

TAIL END CHARLIE

Joey Banks

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CHARACTERS

Robert Dobson (22-25)
Dorothy Dobson (20-25)
George Dobson (25-32)
Frank (28-45)
Hyrum Dobson (55-65)
Dr. Jonathan Ross (55-65)

CASTING NOTE: Hyrum Dobson and Dr. Jonathan Ross can be played by the same actor.

SETTING: A small town outside of Chicago, Illinois. Various time periods between 1944-1945.

PRODUCTION NOTE: A basic living room set is required with three entrances: one to the front door, one to the kitchen, and one going upstairs. There are three distinct areas to the set: the bar, the desk, and the living area.

ACT I

Scene One

Fall, 1944

*The stage is dark. We can't make out where we are, but we can sense it is a home. Too dark to make out anything more than shapes. A lone light shines down on **HYRUM DOBSON**, an older man who has seen better days.*

We can make out basic features of his face, but he is downlit in such a way where his eyes and borders are awash in shadow. We understand he is human, weak, and tired, but other than that, he is unrecognizable.

He sits quietly and without movement in a wooden chair. He holds a small metal tool box in one hand and a glass of scotch in the other hand.

The setting is absent from the scene. We don't know what year it is, what time it is, if this is a memory or a dream, or if it is really the beginning of this story at all.

HYRUM: I have a box. It's more of a collection. Did I ever tell you that? I wanted to remember everything. I was so careful to remember everything. I never mentioned this? I have a box. Where did I put that? Yes, I still do. If you open it you will find currency. Paper, copper, things of value. For dozens of countries. Money sitting in a box. Where did I put that? My boys would sneak upstairs when they thought I was asleep in this chair, they would tip-toe past me, one after the other. I kept my eyes closed. I wanted to remember everything. They were so happy. Oh, yes they did. My two little thieves. They would head into my room and pull open every drawer in my dresser until they found where I hid it this time. This small metal box. Full of so many treasures. The younger one... always so careful to put everything back where he found it. Always so careful to remember everything. The older one... brave and foolish, always daring to take the heist a step further. They loved this little box. But, it was just paper. They were just things. I gave them the world, but they never saw it. They were so young and I had meant to take them everywhere with me. I had meant to remember everything; every promise, every step, for ever and ever and ever. I gave them the world, and they broke my heart. Each of them. Oh no, they're dead now. Hmm? Oh yes. Pieces of earth. Returned to earth. I look around now and I just want to remember everything. I should have put something better in that box. I should have given them more. Now, you and I sit here, and I just try to remember everything. It was just currency. Old bills and coins. How could a moment so small linger in my mind for so long? Did I ever tell you that? I have a box. It's more of a collection. Did I ever tell you that? I wanted to remember

everything. I was so careful to remember everything. I never mentioned this? I have a box. Where did I put that? My boys—

*Unbeknownst to the audience, **GEORGE DOBSON** has slowly entered the scene from some dark part of the stage. This is Hyrum's oldest son.*

Unlike Hyrum, he is alert and clear. We can see that he is young, close to thirty-years-old, but carries himself in a way that suggests he's been dealt a bad hand along the way.

He interrupts his father on his entrance.

GEORGE: Pop?

HYRUM (*with a start*): Who's that?

GEORGE: It's Georgey.

HYRUM: I'm fine, George.

GEORGE: It was only a few minutes out of my way. I thought you could use the company.

HYRUM: He's come to check up on me, Frank. He's worried I'll forget.

GEORGE: I think we should talk about this. I think that's right— I think it's the right thing to do.

HYRUM: The right thing to do.

GEORGE: For Robert.

HYRUM: I don't want to talk about Robert, son. I want you to get out of my house.

GEORGE: We can't bury our heads in the sand and pretend this isn't happening.

HYRUM: Why not? You're good at that.

GEORGE: Robert would have wanted—

HYRUM: What did I say? What did I just say? We aren't talking about this. Not you and me. Not ever. He never listened, Frank, you're right.

There is a long silence as George stands looking at his father. It's tentative between these two men. We understand the relationship is fraught and the hope that it can be repaired has run low over the years.

Hyrum sips his drink and mutters to himself under his breath. Then-

GEORGE: Okay. This has been— anyway, I just wanted to stop by and let you know that this is something we need to be thinking about. They want me to plan the service, so if you want to be involved, be involved. If you want to pull yourself together for a few days and do this right, well, you know where to find me.

HYRUM: Who does?

GEORGE: What?

HYRUM: "They want me to plan the service." Who wants that?

GEORGE: Dad—

HYRUM: Who wants that? Who? What fucking nonsense.

GEORGE: Alright.

HYRUM: Why should one dead son bury the other? Who would want that? Hmm? How would that possibly work? How could a ghost like you bring comfort to anyone with a heartbeat? Are you gonna speak for him? Will you cry? Will you pound the lectern and tell everyone how it's not fair? How he was too young? How his wife didn't deserve to be widowed? Are we going to hold hands and sing hymns and pray for a little more light in our lives, for a little more time? How could that possibly fucking work with a ghost like you? Who wants that, Frank?

GEORGE: George.

HYRUM: Let me tell you something about your brother: I will remember his face. No matter how much I lose, up here, he's not going anywhere. His face is burned to my very being. And there is no way that it can ever be washed away. I know that's true. Ask me how I know that's true.

GEORGE: How do you know that's true, Dad?

HYRUM: Because I had to erase you to make room for him. I welcomed this disease into every memory I have of you. Every damn one of them. I said "you can have these. They are all yours. Feast on them. Gorge yourself on everything that has to do with this ghost. I offer them up to you, but in exchange, I keep *him*." My child is mine. Forever.

Hyrum has said his peace.

The room grows quiet and sits in a long silence.

GEORGE: ...it won't work, though. You can hold on for a while. But this thing is going to eat you alive. You and I both know it. You will remember everything, and then, just like that, you will be gone and this ghost will bury you.

HYRUM: I have this box. You remember this box?

GEORGE: ...Yes.

HYRUM: You remember what was in it? All those years ago?

GEORGE: I do.

HYRUM: Do you know what I keep in here now?

GEORGE: I don't.

HYRUM: He's dead, George. He's dead and I can't change that. I find myself praying for it to be some mistake, for it to be a nightmare I can't climb out of, but there's no end to it. But over the past few days, I've stopped praying for him back. I know that's not happening. So I've started to make new memories and replace these rotten ones with something a bit more comforting. These new memories are vivid, full of detail, and are a lot easier to swallow.

