

The Sugar Blues  
A Play with Music  
By G. William Zorn

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## Characters

Pastor Emmet Wilkes - head of the First Baptist Church.  
 Sadie-May Wilkes - his wife and the choir director.  
 Miller Wilkes - Emmet and Sadie-May's son.  
 Mary Jenkins - the organist/pianist and the church gossip.

### Members of the Choir:

Claudia-Jean Wells  
 Ruth Babbage  
 Dahlia Maples  
 Bea Dobbins  
 Non-speaking choir members as needed

### Members of the Youth Group:

Jimmy  
 Mason  
 Travis  
 Other youth group members as needed

Congregation - the audience

## Notes

The intention of this play is to have a certain amount of flexibility in the language as to accommodate the personalities of each community that it may play in. In short, if you say something in a different way, please change it. For example, there are areas of the country that refer to their religious leaders as "pastor" and some communities refer to such men as "preacher" or "reverend." If that's what you say, then say it that way. The important thing is to get the message of the play across.

## Music

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Songs included:

Throw Out the Life Line - Mary  
Throw Out the Life Line - Choir  
Power in the Blood - Pastor and Youth Group  
In the Sweet By and By - Choir and Congregation  
The Sugar Blues - Sadie-May and Choir  
The Black Sheep Returned to the Fold - Congregation

## SUGAR BLUES

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## PRELUDE

(Lights up on a church. There are pews and an altar with risers for the choir. There is an organ or piano and a small table off to the side for snacks and baked goods. MARY is seated at the organ/piano in mid-practice of the hymn *Throw Out the Lifeline*. She plays through the verse and starts to sing along to the chorus. She does not have to be a particularly good singer.)

MARY

(Sung.)

THROW OUT THE LIFE LINE ACROSS THE DARK WAVE;  
THERE IS A BROTHER WHOM SOMEONE SHOULD SAVE;  
SOMEBODY'S BROTHER! O WHO THEN WILL DARE  
TO THROW OUT THE LIFE LINE, HIS PERIL TO SHARE?

THROW OUT THE LIFE LINE! THROW OUT THE LIFE LINE!  
SOMEONE IS DRIFTING AWAY;  
THROW OUT THE LIFE LINE! THROW OUT THE LIFE LINE!  
SOMEONE IS SINKING TODAY.

(Spoken. To audience.)

Oh! My word. You startled me. I didn't know anybody was here. If you're here for worship, you're early. We used to have an eight o'clock service 'til the factory added a night shift. Those were some empty pews, lemme tell you. Ten o'clock now. Packed house, too. I was just practicin'. How'd it sound? Oh, don't worry, I ain't singin'. There's a reason why I *accompany* the choir, not sing in it. Well, make yourself ta home. We don't turn anybody away. Least of all on a day like today. The more the merrier. Wait 'til you see—. Oh. I prob'ly shouldn't even be talkin' about this. Loose lips sink ships, as they say.

(SADIE-MAY enters, delivering some papers to the podium.)

SADIE-MAY

Good morning, Mary.

MARY

Morning, Sadie-May. You look well.

SADIE-MAY

I don't know how. I've been up all night worryin' about all this. We are doin' the right thing, aren't we?

MARY

Absolutely.

SADIE-MAY

Wish I believed that.

(Exiting.)

Song sounds good.

MARY

Thanks, Sadie-May.

(Calling after SADIE-MAY.)

Fortune favors the brave.

(To audience.)

Now where was I? Oh, yes. Well, you look like nice folks. I'm gettin' a good feelin' for y'all. I think I can trust you.

(She leans in, conspiratorially.)

We have got somethin' special planned for today. Mm-hmm. Pastor Wilkes ain't gonna know what hit him. Oh, don't worry. We ain't gonna do nothin' mean or anything. Oh, dear. I really gotta work on my first impressions. Maybe I should start from the beginning. It all started last Tuesday at choir practice.

(Lights change.)

SCENE 1

(It is the previous Tuesday's choir practice. A few choir members are milling around the space, practicing their parts. BEA enters carrying a plate of cookies. CLAUDIA-JEAN enters also carrying a plate.)

CLAUDIA-JEAN

I brought crumpets, y'all.

(DAHLIA enters, speaking to her child, GEORGE, who is off-stage.)

DAHLIA

(To GEORGE.)

And I mean it. All of that homework better be finished by the time we're done up here. Or there's gonna be big trouble, mister.

BEA

Crumpets?

