
A Prize-Winning Play: *The Waiting*

by Ken Greenman

Ken Greenman's *The Waiting* won one of the six prizes (from among 200 entries) awarded by the New Playwrights Theatre in Washington, D.C. Each prize winner was professionally produced this spring and ran for 12 performances. The play was also selected to be performed in the drama competition sponsored in 1981 for the centennial celebration of Atlantic Union College. It has been performed there and at the Rockville, Sligo, and Takoma Park Seventh-day Adventist churches in the Washington, D.C., area. Those wishing to produce the play, which has been copyrighted, should contact Ken Greenman at Takoma Academy, 81209 Carroll Avenue, Takoma Park, MD 20012.

Ken Greenman grew up in New York City, graduated with an English major from Atlantic Union College, received an M.Div. degree from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University and is currently pursuing a doctorate in drama education at the University of Maryland. He teaches English at Takoma Academy.

After the performance of *The Waiting*, November 6, 1981, at Sligo Church, Richard Osborn, principal of Takoma Academy and treasurer of the Association of Adventist

Forums, interviewed the author. Greenman's edited comments reveal a passion for plumbing the distinctive features of the Adventist experience in order to make a universal statement:

"The play came from a long interest in a couple of fields. One was history. For a class in Seventh-day Adventist denominational history, I went to the University of Chicago and read old newspapers from October 20-25, 1844, and eventually wrote a paper on the social context of those five days.

"The other area was literature. At Atlantic Union College I had gotten fascinated with Emerson and Thoreau. At Andrews I taught a course in freshman composition and got into discussions with some of the English teachers there as to whether we could find important and contemporary themes within our own Adventist culture that people outside would be interested in seeing in some form of art. The discussion started when we read Chaim Potok's books, *The Chosen* and *The Promise*. At the New Playwrights Theatre I was asked a lot of questions about the period covered by the play — whether it really happened or not — by both the director and people who talked to me after seeing a performance of the play.

"So, if you combine an interest in an histori-

cal period with whether the Adventist experience could be made significant to a wider community, you have the background to this play. The other thing that contributed to it was my observation of the dialogue and interaction among my sister's family on a farm in Vermont, and how they treated each other."

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On October 22, 1844, many people in the northeastern United States, believers in William Miller's interpretation of biblical prophecy, awaited the second coming of Jesus. Their belief was that He would come on that day. He didn't. This is a story of one of those waiting families.

Place: A dairy farm, west of Barton, Vermont, just south of Irasburg, north and west of St. Johnsbury. On a clear day, which is almost always, you can see Jay Peak. And from Jay Peak, even on a cloudy day, you can see Canada.

Characters: *Jeremiah Slatter:* Father — 49; farmer, third generation on the farm, "and likely to remain so." Believes in the coming, but is always going on "just in case."

Mom Slatter: Farmer's wife — 47; town girl married a farmer and brings some niceties to the farm as well as surety. She believes completely. She will cook no more breakfasts!

Sister Rachael: The daughter — 19; a happy young lady. A good farmer's wife-to-be. Looking forward to a husband, her Jesse Andrews, with a farm of his own. But now — this. So, with mixed emotions, she waits.

Thomas Slatter: The oldest — 29; the believer in the soil, the seasons, the security of cycles. The unbeliever in "this man, Miller" and "all his business." Thus, a theological antagonist to Momma, yet the son who loves his mother.

Jonathan Slatter: The youngest — 15; the eyes of the story. A follower who believes because the others believe. To Jon, Thomas is wrong, not so much because he disbelieves Miller, but rather, because he disbelieves Mom and Pa. Jon will grow some in all this.

Jesse Andrews: Rachel's betrothed. A believer, but a "hope-not." He wants Rachael more than any coming. Is far from disappointed come the end of the wait.

Scene I: The Evening Before

7:00 p.m., October 21, 1844

When the lights go up: Jonathan, the narrator, appears on the steps to the porch. The other characters are at various spots on stage. Tom is splitting wood outside the house. Ma in kitchen, fixing supper. Pa walks on stage into house, to kitchen, washes hands and sits with Ma. Rachael is knitting in living room, looking out window, not up at sky, but down the road, awaiting a husband, not a Messiah.

Jon: We'd heard all there was to hear, so now, we're waitin'. Momma believes, a lot. Pa, believes some, but right up to now, he's been layin' in the hay for the winter that just might come. Rachael believes, but she don't want to 'cause Jesse and she aren't married yet. They ain't had a chance to be together like married folks. I guess she don't want to get to heaven a virgin. Thomas don't believe at all. Called Miller a phony right to my face. Course he wouldn't say it in front of Momma, since she believes so. There isn't a doubt in his mind about the comin'. It just isn't, plain and simple. So he's there splittin' wood for the winter.

Tom: (Calls to Jon.) Miller's a phony! Tomorrow will come and go and we'll still need wood.

Jon: He almost convinced me! But I still believe. Heck, it's three believing, against one not. And I rather be in heaven with Momma, Pa, and Rachael than in hell with Thomas. *(He realizes the sadness of the opposite.)* And anyway, if the three of them are wrong, we'll still be warm.

Ma: (Calls from the kitchen to the children.) Rachel, come set the table, please. *(Rachael looks towards the kitchen, back to the road, rises and walks to the kitchen, proceeds to set table.)* Jonathan, come in here now. No matter how amazing this is, you still have to eat. *(Jon walks towards Tom instead of kitchen. Tom is still splitting logs. Ma looks out the window at her two sons, sighs and looks to Pa. Pa stands and calls.)*

Pa: Tom! You can stop the splittin'. We're not gonna be needing it against any cold this winter! *(By now Jon is beside Tom.)*

Jon: Ma and Pa are really upset with you, Tom. They don't understand why you can't believe.

Tom: You think I don't know that?

