

ACT ONE

SCENE: The front porch and yard of a run-down farmhouse. There is a rocking chair on the porch. The posts and bannisters have gone unpainted for some time. There are wide, sagging steps. A screened door leads into the house. There is at least one window with gauzy curtains you can see through--sort of. There are a few pots of dead or dying flowers around the porch. The realistic depiction of all this is not so important as is the existence or suggestion of decay. The yard is barren. There should be an area downstage right that is more or less set aside for those times that NORA appears and takes part in the action.

(As the play begins, SALLY ANN is scrubbing the steps. VERNON opens the screen door and comes out on the porch. He watches her for a moment.)

SALLY ANN

Don't you do it, Vernon! I am just about finished here, and I don't want to have to do it all over again.

VERNON

How the hell am I supposed to get down these steps then?

SALLY ANN

Can't you just go on out the back way and walk around?

VERNON

What are you doing that for, anyway? Who in hell do you think cares?

SALLY ANN

I care. You want the house looking nice when folks get here, don't you?

VERNON

I don't give a good Goddamn what it looks like.

SALLY

Well, that is just like you, ain't it? It is just a good thing that *I* do care. When everybody gets here, I want things looking nice.

VERNON

(Gingerly picking his way down the edge of the steps.)

I don't know who the hell you think is gonna show up to this shindig.

SALLY ANN

Everybody knew Grandmaw. A lot of folks will come.

VERNON

Don't see why they should.

SALLY ANN

It is just one of those things that civilized folks like to do, Vernon. Anyway, all the cousins are coming in. Pat was on the telephone all last night. She got the pall bearers lined up, and it ain't easy finding pall bearers. Not everybody's willing, and then, if they are, it ain't just anyone can be a pall bearer.

VERNON

I reckon it's a real talent, all right.

SALLY ANN

Pat asked me about you being one, but I told her that wouldn't be right.

VERNON

Wouldn't have minded.

SALLY ANN

There's rules of common decency about these things, Vernon. Sons ain't pall bearers. Cousins are. Nephews are. Friends of the family. Not sons. Unless of course, maybe a person had six sons. Then it might be kinda nice--all six of 'em standing up there by the casket. I reckon that'd be right nice.

VERNON

You're out of your head, woman. You know that?

SALLY ANN

(Resuming her scrubbing.)

The problem would be if one of 'em broke down and started into crying or something. they might fall down, and then where would you be? Nope. You got to stick with folks who ain't so involved. Folks who can hold up.

(Finishes scrubbing and stands.)

There! Don't that look nice?

(Sound of a car pulling up.)

Oh Lord who's that now? Damn! It's Ralph and me looking like this!

VERNON

Ralph didn't come here to look at you, Sally Ann.

(Raising his voice.)

Or did you Ralph? You come chasing after Sally Ann again? Am I gonna have to get the shot gun?

SALLY ANN

Shut up you old fool.

VERNON

Don't you call me old. I ain't all that old.

RALPH

(Entering.)

What's that Vernon? Who ain't that old? What are you saying about me?

SALLY ANN

The man is just being a fool, Ralph. What are you doing here?

VERNON

Ralph is just one of the hoards of mourners you're expecting, Sally Ann.

SALLY ANN

You don't have to be so damn smart about everything. It's too early for anyone to come paying respects. I was thinking maybe Matthew Mark'd been up to something. You didn't see him on the road, did you, Ralph? He's been real good here lately about sticking to home, but all this has got him in a state.

RALPH

Wondered how he'd be taking all this. Pretty hard on a boy like that.

VERNON

Wouldn't be near so hard on him if she'd tell him the truth. He knows something's wrong, but he don't know what. The boy ought to be told, but try getting that through to her.

SALLY ANN

Well, you go on and tell him if you want. Then you be the one to chase after him when he goes off. You know what he's like. Now, if you'll excuse me, I got things to do.

(She exits into the house.)

VERNON

Here! We got any ice tea for Ralph?

SALLY ANN

He can get it himself if he wants any. It's in the icebox.

(A slam from somewhere. Pause. The two men sit in silence.)

RALPH

Well. (Pause.) Sure was a shock.

VERNON

We expected it.

RALPH

Oh sure, but still. (Pause.) Seems like only yesterday she was standing up on this porch yelling at me for bringing you home drunk from the farm bureau.

VERNON

She raised hell that night.

RALPH

She sure did. (Pause.) Like it was my fault or something.

VERNON

Well, hell, Ralph. It was.

RALPH

It was? Huh! 'Spect it was. (Pause.) Poor old Nora. (Pause.) Sally Ann doing all right with it?