CLAUDIA-JEAN

There was a recipe in the TV Guide. Barbara Walters loves 'em.

(To DAHLIA.)

Trouble with Little George?

DAHLIA

Barkin' in class. That's what his teacher said. The boy was actually barkin' in class. Hasn't done his science homework in three days and when she asked him why, he barked. Like a dog. Well, he takes after his father's side of the family, that's all I have to say about that.

(The rest of the CHOIR begins to filter in now, all with some kind of baked good or snack in tow.)

MARY

Oh, now you used to do much worse, Dahlia Maples. Claudia, you remember the time that Dahlia-

DAHLIA

Mary, please. George is only downstairs and little pitchers have big ears.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

Amen-hallelujah. When Tommy was little I swear he could hear through walls.

BEA

How's he doin'?

CLAUDIA-JEAN

Well, he's not allowed to tell me exactly where he's at, but I get an email from him everyday. He seems in good spirits. Misses home. He asked me if there was a way to send him an order of short ribs from Billy-Bob's. I'd do it, but I wouldn't have the foggiest about how to send food like that to Afghanistan. And who knows if it'd even get to him.

MARY

Sounds like we need to organize another care package for the boy.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

That's not a bad idea. When did we send the last one?

DAHLIA

Oh, it must've been back at Christmas.

BEA

Yes. I remember because I couldn't find my Christmas tree cookie cutter, so I had to use the hat-part of my clown cookie cutter and turned the face into a big present.

MARY

Oh, yes. That was so cute.

(RUTH enters with more food.)

RUTH

Ladies. Hello, Mary.

MARY

Hello, Ruthie.

RUTH

Ready to tickle the ol' ivories?

MARY

Ain't I always?

RUTH

Good. Good to stay limber. Because I may have another job for you soon.

MARY

Oh? Do tell.

RUTH

(Giddier as she goes.)

Well, it's nothin' urgent. It'll be, uh, in June.

MARY

June?

RUTH

Uh-huh.

MARY

Well, what are you tellin' me now for, if it's—

BEA

Ruth-Ann. You don't mean—?

CLAUDIA-JEAN

No.

RUTH

Yes. My little Regina's gonna be a bride.

(Ladies gather around RUTH while they ad-lib *congratulations, bless-her-heart, etc.*)

BEA

Oh, that's wonderful!

DAHLIA

Praise the Lord!

MARY

Well, congratulations. Of course, I'll be able to play for the weddin'.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

Well, it's about time, that's all I can say.

BEA

Oh, Claudia-Jean.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

Four years she's been seein' that Jeelus boy. Cook or get off the stove, that's what I say.

RUTH

Well, I say things cook a little better when you pre-heat the oven, Claudia-Jean. And I just thank the good Lord that they weren't in any rush. The way these kids are in such a hurry these days.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

Yes, that *is* a blessin', I suppose.

(Looking at watch.)

Well, I have seven after. I don't know what could be keepin' Sadie-May.

RUTH

I do. She's out in the parkin' lot havin' another little chat with the good Pastor.

(Several of the women cross hurriedly to the window to get a peek.)

BEA

What is it now?

DAHLIA

Same as it always is. He's cheatin' again.

MARY

Dahlia Maples, you take that back right now. What a horrible thing to-

DAHLIA

Oh, don't get all up in your hair, Saint Mary. I wasn't talkin' about *that* kind of cheatin'. He's been goin' off his diet again.

BEA

Lord, help him.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

I don't know what could be so hard about followin' a simple diet. They got sugar-free everything nowadays.

(Picking up a plate. To RUTH.)

Crumpet?

RUTH

(Taking one.)

Don't mind if I do.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

Barbara Walters loves 'em.

BEA

My sister's diabetic. Got the sugar so bad they thought they was gonna have to take one of her toes.

RUTH

Lord, love her.

(About the crumpet.)

This is delicious, Claudia.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

Thank you.

DAHLIA

(To BEA.)

Did they take it?

BEA

No. She got mad, thank the Lord. Opened up her kitchen door and threw everything that had any sugar in it right out into the yard.

RUTH

No.

BEA

Yes, ma'am. She surely did. The only thing was she didn't bother to tell her husband. Now Bob works nights, so when he come home in the morning and opened the gate to the backyard, well he got the surprise o' his life.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

I can't imagine. All that food all over the yard.

BEA

Oh, honey. The food was, well, gone. But it was still pretty dark out and as soon as he opened that gate, there they were. Twenty sets of beady little eyes starin' back at him.

