SETH

Then you would never make any important decisions. You would never do what needs to be done. On this point I think Oscar and I would actually agree.

MARY

Who decides what needs to be done?

ROBERT

The decision to take one form of action or another, to do one thing or another...is the question.

KAREN

I'm confused.

MARY

So am I.

ROBERT

That is the essence of life, of the mind. What action should one take? Are those actions moral? What are the consequences of those actions?

SETH

Why does this remind me of a doctoral thesis I once read?

Robert smiles.

SETH (CONT'D)

(to Robert)

A brilliant defense of Immanuel Kant's categorical - moral imperative.

MARY

I remember it well. "The best piece of writing to come out of the philosophy department in 30 years."

ROBERT

You flatter me.

MARY

It was Seth who said it. I remember how excited he was.

SETH

What I liked about it was your clear understanding of the need to take action to right a moral wrong.

KAREN

I must admit that when I read it, Robert had to explain half of it to me. But I liked it. It's part of the reason I fell in love with him. I still think about the section on Martin Luther King. Society had a moral obligation to ensure there was equality.

ROBERT

Kant said it was more than an obligation, it was a duty.

KAREN

Oh...sorry.

ROBERT

Karen, there's nothing to be sorry about. I was just commenting.

KAREN

I won't say anything.

MARY

Don't be silly, dear.

KAREN

I just feel that sometimes I'm a fish out of water talking about some of these things.

SETH

Nonsense. I always find what you have to say interesting and insightful.

ROBERT

She's always apologizing for no reason.

MARY

I've noticed that, too.

KAREN

I'm sorry...for being sorry.

ROBERT

She complains that I'm impatient with her.

MARY

Well, are you?

ROBERT

I try not to be. Yes, I am sometimes.

MARY

Well, stop.

ROBERT

(to Karen)

Sorry.

SETH

It's contagious.

KAREN

Sometimes I think I spend too much time with five years olds. Between the kids at home and the children I teach...I worry that my brain will go to waste. I just have a hard time understanding the things Robert lectures and writes about.

SETH

So did his students. That's why I made him Dean.

Laughter.

ROBERT

(joking)

Now you've gone too far.

SETH

It's sort of like this. Philosophers from Aristotle to Plato to Descartes, to Sartre, all of them in their own way have tried to articulate the nature of existence. What is the essence of reality? Was the universe an accident or thought out? Is the mind part of the body, or an independent thing with a soul?

KAREN

The Bible says that God created the universe, the heavens, the earth, people.

SETH

And who created God?

ROBERT

God created God.

SETH

Sort of like an amoeba, self-replicating.

KAREN

God is not an amoeba.

SETH

Probably not.

ROBERT

It's a matter of faith.

SETH

I just have trouble with blind faith.

ROBERT

That's a little unfair, Seth. I'm a Christian because I believe in Christ's teachings.



SETH

As do I. As does Mary. But there's a reason why there are about 50,000 Christian denominations, each pretty much thinking the others are lunatics and heretics. Most Christians are, in my opinion, blind followers of dogmatic traditions that are rigid, controlling and primarily political in nature, not spiritual.

KAREN

Is that how you feel about me, Seth? That I'm just a blind follower?

SETH

No...no, I don't feel that way about you.

MARY

How did we get started on all this?

Seth's bitterness infects the room as he lights a cigarette.

KAREN

I thought you quit smoking.

MARY

He only smokes when he's tense. He's down to half a pack now, which I guess means he's only tense half the time.

SETH

Do I sense a note of hostility?

MARY

I'd just like you alive a few more years, president of the university or not.

Seth takes a long puff, coughs hard.

SETH

During my father's drunken tirades, he would tell me how I would never amount to anything. When I came here as a freshman over forty years ago, Arthur Simon was being sworn in as the new President. What grace. What confidence. After being presented with the President's Pen, he said, "We must risk in order that the world may be a better place. That is why we are here, on this planet, to take risks -- and the greatest is making the choice to take action to do the right thing." And in that moment, I felt that to be a person who could lead and inspire, that would be an achievement. To hold that pen, that position. That would make your life worth living.

MARY

Just because you didn't get it, doesn't make your life worthless.

ROBERT

She's right.

SETH

Seeing the influence I've had on you, Robert, makes me know that.

ROBERT

Me, and many other students.

SETH

(reflecting)

I suppose when you spend your entire life working your way up in an institution -- you come to believe that certain dreams are reachable, even inevitable. The truth is that the only thing inevitable about life is that at some point it will end.

KAREN

Your soul lives on in Heaven.

SETH

And so does one's legacy on this planet.

KAREN

Your soul is more important. That's eternal.

SETH

You'll forgive me if I don't find much comfort in the notion that my eternal soul will find peace in heaven. My guess is that since Oscar Bryant also thinks he's a good Christian, I might be forced to share an apartment with him while I'm there, which then would make heaven sort of a hell, wouldn't it?

KAREN

Heaven is a big place.

SETH

You're right, it should be big enough for the two of us.

KAREN

It's big enough for anyone who accepts Jesus.

SETH

How about Jeffrey Dahmer? He chopped up a bunch of boys and put them in the fridge. Did he go to heaven?

KAREN

If he accepted Jesus before he died.

SETH

So, it doesn't matter what you do in this life, as long as you phone in Jesus before the final curtain.

KAREN

It does matter. What you do in this life, determines what rewards you get in heaven.

SETH

Oh, I guess that would mean Jeffrey is sitting up there in the mezzanine section.

MARY

Don't take your anger out on her.

SETH

Was I doing that? I'm sorry, very sorry.

MARY

Seth.

SETH

Okay.

ROBERT

Karen is encouraged by her pastor to express her faith whenever possible.

KAREN

He encourages you, too, whenever you manage to make it to church.

MARY

Karen, I was cleaning the attic and found some old toys. Why don't you and I take a look and you can pick out a couple for Janey and Robert, Jr.

KAREN

All right.

They go to the door. Karen stops.

KAREN

Seth, I didn't mean to upset you. I think you are a wonderful man and friend.

SETH

You didn't upset me. I apologize if I was ornery. As far as Jesus is concerned, Karen...I just wish he had been on the board of trustees.

Mary smiles and Karen is relieved.  
THEY EXIT through the door.

ROBERT

She wasn't like this when we got married. Ever since the baby died--

SETH

It's hard for her. She carried the child.

ROBERT

She blames herself for the car accident and for Betsy's death.

SETH

She must find solace at the church.

ROBERT

She finds solace in simple answers to complex questions. It's impossible to live with. It's why I... I was weak. I made a mistake with...

He stops himself.

SETH

It wasn't your fault.

ROBERT

You're the only one who knows.

SETH

I appreciate your trust.

ROBERT

There's nobody else I really do trust.

SETH

Ah, for what might have been. I saw you taking my place as Provost now and as President in a few years when I retired.

ROBERT

Thank you.

SETH

No doubt in my mind. I would've made it happen.

ROBERT

It's just not fair.

SETH

Life is only fair for those who make the rules.

ROBERT

Who said that?

SETH

Me.

Both Seth and Robert start laughing.  
It's a bit contagious and it's hard for  
them to stop. Seth pours Robert  
another drink.

ROBERT

Life's twists and turns.

SETH

Morality. May we all find peace living someone else's.

ROBERT

I can't do that.

SETH

All right. Moral relativism. Define it for the sake of  
discussion.

ROBERT

Here, we put a petty thief in jail...and in some Arab country  
they hack his hand off, and many won't condemn the brutality  
because they believe that any society has the right to make  
their own laws. But the question becomes is morality only  
based on society's values? With moral relativism, there are  
no absolutes.

SETH

As Protagoras said, "Man is the measure of all things."

(BEAT)

Pretend you were King for a day...what would your morality  
be?

ROBERT

I've never thought about it.

SETH

Of course you have. The laws of Robert and Seth. The first  
law is yours to make.

ROBERT

The first thing would be to install you as President.

SETH

A man who has his priorities right. However, the trustees  
have already decided.

ROBERT

Well, I guess you would have to--

SETH

Get rid of Oscar.

ROBERT

(laughs)

Exactly. Except, what laws did he break?

SETH

I don't know. We're the ones making them up.

ROBERT

He broke the laws of...human decency.

SETH

There you go. The man is not a decent human being. His first wife drank herself to death. When Oscar was in government, he helped create the policy that sanctioned the murders of thousands in Central America under the notion of stopping Communism. You even wrote about it.

ROBERT

Thousands died for no reason. You're right, Seth. Not a decent fellow.

SETH

Not a decent fellow.

ROBERT

But the law doesn't allow us to do anything.

SETH

I would say that Oscar has violated the law of decency so extremely, so egregiously, that he has committed a capital crime.

ROBERT

(kidding)

Well, I guess the simplest answer is...execution.

SETH

So. How should we do it?

ROBERT

The electric chair.

SETH

Burning flesh smells.

ROBERT

Firing squad.

SETH

Messy.

ROBERT

(laughs)

All right. How about hanging?

SETH

What is this, the old west? How about lethal injection?

ROBERT

It's so undramatic.

SETH

Why does it have to be dramatic?

ROBERT

Because, the point of execution is to rid society of those who behave the most horribly...and to serve as a deterrent.

SETH

I see your point.

ROBERT

Then again, they killed Socrates with hemlock, and that turned out to be quite dramatic.

SETH

I like poison. Poison it is.

ROBERT

Unfortunately, we don't make up the rules.

SETH

What's criminal is that Harvard, Yale, Stanford are going to have a field day raiding us. And the rest of the faculty is terrified of losing their jobs. Most of the alumni are furious. This will cost the university millions of dollars in donations.

ROBERT

It's like watching a car stuck on tracks and the train approaching, and there is nothing you can do.

Silence.

SETH

Oscar wants to meet day after tomorrow to discuss the "transition."

ROBERT

What do you plan to say to him?