VERNON

The woman has found her calling in life. She was born to put people in the ground. Got a true gift for it, I reckon. From now on I intend to be real careful about what she feeds me.

RALPH

So what you planning on doing, Vernon? You gonna stay on here?

VERNON

Where the hell would I go?

RALPH

I figured you just stayed on here because of Nora.

VERNON

There's other reasons to be staying on in a place. (Pause.) Just want to get Mom in the ground--get all this over with. Then I'll worry about what comes next.

RALPH

Lot of memories around this old place.

VERNON

Yep.

(Long Pause.)

RALPH

Remember that fishing trip you and me was gonna take?

VERNON

What fishing trip?

RALPH

Back about the time your Daddy died. Remember? We was going down the Gulf of Mexico and catch us a couple of big fish.

VERNON

I remember.

RALPH

Kept putting it off.

VERNON

Yep.

RALPH

What say we go now? I got more time coming than I could ever use up. Come on Vernon. Let's take us a little trip.

VERNON

Don't know, Ralph. I'll have to think about it.

RALPH

If it's the money, hell don't worry about the money. 'Cause I got the money. I--

(Another car is heard pulling up.)

VERNON

Who's this now? Whose car is that?

RALPH

Ain't from around here. There's a woman driving it.

VERNON

(Standing with the first real sign of life that he has shown.)

It's Mary Katherine! That's who it is. Sally Ann! Get on out here. It's Mary Katherine!

(Vernon starts down off the porch. A woman in her late twenties enters. She seems shy and uncertain of her welcome.)

MARY KATHERINE

Well! (Pause.) I made it.

VERNON

Figured you would. Hell, girl, you must of flew. Lucky old Ralph here don't waste his time patrolling the roads when he can be out jawin' with his constituents.

MARY KATHERINE

Ralph? You remember me, Ralph?

RALPH

Now how could I forget the purtiest girl in three counties. How you doing, honey?

MARY KATHERINE

Just fine Ralph. I guess you're still sheriff.

VERNON

Voting public ain't got any more sense than to keep electing the son of a bitch!

MARY KATHERINE

You still got the ponies, Ralph? You still got old Susie?

RALPH

You may not believe it, but that old girl's still going strong. Twenty-five years old and she still bites my ass every time I turn my back on her!

MARY KATHERINE

Then you ought not to turn your back on her!

VERNON

Hell, he likes it. Most excitement he sees in a month.

RALPH

Here now but ain't you grown into a beautiful woman. Look at this girl, Vernon. If she ain't the--

SALLY ANN

(coming out through the screen door. She stops dead still at the sight of MARY KATHERINE.)

What in the hell are you doing here?

MARY KATHERINE

Hi, Sally Ann. It's nice to see you too.

SALLY ANN

How in the hell--Vernon, did you know she was coming?

MARY KATHERINE

He called me last night.

SALLY ANN

Vernon? Vernon got on the telephone and called you?

MARY KATHERINE

That's how it usually works, isn't it?

SALLY ANN

And you had the nerve to come!

VERNON

Don't you start in on the girl already, Sally Ann. Mom's dead, and she's got a right to be here. More right than most of the sonsofbitches that'll be eating us out of house and home for the next two days.

SALLY ANN

If you are referring to cousin Maudie and her boy, Jim, you can just shut your mouth. They were the closest thing Grandmaw had to--

RALPH

I'll just be moving on now, Vernon. Reckon I'll stop in tonight and pay my respects.

VERNON

Thanks, Ralph.

RALPH

You do some thinking about what I said.

SALLY ANN

I don't know where the hell we're gonna put her.

VERNON

I will Ralph. I'll think on it hard.

SALLY ANN

Where's she gonna sleep, Vernon? I don't suppose that ever crossed your mind when you took it upon yourself to upset every thing I'd got planned and--

(During this, RALPH salutes VERNON, winks at MARY KATHERINE and exits. VERNON turns to the girl.)

VERNON

You look good.

MARY KATHERINE

Thanks.

SALLY ANN

Skinny.

VERNON

Why, she ain't a bit skinny.

SALLY ANN

She's skinny now. She always was skinny.

(MATTHEW MARK, a large young man enters. He is not too bad looking, but has that certain air of the halfwit about him. He has come edging his way around the side of the house.)

VERNON

Here! Matthew Mark! Come and say "Howdy" to your cousin.

SALLY ANN

He ain't gonna know who she is, Vernon.

MATTHEW MARK

Hell, I don't! I know her. I know Mary Katherine!

MARY KATHERINE

Hey there, Matthew Mark! Who gave you that awful haircut?

MATTHEW MARK

Sally Ann done it. I don't hold still.