DAHLIA

Lord.

BEA

Yep. Possums, raccoons, squirrels. All of 'em, just bellied right up to that buffet.

(All laugh.)

BEA

Scared the Holy, uh, Spirit right out of him.

RUTH

How she doin' now?

BEA

She's doin' a lot better, bless her heart. She's learned to bake with that Splendid-

DAHLIA

(Correcting her.)

*Splenda*®.

BEA

Yes, that stuff, and *Equal*® and, ya know what? Some of it ya just can't taste the difference.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

Oh, I can.

MARY

Claudia-Jean.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

Well, I can. I can tell the difference between real-sweet and fake-sweet.

MARY

Really? Let's see.

(Fake-sweet.)

Well, isn't that just the prettiest blouse you have on  
Claudia-Jean.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

That'd be fake-sweet.

MARY

Well, I guess you really *can* tell. My apologies.

RUTH

(At the window.)

Here they come, ladies.

(All run back up to the risers as  
SADIE-MAY and PASTOR enter.)

PASTOR

Get off my back, woman. The boat that I row is already too  
heavy to steer.

SADIE-MAY

And it's just gonna get heavier with every cookie you eat  
from your little stash behind your bowling trophy that you  
don't know I know about.

PASTOR

I have no idea what you are referring to—

SADIE-MAY

Really? Then how did that *Twinkie*® wrapper get stuck to  
your slipper this morning?

PASTOR

Maybe it's one of Miller's.

SADIE-MAY

Now, that is *low*. Blaming your own son.

PASTOR

Or maybe...when I went out to get the paper—

SADIE-MAY

Yes, of course. The *Twinkie*® fairy must've dropped it on  
our front porch—

PASTOR

Well now, let's not get—

SADIE-MAY

--as she was replenishing your stock behind your bowlin' trophy you don't know I know about.

(To CHOIR.)

Good evening, ladies.

CHOIR

(Ad-lib.)

Evenin'. Sadie-May. Pastor. Etc.

SADIE-MAY

Ladies, what happened exactly three months ago today? Do you remember?

PASTOR

Sadie-May-

SADIE-MAY

Exactly three months ago today my husband, our good Pastor Wilkes, was taken to the emergency room. Do you remember why?

PASTOR

I don't think this is the place to-

SADIE-MAY

Because his blood sugar was so high that he couldn't see.

(To PASTOR.)

Do you remember that?

PASTOR

Yes, but I'm fine now.

SADIE-MAY

Not for much longer you won't be. Not if you keep cheatin' on your diet.

PASTOR

Ladies, it was good to see you. Sadie-May, I believe you have a choir practice to run. I have things to attend to in my office.

(PASTOR starts to exit.)

SADIE-MAY

If one of those things you'll be attending to is that jar of jelly beans you hid behind the baptismal, I'd skip it.

(PASTOR stops mid-step.)

SADIE-MAY

'Cause it ain't there anymore.

PASTOR

Sadie-May, man cannot live on bread alone.

(As he exits, he swipes a cookie from the snack table.)

SADIE-MAY

Emmet, you put that back.

PASTOR

(From O.S.)

Too late.

SADIE-MAY

Honestly, ladies. That man will be the death of me. I hate playing the warden, but if he keeps on the way he's going we're gonna be right back in that emergency room. His blood sugar was a hundred and forty-seven this morning.

BEA

Bless his heart.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

Is that high?

SADIE-MAY

First thing in the morning, it sure is. But I can't watch him twenty-four hours a day. Stubborn. Always has been. He thinks he can just pray it away. Well, ya know what? God helps those who help themselves.

RUTH

Preacher, heal thyself.

BEA

Amen-hallelujah.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

I believe that's *Physician*, heal thyself.

RUTH

I was paraphrasin'.

BEA

Well, amen-hallelujah, either way.

SADIE-MAY

Somethin's gotta give. And soon.

(Change of subject.)

Alright, ladies. Let's get this show on the road.

(The CHOIR steps onto the risers and SADIE-MAY steps up to the podium and begins to look through the music. MARY crosses to piano/organ.)

SADIE-MAY

Well, let's see. You know the order, right? Prelude will be: *Throw Out the Lifeline*.

(Raising her hand to conduct.)

And.

(SADIE-MAY conducts as the choir sings. As the song progresses, other members of the church orchestra arrive and join in. \*The instrumentation is at the discretion of each production.)