GEORGE: Goodnight, Pop.

HYRUM: I'd trade you for him. I'd kill you myself if it brought him back. And in here (*points to his temple*), it does.

Scene Two
Summer, 1945

It's mid afternoon in the Dobson home as sounds of a woman singing drift in from the other room. We are still in the same location as the prior scene, but now light has come back to the world. As if a curtain has lifted and the home is rejuvenated. New life, new movement, new colors. This is a home that has found a new beginning.

ROBERT DOBSON *enters.*

Robert is young, in his mid-twenties, and carries himself with a moral confidence that is partly impressive, but mostly annoying. The type of confidence that comes with being young and having your whole life ahead of you.

He is wearing a uniform showing his rank and position as a Captain in the United States Army. A conquering war hero returning after several years, his eyes take in the room. Unchanged, but still very different from what he remembered. A chair moved, a lamp replaced, a painting added, but at its core, still relatively unchanged.

He is quiet as he sets his luggage down and listens to the woman sing in the other room.

DOROTHY (*singing*): "...Till then, when all the world will be free, please wait for me, although there are oceans we must cross and mountains that we must climb, I know every game must have a loss, so pray that our loss is nothing but time..."

George enters carrying groceries. He is preoccupied with his task so he doesn't notice his brother until he has a moment to look up.

GEORGE (*hollering to the kitchen*): They didn't have any fresh, so I just got them canned! I also managed to talk the clerk down to a nice price for the whole bundle and— (*notices Robert*) Robert?!

ROBERT: Hey Georgey-Boy.

GEORGE: Robert! You son of a bitch! We weren't expecting you until this evening.

ROBERT: Well, I caught an early bus out of Columbus to that little stop on Hewitt.

GEORGE: You should have phoned. I would have picked you up.

ROBERT: It wasn't a problem. I wanted to walk.

GEORGE: You wanted to walk, huh?

ROBERT: That's right.

GEORGE: Well, it's great to have you back, little brother.

ROBERT: It's great to be back.

GEORGE: God. You look so much older.

ROBERT: You haven't changed a bit.

GEORGE: Nah, that's not true. Is it?

ROBERT: Sure it is. But that's a good thing, right? Hell, you cleaned up.

GEORGE: These old rags?

ROBERT: Dee's in the kitchen?

GEORGE: Preparing a feast. All your favorites. You're the conquering hero returning home after all these years. Like Achilles after he sacked Troy.

ROBERT: I'm going to loan you some books. You need to read more.

DOROTHY: George, who are you talking to-

DOROTHY DOBSON *enters.*

It's like she stepped out of a picture. Robert visibly changes when she walks in the room. She is younger than Robert, early twenties, but carries herself as if she has had to grow up very quickly over the course of the last few years. There is a kindness and intelligence in Dorothy, but beneath everything she is haunted by the experiences that have shaped her.

Robert.

ROBERT: Hey gorgeous.

Dorothy runs into his arms and they kiss.

It's a moment that has been a long time coming and George may as well not even be there.

GEORGE: I'm going to get all this put away. You two can... catch up.

George leaves the room quietly, but quickly.

DOROTHY: Hey Flyboy.

ROBERT: Dee.

DOROTHY: We weren't expecting you until this evening.

ROBERT: I caught an earlier trip back.

DOROTHY: I wish you would have let me know! I wanted to get this place a little more cleaned up.

ROBERT: Oh, I'm sorry. I'll leave and come back later.

DOROTHY: No. I don't think I'm letting you leave this house ever again.

ROBERT: What about work?

DOROTHY: You can work from the den.

ROBERT: I'm sure you'd love me getting in your hair all day.

DOROTHY: That sounds just fine to me.

ROBERT: You're as beautiful as ever.

DOROTHY: That sounds just fine too.

ROBERT: How long do we have before George gets back?

DOROTHY: Not long enough.

ROBERT: You'd be surprised by how fast I move these days.

DOROTHY: Did you miss me, Mr. Dobson?

ROBERT: Am I that obvious?

DOROTHY: You're transparent.

ROBERT: You sound like a much older woman.

DOROTHY: You look like a much older man.

ROBERT: I think it has something to do with the altitude. But you're not a pilot; so, what's your excuse?

DOROTHY: I don't really sound so old, do I?

ROBERT: Only whenever you speak.

DOROTHY: You brought so much worry into my life these last few years; if I turn grey before I'm thirty I'll never forgive you.

ROBERT: You'll look distinguished and handsome.

DOROTHY: I was worried you'd forget what I looked like.

ROBERT: I did. If I am being honest, I've been greeting every woman like this since I got off the bus.

DOROTHY: Stop it.

ROBERT: There isn't a length of time that could ever make me forget you.

DOROTHY: I'm making dinner. I'm trying to make dinner. I'm not very good at making dinner.

ROBERT: I heard. I don't really need all this. You shouldn't have troubled yourself.

DOROTHY: Stop playing the martyr, Robert. We may still be new at this, but I know that you celebrate when your husband returns from war.

ROBERT: I know.

DOROTHY: I'm one of the lucky ones. I can still sit across the table from you. A lot of women in this town can't say that. So you're going to sit there and enjoy the meal because you're not dead. At least not yet. I'm not being coy about my cooking, this could be terrible.

ROBERT: I've faced scarier situations. Not many, but some.

DOROTHY: I love you.

ROBERT: I love you, too.

DOROTHY: Is it wrong that I still feel like a newly-wed?

ROBERT: No. I don't think so. I mean, we never even had a proper honeymoon.

DOROTHY: I'll send George home early.

ROBERT: Let's just lock up and turn off the lights. He'll get the idea.

DOROTHY: You're awful.

ROBERT: It'll be like in high school. We'll shove a dresser in front of the door and act like we're rehearsing for the school play.

DOROTHY: You were a poor scene partner.

ROBERT: I don't know. I think this one is on Shakespeare.

DOROTHY: Is that right?

ROBERT: "Nay, but to live in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, stewed in corruption, honeying and making love over the nasty sty..."

DOROTHY: "Enseamed." You've always said it wrong.

ROBERT: What do you know?

DOROTHY: I met someone from MGM who said I reminded them of a young Greta Garbo.