Jon: Why don't you, Tom? All of them preachers, preachin' away. . . . They're educated, Tom! More that just readin' and stuff. They know! If it was just Mom and Pa, well, then maybe, but them preachers, and Mr. Andrews and Mr. Wilamont. . . .

Tom: Jon — The more people believin' something don't necessarily make it the more

“Tom: Ma, the Lord works in the seasons, in cycles. . . . I’ve seen how careful He works to make this farm what it is. . . . He’s not about to come breakin’ in on that calm order.”

true. Could just as easily make it the more wrong. The Millerites might be good people. That doesn't mean we should jump to believe them.

Jon: *(After a thoughtful think.)* You'd be better off if you could come to heaven with us, Tom.

Tom: *(Angrily)* Stop bothering me, Jon! *(Tom walks away sullen. Not a glance towards the sky.)*

Jon: *(Alone again)* I sure don't like to push Tom. He's a sight bigger than me, and he's got more of a temper than even Pa. I sure hope the Lord manages to forgive him. *(Tom, followed by Jon, joins the others at the table. Tom, sullen; Rachael, distracted; Jon fidgety; Ma, fervent; and Pa, hungry. They all stand, bow as a ritual. Pa prays.)*

Pa: Lord, we hope you hear this prayer, travelin' as you are. Bless us and bless this food. We pray that we've got everything taken care of enough so you'll see fit to take all of us when you get here. Amen.

All: Amen. *(All sit and eat — Jon a bit too quickly for Momma's liking. . . .)*

Ma: Jonathan, will you stop swallowing your food whole long enough to chew it? It's a wonder you've lived 15 years without choking to death at least twice.

Jon: *(Mouth full)* But Momma, I want to get outside to watch. . . .

Ma: You won't see Him till sometime after midnight tonight. Then “every eye shall see Him.”

Pa: Jon's worried He'll come like “the thief in the night. . . .”

Tom: You all sound like children at Christmas, in a faint — waitin' on presents. . . .

Ma: *(Mild)* Why won't you wait with us Tom? He's coming, the Bible shows it. . . . Why can't you see that? Why?

Tom: Ma, the Lord works in the seasons, in cycles . . . the cows freshen' . . . the leaves turn all the colors they can . . . the sap runs into the buckets. I've seen how careful He works to make this farm what it is . . . to make us what we are. He's not about to come breakin' in on that calm order. He's not about to give the only warning to some Bible-beatin', black-suited windbag. . . .

Rachael: Tom! Please. . . .

Tom: *(A breath)* He's not about to come like Miller says, so quick and mean . . . with no word except from a man — that almost every self-respectin' preacher and farmer around mocks. . . .

Pa: All right Tom. . . . We've gone over this enough. It just brings more pain. Let it stop.

Tom: I'm going outside. . . .

Jon: You gonna cut more wood?

Tom: *(Ignores Jon's question. He rises and looks to Ma.)* Ma, please understand how I feel. . . . *(Ma looks down at her plate, forking her food. Tom goes outside and sits on the logs, holding the ax. Ma sits in silence as Jon, still swallowing his food whole, finishes and Pa, close behind Jon, does the same. Rachael, in the meantime, continues to look towards the window and door.)*

Pa: Expecting someone? *(A nonintended pun.)*

Rachael: Jesse is coming to wait with us.

Pa: Is that an askin' or a tellin'?

Rachael: Pa, please . . . we want to be together.

Ma: Don't you think his folks might want him with them? This is a time for families to be together.

Rachael: Ma — Jesse is my family (*scandal!*), at least, he will be . . . I mean, if there's no. . . .

Ma: Rachael, the Lord is coming. . . . This is no normal time. . . . You can't be thinking that everything's going to be like it's always been. . . .

Rachael: But when I have to face up to something as out-of-the-ordinary, as amazing as this, the only way I can do it is to keep being normal like I am every day. . . . That's the only way I can stand it! So I need to have Jesse here. And he needs to be with me. . . .

Pa: (*Laughs to Ma*) Can't argue with that sort of illogic, can you. . . . When's he going to be here?

Rachael: Soon. . . .

Ma: Finish your supper, if you can. . . . You've got yourself so churned up with waiting. . . . And I'm not sure just yet whose coming is looked forward to more! (*Said with a sigh of resignation. There is worry within her.*)

Jon: (*Has now finished all his food.*) Can I go outside now?

Pa: Go on . . . and make sure the gates are locked shut. Don't want the cows wandering all over kingdom-come by morning. (*Jon runs out.*)

Ma: There'll be no need to worry about that, Jeremiah. By tomorrow night. . . .

Pa: I know, Mother, but it's good for the boy to have somethin' to do. . . . (*Jon has gone out on the porch; Tom has seen Jesse walking down the road. . . . Jesse walks to Tom.*)

Tom: Evening, Jesse.

Jesse: Evening, Tom.

Tom: Come for Rachael?

Jesse: We'll wait together. . . .

Tom: Going to be a long wait — long enough to plan the wedding!

Jesse: (*Hopeful, but resigned*) Wish it was long enough to have the wedding. . . . I guess we'll just have to see. . . .

Tom: You believe He's coming, don't you?

Jesse: More than you do, but less than your Ma or my Pa — that's for sure. . . . All I really want, is. . . . (*He looks toward the farmhouse.*)

Jon: (*Sees Tom and Jesse talking in the dark.*) Rachael! He's here!

Rachael: (*Almost ready to bolt, then calms herself into a composed fiancée.*) Is it all right if Jesse waits with us? (*This to Pa.*)

Pa: Mother? (*Ma nods.*) Then it's fine with me. . . . (*Rachael then runs out to the porch door, slows and walks, restrained, out to the porch.*)

Rachael: What took you, Jesse? I've been waitin'.

“Ma: Rachael, the Lord is coming. . . . This is no normal time. . . . You can't be thinking that everything's going to be like it's always been. . . .”