SONG: THROW OUT THE LIFE LINE

CHOIR

THROW OUT THE LIFE LINE ACROSS THE DARK WAVE;  
THERE IS A BROTHER WHOM SOMEONE SHOULD SAVE;  
SOMEBODY'S BROTHER! O WHO THEN WILL DARE  
TO THROW OUT THE LIFE LINE, HIS PERIL TO SHARE?

THROW OUT THE LIFE LINE! THROW OUT THE LIFE LINE!  
SOMEONE IS DRIFTING AWAY;  
THROW OUT THE LIFE LINE! THROW OUT THE LIFE LINE!  
SOMEONE IS SINKING TODAY.

THROW OUT THE LIFE LINE WITH HAND QUICK AND STRONG:  
WHY DO YOU TARRY, WHY LINGER SO LONG?  
SEE! HE IS SINKING; OH, HASTEN TODAY  
AND OUT WITH THE LIFE BOAT! AWAY, THEN AWAY!

THIS IS THE LIFE LINE, OH, TEMPEST TOSSED MEN;  
 BAFFLED BY WAVES OF TEMPTATION AND SIN;  
 HELPLESS AND HOPELESS, O'ERWHELMED BY THE WAVE;  
 THROW OUT THE LIFE LINE, 'TIS "JESUS CAN SAVE."

THIS IS THE LIFE LINE, OH, GRASP IT TODAY!  
 SEE, YOU ARE RECKLESSLY DRIFTING AWAY;  
 VOICES IN WARNING, SHOUT OVER THE WAVE,  
 O GRASP THE LIFE LINE, FOR JESUS CAN SAVE.

SADIE-MAY

Lovely, ladies. Absolutely—

(SADIE-MAY looks a bit lost in thought  
 for a moment.)

RUTH

Sadie-May?

SADIE-MAY

I'm sorry. I do apologize, ladies. I don't know where I  
 was at just then.

(Turning a few pages.)

We'll do *In the Sweet By and By* for the opening hymn—.

(She stops. CHOIR listens for her next  
 instruction. After a moment.)

MARY

Sadie-May, is there something wrong?

(SADIE-MAY picks up a piece of music  
 and looks through it with a mixture of  
 surprise and awe. CHOIR watches her  
 curiously.)

SADIE-MAY

Ladies?

RUTH

What is it, Sadie-May?

SADIE-MAY

Do any of you know where this piece of music came from?

CLAUDIA-JEAN

What piece of music?

SADIE-MAY

(Showing them.)

*This piece of music. The Sugar Blues.*

BEA

Oh, that's a lovely song. I haven't heard that in years. Ella Fitzgerald sang it. Mama used to listen to it. One of her old seventy-eights.

SADIE-MAY

(To BEA.)

Did you put it in my music folder, Bea?

BEA

Lord no, Sadie-May. No place for secular music in church. I learned my lesson when I asked Mary to play the theme to *Ice Castles* at my cousin's wedding. Uh-uh. No sirree. No secular music in the church.

SADIE-MAY

Listen to these words, ladies.

(Reciting lyrics.)

SUGAR BLUES.

EV'RYBODY'S SINGIN' THE SUGAR BLUES.

THE WHOLE TOWN'S RINGIN'.

MY LOVIN' MAN'S SWEET AS CAN BE-

BEA

(Singing.)

BUT THE DOGGONE FOOL TURNED SOUR ON ME.

(All look at BEA.)

CLAUDIA-JEAN

No place for secular music, huh?

BEA

Sorry.

(SADIE-MAY tries to stifle a sob.)

RUTH

Sadie-May?

DAHLIA

Are you alright?

SADIE-MAY

No, I'm not alright, Dahlia.

(Quoting from song.)

*The doggone fool turned sour on me.*

(To CHOIR.)

None of you knows how this got in my music folder?

(CHOIR ad-libs: *No. Never seen it before. Etc.*)

SADIE-MAY

Well, it's a pretty darn good joke, I'll say that.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

Maybe it's not.

SADIE-MAY

What?

CLAUDIA-JEAN

Maybe it's not a joke.

SADIE-MAY

Ladies, there's another woman in my husband's life. And she's takin' all his attention. And she's gonna win. Twenty-two years we've been married. No one could ever convince me that he was the cheatin' kind, but now--. Well, *now* I'm convinced. Ladies. I am a sugar widow. Or at least I will be if I don't figure out some way to get through to him.