ROBERT: That man did not work for MGM!

DOROTHY: He did so! I can't believe after all these years, you still won't admit—

ROBERT: Is something burning?

DOROTHY: Oh no!

Dorothy runs into the kitchen in order to save dinner.

ROBERT: Hey Dee?

Dorothy sticks her head back into the scene.

DOROTHY: Yes?

ROBERT: Garbo. I kind of see it.

DOROTHY: I know. Now, leave me alone, before I burn the house down.

Dorothy exits.

Robert takes a moment and breathes it all in. He's home. He's with family. Everything and everyone seems to be in the right place. As he looks around the room he notices a stack of documents on the desk.

ROBERT: What are all these papers?

DOROTHY (*from offstage*): Stacks of letters. Plenty of paperwork from your fathers' lawyers. (*Dorothy enters*) Well, I suppose they're your lawyers now.

ROBERT: How was the funeral?

DOROTHY: It was quiet. Respectable. Your father didn't have many friends. You know that.

ROBERT: I do.

DOROTHY: George planned it. They buried him in a nice plot, under a few trees and far away from the main road. I think he would have liked that.

ROBERT: Who knows.

DOROTHY: Do you remember how he was right before you left?

ROBERT: Stark raving mad. Yelling at the walls. Not a great way to go out.

DOROTHY: Yes, well, we all fade. Him just a little quicker than most. He thought the world of you. When we thought that you were... he just stopped living.

ROBERT: He thought the world of what I represented.

DOROTHY: And what's that?

ROBERT: An heir to his throne. He's suckered me back into his life through his last will and testament. He's got everything laid out so neat and clean.

DOROTHY: He trusted you.

ROBERT: He didn't. He didn't trust me. He trusted that I wouldn't burn it all to the ground. But, that's not a surprise, is it? I never had to do anything. I mean, not really. All I had to do was just not be George.

DOROTHY: Your father wasn't known for his ability to see the gray in people.

ROBERT: I don't even know what I would do anymore. So many of the boys who came back... they've got nothing. We were told the world was waiting for us, it wanted to start turning again and all we had to do was come home in one piece. The world was saving us a seat. But that's not the truth. The world managed without us just fine. It didn't look back. It didn't take notice. It just moved. Just kept right on spinning.

DOROTHY: It's been pretty still for me. In this house.

ROBERT: What are these? These all have George's signature on them.

DOROTHY: What are you looking at?

ROBERT: These... it looks like he was accepting bids. For the warehouse. Was Dad thinking about selling?

DOROTHY: You know your father never talked about business with me. I'm sure George can fill you in.

ROBERT: Right.

A silence.

DOROTHY: You know... you don't have to do this.

ROBERT: You have a family fortune I'm not familiar with?

DOROTHY: We could move somewhere else. We could start over again. Go to school like we planned. Just... start over.

ROBERT: We don't have the money, Dee.

DOROTHY: So we find it. We work for it. We steal it.

ROBERT: Join the circus? Farm the land?

DOROTHY: Why not? We are so very young, Robert. Let's act so... very... young.

ROBERT: Just pack up and set out, huh?

DOROTHY: We'll figure it out. You and me? What could stop us?

ROBERT: That's just running. I don't do that.

DOROTHY: It's escaping. And you do that just fine. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here.

ROBERT: Dobson Manufacturing employs a quarter of the town. What happens to them? Where do those people go?

DOROTHY: Give it to George.

ROBERT: George?

DOROTHY: George can do the job. Hell, he's been doing the job since your father passed.

ROBERT: George can barely take care of himself, Dee.

DOROTHY: Maybe you both have some trouble seeing the gray in people.

ROBERT: I don't have the luxury to walk away and I certainly don't have the right to hand the reins to George. It's not just my father's name on that building. It's mine. I lost him. I can't lose that, too.

DOROTHY: I just don't recognize this debt you think you owe the man. He thought you were capable, Robert, but he didn't know a damn thing about you. You wasted so many years trying to make him proud and he took your accomplishments and used them to hurt his oldest son. Every good thing you did was another bullet he could unload into George. And now he's convinced you that the only family you have left is, what, unworthy? Says who? He was your father and you loved him, but you don't owe him your future.

ROBERT: The world kept spinning, Dee... and he saved me a seat. I have to do right by that. He built me something. If I walk away from that... from him... what was the point of it all?

DOROTHY: Funny. I always thought it was to get back to me. Isn't that what you said?

ROBERT: ...What's wrong?

George enters.

GEORGE: Okay, I'm coming in, is everyone dressed?

ROBERT: No. Go away.

GEORGE: But, I brought the flour.

DOROTHY: Well then, I'll take that and I'll leave you boys to catch up.

ROBERT: Hey Doll? Do you know what the flour is used for?

Dorothy exits.

GEORGE: You're a lucky man, Bobby.

ROBERT: Yes, I am.

GEORGE: Dee is, without a doubt, too good for you. Why would she marry you?

ROBERT: I'm very good at Shakespeare.

GEORGE: Liz and I are thinking about starting up again.

ROBERT: How many times is that now?

GEORGE: God, let's see... six? The last time she ended things doesn't really count, because I was drunk and don't remember it. But, she's pushing thirty and seems content to settle.

ROBERT: Congrats. Truly a romance for the history books.

GEORGE: Hollywood's calling.

ROBERT: Your life would make a hell of a picture. No joke. A film that you couldn't take a family to, but a hell of a picture.

GEORGE: I'm not sure. It needs a bit more redemption.

ROBERT: Where do you want to start?

GEORGE: I should have said yes. I shouldn't have hesitated.

ROBERT: Water under the bridge.

GEORGE: I just felt if I could have been with you... I *should* have been with you.

ROBERT: George. I'm here. It's fine. You're not the only guy I knew who wasn't eager to be shot at.

A silence.

GEORGE: What are you going through here?

ROBERT: Newspaper articles, letters, contracts. You name it, it's probably on this table.

GEORGE: So we should probably talk about all this, right?

ROBERT: What do you mean?

GEORGE: Dad left the business to you. I know that, but the situation is a little complicated.

ROBERT: When I spoke to the lawyers it seemed pretty cut and dry.

GEORGE: It's just that he passed quicker than they thought. And, look, I don't want to be indelicate about all of this, but it just feels like we should get this conversation out of the way.

ROBERT: You've been running things. For a while, by the looks of it.