Jesse: We've all been. Is it all right for me to wait with you? (*Rachael nods.*) Good. . . . (*They sit on the porch steps. Holding hands. Jonathan is still standing on the porch, looking up to the sky and back to them. They stare at him, he gets the hint.*)

Jon: Maybe Tom wants someone to talk to. (*Walks toward Tom, then out toward the audience.*) We all sit around, waiting. Each of us waiting with different thoughts. That surprises me when I think of it. . . . Ain't it something, how the same thing, like a person or a thought, or a happenin' can bring up so many ways to look at it? Surprising! (*Looks to Rachael and Jesse, who are no longer looking into the sky, but at each other, love-struck. Jon says sarcastically.*)

Jon: There goes Rachael . . . bein' normal. (*Jon walks to Tom and sits on a log next to him.*)

Jon: Mind if I set here with you?

Tom: Suit yourself.

Jon: (*Uncomfortable pause, small talk.*) Nice night. . . .

Tom: It was clouding up in the west before dark. . . . Might rain tomorrow. . . . Maybe snow if it gets any colder.

Jon: Won't be time to get colder, Tom.

Miller says it's gonna get awful hot, awful quick.

Tom: We'll have snow in two or three weeks. *(Positive)* *(Jon looks into the sky. Tom starts stacking the wood he has split. Jon remembers the gates.)*

Jon: I better do what Pa told me. *(He gets up and walks to the barn.)*

Tom: What'd he tell you to do?

Jon: Lock the gate.

Tom: *(Smiling)* Thinks he may have to search for the cows tomorrow?

Jon: I guess? . . . maybe. *(Surprised at the implications.)*

Tom: That's what he thinks. . . . *(Jon walks to barn — Tom keeps on stacking. Jon looks to Tom, scratches his head — goes. Rachael and Jesse have been sitting and looking up at the sky and at each other. Mostly at each other. . . . Mom and Pa are in kitchen — mime dishes away and talking . . . then reading Bible. Rachael and Jesse speak.)*

Rachael: *(Unsure about reality or possibility of question.)* What do you think it will be like up there? I mean . . . what will we be like?

Jesse: No one seems to know for sure. Maybe we'll be learning a new way of life. *(Dreading missing what he hasn't had yet.)*

Rachael: *(She brings Jesse's head to her and kisses his forehead.)* What I mean is . . . will we be able to be together . . . together like . . . well, in a husband and wife way. . . ? You know what I'm saying. . . .

Jesse: Rachael — I know what you're askin' about . . . I don't know . . . I just don't know. . . . *(Pregnant pause)* I hope so!

Rachael: We've done what was right. We've behaved like engaged folks are supposed to. . . .

Jesse: It ain't been easy. Remember that night when we almost. . . . I've never wanted anyone the likes of how I wanted you that night. I still want you. . . . This is the last chance we'll ever have . . . tonight, now.

Rachael: Don't even talk about it! We shouldn't be thinking these things. Especially now! I know you want to . . . *(Shyly)* I do, too. . . . We would have, someday . . . but now, . . . we'll never.

Jesse: It doesn't have to be.

Rachael: Have to be what?

Jesse: Never. *(Puts his hand behind Rachael's*

head — down to back) Rachael, I want. . . .

Rachael: No, Jesse, no, please. . . .

Jesse: Why not? *(His passion increases.)* Just once, our only time. . . .

Rachael: *(She tries to change the subject.)* We have a new calf in the barn. She's so pretty . . . and so soft. . . . Would you like to see her? Please . . . it's all we can do . . . we can't give in now. . . . I love you, . . . but, . . . please, Jesse, no. . . .

Jesse: Why? It can't be wrong with times as they are. . . . The Lord wouldn't leave us here for doing what loving each other makes us do. . . . You and I are made for this. . . . Please, Rachael, let's. Before we can't.

Rachael: *(Rachael pushes away from Jesse's advances — stands off and talks.)* No! Jesse . . . I love you, but we can't do this now. . . . It's wrong, no matter when. It would hurt Momma so! And it's wrong. We'll just have to wait. No one knows what the Lord has in store. . . . No, Jesse, it's wrong. Come see the calf. *(They walk past Tom and Rachael asks.)* How is the new calf tonight?

Tom: Don't know . . . Haven't been in there lately.

Rachael: Jesse wants to see her.

Tom: Not exactly the most unusual sight. Just a calf.

Jesse: Just curious to see. *(Disgruntled, but resigned.)*

Tom: Sure. . . .

Rachael: We'll be back in a bit.

Tom: If the Lord comes I'll give ya a shout!

Rachael: Tom . . . don't joke about that. . . .

Tom: Sorry. I'm going in to bed. Good night. . . . *(Tom walks to porch — pauses on steps.)*

Jesse: Rachael? *(He's not finished. She leads him. Silently she says, "No." They pass Jon as he is returning from the barnyard and gates.)*

Jesse: *(As friendly as he can.)* What you up to Jon?

Jon: Just doing some chores. Where're you going? *(He walks past them.)*

Rachael: To see how the new calf's doin'.

Jon: Don't forget to lock the gate. *(Jesse and Rachael walk quickly to the barn, stop to look at each other, then enter, closing the door behind. Jon walks to the porch, from where Tom has been watching Jesse and Rachael walk to the barn.)*

Jon: Thought you were going to bed.

Tom: Will in a minute. . . . Gates locked?

Jon: Yep . . . Oh! No! I forgot to feed the new calf . . . better do it now. . . . *(He starts to go to the barn.)*

Tom: Rachael and Jesse can do it.

Jon: Rachael won't remember to do it. She don't remember nothing when she's with Jesse. *(He keeps walking toward the barn.)*

Tom: Jonathan, they'll take care of things in the barn. Let 'em be.

Jon: Pa'll get angry at me if. . . .