SALLY ANN

I'll stab the little son of a bitch with the scissors one of these days! You should hear him take on like I was skinning him up here.

(MATTHEW MARK suddenly lunges for MARY KATHERINE picks her up and swings her around.)

MARY KATHERINE

Put me down, Matthew Mark!

SALLY ANN

You got to watch out for him. He don't know his own strength.

MARY KATHERINE

No kidding! Put me down, I said!

MATTHEW MARK

You been gone a long, long time Mary Katherine. Where you been?

MARY KATHERINE

I been a lot of places, Matthew Mark. Now put me down!

MATTHEW MARK

You say where.

VERNON

Put her down, boy!

MATTHEW MARK

(Reluctantly releasing her.)

Why you come home, Mary Katherine? How come you here?

MARY KATHERINE

Because of Nora, Matthew Mark--

SALLY ANN

She come home 'cause Grandmaw sent for her, Matthew Mark. Now why don't you go on out there and look at that brand new red car of hers? I reckon it's hers. I don't know who the hell else'd drive a red car up and park it on the grass like that.

MATTHEW MARK

Can I, Mary Katherine? Can I?

MARY KATHERINE

Of course you can.

MATTHEW MARK

(He starts to turn. Stops.)

You be right here when I get back? You ain't going nowhere?

MARY KATHERINE

Now how could I go anywhere without my car? I'd have to take you with me, wouldn't I?

MATTHEW MARK

That's right! That's right! Oh, boy! You'd have to take me with you. You sure would!
(He exits joyfully.)

SALLY ANN

And mind you don't go honking that horn, you hear?

VERNON

Leave the boy the hell alone, why don't you? He ain't gonna hurt anything. You got

things to bring in, Mary Katherine?

MARY KATHERINE

Just a suitcase. I'll get it later.

SALLY ANN

Vernon, you got to go on down to Pat's and pick up her good dishes. She told me we could use them, and then there's the front room to get ready. I want you get that old shotgun of yours out of there before anyone gets here. Looks like we're some kind of half-civilized heathens.

VERNON

Instead of the fully civilized heathens they're expectin'? What about the slop jar? You want me to put that any place special?

SALLY ANN

You wouldn't like me to say in front of Mary Katherine.

(He exits, grinning into the house.)

Damn man gets more like Grandpaw every day.

MARY KATHERINE

He looks so good. I thought he'd look. . . older. And Matthew Mark! What are you feeding him? He wasn't any bigger than I was when I left.

SALLY ANN

Well. (Beat.) That's been a while, ain't it? Things change don't they?

MARY KATHERINE

Yes. I suppose some things do. (Pause.) How come you stopped me talking about Nora? Doesn't Matthew Mark know she's dead?

SALLY ANN

I got enough to worry about right now!

MARY KATHERINE

He's got a right to know, doesn't he?

SALLY ANN

And who the hell are you telling me what I should do with him? It ain't like you've paid no nevermind to any of us since you left. Anyway. I'll tell him. I just ain't found the right time to do it yet. You don't know what he's like when he gets all riled up over something. He ain't so quiet like he was. You just don't know.

MARY KATHERINE

No. I don't.

SALLY ANN

What'd you want to come back here for anyway? We could of buried Grandmaw without your help.

MARY KATHERINE

I expect you could've.

SALLY ANN

Wanted to show off, I suppose. Show up everyone in that new car.

MARY KATHERINE

That's right, Sally Ann. I just drove two hundred miles on the hottest day of the year so I could flaunt my wealth.

SALLY ANN

Wouldn't doubt it. (Pause.) What wealth?

MARY KATHERINE

It was just an expression, Sally Ann. I haven't struck it rich. I haven't married a doctor.

SALLY ANN

Too bad.

MARY KATHERINE

You'll be the first to know.

SALLY ANN

Don't bother. Anyways, you could help me out here if you had a mind to. I could use it. Vernon won't do shit. Man don't care about nothing. Don't know what I'm gonna do now that Grandmaw's gone.

MARY KATHERINE

(Goes to one of the dying plants and begins picking over it to see if it's worth trying to save.)

You could start by watering her flowers. Look at them. They're almost all dead.

(During the following dialogue, NORA appears out of the shadows and sits in her rocking chair, the lights should change slightly. MARY KATHERINE and SALLY ANN do not seem to notice her although at times, MARY KATHERINE might come quite close to her. It is possible that MARY KATHERINE senses her presence.)

SALLY ANN

I ain't had time to mess with them, what with running back and forth to the nursing home and everything else. Besides, most of them were dead before she got sick. The whole

place had been going to hell for a while. She couldn't keep up with it.

MARY KATHERINE

I wish you'd have let me know that she was that far gone.