GEORGE: How'd you know that?

ROBERT: Your signature keeps popping up. Over the past few months, more and more. It looks like going all the way back to January? After he was committed?

GEORGE: When we put him in the hospital, I was granted conservatorship over the financials. Decisions. Payroll. It was my hand on the wheel. It wasn't his choice, but he was so far gone at that point, we had to do what was right for our employees. We were missing paychecks, shipments, the whole operation was falling apart. But he hated me for it. He died hating me for it.

ROBERT: I'm sorry, George. I don't know what to say.

GEORGE: I just... I don't want it to sound like I'm looking for a handout. But I've been managing it all, working on some really great opportunities, I mean, I was in the middle of several—

ROBERT: These bids? For the sale of the land the warehouse is on? Was that you?

GEORGE: We've had a rough few years. These goddamn outfits coming down from Chicago keep opening up more and more factories. They can ship hardware faster than us and we can't match their prices. We're David and they're Goliath, but instead of a slingshot we're armed with

a lot of debt. Jim's been asking around and he says we'd be lucky to keep the warehouse open for two to three years at most. So, yes, I made a few calls.

ROBERT: These are offers. To sell a business that has been in our family for, what, forty years?

GEORGE: It wasn't an easy decision. But I can't change the numbers.

ROBERT: We employ over two hundred people in this town, George. What do we tell them?

GEORGE: We'll have to be honest. Thank them and apologize. This isn't unique to us. It's happening all over. The War made a lot of these assholes very rich and they are putting family-run companies out of business everywhere you turn.

ROBERT: So we get smarter. We cut corners. We do what it takes to survive, but we don't cut and run.

GEORGE: The one thing I know better than anyone is that you fold when the odds are stacked against you. If we don't sell, we will have nothing. Our workers will have nothing. I know it doesn't sound like a victory, but look at the amount of money some of these folks are offering. We can let these people go with a little severance. We'd have enough money to live on while we look for something new. This is the right choice.

ROBERT: Maybe we shouldn't talk about this now.

GEORGE: Why? What do you mean?

ROBERT: I don't know enough about where we stand. I know I have ownership and I know you've been holding things together, but-

GEORGE: I'm telling you we'll be broke in a few years if we don't make the right decision now.

ROBERT: Later.

GEORGE: There's a time limit on a lot of these offers, Robert. These people don't just wait around, they aren't known for their patience. Some of these bids could expire within the week. So maybe we could just sit down and—

ROBERT: Jesus, George; later! (*pause*) Look, I don't really know you. Not anymore. I've been home less than an hour and we've talked and we've laughed, but you are a completely different person to me.

GEORGE: I'm the same person, Robert.

ROBERT: No. You don't want me to believe that, because I didn't particularly care for that person. And if this person in front of me is real, I'm over the moon. I really am. Because that other person would disappear for weeks on end. That other person skimmed the books, gambled away our money, beat his wife, and broke every fucking promise that mattered. You don't want me to believe that you're that person, because if *that* person came to me giving me financial advice and didn't have proof to back their claims up other than their word, well then that person would have very little chance of getting what they wanted.

GEORGE: I'm not making this up, Robert. The numbers are the numbers.

ROBERT: I will take a look. You have my word. But my name is on that building, and I'm not selling.

GEORGE: You sound just like him. I don't know. Maybe it's because I've always been on the outside looking in, but it's just a name. It's just a business. It's not surprising you feel differently, but this shouldn't be about pride.

ROBERT: I don't know what happened between you two after I left. I can only guess. And I know you felt like you weren't there for me, but I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. Because I know that man. I know how cold it gets in that shadow. And you know, more than anyone, what that cold drives you to do.

GEORGE: Later, then.

ROBERT: Thank you.

A pause.

GEORGE: You know I'm with you, right? No matter what happens with all of this.

ROBERT: I know. (*pause*) You do look good, George. I mean that. And what you did for Dee, watching after her, I owe you big.

GEORGE: Dorothy's a doll, Bobby. It was never a chore.

ROBERT: I'm serious, though. This is an improvement. This new look.

GEORGE: How do you mean?

ROBERT: 'How do you mean?'. You're well spoken, clean shaven, and, well, you aren't sleeping on a bar room floor somewhere.

GEORGE: To be completely fair, I never slept on the floor. I drank enough that I simply passed out.

ROBERT: When did this all change?

GEORGE: A lot of things have changed since you've been gone. We all grew up a bit. I was overdue for a bit of growing up.

ROBERT: Dad?

GEORGE: You. We thought you were dead. The way that man looked at me. I finally saw myself the way he did.

ROBERT: So?

GEORGE: So, I kept my chin up. The old man was fading fast, and there was no one there to take care of him. So, I stepped in. We finally connected on a certain level. To a certain extent. But, that was as close as I got to him. I wasn't you.

ROBERT: They ever tell you where it came from?

GEORGE: What?

ROBERT: You know, Pop going off and all that.

GEORGE: He was paranoid; delusional. He snapped. I don't know. The doctors gave us a lot of explanations that no one could really understand. He just got sick. Sometimes people just get sick.

ROBERT: It's a hell of a thing to watch a man's mind disappear. People that weren't there. Conversations that never happened.

GEORGE: I caught him once outside in the lawn screaming and hollering at no one in particular. I don't know if this sounds selfish, but a part of me thought it was some cruel answer to my prayers.

ROBERT: Well, that's nice.

GEORGE: I never prayed for any harm to come to that man, but you better believe I prayed for a clean slate a couple of times. And to watch him just... forget, change, whatever it was... I don't know, I think there was some part of me, deep down, that kept coming home to see if the pieces of himself he kept shedding, day after day, if one of those pieces was the part that hated me. The part that guarded the memories of all of my disappointments, all of our arguments, well... maybe that part had dissolved, shed itself like a snake, and I'd get a few months where we could live in the past. Before it all went to shit.

ROBERT: When did you put him in the hospital?

GEORGE: One day he just stopped. Stopped talking, stopped going into work... he would just sit here and mumble. For hours. Eventually, he stopped losing pieces because there was nothing left to lose. We kept trying to tell him that it was temporary, that he'd be home before he knew it. That man was a lot of things, but he was no fool. He knew he wasn't coming back. Not in any way.

ROBERT: He stopped returning my letters. I think that's when I knew that this wasn't going to get better.