SETH

Any suggestions?

ROBERT

Maybe, ask him--

SETH

Why a man who has a history of serious heart problems would want to undertake such a stressful job?

ROBERT

And what do you think he'd say?

SETH

That he had a moral obligation to make Briarton a better place.

ROBERT

(smiles)

He would say that.

Robert takes a sip of the drink.

ROBERT

You know, I can't even enjoy a drink anymore without feeling guilty.

SETH

Is it a sin to have a drink, now?

ROBERT

According to Karen. Though she won't say anything.

SETH

Then forget about it.

ROBERT

I can't. I feel guilty about...you know.

SETH

You have to get over that. Guilt will kill you.

Seth lights up another cigarette,  
COUGHS again.

ROBERT

So will those cigarettes.

SETH

You're not the first professor to have an affair with a student.

ROBERT

I still have this urge to tell Karen.

SETH

That would just end your marriage.

ROBERT

I feel so responsible.



SETH

Did she really expect you to leave your wife for her? If it hadn't been you, it would've been someone else who rejected her. She was emotionally unstable. When she took those pills, it was a terrible thing. But, there was nothing you could do.

ROBERT

I wish I believed that.

(BEAT)

You're the only person, ever, who has really believed in me, and I wouldn't be where I am without you.

SETH

You know, my own son settled in life for mediocrity. Working in the post office... You... you've always had a direction... a moral compass. You have a passion for education, for this great institution.

ROBERT

I can't believe the trustees made this decision. If there were only a way to undo it.

SETH

Of course, there is no reason to unless, as Mill put it, the greater good would be served.

ROBERT

The university is going to suffer--

SETH

Of course we all still have a choice. PLATO! What would you do if you borrow a weapon from your neighbor? The neighbor asks for its return because he's telling you he's furious with someone else and he intends to use the weapon to kill him. If you return the weapon, you become part of the crime. If you don't return the weapon, then you're violating your oath to the man to return his property.

ROBERT

Yes, but in the end there is a right decision. One would be morally obligated to prevent the killing. That would supersede the other obligation.

SETH

Unless, of course, there were a moral obligation for that person to be killed.

ROBERT

I can't imagine--

SETH

Of course you can. You know and I know that there are no absolute moral laws.

(MORE)

SETH (CONT'D)

There is only what you and I believe, know, to be right and wrong. The whole world behaves on that principle. My god, look at what we have now. Men flying planes into buildings, suicide bombers killing infidels, all in the name of religion. We call their martyrdom madness, and they call us immoral heathens.

ROBERT

There is nothing we can do.

SETH

It's a choice.

ROBERT

My conscience--

SETH

Conscience...is something we learn. It's something we're taught. But what does it mean?

ROBERT

It means knowing right from wrong.

SETH

A terrorist blows up a school bus of children thinking he's done a great deed.

ROBERT

And he's wrong.

SETH

Every revolution began with so called terrorists. The British called George Washington a traitor and we call him the father of our country.

ROBERT

Yes, but they were committing violent acts for what they believed was the greater good.

SETH

And what about the greater good of this university?!

ROBERT

I know what you're asking--

SETH

I got the idea from you.

ROBERT

Me?

SETH

You said you wished he had a heart attack. You were thinking of ways to execute him.

ROBERT

I was joking.

SETH

Were you? We always pretend that we don't wish ill on others. That's the biggest lie we tell ourselves.

ROBERT

Seth, this is too much.

SETH

No, what's too much is for us to sit back and do nothing. That's what Kant would say.

ROBERT

Except, Kant based his theory on moral law.

SETH

The greatest good for the greatest number. Right? If universal suffering shall occur, then--

ROBERT

Then, one must take the action--

SETH

To save the innocent.

ROBERT

Yes. But Kant makes it clear that just because someone might be unhappy isn't enough reason...self-interest, isn't sufficient basis to take action.

SETH

You mean killing.

ROBERT

I mean murder.

SETH

There's the rub, my friend. It's murder if it's selfish. It's a moral choice if it's not.

ROBERT

Society would look at it as murder either way.

SETH

Not if you don't get caught. We wouldn't do this for selfish reasons alone, because that would be wrong.

(BEAT)

Is it imperative that Oscar not be President?

ROBERT

Seth, I mean there must be other ways. We could get the faculty to sign a petition--

SETH

The Board of Trustees knew how they felt. They didn't care.

ROBERT

We could go to the press.

SETH

It would be like sour grapes.

ROBERT

I don't know.

SETH

You do know.

ROBERT

How?

SETH

He's a sick man.

ROBERT

It's outrageous.

SETH

It's outrageous that he's going to be President.

ROBERT

This is very dangerous.

SETH

Yes, but not immoral.

ROBERT

I can't do something like that.

SETH

Even if you know the consequences for not taking action.

ROBERT

My conscience--

SETH

It is moral. If a man comes into your house meaning you and your family harm, tries to rape your wife and you kill him in self-defense...that is not murder.

ROBERT

Oscar Bryant is not attacking us--

SETH

How about our careers and livelihoods? Yours. And there's Karen and your children. This man will destroy everything we believe in.

(MORE)

SETH (CONT'D)

By the time he's done, he will have the blood of dozens of faculty and students on his hands. But will he feel guilt?!

ROBERT

It's murder.

SETH

It's for the greater good. If you had a chance to kill Hitler when he was young, knowing what he would do, would you have done it?

ROBERT

Of course.

SETH

It would be imperative to kill him, to save millions of lives.

ROBERT

Yes, it would have been imperative.

SETH

Yet, you would be a killer.

ROBERT

Oscar is not Hitler.

SETH

You're right. He's not. It's wrong to compare him to the most evil man in history. But the question is, how much harm do you have to do to others, to justify having your own life taken? Take the article you yourself published condemning the atrocities in Central America, how our policy was immoral? For that policy, some called Oscar Bryant a statesman, others called Oscar Bryant a war criminal. What do you think he was?

ROBERT

Seth--

SETH

And based on past, what will he do here? What great leader will not lead, what scientific discovery will be lost? What good works will go undone? What will happen to this great university?

ROBERT

We can't know for sure--

SETH

Then tell me what you do know?

ROBERT

I do know that he's the wrong man...it's a terrible thing that he was named to be President...I know that, but, I--

SETH

He is a monster, Robert. You do know that, too.

Silence.

ROBERT

Why do you need me? You could do it yourself.

SETH

I could, maybe. Maybe not. But then, you would know if I did. How would you look at me then?

ROBERT

What do you mean?

SETH

How would you look at me, knowing I'm a murderer. Could you look me in the eye? Could you still trust me?

ROBERT

I would never say anything.

SETH

Because you want him dead, too. But you would be just as responsible. You knew what I was going to do, and you did nothing to stop me. Of course, you would be reaping the benefits, but taking none of the risks.

ROBERT

That's not fair.

SETH

Fair is not part of this equation. Survival, justice, a moral obligation to the university. Those are the stakes here.

ROBERT

I know that, but--

SETH

Know this, he will destroy this great institution.

ROBERT

Destroy?

SETH

Oh, it will continue to exist, but as a pail shadow of what it once was. It will become unrecognizable, second rate, mediocre. You know that.

ROBERT

Yes.

SETH

And again, this was *your* idea. You brought it up first.

(Silence)

He asked that you be part of the meeting in two days. It's our best chance, maybe our only one. The future is all we have, and with him, we have none. It's for the 'Highest Good', the Greatest Good'--

ROBERT

--for the 'Greatest Good'--

SETH

Action must be taken.

ROBERT

If we did this thing...I mean, I know he shouldn't be President,...If we did this thing--?

SETH

We would be very careful.

ROBERT

What about his wife, his family?

SETH

He has no children and based on his first two marriages we'll be doing her a favor.

Silence.

ROBERT

Will you be able to live with yourself?

SETH

Yes...because we are not evil men. We are good men. We are men who love...and care...and only want the best...for the future. Yours, mine, the school's. You see what we have to do, Robert. You see it clearly, don't you?

ROBERT

Yes.

SETH

Think of Kant, and tell me why we are going to do this thing. Tell me why we must. Tell me why.

ROBERT

Because...

SETH

Why?....Why?

ROBERT

It is a moral imperative.

The LIGHTS QUICKLY FADE OUT.

**Act I, Scene 2**

NIGHT...two days later. Seth leads Oscar into the study. Robert gets up from his seat to shake his hand.

SETH

You remember, Robert.

OSCAR

Of course. How are you young man?

ROBERT

It's great to see you again, sir.

SETH

We appreciate your coming over tonight.

OSCAR

Well, I'm still staying at the hotel until the President's home is vacated, so meeting here was an excellent idea.

SETH

Please, sit down.

Robert and Oscar sit.

SETH (CONT'D)

Can I get you something to drink?

OSCAR

Well, since on doctor's orders I'm limiting myself to one drink, let me choose my poison carefully. Do you have any single malt scotch?

SETH

Glenlivet?

OSCAR

Perfect.

Seth pours the drink from the bottle, but as he does also empties a small vial's contents into the glass out of Oscar's view.

OSCAR

(to Robert)

I understand that you're the expert on Kant.



ROBERT

Hardly. Though I've written extensively on his ethical philosophy.

OSCAR

Yes. I quite agree with him.

ROBERT

Really?

OSCAR

Certainly. We all have an obligation to live moral lives. You know, I think people misunderstand my desire for absolutes. If we don't have them, by what moral code do we decide the correct course of action?

ROBERT

But what if there is a flaw in what's considered an absolute?

Seth hands Robert the drink to hand to Oscar. He hesitates.

OSCAR

Then you must reconsider it.

ROBERT

I see.

OSCAR

I'm more open minded than you give me credit for.

Robert isn't sure what to do with the drink. Seth tries not to seem anxious.

OSCAR (CONT'D)

Sometimes these decisions can be difficult, deciding what truly is moral. Too often politics, in government and out, is based on what is pragmatic, not what is right.