MARY

Well, what can we do to help?

SADIE-MAY

I wish I knew, Mary. But, it would take God himself to ride in on a lightning bolt and get right in his face before he'd get the message, I swear.

DAHLIA

Maybe...Maybe not.

MARY

(Looking at DAHLIA.)

Uh-oh. I know that face. She's got somethin' cookin'. She had that very same look right before she short-sheeted Bobbi-Jo Beasley's bed at bible camp when we was kids.

(From O.S. we hear a child's laughter.)

DAHLIA

(To GEORGE.)

George William, you better be laughin' about science, young man.

(To MARY.)

What did I tell you about big ears?

SADIE-MAY

What are you thinkin', Dahlia?

DAHLIA

Well, it seems to me that the good pastor just ain't resigned himself to his situation yet.

BEA

What d'ya mean?

DAHLIA

Well, have you ever noticed, and Sadie-May you can back me up here. Have you ever noticed that when Pastor Wilkes makes up his mind about somethin' there's a certain gesture involved.

RUTH

You mean how he—

SADIE-MAY

(Realizing.)

--puts his hands in his pockets and looks up?

RUTH

Yes. I haven't seen him do that since we talked him into that pancake supper for the needy. Remember?

SADIE-MAY

I remember, but I can't recall how we talked him into it.

MARY

I do. We had him talk to Hobo Joe.

SADIE-MAY

Mary, we do not call him that.

MARY

Sorry, Sadie-May. I didn't mean any disrespect. But, that's what he is. He lives under the overpass, for Pete's sake.

SADIE-MAY

His name is Joe Barrett and he is a member of this church. We do not refer to a child of God as a hobo in the house of the Lord.

MARY

Well, he does.

SADIE-MAY

Mary—

MARY

First time I met him he says: *Hello, I'm Hobo Joe.*

SADIE-MAY

Be that as it may—

BEA

Ladies, I think we're getting a little off the track here. Dahlia?

DAHLIA

Well, I was thinkin'. The Pastor doesn't have to meet God to get a little fear o' God, if ya see what I'm sayin'. Least not literally.

RUTH

Well, I'm lost.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

Me, too.

DAHLIA

Whoever or whatever slipped that piece of music into Sadie-May's music folder, I believe, was actin' under the influence of a higher power. I believe it may be time we reconsidered our little rule about secular music in the church. We just need the good pastor to have his own

little come-to-Jesus meeting. And I know just how to do it. You think you're up to this Sadie-May?

SADIE-MAY

Dahlia, I'm at my wit's end. Lady Sugar is not gonna take my husband from me.

DAHLIA

Good. Here's what I'm thinkin', ladies.

(All gather around DAHLIA as the lights  
fade on all but MARY at the  
piano/organ.)

MARY

And that's all I can tell ya right now. I don't wanna spoil the surprise.

(Lights change.)

## SCENE 2

(We are now in the middle of the Wednesday night Youth Group meeting. PASTOR is there along with several young men of various ages ranging from thirteen to sixteen. They are seated in chairs arranged on a small open circle facing the audience singing the last two verses of the hymn: *Power in the Blood*. All verses are included here. The total number sung is at the discretion of the production. MARY accompanies.)

PASTOR

WOULD YOU BE FREE  
 FROM THE BURDEN OF SIN?  
 THERE'S POW'R IN THE BLOOD,  
 POW'R IN THE BLOOD;  
 WOULD YOU O'ER EVIL  
 A VICTORY WIN?  
 THERE'S WONDERFUL  
 POWER IN THE BLOOD.

GROUP

THERE IS POW'R, POW'R,  
 WONDER WORKING POW'R  
 IN THE BLOOD  
 OF THE LAMB;  
 THERE IS POW'R, POW'R,  
 WONDER WORKING POW'R  
 IN THE PRECIOUS  
 BLOOD OF THE LAMB.

ALL

WOULD BE FREE FROM  
 YOUR PASSION AND PRIDE?  
 THERE'S POW'R IN THE BLOOD,  
 POW'R IN THE BLOOD;  
 COME FOR A CLEANSING  
 TO CALVARY'S TIDE?  
 THERE'S WONDERFUL  
 POWER IN THE BLOOD.

WOULD YOU DO SERVICE  
 FOR JESUS YOUR KING?

THERE'S POW'R IN THE BLOOD,  
 POW'R IN THE BLOOD;  
 WOULD YOU LIVE DAILY  
 HIS PRAISES TO SING?  
 THERE'S WONDERFUL  
 POWER IN THE BLOOD.