Tom: Let them alone. *(He breaks through the stern look with a smile.)* Besides, with tomorrow being what it is, the calves won't get a chance to be hungry, right? *(Pause)*

Jon: Maybe . . . Well. . . .

Tom: Certain. *(Tom walks back to the woodpile and sits. Jon goes in and sits with Pa and Ma. They are sitting in the kitchen near the stove or fireplace. Pa is reading the Bible, Ma just rocking gently, quiet. She looks up.)*

Ma: Jeremiah, it seems as though we ought to be singing, or praying, or at a meeting. . . . Something different than just sitting here by the fire.

Pa: I'm afraid the meeting wouldn't be much bigger than us, the Andrews, and the Wilamonts. You know the rest don't believe what Brother Miller has to say. . . . That's why we decided to wait as families. . . .

Ma: Yes, I know . . . but just sitting here. . . . It's like what Rachael said about being normal in the middle of amazement. . . .

Jon: *(As he enters and sits.)* I locked the gates, Pa, and Tom said Rachael and Jesse would feed the calf. . . . They wanted to see the new one.

Pa: Rachael must feel sorry for it only having but just a few days.

Jon: They're in there looking at the calf now. . . . *(Pa goes to window.)*

Jon: Do you figure the Lord will take Tom, even though he don't believe in the coming? He's not a heathen. Just don't accept the coming. He'll sure believe when he sees the angels!

Pa: I don't suppose the Lord will cut anyone out just because He caught them by surprise. Tom's led a good life . . . been a loner, but never turned down a call for help. It's sad

he never married. A man, 29, should'a had a wife.

Jon: He would have married Ruth if she hadn't passed away. . . .

Pa: Still — Six years is a long time to hurt.

Ma: That's just the way my Thomas is.

Jon: He laughed when I told him you wanted me to lock the gates. *(There is an embarrassed squirming. Ma looks over to Pa, as he avoids her stare. . . .)*

Ma: *(Sadly)* Jeremiah . . . you see? You give Thomas reasons to not believe by your not fully believing.

Pa: Ma, I don't think Thomas needs any help not believing. He has a mind of his own.

“Jon: Do you figure the Lord will take Tom, even though he don't believe in the coming? He's not a heathen. Just don't accept the coming. He'll sure believe when he sees the angels!”

Ma: I suppose . . . *(Then Ma begins to softly sing and hum “Amazing Grace.” . . . When she gets to “When we've been there ten thousand years. . . ,” she sings aloud. Pa joins in. Jonathan sits awhile and walks out to the porch. The singing of Mom and Pa is heard beneath Jon's monologue. The songs go from “Amazing Grace” to “Just Over the Mountain Is the Promised Land,” “We Are Nearing Home,” “Blessed Assurance.” Then to a quiet hum . . . to silence. Tom is still sitting on the woodpile, carving. Jesse and Rachael are still looking at the calf. Jon is on the porch looking up. . . .)*

Jon: That's how we wait out the Last Night. Mom and Pa sitting and reading. Tom whittling by the woodpile, Rachael and Jesse spending time looking at the calf, . . . Feedin' her and the rest of them, I expect. Our last night on earth . . . Unless it took Him longer to come than we expected. *(He walks off the porch and stands out looking at his home, his sky, his earth.)* My, but it sure is pretty. This earth, Vermont, this farm, the woods. . . . Miller and his people say it's all

evil. Seems they can't wait for the consumin' fire to burn it all away. . . . (*Walks some more.*) I can wait. . . . (*Looks over at Tom.*) I mean, if. . . . (*pause; then pleading.*) But it's pretty. (*He walks over to Tom and sits.*) What you doing'?

Tom: (*Obviously*) Whittling. (*A wait.*)

Jon: What you thinkin'?

Tom: How peaceful and calm this all is. . . . (*Smiles at his brother.*) What about you?

Jon: I'm takin' it all in. . . . I'm gonna miss it.

Tom: You won't have the chance.

Jon: What do you mean?

Tom: I mean it will be here tomorrow and next week . . . and so will you.

Jon: (*Pause*) I hope so, but. . . . (*Jon sits in quiet with Tom. Pa stands and takes some hot drink from fire. Ma watches and goes to window — looks out back and says.*)

Ma: It's going to be so beautiful. . . . The Lord made this world so beautiful, even with all the hurt. Heaven will be so much more grand.

Pa: This world isn't so beautiful. A lot of tears and sweat. Some blood. There's more pain than beauty.

Ma: Think of the beauty without the pain, though. Think of holding Baby Matthew. . . . Tom walking with Ruth instead of grieving her passing.

Pa: I'm looking forward to not havin' to work so hard an' long. . . . That's my reward; a good long rest from my work. . . . (*Pause*) You want Him to come more than anything else, don't you. . . .

Ma: (*After a wait.*) I want Tom to be with us. My heart wants that more than anything.

Pa: Tom's always meant the most to you of all the children. . . . He's had the love you would have given Matthew plus what love would naturally be his.

Ma: I want so much for him to believe . . . so much. To leave Tom behind would just. . . .

Pa: If the Lord comes, He's not going to leave a man as good as Tom behind. I believe that more than I believe He's coming.

Ma: (*Half jesting, half serious.*) Jeremiah, do you really believe He's coming? You say you do, but you've worked the fields and stored

the hay as though tomorrow is just another day.

Pa: I want Him to come more than I believe He will. And if He doesn't come, I'm not going to have all my eggs crushed. I'm keeping one or two in other baskets. I haven't dug the potatoes.

Ma: But you've cut and stored the hay.

Pa: Compromise.

Ma: Jeremiah. (*A maternal moment, sweetly.*)

Pa: Mother, I'm a farmer. Don't ask me to be a saint. If the Lord takes me, it will be with the good earth under my fingernails.

Ma: (*Smile and pause.*) Jeremiah Slatter, I love you. And the Lord loves you more than I love you, so you'll be in heaven, dirty hands and all.