SETH

Like U.S. policy in Central America.

OSCAR

Now what we did there was moral.

ROBERT

I'm not sure Kant would agree.

OSCAR

How so?

ROBERT

Sixty thousand people were butchered. More than that in refugees.

OSCAR

I can see you're passionate about this. That's good. You should be. It means you have a heart. But American troops did not commit the atrocities.

ROBERT

Our country, you supported those who did.

OSCAR

We had to stop the leftist guerillas. Morally, we were right. Practically, there was much suffering. But as tragic as it was, it was necessary.

ROBERT

Why?

OSCAR

To save the country, the region, for democracy.

(BEAT)

You going to give me my drink?

ROBERT

Uh--

Robert hesitates slightly...

OSCAR

Sadly, sometimes people must die for a nobler cause.

Robert is appalled by this remark, and finally hands the drink to Oscar without reservation.

OSCAR (CONT'D)

Thank you. I love talking politics.

SETH

Even with those who disagree with you?

OSCAR

Especially.

SETH

You want the same, Robert?

ROBERT

Yes, please.

Seth pours two more glasses from the bottle, gives one to Robert and then sits down across from Oscar. Robert sits in between the two, each of the three chairs about ten feet from each other.

OSCAR

Well, Seth, I can say you've aged since graduate school, but not as much as I have.

SETH

It must be that you work harder than I do.

OSCAR

Is that it? Maybe you just take better care of yourself.

SETH

I doubt it.

Oscar begins to drink, stops.

OSCAR

A toast. To the future of Briarton University. May it become what it should be.

Oscar tastes the liquid. Robert and Seth watch anxiously. Oscar swallows tentatively.

SETH

Is something wrong?

OSCAR

It's been so long since I've had Glenlivet, I wanted to enjoy it.

Oscar then takes two quick healthy gulps, almost finishing, while Seth and Robert sip theirs.

OSCAR (CONT'D)

So...the future.

SETH

Of course, that is the question. What should it be?

OSCAR

How right you are, my friend. I can call you friend? We've known each other long enough.

SETH

Of course.

OSCAR

Because it's important to have a good relationship with the people you work with.

SETH

Absolutely.

OSCAR

Like you two. You've helped Robert here along ever since he got to Briarton, so you know he's somebody you can trust.

SETH

I asked Robert to be here because as Academic Dean he has some insight into the ramifications that drastic changes in the curriculum and staffing would bring.

OSCAR

So, the two of you are worried about the corrections I'm going to make when they hand me the President's Pen next week.

SETH

We have concerns.

OSCAR

We can talk about those, but you and I have much to catch up on.

SETH

I didn't think you remembered me that well.

OSCAR

You were impressive even back then.

SETH

So were you.

OSCAR

Tell the truth. I didn't really manage to impress you, did I?

SETH

I certainly heard what you had to say.

OSCAR

Everybody heard what I had to say. I never shut up.

ROBERT

Just before you got here, Seth was telling me how... stimulating you were back then.

OSCAR

You're not a very good liar. Our good friend here thought I was a loud-mouthed buffoon and still does.

SETH

A buffoon is somebody I wouldn't take very seriously. I take you very seriously, Oscar.

OSCAR

I imagine you do...at this point.

(BEAT)

I know you wanted this position.

SETH

If it wasn't me, no one deserved it more than you.

OSCAR

You do that very well. Amazing. I'll admit that there are many times I've told a polite lie in my life...but never as good as that.

SETH

You underestimate how much I admire your political skills.

OSCAR

Did you know that I read your thesis about Marx? I even defended you to a bunch of left wing nuts who thought you were a traitor "to the cause." In the end you turned out to be wrong, of course.

SETH

Wrong? I predicted the downfall of Communism in the Soviet Union.

OSCAR

That was easy to do. You said that it would fail because it was a dictatorship. You still had empathy for the leftist liberal bleeding heart ideas. I knew it would fail because Communism was inherently corrupt both philosophically and politically.

SETH

Which was my point exactly and which is why I opposed the war in Vietnam.

OSCAR

As far as I'm concerned, the actions of the liberal professors and the radical students in the 60's bordered on treason.

ROBERT

For legally expressing their opposition to a war that virtually everyone now says was a mistake?

OSCAR

Ah, the acolyte defends the master.

ROBERT

The acolyte wasn't born then, but he has read about it.

OSCAR

(to Seth)

I see that you've trained him well. Patriotism means supporting your government in times of war.

ROBERT

All wars? Iraq? WMD's?

OSCAR

Even Iraq.

SETH

When you addressed the trustees, did you happen to mention your views on history?

OSCAR

No, I saved them for you.

SETH

I can see why.

OSCAR

They wouldn't have appreciated them the same way.

SETH

It's always important not to give out too much information. People might get the right idea.

OSCAR

You always had a quick wit, Seth. I think that's what Mary saw in you. How is she?

SETH

She's fine. She sends her regrets at not being here tonight. She's teaching a class.

OSCAR

Here, at Briarton, right? And a private practice to boot. Quite a woman you married.

SETH

I think so.

OSCAR

What is she teaching?

SETH

This term, a class on medical ethics.

OSCAR

Clearly, you must have had some influence on her.

SETH

Not much. She opposes, but I favor euthanasia in certain circumstances.

OSCAR

Anyone in mind?

SETH

Only hypothetically speaking.

Oscar loosens his collar, wipes his head.

OSCAR

It's warm in here. Things are only hypothetical until a person has the will to act. Wouldn't you agree?

SETH

I'm not sure I understand.

OSCAR

People talk about change, but rarely have the courage to act on their convictions.

SETH

That certainly wouldn't seem to be a problem for you.

OSCAR

But is it a problem for you? Do you have the courage to act on your convictions?

SETH

I don't know. Do I, Robert?

ROBERT

Uh...yes. Yes, you do.

OSCAR

I wonder.

SETH

Can I get you another drink?

OSCAR

Not yet. You know, Robert, I've known your mentor here from the early days, and I can say one thing that's absolutely true about him. He never left this place. Right, Seth? You never left.

SETH

That's right. I've done my life's work here.

OSCAR

There's nothing wrong with that, Robert. To spend your whole life stuck doing the same thing. Now, I just hope it doesn't happen to you.

ROBERT

I don't think that, uh,...

SETH

I can speak for myself. Oscar, I will acknowledge that you and I have had, and will continue to have our differences. The question is, can we work together?

OSCAR

That is the question. What do you think, Robert? Do you think I can work with Seth?

ROBERT

I don't know.

OSCAR

Do you think I can work with you?

ROBERT

I like to think I can work with anybody.

OSCAR

Did you hear that, Seth? If I were you, I'd start to get worried.

SETH

I know where I stand.

OSCAR

And Robert, where do you stand?

ROBERT

I stand for the good of the university.

OSCAR

Of course.

Oscar pulls out a handkerchief, wipes his face, takes a deep breath.

OSCAR (CONT'D)

When the President of the United States asked me to be in his cabinet, I only agreed to take the job if I could make the changes I thought necessary. He accepted my terms. I intend to do the same here. I know I'm going to meet resistance. So be it. However, in the end, I will get what I want, or die trying.



SETH

No need to get dramatic.

OSCAR

That's my style. Drama can get you a long way. Now...let's start with the big one....tenure.

Oscar unbuttons his shirt.

SETH

Do you mind if I smoke?

OSCAR

No, it's your house.

Seth lights a cigarette.

ROBERT

I think, that, you're going to meet a lot of resistance.

OSCAR

(impatient)

I know that.

ROBERT

Then, to sell this idea to the faculty, you have to have a rationale they can live with.

OSCAR

Can you open the door?

Seth gets up, opens a window.

SETH

You sure I can't get you another drink?

OSCAR

All right. A soda, Coke?

SETH

Coming up.

Seth goes to the bar, pours a can of coke in a glass over ice and again secretly pours some more of the fluid from the vial. As Oscar speaks, Seth once again hands Robert the drink. Robert is clearly having doubts. Oscar reaches out for the drink and Robert reluctantly hands it to him. Oscar takes several large swallows to quench his thirst.

OSCAR

Rationale. All right. How about the fact that one school after another has incompetent, emotionally unstable persons teaching. It's true in the public schools. It's true in the colleges and the universities. Let me give you an example. There was a teacher in Florida who would get into book throwing fights with her students, claimed that evil spirits had invaded her students' eyes and then she changed her last name to "God". Under tenure rules, it took three years to get rid of her.

SETH

Well, I would agree with you in that case, Oscar.

OSCAR

You would?

SETH

The problem is that most of the faculty here think they're God and since it is your intention to make sure this institution is monotheistic - *with only one God* - then I think you're going to be spending a lot of time rooting out the infidels.

OSCAR

If that's what it takes.

SETH

Clearly, you are the God to do it.

OSCAR

(to Robert)

I think that your mentor is mocking me.

ROBERT

I think he's just pointing out the difficulty of a change like this.

OSCAR

People must be accountable for what they do, wouldn't you agree?

ROBERT

Yes.

OSCAR

And that there are no guarantees in life?

ROBERT

Yes.

OSCAR

Then why are we guaranteeing the faculty jobs whether they meet the standards or not?

ROBERT

I think the question is, who is making the standards?

OSCAR

Those in charge. Those in authority, as in all walks of life.

ROBERT

But to one authority a professor might be gifted, to another he might be an imbecile.

OSCAR

Granted. It's an acceptance of change when the power structure changes. It works that way in business and government.

ROBERT

Well, for the sake of argument, this isn't a business. This is a place where ideas of various sorts can be expressed and flourish, and if someone has to worry whether or not what they say or write or publish will get them fired, then that will have a chilling effect on the essence of free thought.