THERE IS POW'R, POW'R,  
 WONDER WORKING POW'R  
 IN THE BLOOD  
 OF THE LAMB;  
 THERE IS POW'R, POW'R,  
 WONDER WORKING POW'R  
 IN THE PRECIOUS  
 BLOOD OF THE LAMB.

PASTOR

That just gets better and better, guys. We are gonna be ready for that conference this year and we are gonna beat the pants off of Moreland Baptist. Let us give our esteemed pianist a round of applause?

(The GROUP applauds MARY. She stands and bows.)

MARY

That really did sound lovely, boys. Keep up the good work.

PASTOR

Thanks again for staying after to play for us, Sister Mary.

MARY

(Gathering her things.)

It was my pleasure, Pastor.

(To all.)

Everyone have a good night now.

GROUP

(Ad-lib.)

Good night. Good night, Miss Mary.

(MARY has exited.)

PASTOR

Now. Shall we begin our meeting? You know you can talk about anything in this room. It's just like they say about

Las Vegas: What happens in youth group, stays in youth group. Right?

GROUP

(Ad-lib.)

Right. Yes, sir. I guess.

PASTOR

Now Jimmy, did you have something you wanted to bring up for discussion today?

JIMMY

No.

PASTOR

Jimmy...

JIMMY

No, sir. I have nothing to say.

PASTOR

C'mon, Jimmy. We're all men here. We can talk about stuff in this room where we're safe from moms and girlfriends and-

MILLER

Not dads, though.

PASTOR

(To MILLER.)

No, Miller. Not dads. At least not for you, pal. I'm sorry 'bout that. But, don't think of me as your dad on Wednesday nights. We're just a bunch o' guys sittin' around talkin'. Okay?

(To group.)

Now, if Jimmy doesn't wanna bring it up, I will. Temptation.

(There is a collective groan from the group.)

PASTOR

I know, I know.

(Crosses to table.)

But, I'll let you in on a little secret.

(Retrieves a small bowl.)

Anybody want some jelly beans?

(PASTOR takes a generous handful of jelly beans and passes the bowl around. The boys take some as it passes.)

PASTOR

I was once your age. I know what it's like. I'm also pretty observant.

MASON

What d'ya mean?

PASTOR

What I mean, Mason Dobbs, is that I've seen you and Travis and a few other boys smoking cigarettes over behind the Tastee Freeze.

TRAVIS

That was just a one time thing, Pastor.

MASON

Yeah. And they weren't ours. Don't tell our parents, please? Ev'rybody else does it.

PASTOR

That's what I'm talking about, boys. Temptation. First of all, everybody else is *not* doing it.

TRAVIS

My parents smoke. My uncle. Even my principal smokes. I've seen him out the window when he thinks ev'rybody's in class. He goes out behind the equipment shed.

PASTOR

And why do you think he does that, Travis?

TRAVIS

I dunno. Maybe he's ashamed?

PASTOR

Could be. Anybody else have any ideas?

JIMMY

Maybe he doesn't want us to see.

PASTOR

Why do you think that is?

JIMMY

He doesn't want us kids to see him smoke, 'cause we might be tempted to smoke, too.

PASTOR

(Taking another handful of jellybeans.)

Ah, there's that word. Tempted. Temptation. There are lots of things in the world to be tempted about, right? Alcohol. Drugs. Sex. Well, those are the big ones, anyway. What else?

(No response.)

PASTOR

C'mon, guys.

TRAVIS

My mom says I spend too much of my allowance on comic books.

PASTOR

Yes. Okay. Any others?

TRAVIS

And too much time on the internet.

PASTOR

Good. Any—

TRAVIS

Too much time watchin' TV.

PASTOR

Alright—

TRAVIS

Too much time on the phone.

PASTOR

Thank you, Travis.

(To group.)

See? The world is full of temptations. And how do we combat temptation?

MASON

Talk to somebody?

PASTOR

Yes. Good.

JIMMY

Assuming that the person you talked to doesn't try to bring it up at youth group...

PASTOR

(Eating more jelly beans.)

Yes, well Jimmy, as you can see you are not alone. Everyone gets tempted by something in the world. It's nothing to be ashamed of. It's a very human thing: temptation. What else can we do? What about education?

MASON

What about it?

PASTOR

Why did you smoke that cigarette, Mason?