Pa: You'll still hold my hand through the Pearly Gates?

Ma: Right down the streets of gold. . . . (*She moves to Jeremiah and kisses him. A smile . . . Pause.*) I wish Rachael and Jesse had had the chance to have what we've had. (*Pa looks to barn.*)

Pa: They've been waiting for it long enough.

Ma: I'm sure the Lord has some things even better. If we're here tomorrow morning, I'm going to fix us the biggest, best breakfast ever eaten . . . and it will be the last breakfast I'll ever make, on earth.

Pa: You suppose you'll be cooking in heaven?

Ma: The Lord may make us into perfect beings, but even a perfect woman will fix breakfast. Only there, maybe, perfect men will help!

Pa: Don't go gettin' uppity on me — our last night on earth. . . . (*All is in jest . . . they sit and continue to read. Pause. Jesse and Rachael walk from barn. They are tender to each other. They speak in whispers.*)

Rachael: Isn't the calf beautiful? . . . all new. She's like a promise . . . that somehow our love will still grow. I love you, Jesse. And if we can, someday, it will be the way I've always dreamed. . . . I've always wanted it to be beautiful. and if we have the chance, it will be. (*They've been walking towards Tom and Jon. As they approach, Tom rises and stretches.*)

Tom: Well, I'm ready for sleep. You?

Jon: (*Still sitting . . . stretching . . . imitating his brother.*) No, I want to sit here a while longer. (*Rachael and Jesse get closer.*)

Tom: No, I think you want to come in. . . .

Jon: (*Oblivious of Tom's "hint." Sees the two lovers.*) Hey, Rachael! Did you feed the calves?

Rachael: (*Startled from her reverie*) What? No! We were. . . .

Jon: See, Tom! I told you, she forgets everything when she's with Jesse. Now I have

“Rachael: Tom, it's going to mean Jesse and I can be married. You know how I've wanted that. Tom: Yep. I imagine you've wanted Jesse more than Jesus all along.”

to do it myself anyway. . . .

Tom: Well, just go do it then! (*Jon is shocked at Tom's hard tone. He walks past Rachael, Jesse, confused.*)

Tom: How is the calf? (*He smiles warmly, touches her arm, big-brother. She knows — he knows.*)

Rachael: Lovely, Tom, and so new.

Tom: Good. 'Night, Jesse. . . .

Jesse: (*Confused*) Good night . . . I. . . .

Tom: See ya in the morning. I'll have lots of work to do.

Rachael: You're sure, aren't you?

Tom: I'm positive.

Rachael: Goodnight, Tom. (*Tom goes into the house; Rachael and Jesse walk on past for a stroll. . . . Jon comes out of the barn in a huff. Runs to the porch. Stops, turns to the audience.*)

Jon: Makes me mad. I figure — the Lord's coming . . . it's almost time . . . and here I am feedin' the calves and shoveling that mess! I'm sure glad He's coming!! I can leave all the barns behind! (*Pauses . . . walks up to the porch. Stops, looks.*) My, but it is beautiful. (*Enters the house — lights.*)

Scene II: The Night

11:30 p.m. October 22.

The 24-hour period of return is almost over. The discouragement is evident in degree. Except for Ma, who interprets the delay as an ultimate test of her faith. He will come — even at the 11th hour, or 11:59. But He will come. The rest of the family does not concur. A pervasive gloom. Mom is out, off stage. Rachael and Jesse are walking in from stage left, but in darkness almost total. Jonathan is busying himself with whittling (like Tom) by the woodstack, left. Pa and Tom sitting on porch discussing the obvious.

Tom: How is Momma going to be, once the time to wait is past?

Pa: She's a very strong woman. She'll hurt for a while . . . be disappointed . . . but, she'll get beyond it. . . . But we might be talking about this a bit early. I mean, it is not midnight yet.

Tom: (*With a slight edge.*) What do you want to talk about, instead? Clearing off some more of the trees for grazing in the spring? We could argue over that for a half hour or so.

Pa: (*With resignation.*) I suppose one conversation is just as good as the next . . . under the circumstances.

Tom: Did you ever really believe He was coming?

Pa: Yes, I did, most of the time, in fact. The rest of the time your Ma believed for me.

Tom: When'd you finally stop? (*Pa looks off for awhile, "the truth will come out."*)

Pa: I suppose it was something Rachael said at supper a while back. She wished she might be fixing Jesse's suppers in her own kitchen. I found myself wanting her to have the chance. It wasn't a big step from wanting that for Rachael, to not wanting Him to come at all. What a man wants he generally believes to be possible. So I suppose not wanting something is just a step away from not believing it.

Tom: I wouldn't want to be Miller tomorrow morning.

Pa: He'll figure out why he was wrong. One thing I've learned studying the Bible. . . . Every rock-bottom belief has at

least a half a dozen ways to be wrong. . . .

Tom: Figure the Lord may come tomorrow instead?

Pa: No. (*Finality.*)

Tom: (*Change tone and subject as Tom walks across porch and looks at Jesse and Rachael.*) I suppose we'll be having a wedding now. They've put it off too long, waiting on this day. Rachael needn't waste any more time.

Pa: You're right. . . . There needs to be a wedding, quick. (*Mom enters scene – yard, porch, etc.*)

Tom: When do you figure it'll be?

Pa: As soon as we can marry them off, now that they can be.

Tom: (*Innocently.*) What's the hurry?

Pa: (*Stares at Tom with a whimsey.*) Here's your Momma. You know.

Tom: They can't hold off much longer. . . . (*Pa nods as Mom enters. She is like the excited child, waiting for Santa. No doubt of faith. The Lord is on His way.*)

Ma: It's nearly time. Any moment now!

Tom: You still believe He's coming. . . . ?

Ma: Of course, Thomas! Nothing's changed! He's closer now than before. Jeremiah, how can you hold yourself so calm, knowing how close He must be.