OSCAR

Very eloquent. You have taught him well, Seth. It will not be a witch hunt. It will not be based on ideology. That would be wrong. No, it's to weed out the incompetent. I will use standards that a reasonable person could accept. So, when I do away with tenure, will you support me?

Robert doesn't answer.

SETH

You're putting him in an awkward position.

OSCAR

He's a grown man. He can answer for himself.

ROBERT

I would have to know how it works.

OSCAR

It will work this simply. I will fire who I think should be fired and keep those professors who I think are worthy.

ROBERT

And what will be your standards of review?

OSCAR

I will observe them in action - talk to students...

Oscar becomes suddenly lost for breath.  
He clutches his chest in pain.

I can't breathe.

OSCAR (CONT'D)

Oscar tries to put the drink down on the table but the glass misses and falls to the floor, the drink spilling. Oscar reaches in his pocket, pulls out a bottle of pills, tries to open it.

Help me.

OSCAR (CONT'D)

He starts to open the bottle, has trouble.

Let me.

SETH

Seth takes the bottle from him, but instead of opening it, steps back away from him as Oscar collapses to the floor.

The pills...

OSCAR

Seth inspects the bottle.

Nitroglycerin. Used to start hearts up and blow up buildings. I always found that an interesting connection.

What...are...you...doing?

OSCAR

Acting on my convictions.

The pills...

OSCAR

I'm afraid not.

SETH

Seth...

ROBERT

What?

SETH

He's sick...he's...

ROBERT



Robert steps back from Oscar who lunges for the pills, falling to the floor. Oscar shortness of breath becomes more intense as he gasps for air.

OSCAR

For God's sakes...please...

Robert turns his back...he can't watch. Seth bends down next to Oscar, takes his arm, feels for a pulse. He puts his ear next to his mouth.

SETH

He's still breathing.

Robert still hasn't turned as Seth grabs a pillow.

SETH (CONT'D)

Help me! HELP ME!!

Robert still doesn't move. Seth jumps up and quickly pulls Robert over so both of them are now kneeling next to Oscar. Seth places the pillow over Oscar's face.

ROBERT

I can't.

SETH

You will, damn it! Just push down on that side.

Robert reluctantly complies. They both push down on the pillow. Oscar stirs, seems to try and fight what is happening, his legs twitch. Then...The SOUND OF SOMEONE COMING INTO THE HOUSE.

ROBERT

Somebody's here.

MARY (OFF STAGE)

Hello!

The door starts to open. Seth quickly throws the pillow back on the couch and grabs the nitroglycerin pills out of Robert's hand and puts them in his own pocket.

MARY ENTERS and sees Oscar on the floor.

MARY (CONT'D)

Oh, my!

SETH

He just collapsed. He was talking and all of a sudden...

Mary rushes over to him and immediately begins CPR and mouth to mouth resuscitation.

MARY

Call 911! Now!

Seth hesitates for a second then goes to the phone and picks it up.

BLACK OUT.

**END OF ACT ONE**

**Act II, Scene 1**

NIGHT, two days later. Seth dressed in pajamas and bathrobe, reads at his desk puffing on a cigarette. Mary comes in also dressed for bed. Seth coughs from the cigarette.

SETH

You'll notice that I'm keeping the rest of the house smoke free as you desire.

MARY

I just wish that you would keep your body the same way.

SETH

I'm glad you still care.

She walks over to him and kisses him.

MARY

Yes, I still care. I love you.

SETH

I love you.

MARY

You coming to bed?

SETH

In a minute. I'm just going over some notes for the meeting with the trustees.

MARY

What do you think they're going to do?

SETH

I'm not sure. It depends.

The DOORBELL RINGS.

MARY

Who could it be at this time?

Mary EXITS the stage leaving the door to the study open. SOUNDS OFF STAGE of a DOOR OPENING and...

MARY (OFF STAGE)

Robert, it's very late.

ROBERT (OFF STAGE)

I'm sorry. Is Seth still up?



Mary and Robert ENTER.

SETH

Robert, what's going on?

ROBERT

I'm sorry, Seth. But I need to go over some papers before the trustees meeting.

SETH

Well, I guess it couldn't wait.

MARY

I'll leave you two alone. Good night.

MARY EXITS closing the door behind her.

ROBERT

He's still in a coma.

SETH

I'm well aware of that fact.

ROBERT

What if he wakes up?

SETH

Then you and I will have a very resentful boss.

ROBERT

I'm serious.

SETH

His prognosis is not good.

ROBERT

I heard a rumor that he was responding to treatment.

SETH

Where did you hear this?

ROBERT

One of the parent's of Karen's student is a nurse at the hospital. We should know what we're going to say.

SETH

Like we discussed, we're going to say he suddenly collapsed just as Mary came home. She administered CPR while I called 911. That's it. Nothing more.

ROBERT

I mean what are we going to say if he wakes up?

SETH

And accuses us of trying to kill him?

ROBERT

Yes.

SETH

Then...then, that would be quite interesting.

ROBERT

"Interesting" is not the word I would use.

SETH

You need to calm down.

ROBERT

I AM CALM!

SETH

I think it would be good if we didn't share this conversation with the neighbors, let alone Mary.

ROBERT

The pillow...the one we used to...

SETH

I took off the cover and cleaned it twice.

ROBERT

What are we going to say if he accuses us?

SETH

We have no choice but to deny it completely. That Oscar Bryant's heart attack must have affected his brain, causing delusions. Think about it. How would it look? My wife saves his life, yet he's accusing me of trying to kill him. I called 911. People will think him crazy...but only if we tell the truth. And the truth is he collapsed and we saved him.

ROBERT

I don't know.

SETH

You don't know what?

ROBERT

Who they'll believe.

SETH

Oh, they'll believe us, if you can tell the truth with conviction.

ROBERT

It's not the truth.

SETH

He did collapse. We did save him.

ROBERT

Yes, but...

SETH

Choose the facts that fit the story you want to tell and ignore the rest.

ROBERT

I'm having trouble with this.

SETH

So am I. But we didn't have any choice. He would've destroyed Briarton and us. Remember that.

ROBERT

Karen...she senses something wrong. She keeps on asking questions.

SETH

What do you mean?! You didn't tell her, did you?

ROBERT

No.

The PHONE RINGS several times, stops.

SETH

I hope you're not thinking of spilling your guts to her. If you were Catholic you could go to confession, but you're not. This is a secret...just between you and me.

ROBERT

I can't sleep--

SETH

Damn it...there's I nothing I can do about that! You're going to have to live with it. You're going to have live with it, like I'm going to have to live with it.

Mary ENTERS.

MARY

That was Henry Wexler. Oscar Bryant passed away an hour ago.

Silence.

SETH

Well, that's that. A tragedy. But we did our best to save him.

MARY

Are you all right, Robert?

ROBERT

Uh, yes, I guess.

SETH

Robert has had a lot on his mind. Why don't you go home and give that lovely wife of yours a kiss and go to sleep. Everything will seem clearer in the morning.

Robert, in his own world, heads for the door.

MARY

Good night, Robert.

ROBERT

Good night.

Robert EXITS.

MARY

What's going on?

SETH

Uh, he and Karen had a fight.

MARY

Over what?

SETH

I don't know. Something to do with the kids.

MARY

Well, what?

SETH

He asked me not to say anything.

MARY

(annoyed)

Really.

SETH

Don't get angry at me.

MARY

I'm not angry. I just don't understand.

SETH  
There's nothing to understand.

                                MARY  
You're keeping something from me.

                                SETH  
How do you know?

                                MARY  
Because when you've tried, I've known anyway.

                                SETH  
Is that right?

                                MARY  
Have you been keeping things from me?

                                SETH  
You're getting tricky in your later years.

                                MARY  
I don't want you to keep things from me.

                                SETH  
I'm tired. Let's go to bed.

                                He goes to kiss her but she turns her  
                                head so he only kisses her on the  
                                cheek.

                                MARY  
I'm not tired. I think I'm going to read awhile.

                                SETH  
All right. 'Night.

                                Seth EXITS. Mary sits down, thinks for  
                                a moment, a disturbed look on her face.

LIGHTS QUICKLY FADE OUT.

**Act II, Scene 2**

                                One week later. SETH, dressed in a  
                                business suit, stands alone on stage, a  
                                SINGLE SPOTLIGHT on him as he delivers  
                                a speech.

                                SETH  
Oscar and I didn't always see eye to eye. Yet, in one way,  
we were quite alike. We shared a love for this institution,  
this university, and a passionate determination to maintain  
its greatness.

(MORE)

SETH (CONT'D)

A great American has died and we are all the poorer for his loss. I only hope, now, as I represent Briarton as its new President, I can live up to the ideals, standards and aspirations that Oscar Bryant so exemplified.

LATE AFTERNOON, several hours later in  
SETH'S STUDY.

Seth takes a seat as the LIGHTS COME  
UP.

Seth, Mary, Robert and Karen, are all  
dressed just having come from the  
funeral. They sit having coffee and  
cookies.

KAREN

I thought what you had to say were very kind words.

SETH

Thank you.

KAREN

I realize that it may have been hard for you.

SETH

Why?

KAREN

Because you and Oscar, I know, did not agree.

SETH

It never serves one well to speak ill of the dead,  
particularly at their funeral. They can't talk back.

ROBERT

Did you notice how cold his wife was?

SETH

No, she seemed fine.

MARY

He's right. She was almost hostile. I tried to talk to her,  
to give my condolences and to tell her that I did the best I  
could to save her husband. She wouldn't even acknowledge me.

SETH

She is just upset.

ROBERT

Mary's right. The way she looked at me.

KAREN

Robert, we should go. The baby sitter has to get home.

ROBERT

All right.

MARY

It's been a long day. You two come over for dinner this weekend.

KAREN

We can celebrate your becoming President, Seth.

SETH

Uh, yes.

KAREN

Did I say something wrong?

ROBERT

No...it's just, Oscar--

KAREN

I'm sorry.