MASON

I dunno. I guess I just wanted to see what it was like. Jerry Mullins smokes and he drives a motorcycle-

TRAVIS

--And he always has a girlfriend.

PASTOR

So, you thought if you smoked, it might make you cool like Jerry Mullins.

TRAVIS

I dunno. Maybe.

PASTOR

See? Right there. If you'd done a little research - educated yourself - you'd know how bad smoking is for you. I know you're not thinking about stuff like heart disease or lung cancer right now, but what about how it makes your hair and your clothes and your breath smell. You think you're gonna keep a girlfriend with stinky breath? Or how you might be putting yourself or someone you love in danger by smoking around them?

MILLER

What about prayer?

PASTOR

What about it?

MILLER

Can you pray temptation away?

PASTOR

Yes. I believe you can. But you have to believe you can, Miller. That's actually a good place to start the scripture passage for—

MILLER

What about someone else? Can you pray for someone else's temptation?

PASTOR

Sure. You can always call upon the Lord for help. For you or anyone you care about. Mason, you said you parents smoke and your uncle—

MILLER

What if it doesn't work?

PASTOR

If what doesn't work?

MILLER

Praying.

PASTOR

Gimme a *for-instance*.

MILLER

For instance, I've been praying for someone who's sick and it doesn't seem to be doing any good.

PASTOR

Who's sick, Miller?

MILLER

And they're sick from somethin' that—

PASTOR

Who's sick, Miller?

MILLER

--somethin' that they can control. So I prayed. I'm still praying, but it doesn't do any good. Everyday it just gets

worse and worse and they don't seem to wanna help themselves. And I don't think God's listening, dad.

PASTOR

Who is sick, Miller? Is it one of your classmates?

MILLER

Have another mouthful of jelly beans and think about it, dad.

PASTOR

Mason, what are you--?

MILLER

You are a diabetic, dad.

PASTOR

How did you--?

MILLER

I'm not stupid, okay? Just because you and mom decided you weren't gonna tell me, doesn't mean I couldn't figure it out. I'm not stupid.

PASTOR

Nobody said you were.

MILLER

And I *did* educate myself. Have *you*? Diabetes can lead to stroke and heart disease, coma and death. You could die from this, dad. And I see you eating this...this...crap. Yes, I said *crap* in church. Maybe you'll listen. Everything I see you eating is bad for you, bad for you blood sugar. Jelly beans and cookies. What did you have for breakfast, dad?

PASTOR

I had a-

MILLER

I'll tell you what you had. You ate breakfast down at Deede's Restaurant. You had a sweet roll and coffee.

PASTOR

How do you know that? You were supposed to be in school.

MILLER

How else would I know, *Pastor Wilkes*? Huh? I was there. I saw you. If I waited for you to tell me, you'd prob'ly be dead.

PASTOR

(Crossing to him.)

Miller, hey, I'm fine.

MILLER

(Crossing away.)

No, you're not.

PASTOR

Look, this isn't the place for this discussion. We can talk about it when we get—

MILLER

You said we can talk about anything here.

PASTOR

This is family stuff.

MILLER

Families tell each other things. Even if it's something you're ashamed of.

PASTOR

I'm not ashamed of this.

MILLER

Then why try to hide it? Why couldn't you tell me? You're no better than our principal, dad. No, you're worse. Did you ever once think about me? What this might mean to me?

PASTOR

Of course I did. That's why I decided it was best not to—

MILLER

Diabetes can be inherited. That's me educating myself again. I could be doing stuff now to make sure I don't get this disease. Or I could get it and ignore it. Like you.

PASTOR

It's not that easy, son.

MILLER

It is if you think about somebody else. The people you might be leaving behind?

PASTOR

I'm not going anywhere.

MILLER

You don't know that. I found your stash, dad. And I told mom. If I'm not enough and mom's not enough and even God's not enough then...I don't know what to-. You have to be enough, dad. You. Because if I lost you to to to cake, dad. If you died because you couldn't say no to a piece of cake, then, no amount of prayer is gonna fix that. And maybe you shouldn't be the guy leading a discussion on temptation. I'm outta here.

(MILLER exits. PASTOR starts to run after him.)

PASTOR

Miller. Miller.

(Stops. To the group.)

Maybe we should take a five minute break.

JIMMY

No offense, Pastor Wilkes, but I'd just as soon go home now.

TRAVIS

Yeah, me too.

PASTOR

But, we haven't finished our discussion.