Pa: (*Dreading saying it.*) I haven't held on as long as you, I don't believe He's coming. It seems Miller's been mistak. . . .

Ma: (*Interrupting.*) Don't lose the gift right when it's offered! It's so close to the time. The waiting is almost done. The good Lord chooses this late hour to find those who truly believe His word. Don't you see? This is the last test, the last moments in His refining fire. . . . Surely you see that! Surely you . . . (*She does not finish. She sits, rocks and says.*) Wait, Jeremiah, just a little longer. Please wait. (*Pa moves to Ma to embrace her. At his touch, hand on shoulder, she stands, they embrace.*)

Ma: Please, hold on. Believe, please, and help my unbelief. (*Pa holds Ma close, Tom looks on, invisible. He moves to speak, decides against, and goes out, off the porch. He encounters Rachael and Jesse as they return.*)

Jesse: Looks like you were right all along.

Tom: Giving up early, Jesse? Still some time to go. Wouldn't hurt to wait.

Jesse: Whose side you on, anyway?

Tom: Just don't want anyone to be hasty.

Rachael: Tom, it's going to mean Jesse and I can be married. You know how I've wanted that.

Tom: Yep. I imagine you've wanted Jesse more than Jesus all along. (*A joke, but not taken thus.*)

Jesse: Now hold on, Tom. That's not fair. She's been waiting just as sure and faithful as your Mom. And it's been harder on Rachael than anyone, including your Mom.

Tom: I know it's been hard on you, Rachael. I imagine you feel relieved.

Rachael: I'm happy the way it's turned out, and I would have been happy if the Lord *had* come.

Jesse: I'm happier now!

Tom: I know, Jesse.

Rachael: How's Mom going to feel?

Tom: Pa says she'll get past it.

Jesse: I hope so. I don't want her to be so upset that she'll try to stop Rachael and me from . . .

Rachael: Mom would never do something like that. Especially now that. . . . (*She pauses.*)

Tom: Now that what . . . ?

Jesse: (*Too quickly.*) Now that the Lord's not coming.

Tom: . . . But don't you figure He's coming. . . . Just not right now?

Jesse: Sure! He's coming some time . . . but now it won't stop us from getting married. (*To Rachael.*) Right?

Rachael: (*To Tom more than Jesse.*) Soon, more than ever before.

Tom: Of course. And Mom won't go to stop you. . . .

Rachael: Please make sure, Tom. . . . (*A plea.*)

Tom: I promise, Rachael. (*It is obvious that Jesse has been totally left out of this brief, but important exchange. His discomfort over this, added to his impatience about the marriage, begins to show.*)

Jesse: I'll talk to her . . . she'll see that. . . .

Rachael: Jesse, I don't think you'll. . . .

Tom: The less you say to Mom, the better. Let Rachael and I do the talking. . . . (*Jonathan has been the observer in all this. He wants to speak, but he has a prior question in his mind, unanswered. He moves to the group.*)

Jon: You all figure He's not coming? What about if Miller was just a day or two off? I mean, it's possible He might come next Tuesday, or on Sunday while we're meeting with the others. Wouldn't that be like Him, to come while we're singing hymns together? (*Rachael has been aggravated by Jon's grasping at straws. When she speaks, her patience has parked and popped.*)

Rachael: If that's the way the Lord wants me to live, never sure, never able to start something for fear we can't finish it — I can't. I won't live that way. I don't care if He comes tomorrow, or next week. I'm going to live my life like He's never coming. *Never.*

Tom: Don't you think that's going a bit too far, Rachael?

Jon: You could get into lots of trouble talking like that.

Jesse: With who?

Jon: Pa, and Ma.

Tom: Not to forget our soon-coming Lord. (*This has been said, of course, with sarcasm. And for this, he is made immediately sorry.*)

Rachael: Tom, please don't make fun. I'm scared about tomorrow and next week, and next year. I'm scared because now I don't know whether they're going to come or not! I want them to come, so I can live them with Jesse. I feel guilty for wanting them. But I want them. (*To Jesse, now*) Each day . . . and each night. . . . (*Rachael walks away a few steps, Jesse follows, hoping to be helpful. He touches her shoulder. She turns, his arm goes around her shoulder. She speaks to Tom.*) I've envied you, Tom, these last few months. . . .

Tom: (*A contrite young man.*) Envied? Why?

Rachael: I've envied your not believing. You've always been sure. You haven't had to face giving up everything. It's been easy for you. All you had to do is go on, one day, one night, one day, as though it would go on forever. It's been easy for you, Tom, easy.

Jon: Momma hasn't made it easy for him, Rachael. Every time he's sat down, she preached at him. There's not much easiness when someone's preaching at you. . . . And Momma hasn't given Tom a peaceful mo. . . .

Tom: (*Interrupting.*) I don't need anyone to defend me, Jonathan. It's been hard on all of

us, Momma included.

Jesse: And now it's over.

Rachael: Almost. (*Through this conversation, Ma and Pa have been in the kitchen. At the point that Rachael says, "Now that the Lord's not coming," Ma moves upstairs off. Pa has been alone in the kitchen. At Rachael's "almost," a pause and Pa takes his watch, opens it, looks, sighs, and calls to Ma, low, sympathetic.*)

Pa: Bess, Bessie? Come on down. It's time.

Ma: (*From off and up.*) No, Jeremiah, not yet. (*Pleading.*)

Pa: Momma, (*A statement of fact.*) it's midnight. (*A silence, then an order.*) Bess, come down. We all have to talk. (*This is loud enough for all to hear, but not threateningly loud.*)

Tom: (*To Jesse.*) No matter what, you be gentle. (*Ma comes down and into living/dining room where Pa waits — Silence as Mom stands.*)

Pa: The waiting's over.

Ma: How could we have been wrong? The Bible doesn't lie? How could. . . .