MARY

Yes, we should celebrate. We're not saying we're happy Oscar Bryant's dead...we're saying we're happy for Seth--

SETH

And Robert. Right?

ROBERT

Yes.

SETH

Because I intend to make sure that Robert succeeds me as Provost.

ROBERT

Who knows about the future? It's very unsure.

SETH

The future is fairly predictable.

ROBERT

But not certain.

MARY

All Seth was saying--

ROBERT

I know what he was saying. I'm not ungrateful... it's just...

Silence.

KAREN

Well, good night everybody.

MARY

Good night.

Robert and Karen EXIT.

MARY (CONT'D)

He seems to be carrying some sort of burden.

SETH

We all carry burdens. Some just handle it better than others.

MARY

What do you mean?

SETH

Just speaking philosophically. It's what I do.

MARY

Give me a hug.

Seth and Mary embrace.

SETH

Do you know how lucky I am to have you?

MARY

Yes.

SETH

Oh, you do, huh?

MARY

You just thank your lucky stars every day.

Just then ROBERT rushes back in.

ROBERT

I'm sorry, but there's this Detective out here...

DETECTIVE PAULINE JOHNSTON ENTERS.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Good evening. Sorry to barge in, I'm Detective Pauline Johnston, Metro Division. You are Seth Colby...and you are Dr. Colby?

MARY

Yes, I'm Dr. Mary Colby.



DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Dr. Colby. My aunt's been a patient of yours for years.  
Agnes Johnston?

MARY

Oh, yes.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Thinks the world of you.

MARY

Thank you.

She hands each of them a card... all  
except Karen who comes back in a moment  
later.

MARY

Homicide.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Just a formality. There were some questions about Oscar  
Bryant's death.

SETH

We explained everything the night he had his attack.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

I understand. However his wife feels that, uh, -- she would  
like us to take a look into this.

MARY

This is very inappropriate.

KAREN

Robert...the babysitter.

ROBERT

Uh, I have to go.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

And you are Robert Salinger. You were also here the night he  
died.

ROBERT

Yes, but...

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

But you have to go.

ROBERT

I mean I can stay if you want.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

No, this is just a formality. I'll be by to see you. Good night.

A disconcerted Robert slowly EXITS following Karen out.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

According to what you told the paramedics, Oscar Bryant collapsed during a meeting with you and Mr. Salinger... and then Dr. Colby tried to revive him. Correct?

MARY

That's it.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Do you mind if I speak to your husband alone?

MARY

Yes, I mind. I have been married to this man for 37 years and I know he would never hurt anybody.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

I suppose it's all right if you both are here. What was of concern to Mrs. Bryant was the fact that the deceased always carried nitroglycerin pills with him -- but none were found when he came to the hospital.

SETH

Maybe they fell out of his pocket, or he forgot them.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

My thoughts exactly. You didn't happen to see any, did you?

SETH

No.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

You sure?

SETH

Yes, I'm sure.

MARY

I didn't see any, either.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Now, how long was it before you called 911.

SETH

Less than a minute. He collapsed. Robert and I rushed to his side. Mary came in at that moment and I called for help.

Seth lights a cigarette, COUGHS HARD.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Do you mind not smoking?

SETH

Uh, this is my house.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

I understand that, but I'm allergic to smoke.

Seth reluctantly puts the cigarette out.

SETH

As you wish.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Doesn't she tell you how bad those things are for you?

SETH

Often.

MARY

I dread hearing the results of his annual checkup. Did you make the appointment with Larry?

SETH

I'm going this Tuesday. But I don't think the detective is interested in my visits to the doctor.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Oh, I'm interested in everything. You know, I grew up here. As you would say a "townie". I've always been fascinated at what happens at Briarton. It's funny. You grow up next to a place, one of the best schools in the world, and you feel like it's another planet.

MARY

Where did you go to school?

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Oh, I went to State. It's not the same as a fancy private college like this. Not as expensive either.

SETH

Well, if you have no more questions--

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Not that I could have gotten into a place like Briarton. I did real well in college, grade-wise, but high school was another matter. I was too interested in the boys, at least according to my mother, may she rest in peace. She died of a heart attack, too.

MARY

I'm sorry.

SETH

Yes, our condolences.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Thank you. Five years ago last month. Problems from the smoking. You should take note of that, sir. Doctors told her to stop, but that demon weed had its grips in her. Now, where was I?

Seth and Mary react to the detective's eccentric behavior.

MARY

Where you went to school.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Before that.

MARY

Growing up as a townie.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Before that.

MARY

How soon we called 911.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

That's right. That's right. Thank you. I always had problems with my short term memory. That's why I had to study extra hard in school. You know, I've been taking Ginkgo Biloba for it. Dr. Colby, do you think that will help?

MARY

It might.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

I hope so. But...there was, what was it we were talking about before the 911 call?

SETH

About the nitroglycerin pills.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

THAT'S IT! Thank you!! That's what I found...odd. You see, my mother never went anywhere without hers. She took those pills everywhere she went. She took the cigarettes, too, unfortunately. But those pills saved her life two or three times, and I'm just puzzled. It seems that Mr. Bryant's heart condition was under control. And then all of a sudden--

SETH

Perhaps you should be talking to his doctors.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

I have.

MARY

When I got here, he was barely breathing, his pulse negligible. He had suffered a major heart attack.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

And, the other problem is that he was almost brain dead when he arrived at the hospital.

MARY

That can happen sometimes.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

You didn't see any nitroglycerin pills?

MARY

As I said, no.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

I appreciate both of yours patience. You see, I'm just trying to find out what could've caused this man's heart attack.

SETH

Perhaps, it was just his time.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

You know, that's exactly what I said to Mrs. Bryant. But she would have none of it. So,...that's why I'm here. What were you and Mr. Bryant talking about?

SETH

Why? Does it matter?

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Just a townie's curiosity.

SETH

We were talking about the changes he intended to make here at Briarton.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Of course. Were you in agreement with those changes?

SETH

Some yes, some no.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Did he seem to be agitated during the conversation?

SETH

Not really.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Even when you disagreed with him? I know I get agitated when someone disagrees with me. In fact, I become totally unpleasant. My mother, may she rest in peace, would say, "Pauline, you're surly when you don't get your way. You're just pigheaded."

SETH

I think it's important always to listen to your mother.

Detective Johnston ignores the comment as if he were paying her a compliment.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

And I wish I had. Would've saved myself a lot of heartache, particularly with the boys. So, Mr. Bryant wasn't agitated when you two were talking?

SETH

Perhaps a little. But I'd say it was more passion as he expressed his point of view.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Then he collapsed.

SETH

That's right.

Detective Johnston flips through her pad.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

I think that's almost it. President Colby...that's what I should call you now, isn't it?

SETH

Yes.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

You were originally the second choice for President of the university.

SETH

That's a question for the Board of Trustees.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

I was just wondering if Oscar Bryant might have been feeling uncomfortable, even full of stress, because he knew you wanted his job.

SETH

He had no worries. He already had it.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Of course. What was I thinking? I'm sorry. I apologize. There was nothing you could do about it. Right?

MARY

Right. There was nothing he could do about it.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Of course.

SETH

If there's nothing else--

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Just to make you feel a little better. The guys from the precinct and the regulars at McCarthy's Bar and Grill, which by the way has the best clam chowder in New England, lost a lot of money betting on you.

SETH

On me?

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

We thought you were a shoo-in to be named President the first time. When they named the candidates, Oscar Bryant was ten to one. Nobody could believe they named him to run the school. I bet, not even you.

SETH

I suppose it's some sort of compliment to be the object of an illegal gambling pool.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Well, that should do it, for now. I'm sorry to disturb you both. If either of you remember anything else, you have my number. Good evening.

MARY

Goodbye.

Detective Johnston EXITS.

SETH

I guess you were right about Oscar's wife.

MARY

People just can't accept that sometimes bad things happen. They have to search for somebody to blame. Coming to bed?

SETH

In a minute.

Mary puts her arms around Seth. They kiss.

MARY

Don't be long.

SETH

I won't be.

MARY

It's not good to keep a girl waiting.

Mary pulls away and EXITS. Seth waits a second, goes to the phone, dials.

SETH

Robert...Is Karen nearby? Good.....just listen...just listen to me...calm down.... Yes, she's going to ask you questions. It's nothing to worry about.....Just listen...It's going to be all right. Now, this is what you say...

BLACK OUT.

### Act II, Scene 3

MORNING, five days later. Seth sits at his desk when the phone rings. He picks it up.

SETH

Hello, Doc. Yes..I understand. Yes, well... I'll tell Mary. Thank you, Larry. 'Bye.

Seth slowly puts the phone down. Without thinking he pulls a cigarette out of the pack, begins to light it. He stops, stares at it for a moment. He puts the cigarette in his mouth, strikes the match. His hand shakes and he must guide it with the other in order to light the cigarette. He takes a puff, coughs slightly and then exhales smoothly.

A DOORBELL RINGS. Mary answers the door.

MARY

Come in.

KAREN

Is Seth home?

Mary and Karen ENTER.



MARY

Karen stopped by.

SETH

Well, hello hello. How are you, dear?

Seth gets up and greets her.

KAREN

I hope I'm not disturbing you.

SETH

Not at all. Please, sit down.

MARY

Do you want anything to drink? I have tea ready in the kitchen.

KAREN

Tea would be great.

MARY

Seth?

SETH

No, none for me.

MARY

I'll be back in a second.

Mary EXITS.

KAREN

Seth...I'm worried about Robert.

SETH

He's been under a lot of pressure.

KAREN

He yelled at the children last night.

SETH

All parents yell at their children.

KAREN

Never like this. He was screaming at the top of his lungs for them to be quiet.

SETH

Were they noisier than usual?

KAREN

It wasn't like anything I'd seen before. He yelled at me.

SETH

I see.