GEORGE: We kept him going as long as we could, but in the end-

ROBERT: No. I understand. Putting him in there was the best thing; I would have done the same.

GEORGE: Can I get you a drink?

ROBERT: That sounds fine.

GEORGE: Does it feel good to be home?

ROBERT: It feels unreal.

GEORGE: Why?

ROBERT: Once you've been away from a place for so long the memories get a bit diluted. It's harder to hold on to them. They detach to such a point where they are impossible to recall. Like a dream.

GEORGE: Sounds lonely.

ROBERT: I have memories of us growing up in this very room. Christmas mornings, fighting and yelling in the kitchen while Mom complained to Dad that he never kept us out of her hair long enough to make a decent meal. And now, we live here. I keep catching myself looking around this room struggling to connect to a piece of furniture or a photograph. I feel like a visitor. Like I'm just passing through.

GEORGE: The prodigal son returns.

ROBERT: Right, and all that nonsense.

GEORGE: The favorite son. "My legacy". Here you go.

ROBERT: Thanks.

GEORGE: Be careful. I poisoned your drink.

ROBERT: Well, since you can't make a proper drink I'm not too worried.

GEORGE: I don't have to sit here and take your abuse.

ROBERT: You're the outcast of the family. You have to take what's given and be glad people still care about what you say.

GEORGE: Why am I welcoming you back home? I don't even like you.

ROBERT: You're a good brother. Now, if you don't mind leaving the room so I can subtly pour out this awful drink and make my own; fresh.

GEORGE: I'll be back around dinner. I have to run by the post office before they close up for the day.

ROBERT: Good. Take your time, Georgey-boy.

GEORGE: Keep it in your pants. I'll be back soon.

George exits.

Scene Three
Summer, 1945

With a quick look around the room, Robert stands and continues to survey, examining different tokens which trigger different memories. This should take time. There's something beautiful about recollection and Robert isn't immune to its charms.

And then, he notices a letter.

Dorothy enters.

DOROTHY: Are you getting hungry?

ROBERT: Starving. Why is this out here?

DOROTHY: You wrote it to me.

ROBERT: I know. Why did you keep it?

DOROTHY: I wanted to keep it.

ROBERT: Why?

DOROTHY: When they wrote me to say that you were being sent home; well, that letter was fine and all, but the one you're holding in your hand, that one is something special.

ROBERT: What do you mean?

DOROTHY: It was your last. A few weeks after we received that letter we got the knock on the door. Two boys, younger than you when you left, in uniform, handing me a letter and telling me how sorry they were for my loss... and I just remember staring. Not doing anything else. Just staring. Absently. Those two boys sat with me for what felt like hours. Finally, we spoke. I kept asking them questions and they... they were so certain you were gone, but I didn't feel it. But they were so smug about it. As if calling it grief and denial could make me feel something that wasn't true. We called George and he came straight over and then we headed over to tell your father.

ROBERT: I'm sorry, Dee. I wish it never happened.

DOROTHY: That letter... that was Normandy?

ROBERT: It was. I made my mark, landed, and flew out the next morning.

DOROTHY: It's funny. I remember the relief I felt knowing that you came out of that unscathed. The reports I read, the radio talking about the amount of loss suffered, and you weren't touched. It was like nothing I ever felt before. And then... a few weeks later, and you were gone.

ROBERT: They threw our dog tags in the bomber. They lit it on fire. Everyone just assumed.

DOROTHY: What happened to Jack?

ROBERT: Broke his leg in the crash. They couldn't march him back. So they put him back in the bird and let him burn up with the rest of it.

DOROTHY: That's awful, but it doesn't make it right. We planned your funeral. We buried you. There are some things in life that require certainty.

A long silence.

Dorothy crosses over to Robert and gently takes the letter. She reads--

DOROTHY: "With another man, I was tail-end Charlie. A bad position in any type of plane, worse in the slow job I fly, and from the time we get ready, I started to prepare for what I feared would be a tough time." What does that mean?

ROBERT: What?

DOROTHY: "Tail End Charlie."

ROBERT: It means I was the last one in the formation that day.

DOROTHY: Sounds dangerous.

ROBERT: I was guarding the rear.

DOROTHY: Who was guarding you?

ROBERT: I'm here, aren't I?

DOROTHY: The two men in uniforms at the door... they came back a few months later to let me know there was a mistake. Your father answered the door that day while I was out running errands. We didn't believe him when he told us. He didn't have any proof so we thought he was having an episode. Your letter came the next day. I was overjoyed, but your father... it was like the darkness lifted and he was himself again. Until he wasn't.

ROBERT: Dee-

DOROTHY: Dinner in ten.

Dorothy exits.

There is a knock at the door.

Robert sets the letter on his desk and opens the front door.

*A visitor enters the room. This is **FRANK**. The moment he enters we understand that this clean, picture perfect setting has suddenly been tarnished. This is a man you would cross the street to avoid. Older than the others, early thirties to mid-forties, but with a timeless quality that hangs over the heads of men with questionable character.*

He enters the play like a hurricane.

FRANK: George! You were supposed to meet me an hour ago! You think I got time to wander around this hell hole of a town waiting for you to show up? Christ, pal, where the fuck are your manners?

ROBERT: Can I help you?

FRANK: No. Just cool it. Come on, I'm in a hurry! Does your brother always take this long?

ROBERT: He's not here.

FRANK: He's not?

ROBERT: No. I'm sorry, who are you?

FRANK: Name's Frank. I'm a friend of George. Best friends. He's gonna be in my wedding. Where is he anyway?

ROBERT: The post office. Can I give him a message?

FRANK: No, that's alright. I guess I'll wait. Hey, do you have any of those dainty little sandwiches? I passed a place with some dainty fucking deli sandwiches. They were tiny and tasty and I had like six of them.

ROBERT: I'm sorry. Who are you?

FRANK: It is so quiet out here. My place is up in the city and I've got a nightclub directly below me. All night long there's just fucking music and dancing and six or seven apes on the corner playing dice. But out here? The silence, buddy... I mean, Jesus Christ. I'd go to sleep and never wake up.

ROBERT: You do realize this is my house, don't you?

FRANK: Sure I do. It's picture perfect; returning war hero, lovely wife, welcome home party. All that nonsense. That's aces.

ROBERT: That's the truth.

FRANK: Why is the door still open?

ROBERT: So you can leave.