Pa: There wasn't any lying going on. . . . There was just being wrong. . . . A mistake, somehow, a mistake.

Ma: Maybe he was off just a day. Or two. . . .

Pa: Maybe a week, a year. Maybe a lifetime. It doesn't matter now. What matters now is picking up and starting again. Each day, living each day.

Ma: But He may come soon, and if we're just doing what we do each day. . . .

Pa: If the Lord won't take me when I'm being myself, I don't imagine He'll take me when I'm pretending to be someone I'm not. It's not a matter of what I do, it's a matter of what He's done . . . you know that, Momma. You knew before you heard of Miller. (*Ma's silence bears consent? Pa doesn't know, waits for answer, none comes — so on to the next order of business.*) It's late. Let's talk with the children — then we'll turn in. There's lots of work to catch up on. We'll start tomorrow.

Ma: (*Bitterly still. The silence was not yet consent.*) With a breakfast I thought I'd never have to make.

Pa: I'll fix it tomorrow.

Ma: No. That's my chore.

Pa: Come on outside. . . . (*A gentle request. They go out to speak to the kids, lights up*

on porch.)

Rachael: Momma . . . I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry that it didn't happen like you wanted. (*Pa cuts in quickly.*)

Pa: It's a sad time for all of us, not just for your Ma, Rachael.

Jon: What do you figure happened? I didn't expect that Brother Miller would be wrong. I mean, he used the Bible to prove what he was saying.

Pa: For every text in the Bible, there's many possible ways of looking. It shouldn't come as all that surprising that Miller was wrong. Disappointing maybe, but when you think about it, not surprising.

Jon: Tom wasn't surprised or disappointed! (*A burst of pride that fails. The looks from all, especially Tom, makes Jon try to back-track, which makes it worse.*) I mean, I'm sure you're relieved, right, Tom? You were right all along.

“Pa: For every text in the Bible, there's many possible ways of looking. It shouldn't come as all that surprising that Miller was wrong.”

Tom: Jon — will you just shut up?

Rachael: What does it mean for us, now, I mean? What about tomorrow? Momma? What about the waiting?

Ma: (*A pause, then a plea.*) Just because Miller missed the time for the Lord's return, it doesn't mean he was wrong completely. It might be Jesus is coming right now. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe next week. If we're just patient enough. . . . If we just wait on Him.

Jesse: No!

Tom: Jesse!

Jesse: No! I won't put our weddin' off any more! Just so (*To Momma*) you can hold on to a hope that won't come true!

Tom: (*Mild threatening.*) I asked you to keep quiet.

Jesse: You're asking too much. There's no way I'm waiting any more. And it ain't right for *her* to ask us to. . . . How can she expect us to hold up our lives? I'm like a horse hitched to a plow . . . pulling hard, but the plow's rock-bound. . . . I'm going to move on or bust my harness.

Rachael: Momma, you *must* understand how Jesse feels. (*To him.*) I don't like how hard he sounds talking to you, (*back to Momma*) but you've got to know how we want to be together. We put it off 'cause of the coming. . . .

Tom: (*To Rachael.*) You needn't run on so . . . Momma understands how you feel. You've got to see how she sees. It's like everything else is too small compared to the Lord's coming. (*To mom.*) Momma can't see anything else but the glory and she wants us to see, like she sees. . . .

Ma: I don't like being talked about like I'm not here.

Tom: You're *not* here! You think you're on your way to heaven in a train, but that train never came. Momma, come back to earth. Come back to us.

Ma: I know the feelings you have, Rachael. Don't you think I felt that way for your father! (*To Pa.*) I was longing for you long before you asked me to come with you. . . . (*She looks back to Rachael.*) You want to be together like only married folk can be. You want that being close and warm . . . you want. . . .

Rachael: Momma, (*quietly*) we are going to have all of that no matter how you feel about it. (*Jesse nearly chokes, general upset. Mom is confused and shocked.*)

Tom: (*Too quickly.*) What she means is that. . .

Rachael: (*Interrupting.*) It doesn't need tellin' what I mean. (*She goes to Jess, who stands with arms around, to face the music together.*) We've never been together (*awkward*) like that. But we're going to now as man and wife. We got the right. It's all wrapped up in our tomorrows together.

Jesse: (*Low, intense.*) We have a right to tomorrows. . . .

Ma: (*Intense, pleading.*) You'll lose heaven just to use that right? Don't you taste the sourness in the sweet temptation? You want

a good thing, but the time's wrong . . . now is not the time. It's time to wait on the Lord.

Pa: Seems to me they waited as long as they could. You're asking them to hold off too long.

Tom: The waiting is over, Ma. Rachael and Jesse need to move on.

Pa: Looks like we're going to have a wedding, sooner the better.

Jon: Momma, please see it like they see it. At least for their sake. . . . We've got to let them have tomorrow.

Tom: (*Tom looks off.*) There's going to be a sunrise, Momma. It may cloud up later on,

“*Rachael:* It's just because tomorrow *may* be the last day that I want to live now as hard and full as I can.”

but the morning will come. . . .

Ma: (*Anger, coming from a hurting spirit.*) And you'll expect a breakfast from me, won't you?

Pa: It's no more or less that you've done every morning for 30 years.

Ma: Act as though nothing has changed on heaven or earth . . . as though tomorrow may not be earth's last day. . . .

Rachael: It's just because tomorrow *may* be the last day that I want to live now as hard and as full as I can.

Ma: If only you could see what you're doing. . . .

Pa: All she's doing is getting ready to live a normal life. And we're not going to stand in her way.

Tom: And I figure that tonight the Lord showed us He won't stand in her way either. . . .

Rachael: Momma, please . . . be happy with us.