SALLY ANN

Didn't figure you'd care.

MARY KATHERINE

Well of course I'd care! She was the one that wouldn't have me. She was the one that said never come back.

SALLY ANN

You should of come anyway. She'd have give in.

MARY KATHERINE

Nora would not have given in!

SALLY ANN

And you sure as hell weren't going to, were you?

MARY KATHERINE

No.

NORA

(Appearing.)

I didn't raise you to give in.

MARY KATHERINE

I still wish you'd called me.

SALLY ANN

I couldn't find your home number.

MARY KATHERINE

You could have asked the operator. That's what Vernon did.

SALLY ANN

I ain't talking to no operators. I ain't talking to nobody on the telephone that I don't know!

MARY KATHERINE

You haven't changed, have you?

SALLY ANN

No, and I ain't fixin' to.

MARY KATHERINE

Good. (Pause.) How long was she sick?

SALLY ANN

Who?

MARY KATHERINE

Who the hell do you think I mean? Grandmaw.

NORA

I'm the one in the worst shape around here.

SALLY ANN

Let's see. Oh, it's been two months or more since she took real bad. She'd been doing poorly off and on for quite a while, but I kept her here at home as long as I could. They kept her at the hospital three weeks and then moved her to a nursing home. It was only waiting then, they said.

MARY KATHERINE

It's too bad you couldn't have kept her here at home. She'd of wanted to die here.

NORA

I wasn't crazy about the idea of dying anywhere.

SALLY ANN

What the hell would you know about what she would have wanted? What's it been--ten, twelve years since you laid eyes on her?

MARY KATHERINE

Something like that. I just remember how she was.

SALLY ANN

She changed. She got old, and she couldn't look after herself. It got so I couldn't lift her anymore. When they said she wasn't getting any better, Vernon went over and looked at the Richardson Home in Lebanon. Then he come back and said she should go there instead of back home here. It was him not me.

MARY KATHERINE

Poor Nora. Lord, I never thought those words would pass my lips.

SALLY ANN

It was a fine place. Vernon wouldn't of sent her if it wasn't.

NORA

Stank of piss.

SALLY ANN

And one of us would go every couple of days to see her. Vernon used to go every Sunday hisself. Of course he spent most of the time in the T.V. room watching baseball with the old men, but then she didn't know whether he was there or not half the time.

NORA

I knew.

SALLY ANN

You should of seen how clean they kept those floors!

NORA

Gave you white bread wrapped up in waxed paper.

MARY KATHERINE

Do you think--did she die easy?

SALLY ANN

Went off just like that, they said.
(She snaps her fingers.)

NORA

Dying's the easy part.

SALLY ANN

The nurses said they just turned around one minute and she was gone. I got there just as soon as I could. They had moved her into one of the empty rooms. I went right in there to kiss her goodbye.

NORA

And they say there's no hell!

MARY KATHERINE

Did you really kiss her?

SALLY ANN

Well, I meant to, but you know what, Mary Katherine? I just couldn't. She looked so awful. They had strapped her chin closed with a little rubber tube, and they were getting ready to put her in a plastic bag--had it all laid out ready to zip her up in it.

MARY KATHERINE

Let's not talk about it anymore, okay?

NORA

That's what it all comes down to you little fool!

SALLY ANN

You asked me about it, didn't you?

MARY KATHERINE

Yes, but I didn't need all the graphic details.

SALLY ANN

Anyway, she's all right now.

MARY KATHERINE

She is?

NORA

Just dandy.

SALLY ANN

I expect Charlie's got her all laid out pretty as can be. I didn't get the cheapest coffin either, not like we had to do with Grandpaw. Vernon had some money from somewhere, and I picked out a real pretty one.

NORA

Not the one I'd have wanted--the one I'd have picked out!

MARY KATHERINE

Who's this Charlie? I thought the undertaker's name was Sam.

SALLY ANN

This is Sam's boy, Charlie. He sort of took over the business when Sam started slowing down.

MARY KATHERINE

You aren't talking about "Chuckles Ferris" are you?

SALLY ANN

Actually old Sam started getting a little queer in the head, folks said.

MARY KATHERINE

That fat kid a couple of years ahead of me?

SALLY ANN

'Course you can understand how undertakin' might make anyone a little bit strange.

MARY KATHERINE

Chuckles Ferris is the undertaker??

SALLY ANN

What? Yes. Charlie Ferris. He's a right handsome man now, I'd say. Over six feet tall.

MARY KATHERINE

Sally Ann! Do you realize that Chuckles Ferris will be the last man to ever see you with your clothes off.

(c) Jeanne Beckwith

NORA

What makes you think he won't be the first?

(c) Jeanne Beckwith