KAREN

He's never acted that way. This is not the man I married.

SETH

Are you the woman he married?

KAREN

I don't know. I suppose not.

SETH

Well?

KAREN

Do you think it's my fault?

SETH

I'm not saying that.

KAREN

I just want to know what's going on.

SETH

Stress can make people act in ways that are out of character.

Mary ENTERS carrying a tray with a pot of tea.

KAREN

Thank you, Mary.

MARY

You're welcome.

KAREN

He just...when we were going to bed he started to cry. I asked him...I didn't know what to do. I asked him what was wrong.

MARY

What did he say?

KAREN

He screamed that he was sick of the way I looked at him...how I "judged" him all the time.

SETH

Maybe he feels that you are judging him.

KAREN

I'm not. I'm not. Do you know what he's talking about, Seth?

SETH

It puzzles me, too.

KAREN

You don't seem very concerned.

SETH

Of course, I am. I will talk to Robert as soon as possible. I'll do anything I can to help.

MARY

Could it be about the argument you had regarding the children?

KAREN

Uh, he yelled at the children last night, but we didn't argue about them.

MARY

I mean before that...last week.

KAREN

Robert and I never argue about the children. He leaves...he pretty much leaves it all up to me. Did he say something to you?

MARY

Uh, I just thought....my mistake, I thought you two had a disagreement.

SETH

No, it's you and I who disagree over our children.

MARY

Yes...we do.

KAREN

I think Robert has never forgiven me for--

SETH

That's not true.

KAREN

He doesn't like to make love to me. I mean...he does, sometimes...but I can tell he doesn't want to.

MARY

Karen, all marriages go through ups and down. Seth and I have had ours.

KAREN

He won't even touch me. I can count on my fingers how many times it's been since Betsy died.

MARY

Have you spoken to him about how you feel?

KAREN

I tried. I wanted us to talk to our pastor, but Robert won't.

MARY

How about a marriage counsellor?

KAREN

He doesn't want to have another baby. That's why he won't touch me. He hates me.

MARY

He doesn't hate you.

KAREN

When I teach the children at school, I look at them, everyday, I look at them...and I see little Betsy, her head covered with blood, next to me. Everyday. That's God's way of punishing me. Making me teach these children.. and love these children, because I killed Betsy.

Mary embraces Karen.

MARY

It was an accident, Karen, that's all. An awful car accident.

KAREN

I pray every night for God to forgive me and for Robert to forgive me and love me again. But that's selfish, isn't it?

MARY

No, it's not selfish.

KAREN

Seth, I want to know...is Robert seeing someone else? You would know. He would tell you.

SETH

He's not seeing anyone else.

KAREN

You wouldn't lie to me.

SETH

I give you my word, he is not seeing anyone else.

KAREN

Because I heard some stories--

MARY

Karen, you need to stop punishing yourself.

KAREN

That's what my pastor says that God has already forgiven me. It just doesn't feel that way.

SETH

I'll talk to Robert about how you feel.

KAREN

Would you, Seth? He really listens to you.

SETH

I'll talk to him.

KAREN

I have to go. Thank you.

MARY

I'm sure it will sort itself out. You'll see. Everything will be fine.

KAREN

You know, Pastor says that God works in mysterious ways. I mean, Seth became President of the University, like he should have been...but someone had to die. So, God must have wanted Betsy to die for some reason. It's the only thing that makes any sense. Some day God will show me. I know that...some day...I'll know.

Karen dabs the tears from her eyes and heads for the door.

MARY

Take care of yourself, Karen.

KAREN

Thank you. You both are so wonderful.

Karen EXITS.

MARY

Whoa...that was not good.

SETH

Everything will be all right. God finds a way to forgive everyone if they believe hard enough.

MARY

That's not fair.

SETH

What? Her religious delusions?

MARY

How do you know they're delusions?

SETH

Do you really think that God wanted her little girl to die?

MARY

Who knows what God wants?

SETH

Her beliefs are just a way to comfort herself.

MARY

So?! Is that so bad? We could all use a little comfort now and then.

SETH

And I suppose I'm failing in that department. Excuse me. This has been a trying time for everyone.

The PHONE RINGS. Mary is closest so she picks it up.

MARY

Hello. Oh, hello. Yes, he's right here.

She hands the phone to Seth.

MARY (CONT'D)

It's Henry Wexler.

SETH

Henry, how are you?

(PAUSE)

Yes...I was questioned. The whole thing is ridiculous. This was all started by Oscar's wife.

(PAUSE)

I see.

(PAUSE)

No, I was not aware...

(PAUSE)

That's, well...Yes, I agree. Nothing will come of it.

(PAUSE)

Yes. Thank you for calling me. Goodbye.

MARY

What?

SETH

They're exhuming Oscar Bryant's body.

MARY

What could they hope to find?

SETH

(angrily)

Nothing. They're not going to find anything.

MARY

I know that. I know that, Seth.

SETH

I'm sorry.

(BEAT)

According to Henry, rumors are spreading. People will say anything.

(BEAT)

I don't think this jeopardizes.... No...no.

MARY

Why would it jeopardize anything?

(BEAT)

Seth? What's going on?

SETH

You know, there are people, on the board, who obviously never wanted me to have the job. They undermined my candidacy the first time. I know that. And now that I have it, they want to...

Mary goes up to Seth, gives him a hug.

MARY

Did you know, that you're my hero. And you know why? Because in your career you've always stood up for what is right. You didn't do anything. So, that's why you have nothing to worry about. You're going to be President for life. I just know it.

LIGHTS QUICKLY FADE OUT.

#### **Act II, Scene 4**

NIGHT...eight hours later. Seth sits alone in his office, still dressed, smoking a cigarette. A KNOCK on the BAY WINDOWS startling him. He looks out and sees who it is and immediately opens the windows. Robert steps in wearing a windbreaker.

SETH

Robert--

ROBERT

We have to talk.

SETH

I do have a front door.

SETH

Quiet. You'll wake Mary. I have something I want to show you.

Seth pulls out a case from his desk.  
Inside is an exquisite old quill pen.

SETH (CONT'D)

The President's Pen. We did it Robert. You and me.

ROBERT

They're doing a full autopsy on Oscar's body! We killed him. They'll find the poison!

SETH

They'll find a legal substance in his body. A lot of the legal substance, and no proof that we gave it to him.

ROBERT

You put it in there.

SETH

And you gave him the glass.

ROBERT

Pauline keeps on asking me...

SETH

Pauline?

ROBERT

Detective Johnston.

SETH

You're on a first name basis?

ROBERT

She's interviewed me three times in the last two days.

SETH

Why didn't you call me?

ROBERT

Pauline told me not to.

SETH

Really? What have you told Pauline?

ROBERT

I told her...told her...a lot less than you have.



SETH  
I haven't told her anything.

                                ROBERT  
That's not what she said.

                                SETH  
What did she say that I said?

                                ROBERT  
That you tried to stop me, but I took the nitroglycerin pills. That I was the one who killed Oscar.

                                SETH  
She's LYING! I said no such thing. She's lying. Pauline is trying to play us off against each other.

                                ROBERT  
Is she?

                                SETH  
Yes.

                                ROBERT  
What did you tell her?

                                SETH  
I didn't tell her anything. She's trying to get you to crack.

                                ROBERT  
I wish I could believe you.

                                SETH  
I'm not the one who has spoken to her three times. What could you have possibly talked about?

                                ROBERT  
I just kept on repeating what we agreed...but then she would try and show me how I was changing what I was saying.

                                SETH  
What did you change?

                                ROBERT  
I didn't change anything--

                                SETH  
What?

                                ROBERT  
I told her -- that I couldn't remember whether there was a bottle of pills.

SETH

Why? Why didn't you just say that you didn't see a bottle of pills?!

ROBERT

Because--

SETH

You made it sound like you're hiding something.

ROBERT

Maybe, because I am! Like the fact that I helped kill Oscar Bryant. Maybe, because this whole thing is a little harder for me than it is for you.

SETH

Robert, listen to me....we're in this together. One of us gets destroyed, the other gets destroyed.

ROBERT

I should never have done this.

SETH

We had no choice.

ROBERT

I, no...we had lots of choices. We could have fought him. We could have resigned. We didn't have to kill him. You manipulated me.

SETH

It didn't take much persuasion, Robert. You wanted him dead just like I did.

ROBERT

And now, I'm a killer.

SETH

Nobody can prove that.

ROBERT

But I know it. And what I know is that what I did is making me sick every second I'm alive. I feel like I have a snake squirming in my stomach eating my insides out.

SETH

You're going to have to find a way to live with it.

ROBERT

Tell me how. How do you do it?

SETH

I know in my heart that it was the right thing to do. Oscar was evil.

(MORE)

SETH (CONT'D)

Everything he did was against the public's interest. And, he was out to ravage and demolish this university. Are you saying that meant so little to you?

ROBERT

It meant everything to me.

SETH

Then what you did was right and just and moral. What we did, together. You and me. Together.

ROBERT

I don't think so. It was a perversion of morality.

SETH

You don't think Oscar wouldn't have done the same thing.

ROBERT

I don't know what he would have done. I know what I did. And there was no justification. I followed you--

SETH

And I never led you anyplace you didn't want to go.

ROBERT

And that's why I'm so ashamed.

SETH

You wanted to do this, Robert, and now that's it's done you indulge yourself, making yourself a victim. You're not the victim.

ROBERT

No, Oscar is.

SETH

You don't see it, do you? You did what you needed to do, to protect your future, your family's future, the future of the university, for all of society for that matter. Look what damage he did in his life.

ROBERT

You're so persuasive, Seth.

SETH

Because I'm right.

ROBERT

History is full of those who justify murder in the name of God, country, morality, for a higher purpose, for a Greater Good. I never dreamed I'd be one of them.

SETH

Our motives were pure.