Ma: (*Angry, bitter.*) I will pray for you. (*She walks up into the house – gone. . . . Rachael begins to follow. Pa stops her.*)

Pa: Leave her be. She'll work this out better alone than with us pesterin' her. It's late. We all better get some sleep. Jesse, go home

and see how your parents are. No doubt there will be some more talking you have to do. . . . (*Pa turns and follows Ma's trail.*) As I will. (*Exits into house.*)

Tom: Good night, Jesse, Rachael. Jon, come on in. . . .

Jon: (*A firm “No” to an older brother; surprise!*) I got some thinking to do. Good night. (*Tom pauses, goes in; Jon walks down stage; Jesse and Rachael head off stage. Jon looks out to the audience . . . talks as a prayer and drifting thought. . . .*) I'm worried about Mom. . . . The coming meant so much to all of us, but to her most of all. I hope she doesn't come to hate. She's been so disappointed. . . . What's she going to do about it? She really can't blame any of us. We believed like her. Who then? Brother Miller? Tom?

God, please see that Mom doesn't blame anyone. It's no one's fault that you didn't come. You had your reasons. . . . You must'a. . . . I sure wish you could show me what they are. Or, at least, show Momma. She needs something to hold on to. She needs something to help her see how important tomorrow and the next day is. . . . I've never seen her so upset. Help her, please, just to see. (*He exits into house – lights fade off. House – yard – barn last.*)

Scene III: Early Morning Before Breakfast

5 a.m., October 23.

Momma comes into kitchen to prepare breakfast. Tom is there already, sitting in the dark. Mom lights two lanterns. After the second she sees Tom. She is startled.)

Ma: Tom! You gave me a fright.

Tom: I'm sorry . . . couldn't sleep much. I wanted to be here with you this morning.

Ma: (*Suddenly becoming angry.*) Why? Haven't you done enough already? Why do you want to make it worse. . . .

Tom: I did nothing but be honest. It would have been worse if I'd lied, said I believed when I really didn't.

Ma: But why couldn't you believe? If more people believed instead of thinking like you, we'd be in heaven right now. It's your fault. And now you're going to scoff even more.

Tom: Whether I believed or not didn't have a thing to do with the Lord not coming. I

don't believe He'll ever come in the way you talk about Him coming. . . . He's orderly. He goes step by step. He's not going to come in destroying all that's so beautiful. Why would He burn that rabbit warren in the woods. . . . Does your God bake baby rabbits like you fry potatoes? That's a terrible God you have!

Ma: You don't understand how sinful this world is!

Tom: How sinful are those new calves in the barn? Or Mrs. Preston's new baby? You mean to tell me that baby would be burned by God just because the Prestons didn't believe in Miller's prophecies?

Ma: They weren't Miller's! The prophecies are in the Bible, they're God's warnings to us. Miller preaches God's words. Not his own.

Tom: Whose ever words! They were wrong. He's wrong. You're wrong. You've got to see now that life is going to go on. Those calves in there are going to grow up, freshin' an' nurse their young, give milk. This whole world is going to go on doing whatever nature tells it to do. . . . And that isn't sinful, it's natural, so it's right.

Ma: Tom, you're saying that whatever *is*, is *right*. . . . No! I won't accept that. Suffering *is*, death *is*, pain *is*, but that doesn't make them right. I won't accept a world where tears and trouble are "right." God is a maker of joy, not tears.

Tom: Then will you let Rachael and Jesse have the measure of joy that's beginning to come to them?

Ma: But what about the tears? Just starting off like they are there's bound to be tears. It would be so much better if they could spend tomorrow and forever in heaven, without the tears. . . .

Tom: Momma, if Rachael finds reason to cry, tomorrow or whenever, it's Jesse who will be drying those tears. . . . And if they laugh, they'll laugh together. But at least they'll have the years with each other here, starting today, and going one day after the next. . . . All the time they need together.

Ma: You make it sound as though the Lord's coming was a bad thing, something to dread. . . . I don't dread it. . . . I long for it! And I will live as though He was coming

tomorrow. . . . My only plan will be heaven . . . always, tomorrow in heaven.

Tom: That's a waste of life. . . . You've got to have plans, a future . . . a body has to have tomorrow to plan on! You'll miss so much if you don't. You've got to plan to stock up for tomorrow so you'll *have* something tomorrow.

Ma: I don't need to depend on anything but the Lord. . . .

Tom: That's not living, that's being a tree in the woods waiting on the ax. Never feeling, just waiting . . . never looking forward to anything. . . . It's a waste. . . . (*Tom walks out . . . goes to the woodpile, handles the ax. Ma moves about the kitchen, in preparation for breakfast. She soon moves to the stove and the box next to the stove that holds the wood. . . . She looks in, bends down and takes the one remaining piece out. The box is now empty. One small piece of wood doth not a fire make. Momma realizes this. One needs to plan ahead for wood. She has not permitted a restocking of the box. . . . But now. . . . And so a compromise must be reached, or there is no food, no heat. She goes to the door, porch, out to Tom. He stands. . . .*)

Ma: I need some of the fruits of your planning ahead. (*Willing to bend.*)

Tom: What do you mean? (*The shoulder chip begins to slip.*)

Ma: The woodbox, Thomas. I didn't let you fill it. So there's no wood in it. No wood means no breakfast. I need some of your wood. (*Vulnerable.*)

Tom: (*He could be mean, but instead he is conciliatory.*) You wouldn't let me put any. . . . (*He sees the truce flag of peace.*) Sure! . . . Big pieces? . . . Kindling? . . . How much? . . .

Ma: At least enough for breakfast.

Tom: How about if I fill the box while you cook?

Ma: (*A silent sigh.*) Enough wood for a few days. . . .

Tom: Just a few. . . .

Ma: All right . . . a few days. . . .

Tom: For all of us. (*Mom goes into the kitchen with some wood, Tom follows with more. He has stacked up a huge armload, almost too much, in his happiness. He goes in and dumps all the wood in the box. . . . They look at each other as the lights go off.*)