FRANK: That's alright. I don't mind waiting.

ROBERT: I do.

FRANK: I'm sorry?

ROBERT: I don't particularly feel like entertaining company. Especially company I didn't invite.

FRANK: It's fine. I know George. What did we end up deciding on those dainty fucking sandwiches?

ROBERT: George isn't here right now. And I don't know you. So, if you wouldn't mind, maybe I can just let him know you stopped by and he can give you a call later. But for now, hit the road.

FRANK: Stern.

ROBERT: What?

FRANK: Do you mind if I sit down? I'm beat.

ROBERT: Yes. I do.

Frank sits and picks up a newspaper. He makes himself comfortable, an obvious provocation.

FRANK: You know how I met your brother?

ROBERT: In the backseat of a black and white?

FRANK: Close. We went on a bender together, lost some money at the race track, lost some money at the tables. He loses a lot of money; I like that about him. Anyway, that night I'm with this dame. Beautiful, but expensive. Too expensive, you following me? I can't pay. I'm not sure I'd even want to pay because it feels like the products a bit beat up. Past its' prime. Still beautiful, just a little worn in. Well, she storms out calling me every name in the book, and you gotta understand something about me, I'm easy. I'm just a super nice guy, but if you push me, well... I push back. I'm only human. So she's hollering, I'm hollering, I'm not proud to admit it... but I snapped. Next thing I know, she's not hollering so much anymore. She's laying at the bottom of my staircase and that face definitely wasn't worth the cost anymore. I gave George a call and he came right over. Smoothed everything out. He's got a way with words, your brother, protected me from getting pinched. Let the cops know it was all just a misunderstanding. Then we went and got some chink noodles. It's easy to handle misery when you got company. You got a beef with me?

ROBERT: Yes. I do. Please get out of my house before my wife comes back.

FRANK: Don't blow a fuse, stiff. I'll leave.

ROBERT: Please.

FRANK: Can I have a drink before your brother comes home?

ROBERT: If you touch my whiskey I'm going to punch you in the nose.

FRANK: Man, he was not kidding about you. You don't look too big but I bet you gave those Krauts and Japs a little bit more than a friendly talking to. You ever kill a man? Yeah. I see that look in your eye. A little haunted, a little distant. You've been through something rough, you've seen a few things you shouldn't. Maybe done one or two things you ain't proud of? I like that. I like you. Let's have a toast. It can be very patriotic.

ROBERT: Does this look like a bar?

FRANK: Wherever I go, there's a bar. I'm resourceful like that.

ROBERT: Get out.

FRANK: Is this your wife in the picture?

ROBERT: Out!

FRANK: Maybe I'll hang around and meet the little lady. How does she look on her knees?

Robert moves over to the man, grabs him and throws him to the door.

ROBERT: Get the hell out! Now!

FRANK: Easy! Easy! Can I still leave that message: tell your brother he owes me two grand. And he's late. He'll know what that means. I'll see ya later, stiff. Oh! And next time? Put out some fucking sandwiches.

Frank exits.

Robert slams the door and retreats to his parlor. He pours himself a quick glass of whiskey and downs it.

ROBERT: Son of a bitch, George.

Dorothy enters.

DOROTHY: Oh. I thought I heard you talking to someone.

ROBERT: One of George's friends stopped by.

DOROTHY: Really? I didn't think George still spoke to people around here. Or the other way around, I guess.

ROBERT: He told me he stopped gambling and drinking. All of it.

DOROTHY: Who did?

ROBERT: George.

DOROTHY: He did.

ROBERT: Are you sure?

DOROTHY: Why?

ROBERT: I guess you gotta hand it to him. It's a hell of a way to welcome me back. I've been home for a few hours and we already have some lowlife showing up asking for money. It's like I never left.

DOROTHY: What? Who?

ROBERT: You know, for a *second* there I thought he was telling me the truth. I really wanted to believe that he could change.

DOROTHY: Robert. Breathe. I don't know what you're talking about, but if I'm being completely honest... I don't follow George around keeping notes on his behavior. All I can tell you is what I've seen. He's sweet, he's kind, and if I ever needed anything, he was always the one to get it for me. When I broke down, he would comfort me. So, who knows, but it's better... and maybe we take the good with the bad... and maybe that's enough.

ROBERT: Fine.

DOROTHY: He's your brother. He loves you. We don't need to fall back into these bad habits.

ROBERT: That's what I'm worried about. He-

DOROTHY: I'm talking about you, Robert. I'm sure there's an explanation. Dinner's ready.

ROBERT: I'll get cleaned up.

DOROTHY: Robert?

ROBERT: Yes?

DOROTHY: Whoever it was, or whatever it was about, it's probably old business. Something that happened a long time ago.

ROBERT: You're probably right.

DOROTHY: I know I'm right. Don't you?

ROBERT: I do.

Dorothy exits.

Robert picks up his letter and begins to read it silently to himself. Throughout the play, it is important to understand: there is a power to this letter. It's magnetic, real, and grounding. It is an artifact from a place in time before everything changed.

The phone rings.

ROBERT: Hello? Yes, Mr. Harper. I just got in, actually. I'm doing just fine, sir. Okay, Jim it is then. It's just, well, when I was a kid you were always 'sir.' No, no I know. Uhh, let's see... A couple of hours. . Oh yeah, everyone's here. We're about to sit down for dinner. No no, it's fine. What can I do for you, Jim? On Monday should be fine. I'll be over first thing in the morning and we can get it all ironed out. I know, me too. And, listen, I spoke with George and I know things are tough going, but we're gonna figure this all out. Let's just not do anything drastic until I can wrap my head around some of these issues. Well, all the debt and the offers to sell and such. What do you mean? Right, George said two, maybe three years. Is that right? I see. I must have just misunderstood. (*George enters*) Yes, I know. Well, thank you. I'll be doing my best. Good, I'm looking forward to it. I'll be there. Okay, well, good evening 'sir'. Good-night!

Robert hangs up the phone.

GEORGE: Who was that?

ROBERT: What?

GEORGE: On the phone. Who was it?

ROBERT: Jim Harper.

GEORGE: Right.

ROBERT: I'm headed over there Monday to finalize everything with the transfer. Make it all legal.

GEORGE: On Monday? I thought Jim wasn't coming back from the city until sometime later next week?

ROBERT: He said Monday.

GEORGE: News to me.