ROBERT

(laughs)

As the driven snow. My God, we're regular choir boys. Seth and Robert, Murderers' Anonymous. We could start our own self-help group. My name is Robert and I am a murderer. But my friend Seth says that I should forgive myself because murder is only a disease that you get over one day at a time. Don't you see, Seth, we can't live this lie. It won't work.

He pulls out a crumpled note out of his pocket, hands it to Seth who reads it.

SETH

This implicates both of us.

ROBERT

You don't get it, Seth. We're both guilty. All we have is what we do, how we act. And what we did -- I'm trying to save your soul, Seth. I'm trying to save you.

SETH

I'm okay with my soul.

ROBERT

That's what's so disturbing to me. It means that you either don't have a soul, or you're doing everything in your power to deny that it's there.

SETH

I can live with myself.

ROBERT

Seth, you can't live with yourself. I know that. I'm doing this, because I love you...to save you.

SETH

You need to save yourself, Robert.

ROBERT

I AM!....I am.

Points to the letter that Seth is holding.

ROBERT(CONT'D)

It's the only way.

SETH

And when do you intend to...do this thing?

ROBERT

I don't know. Soon.

SETH

Does anybody else know this...seen this note?

ROBERT

No. But I want you to give it to Karen. You'll explain it to her, why I couldn't go on living.

SETH

No, I won't be able to explain it, because I don't understand it.

ROBERT

You're good with words. You'll find a way.

SETH

Not for this.

ROBERT

Then just give her the letter. You promise to do that?

Seth is at a momentary loss for words.  
Robert snatches the letter from him.

ROBERT (CONT'D)

I wanted to trust you and you just manipulated me.

SETH

That's not true.

ROBERT

I'll leave it for her and I'll send a copy to the police.

SETH

And you'll destroy me as well.

ROBERT

We have to pay. We are...not evil...but once you do something, then you must be responsible.

SETH

You can't do this.

ROBERT

I am a murderer. Under a court of law I would be executed.

SETH

You haven't even been tried!

ROBERT

But I know I'm guilty.

SETH

But that's for somebody else to decide. You just can't kill yourself.

Robert pulls out a small caliber handgun from his pocket.

Seth jumps back.

ROBERT

You can't go on this way, either. Your soul is tortured. You can't deny it.

SETH

Give that to me.

Robert plays with the gun as he speaks, turning the cylinder slowly.

ROBERT

My whole life, I always wanted to feel, like I had some power...you know, real power...over what happens in the future. That's what you wanted, too, Seth. But the real power is the power to correct the past. To change, to clarify and make right...what was wrong. For the first time, I'm completely in control of my life. It's very liberating.

SETH

You haven't thought this through.

ROBERT

You see, what we did wasn't moral...or an imperative. It was two desperate men committing a desperate act. I destroyed that girl's life and now I've committed a murder. I have to die.

SETH

Give me the letter.

ROBERT

You'll give it to Karen?

SETH

Yes.

ROBERT

You give me your word?

SETH

Yes, I give you my word. I'll give it to her.

Robert hands Seth the note and then embraces him. Seth won't let go when Robert starts to pull away.

ROBERT

Goodbye, Seth.

SETH

Robert, give me the gun. Give me the gun.

(Desperate)

You have everything to live for. Everything. Kant said suicide is immoral--

Robert pulls away from Seth. Seth attempts to grab the gun but is not close to touching it.

ROBERT

Kant is not GOD! NOT GOD! Don't you see that?! He was a man who had some ideas. And like everyone with ideas they get twisted and convoluted and--

SETH

It's a sin, Robert. Against Christianity.

ROBERT

Something you're an expert on. Shall we ask Oscar about sin? Would he say we're good Christians?

SETH

This goes against everything you believe.

ROBERT

You're so good, Seth. Always so convincing. Tell me what Kant would say. It's why we had to murder Oscar. What's the reason? Tell me, Seth.

SETH

Because it was a moral imperative.

Robert LAUGHS hard, an eerie cackle of pain and irony. Seth joins in, chuckles, thinking maybe he's gotten through. Then, Robert suddenly stops.

ROBERT

Tell Karen and the children I love them.

Robert turns to leave.

SETH

You're right. We lost our senses. We shouldn't have killed him. We're good men.

Seth lunges for the gun, misses and falls to the floor. He gets up slowly, speaks as he does.

SETH (CONT'D)

Promise, you'll think about it until tomorrow. You won't do anything tonight.

(MORE)

SETH (CONT'D)

Promise me we can talk about this in the morning. Promise me that. Think about Karen and little Janey and Robert Junior. It's not fair to them. Don't do this to them. Give me the gun.

ROBERT

Okay.

Seth has finally seemed to get through to Robert. Robert turns, nods slightly, as if in agreement and HANDS SETH THE GUN. Robert continues out through the BAY WINDOWS.

SETH

All right? Good. All right.

As ROBERT EXITS, Seth puts the gun down on the table. He heads out of the room and tears up the letter. Robert reenters the room through the outside door and and grabs the gun. He closes the window door, which Seth hears. Seth rushes back out and sees the gun is no longer on the table. He rushes outside.

SETH

(screams; moans)

NOOOOooo!!!! Robert, no, no!

A GUN SHOT.

SFX: Dogs barking in the distance.

LIGHTS OUT.

## **Act II, Scene 5**

MORNING, four days later.

Seth, dressed in a business suit for the funeral, again delivers the eulogy, a SINGLE LIGHT on him.

SETH

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "We seldom see anybody who is not uneasy or afraid to live." Who among us does not have some demons that they deny, turn a blind eye to, in order to allow themselves the illusion of a peaceful night's sleep? I regret that we did not see Robert's demons so that we could help him. I will live with that...guilt...the rest of my life. But, in the end, we should not judge Robert Salinger on the way he died, but in the way he lived. He loved his family more than anything. He loved this university.

(MORE)



SETH (CONT'D)

He was a man who would sacrifice...everything...for what he believed. Robert believed that one must live his life taking actions that were for...for the 'Higher, the Greater Good'. He did that.

(Seth chokes on his words.)

We use the word friend easily in this world. We use the word for people we may work with or see on occasion socially, but they are not friends. Friends are people we love. They are people who will put their lives on the line for ours. They are like a son, or a brother, a part of our family. They are the people whose opinions we value and cherish. Those are friends. Robert was my friend...my dearest friend. And, I shall miss him terribly.

The LIGHTS DIM...then QUICKLY COME UP lighting only a small part of the stage, sort of in a limbo. Seth and Karen separate from an embrace as Mary watches.

KAREN

Why, Seth...why?

SETH

I didn't want to tell you. You remember you asked me if he was having an affair with a student--

KAREN

You told me that he hadn't. You lied to me!

SETH

I told you that he wasn't having an affair now...and that was true. It was a couple of years ago.

KAREN

That's why he killed himself?

SETH

The girl committed suicide when he ended it. Robert couldn't get over it.

KAREN

I don't understand.

SETH

I'm sorry.

KAREN

Was it...did he see this girl after Betsy died?

SETH

Yes.

KAREN

Yes...that would be right.

SETH

The night he came by, he was going on about being responsible for the girl's death and I tried to talk to him...but he said he just wanted to say goodbye, and--

KAREN

I pray that Jesus and God forgive him.

SETH

The last thing he said was that he loved you and the children.

KAREN

The truth is...he loved you more than me, Seth. He loved you more than anybody.

LIGHTS OUT.

**Act II, Scene 6**

AFTERNOON, three hours later. Still dressed in their clothes from Robert's funeral, Seth and Mary now sit side by side in the study. Detective Johnston leafs through a note pad.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

This will only take a few minutes.

MARY

I just have to say, with all due respect, we just buried one of our best friends. There should be a better day to do this.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

All right. I was just trying to avoid having President Colby here come down to the station. But if that's what you want--

SETH

No. Let's do it now.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

All right.

MARY

If you seriously think that Seth had anything to do with these deaths, maybe we should have an attorney here.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

If you like, we can do this another time with your attorney present.

She starts to close up her note pad.

SETH

No, let's get it over with.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

You sure?

SETH

Yes. Because the next time you bother me I'm going to sue you for harassment.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Now, is that necessary? I'm just doing my job, sir. Stand in my shoes for a second. Two people have died here, in the last three weeks, under very strange circumstances. Maybe it's a coincidence or just some really bad luck--

SETH

All three.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

All three what?

SETH

They died under strange circumstances. It was a coincidence. And it was really bad luck.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Yes. Isn't that something? Exactly what I said. Let's start with the first one.

SETH

First what?

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

The first piece of really bad luck. Oscar Bryant. You know that the coroner's office performed an autopsy?

SETH

I heard.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Yes, I'm sure you did.

(BEAT)

Do you know what Ergotamine is?

SETH

No.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

I'm sure you know what it is, Dr. Colby.

MARY

It's a vasoconstrictor. It's used to treat people for severe migraine headaches.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

But you wouldn't recommend it for someone with a heart condition.

MARY

Probably not.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

And you certainly wouldn't give too much of it?

MARY

I'm not a cardiologist.

SETH

What's this all about?

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Well, there were small traces in Mr. Bryant. Now the coroner says that Ergotamine doesn't usually last long in the body, so he estimates that at one point Mister Bryant had enough in him to give a horse a heart attack. The way the doctor described it, it's like he drank a hundred cups of coffee all at once. President Colby, you have any idea how all that Ergotamine got into Mister Bryant?

SETH

I have no idea.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Well, that's what so curious about this case.

SETH

Maybe he had a bad headache.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

He didn't take Ergotamine.

MARY

Are you sure?

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Not according to his doctors.

SETH

Have you checked into his wife. I understand he left a rather substantial estate.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Well, you know, that's what I thought. But he made her sign a pre-nuptial agreement. Now, she did okay.

(MORE)

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON (CONT'D)

More money than I'm ever going to see. But that's not where most of his estate is going.

SETH

Where did he leave it?