ROBERT: It was a little weird, actually. Jim didn't seem too alarmed about the condition of things down at the warehouse.

GEORGE: Is that right?

ROBERT: He said "nothing to be concerned about."

GEORGE: Well, I wish I shared Jim's optimism.

ROBERT: He also didn't seem to know anything about any offers from possible buyers.

GEORGE: He wouldn't. I haven't told him. Jim and I don't really see eye to eye these days.

ROBERT: You want to elaborate?

GEORGE: I slept with his daughter.

ROBERT: I thought both of his kids were married.

GEORGE: One of his kids is not... as married as she was... anymore...

ROBERT: Great. Well, look, you're gonna have to loop him in on what you've been telling me. We'll need all hands on deck.

GEORGE: You don't want a break?

ROBERT: What?

GEORGE: You just got back and you're already rushing off to do something else? Don't you just want to take some time off, get to know your wife, see your friends? Go travel! I mean, after what you've been through—

ROBERT: Wait. Did you ask Dee to tell me not to accept the job?

GEORGE: What?

ROBERT: Dee suggested that I walk away from all of this. Did you ask her to do that?

GEORGE: I don't know anything about that, but can you blame her? You think this has been easy on her? She's sick of standing still waiting for you to come home.

ROBERT: I'm home now.

GEORGE: I don't know if that's true. I think we're both a little concerned that if you don't take some time to adjust you'll never figure out who you are without him in your life. Dee's not the same. I'm not the same. Quit telling us that you are.

ROBERT: You're not the same. *(pause)* Your friend Frank dropped by.

A pause.

GEORGE: I don't know a Frank.

ROBERT: C'mon, George.

GEORGE: I'm telling you! I don't know anyone named Frank! What are you saying?

ROBERT: He told me you owed him two grand.

GEORGE: Two grand? I don't owe anybody anything.

ROBERT: Please.

GEORGE: Look, Bobby, I haven't placed a bet in close to three years. Didn't I just tell you that earlier?

ROBERT: You did.

GEORGE: Jesus Christ, Bobby! That didn't take you long. What, you've been home a couple hours and you've already got me figured out?

ROBERT: You're going to sit there and tell me that somebody just walked into this house, claimed they knew you, and decided that they would pester me for money you didn't owe?

GEORGE: Whoever you talked to doesn't have a goddamn thing to do with me. That's what I can tell you.

ROBERT: Alright, George.

GEORGE: Robert, please. Don't do that.

ROBERT: Do what?

GEORGE: That... that thing you do when you just bow out of a fight.

ROBERT: I like to quit while you still have some dignity. It helps you feel better about the things you've done.

GEORGE: This is the last time I'm going to say this. Then I say we drop it and leave it alone.

ROBERT: Fine.

GEORGE: I don't owe any money. I don't want any money. I've changed the way I do things. I'm straight now. Pulled as tight as I can stretch.

ROBERT: Fine, George.

GEORGE: And you need to start remembering that you're my brother. You're not him. Even if you want to pretend.

ROBERT: That's not what I'm trying to do-

GEORGE: Isn't it?

ROBERT: No.

A long pause.

GEORGE: I'm sorry.

ROBERT: I'm sorry, too.

GEORGE: I didn't mean to get all riled up. I just... I've worked really hard to be who I am today, and that's all because of you.

ROBERT: Yeah.

GEORGE: Okay?

ROBERT: It was probably someone from a long time ago. Someone who was mixed up or confused you for somebody else.

GEORGE: If he comes by again; just let me know. I'll deal with it.

ROBERT: Thank you.

GEORGE: I'll help Dee in the kitchen.

George exits.

Lights fade. Time passes.

Scene Four
Summer, 1945

George and Robert are sitting in the living room and Dorothy enters carrying a tray of coffee which she sets down and then takes a seat. It's a very traditional, domestic interaction as the tension from the past scene has eased.

We are later in the evening after dinner has been served.

DOROTHY: Here we are!

GEORGE: Thanks, Dee.

DOROTHY: What are you two talking about?

ROBERT: George was just filling me in on some of what's been happening around town since I've been gone. I swear, Dee, he sounds like one of your friends from high school. Gossip and all that.

DOROTHY: Which reminds me! Peggy is coming over tomorrow with Ben.

ROBERT: Ben?

GEORGE: Ben Sullivan?

ROBERT: I haven't seen him since '40.

GEORGE: That's right!

Both brothers begin to laugh at a shared memory. It's a nice moment that lets us in on the fact that these siblings were once very close, before expectations and life got in the way. There was a camaraderie present that is now sorely missing.

DOROTHY: What is it?

GEORGE: We're just remembering something we're not entirely proud of.

ROBERT: Don't lump me in there with you, Georgey-boy, I wasn't the bastard who pushed him down the hill.

DOROTHY: You pushed him down a hill?!

GEORGE: Well-

ROBERT: Rolled him. That's more accurate.

DOROTHY: George!

GEORGE: Okay, hold on now! Now, in my defense, it was more of a mound, and less of a hill. Secondly, that son of a bitch had it coming; you can ask anybody, and that's the truth.

DOROTHY: Why?

ROBERT: Ben had said some stupid things about Dad. This was just around the time the old man began to have his hallucinations, so Ben decided it would be a whole lot of fun to play out some stupid scene at lunch. Well, George and I laughed along with everyone else, because it was funny, and we weren't too happy with the bastard either. But, when Ben started doing an imitation of George here, well...

DOROTHY: What?

ROBERT: George grabbed one of those big bins from the gym that Coach Adams kept all of the basketballs in and literally shoved Ben Sullivan-

GEORGE: Head first.

ROBERT: -head first into this thing. We took him to the top of that hill-

GEORGE: Mound.

ROBERT: --that surrounded the track, and, well, we...

DOROTHY: Oh, that's awful...

GEORGE: It was a poor impression.

ROBERT: It was dead on.

GEORGE: Piss poor impression. I don't sound like that.

ROBERT: You did then.

GEORGE: I still remember the look on his face when that thing stopped rolling.

ROBERT: Ben's eyes had rolled up into his sockets and were darting around in his head. He looked at George and then he looked at me, cursed at us, took one step, fell, and lost his lunch all over his slacks.

GEORGE: That is one of the proudest moments of my life.

ROBERT: And that says a lot.

Suddenly, there is a knock at the door.