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

To Briarton University. Quite a chunk of cash, for scholarships for minority students, and to start a hockey team.

Silence.

SETH

Well, this is a day of surprises. It's nice to know that Oscar cared so much for our Alma Mater.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Apparently so. Anyway, he had all this Ergotamine inside of him, and that seems to be the riddle without an answer.

SETH

Well, I can't help you.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Maybe it's just that you forgot. Are you sure Mr. Bryant wasn't complaining of a headache and you said something like, "I have the perfect thing" and you ran to the medicine chest and got some pills and just happened to give him too much?

SETH

Like enough to kill a horse? That I somehow poisoned him with this...Ergot...how do you say it?

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Ergotamine. Now you used the word poison. I just figured it was all an accident. You just gave him a little too much and it accidentally triggered the heart attack. Is that how it happened?

SETH

No.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Then how did it happen?

SETH

I already told you at our last soiree.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

So the Ergotamine--

SETH

I really don't keep up on the world of medicine.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Got into his system...magically. Dr. Colby, do you keep Ergotamine in your office?

MARY

Maybe some samples.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Any samples missing?

MARY

Not that I know of.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

And you would notice.

MARY

Yes, I think so.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

But you're not sure?

SETH

Are you saying she's a suspect?!

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Oh, no...not at all. I'm just wondering where you got the drug.

SETH

This is outrageous.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

I'm not trying to get you upset, President Colby. I'm just trying to get to the truth.

SETH

I take it you think I'm lying.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

I know Robert was. He was so unhappy, so burdened. He reminded me of my little brother, who was the worst liar I ever saw, when my father, may he rest in peace, confronted him about stealing some candy from the grocery store. My little brother felt so guilty about it, he was dying to confess, but he was just so afraid of disappointing my father, he kept on denying it, changing his story, but everybody knew he was fibbing. Robert, wanted to tell the truth. There was only one thing stopping him.

SETH

What was that?

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

You.

SETH

I didn't stop him from--

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

He looked up to you. I imagine you were like his father.

SETH

I guess you also have a PhD in psychology.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

He was your boy.

SETH

He was my friend, not my boy.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

You said that very nicely in your eulogy.

SETH

Is it accepted procedure for the police to be so offensive?

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

I'm just telling you what I see.

SETH

I'm sure what Robert told you was the truth.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

What he told me were conflicting stories. First there was no nitroglycerin bottle, then there was. Then he wasn't sure.

SETH

Robert's emotional state was delicate. The abusive use of your police powers, I'm convinced, made him feel persecuted, pushing him over the edge.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Are you blaming me for his suicide?!

SETH

(angrily)

You misrepresented to him what I told you!

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

And what did he say I told you?

SETH

Something about the nitroglycerin pills.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

What about them?

SETH

You said that I said he had them or something. It was part of all his hysteria that night.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

You mean he was afraid you were trying to pin the murder on him.

SETH

You're doing to me what you did to him, but I won't--

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

You won't what...crack?

SETH

I'm not fooled. And what you did, didn't help Robert, not one bit.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

I'm not to blame for the fact that he felt remorse and guilt for committing a murder.

SETH

Are we done here?

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Can you explain why Oscar Bryant showed signs of asphyxiation as well as heart failure?

SETH

What are you suggesting?

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

What I'm suggesting is that the drug didn't work, and someone felt it necessary to finish the job.

SETH

And I suggest to you that you've been watching too much television.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

I realize that to you I'm some intellectual midget who just happened to grow up here, a town where the students and faculty are the royalty...while the people who live here are the serfs.

SETH

So, you're going to take out your petty insecurities and feelings of inadequacy out on me. Wonderful. Using your police powers to persecute me because you regret chasing boys in high school instead of doing your schoolwork.



DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

You're good. You know right how to go for the jugular.

(to Mary)

Has he always been this charming?

SETH

You have nothing.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

What I find the most interesting is how you never really say you didn't do it.

SETH

I didn't do it.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Not very convincing.

MARY

I think, if that's all the questions you have?

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

I'm almost done. When you spoke this morning you mentioned that Robert always strived to achieve the "higher and greater good". What did you mean by that?

SETH

I don't see what that has to do--

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Indulge me.

SETH

It comes from Kant and Mill. Action that is morally required for the universal good.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

And was the universal good making sure Oscar Bryant didn't become president of the university?

SETH

You have a very active imagination.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

My father, who worked over at the iron works before they closed down, used to say to me...the rich folks...they think they own everything...and the folks over at the university, they think they know everything...and the rest of us, we think we do everything. But the only person who has really got anything at all is the person who gets up in the morning, looks in the mirror, and doesn't hate himself.

SETH

And the reason you're sharing this pearl of wisdom--

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Because I can get up in the morning and look at myself. I doubt if you can.

SETH

Does that end our little, and what I hope and assume will be our last encounter?

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

You may think that... Just know, there is no statute of limitations on murder.

MARY

This has to stop now. I've known this man. He did not - could not - do something like this.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

Are you sure?

Silence.

SETH

If she had anything she wouldn't be going on like this.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

You still haven't explained how Oscar Bryant ended up with that drug in his system.

SETH

I don't have to. You're the one who has to find the explanation.

Detective Johnston folds up her note pad, goes to the door, turns to Mary.

DETECTIVE JOHNSTON

I feel sorry for you, Doctor. You're a good woman. You treat people in the community with respect and dignity. You deserve better.

MARY

Please leave now.

Detective Johnston EXITS.

Mary puts her head in hands, upset.

SETH

What's wrong?

MARY

Nothing.

She gets up, heads for the door.

Where are you going?  
 SETH

I have a headache.  
 MARY

Mary EXITS.

BLACK OUT.

**Act II, Scene 7**

NIGHT, six hours later.

Seth sits alone his bathrobe, smokes a cigarette, sips on a scotch.

SOUND of a DOOR OPENING off stage.

Seth puts out the cigarette, calls out.

Mary!  
 SETH  
 Mary! Mary! I'm in here.

Mary ENTERS, closes the door behind her.

Where have you been all day? I was getting worried. How are feeling?  
 SETH (CONT'D)

Mary sits down, sullen, exhausted.

My head still hurts.  
 MARY

A long silence.

I have something to tell you that's not, uh, such good news.  
 SETH  
 I, uh,--

Mary has been in her own world, not listening. Then...

Why, Seth?  
 MARY

What do you mean?  
 SETH

Why did you do it?  
 MARY

SETH

Don't tell me you believe that woman?! See, that's what she's trying to do. Like with--

MARY

I thought it was odd when you were reading my medical books. But now I understand. You couldn't very well ask me how to poison Oscar Bryant

SETH

That's ridiculous.

MARY

What did you do, grind the pills up from my office and mix them in his drink?

SETH

I realize that Robert's death has affected you--

MARY

Oh, I'm very sad about Robert's death. But you know something, and I'm a little ashamed to admit it, part of me said to myself that with Robert gone, maybe now you could reach out to your own children.

SETH

You know I love you, Mary.

MARY

You loved Robert.

SETH

Why are you being so cruel?

MARY

The cruel thing was convincing Robert to go along with your sick plan.

SETH

I didn't--

MARY

STOP IT, SETH! Stop it. I know the truth. All I want to know is why.

SETH

(avoiding)

There is no why.

MARY

I always thought you were a better man than this.

SETH

Oscar Bryant would've have destroyed Briarton.

MARY

How could you?

SETH

I can live with myself.

MARY

That's what makes me so sad.

SETH

There are things worth fighting for. And this university is one of them. You must see that.

MARY

It's worth fighting for. But what you did--

SETH

What I did, is what I had to do, to protect the school, the future--

MARY

It doesn't justify--

SETH

We're talking about one of the most important institutions in this country.

MARY

I'm a doctor. My whole mission is to save lives. Those are my ethics, Seth. I can't condone--

SETH

Neither can I. Neither would I. This, this situation, was unique and extraordinary because of the circumstances. Had Oscar become President--

MARY

We would've gone on with our lives. Briarton would have survived. You know, Seth, I'm not going to argue with you. That's your genius. You've spent your life figuring out ways to make your point and convince others to go along. Poor Robert.

She goes to leave.

SETH

We can get past this, Mary.

Mary turns around, addresses Seth.

MARY

Thirty-seven years. It's a long time. A long time to love someone. A lifetime.

SETH

I'm sorry my love wasn't enough.

MARY

When we first married, right after Daniel was born...you had an affair with that English instructor. Wasn't Gail her name?

SETH

That's not true.

MARY

But I said to myself that I didn't want to lose you because you were so...special and handsome and smart, and because I loved you, so I never said anything. I never said anything when you would tease me at the dinner parties, belittling me until I was ready to cry. I would say to myself, that's not the real Seth. The real Seth is just having a bad day or he is under so much pressure. I always hoped it would get better. And it did for awhile. Until the next time. And I would think everything was all right... until the next time. I believed, like a fool, that you would change.

SETH

Mary, I'm so sorry.

MARY

I never took sides between you and the children even though I felt you were wrong, because I loved you. The way you would back-stab other faculty to get ahead made me sick. But you were my man, and I was going to back you up no matter what...because I loved you. I loved you even though the first person you would want to share your life with was Robert. You were the man I admired, respected, treasured, over everything else. But you know what? That man, the man I loved, wouldn't - couldn't have done this. And a lifetime is too long to be hoping the man you love will love you back.

SETH

If you really love me, you would find a way to forgive me.

MARY

You didn't have to kill him.

SETH

Everything I am -- that I was meant for -- I had to do it. Otherwise, my whole life would've meant nothing.

MARY

Your whole life was something, Seth.

She gets up.



He can't bring himself to say it. He chuckles very briefly to himself... ironically, bitterly. He takes another drag on the cigarette as the LIGHTS SLOWLY FADE TO DARKNESS.

**END OF ACT II**

**THE END**