ROBERT: Be right back.

Dorothy and George don't notice, they are still discussing Ben Sullivan, as Robert stands and moves toward the door.

Once Robert opens the door, Frank steps in. Once again, without invitation.

FRANK: Hey, stiff.

ROBERT: What did I tell you?

FRANK: Can George come out to play?

GEORGE: Robert?

ROBERT: Get off my property. You're not going to shake me down in my own living room. You think you scare me? Do you have any idea what I'm going to do to you if you don't turn around and leave in the next ten seconds?

DOROTHY: Robert...

ROBERT: It's alright, Dorothy.

GEORGE: Robert... what are you doing?

ROBERT: This is Frank. He was just leaving.

DOROTHY: That's not funny, Robert.

GEORGE: It's not. That's a bad joke.

ROBERT: Get out!! Now!!

A pause.

GEORGE: Robert, shut the door.

ROBERT: I don't care, George. I really don't. I don't care if you're telling the truth or if he is. But this is my home. I don't want you bringing any of this back here.

GEORGE: You're scaring your wife. Shut the door and stop it. It's not funny.

ROBERT: I'm so sick of having to tiptoe around this with you. I'm not judging you, I'm telling you what I expect from you. Go speak with him outside and work it out.

DOROTHY: George...

GEORGE: Go in the kitchen, Dee.

DOROTHY: No. This is an awful thing to do.

GEORGE: Please.

ROBERT: Am I missing something?

GEORGE: It's fine, Dee. Just go inside and let me talk to Robert alone.

DOROTHY: No!!

FRANK: I'll just invite myself in.

ROBERT: George, take him outside and deal with this. Now.

GEORGE: Are you serious, Bobby?

ROBERT: Will somebody tell me what the hell is going on?

GEORGE: Bobby, just close the door and sit down.

ROBERT: Jesus, George, if you're in deep just tell me and we'll find some way to work around it, but don't stand there and pretend like this isn't a problem, like you don't-

GEORGE: Bobby!

ROBERT: What?!

GEORGE: ...There's no one there, pal.

ROBERT: What're you talking about?

GEORGE: There's no one there.

ROBERT: Very funny.

GEORGE: Shut. The. Door.

ROBERT: Frank, right?

FRANK: That's right.

ROBERT: Do you know my brother?

GEORGE: Robert, please...

FRANK: Of course I do.

ROBERT: Talk to him. Not to me.

DOROTHY: George, maybe we should—

FRANK: Hey there, Georgey-boy. How about that two grand?

A long pause.

It becomes apparent that George doesn't hear or see Frank.

This mysterious man is imaginary.

An artifact of Roberts' mind.

ROBERT: Answer him.

GEORGE: Bobby...

ROBERT: Answer him!!

GEORGE: There's no one there.

ROBERT: He's right there! Use your eyes, goddamnit!

A pause.

The frustration and worry in the room is palpable. There is a history of mental illness in this family and no one wants to be the first to discuss it.

ROBERT: You... you don't see anybody, do you?

DOROTHY: ...No.

Robert stares at Frank for a few long moments before he turns, wordlessly, and walks out of the room.

Robert exits.

Frank looks around the room and slowly follows Robert offstage.

Frank exits.

A long silence.

DOROTHY: George...

GEORGE: Not another word.

DOROTHY: George!

GEORGE: We'll talk about it in the morning.

George exits.

Dee follows George to the door and locks it behind him. Her hand rests on the door, a plea for him to return, and to help process what just happened.

Dee was there when Hyrum Dobson went mad and she was there when he died. She understands the gravity of the moment. After a pause, she walks back to the couch and begins to clean up, but over time... the weight of it all hits her, and she collapses into herself. In tears.

Dee lingers a moment longer, then she takes the dishes away to the kitchen and turns the lights off. She is shaking.

Black.

ACT II

Scene One

Fall, 1944

Lights up on the Dobson living room.

Dorothy and George sit silently. The room is quiet and the lights resemble the setting of the first scene of the play.

We haven't picked up where we left off, but rather we are witnessing a memory the two shared sometime in the past. We hear a live ticking of a clock somewhere in the room and Dorothy stares at it. After a while, she breaks out of her reverie.

DOROTHY: Where do we begin?

GEORGE: I'm not sure. An announcement, maybe? In the paper?

DOROTHY: Is that normal?

GEORGE: I could call a few churches. Get an idea of their availability for a service. How many people are we expecting?

DOROTHY: Most of his friends were over there with him. Let's keep it small: no more than fifty?

GEORGE: I'll write the obituary and nail down the church. Are you still able to meet at the cemetery this afternoon?

A silence.

DOROTHY: Maybe it's like scar tissue.

GEORGE: What?

DOROTHY: Maybe... maybe it's like scar tissue. I can still feel him with me, I still notice him in everything I do, and maybe that's because when you die a piece of you remains scarred onto the people you love. Like an echo. But more permanent, more visible. That makes sense, right? I

can remember watching my mother after my father passed. Just watching her. She was the same woman, but everything about her was just slightly altered. Where she would smile, easily and with strength, now there was a twitch in the corner of her mouth, a tenuousness. The way she moved, cooked, sang, slept... there was a flicker of... loss. Scar tissue. Maybe we heal, but never fully.

George, noticing Dorothy getting upset, gets up and joins her on the couch. He wraps his arms around her in an effort to comfort. This is clearly not something he is comfortable doing as he is visibly uncertain.

GEORGE: I wish I had something that I could say to you. What do you need to hear right now?

DOROTHY: A lie. That familiar lie: the “everything will be alright” lie.

GEORGE: That’s a pretty good lie.

DOROTHY: The best.

GEORGE: I’ve never been good at grief. The amount of effort it takes, the awkwardness that surrounds it. Who has the time? I’m glad there’s no body.

DOROTHY: Don’t say that.

GEORGE: Viewings. I don’t understand them. Everyone lines up to stare at this thing that’s not even human anymore. Like some morbid buffet platter. They force themselves to take in this painted pile of bones and skin wearing a fancy suit, and then they shuffle over, give us a handshake and a pat on the back, and then head to the next room to eat our food.

DOROTHY: What does the handshake even mean?

GEORGE: Exactly. I’m not selling these people a car or accepting an award. How is any of that grief?

DOROTHY: I wish I could hold him. I wish they could send him back to me.

A pause.

GEORGE: Me too.