MASON

Maybe we should talk about something you know a little more about.

TRAVIS

Yeah.

(The group begins to exit.)

PASTOR

Guys, c'mon.

(All have exited, except JIMMY.)

JIMMY

(At the door.)

Good night, Pastor Wilkes. I don't believe what Miller said. I just wanted you to know that. I'll be praying for you.

PASTOR

Thank you, Jimmy.

(JIMMY exits. PASTOR sits back down and stares at the bowl of jelly beans. He stands up, looks around the church to make sure no one is around, and begins to eat the jelly beans. MILLER enters unnoticed and watches his father for a moment then exits again. Lights change.)

## SCENE 3

(We are back to the present Sunday morning, a few minutes before the ten o'clock service is to begin. SADIE-MAY enters. Notices audience.)

SADIE-MAY

(To audience. Just above a whisper.)

Oh, good. The phone tree worked. Thank you all for coming a few minutes early this morning.

(Glances toward the entrance to the altar to see if PASTOR is coming.)

Desperate times call for desperate measures, brothers and sisters. Now, you're probably wonderin' about the order of service.

(The CHOIR has now entered and taken their place on the risers. She hears the PASTOR approaching.)

SADIE-MAY

All I can say is: go with the flow, y'all.

(SADIE-MAY quickly takes the podium as MARY begins to play the introduction to *The Sweet By and By*. SADIE-MAY leads the congregation in singing the hymn. PASTOR enters, a little puzzled that the service has started without him, and takes his seat.)

CONGREGATION

THERE'S A LAND THAT IS FAIRER THAN DAY,  
AND BY FAITH WE CAN SEE IT AFAR;  
FOR THE FATHER WAITS OVER THE WAY  
TO PREPARE US A DWELLING PLACE THERE.

IN THE SWEET BY AND BY,  
WE SHALL MEET ON THAT BEAUTIFUL SHORE;  
IN THE SWEET BY AND BY,  
WE SHALL MEET ON THAT BEAUTIFUL SHORE.

WE SHALL SING ON THAT BEAUTIFUL SHORE  
THE MELODIOUS SONGS OF THE BLESSED;  
AND OUR SPIRITS SHALL SORROW NO MORE,  
NOT A SIGH FOR THE BLESSING OF REST.

IN THE SWEET BY AND BY,  
 WE SHALL MEET ON THAT BEAUTIFUL SHORE;  
 IN THE SWEET BY AND BY,  
 WE SHALL MEET ON THAT BEAUTIFUL SHORE.

TO OUR BOUNTIFUL FATHER ABOVE,  
 WE WILL OFFER OUR TRIBUTE OF PRAISE  
 FOR THE GLORIOUS GIFT OF HIS LOVE  
 AND THE BLESSINGS THAT HALLOW OUR DAYS.

IN THE SWEET BY AND BY,  
 WE SHALL MEET ON THAT BEAUTIFUL SHORE;  
 IN THE SWEET BY AND BY,  
 WE SHALL MEET ON THAT BEAUTIFUL SHORE.

(As the hymn ends, PASTOR starts to get up, but SADIE-MAY begins to address the congregation from her place at the podium.)

SADIE-MAY

Dearly beloved, thank you for coming today.

PASTOR

(Stage whisper to SADIE-MAY.)

What are you doing?

SADIE-MAY

(Ignoring him.)

We would like to start today's tribute with a poem written by a man who has been a member of this community all of his life and someone who was instrumental in getting our monthly pancake supper off and running. Joe Barrett.

(JOE crosses to the podium.)

JOE

Good morning. I'm Hobo Joe and I'd—

(SADIE-MAY clears her throat and looks disapproving at JOE.)

JOE

Sorry. Joe. It's just Joe. I'd like to read you something that I shoulda read a long time ago.

(Takes out a piece of paper. Reading.)

The night sky is my friend.

The stars go on without end.  
 And all the creatures of the dark  
 Sing me to sleep where, during the day, people park.  
 I didn't need for nothin'  
 A self-sufficient man.  
 That is something Pastor Wilkes understands.  
 (Correcting himself.)  
 Stood. Understood.  
 (Whispering to SADIE-MAY.)  
 'Cause he's not here right now, right?

(SADIE-MAY nods.)

JOE  
 (Reading.)  
 I like my life and have my pride.  
 Don't need nobody but God by my side.  
 But, when Preacher'd stop by my place  
 He always had a smile on his face.  
 I'm glad for pancakes and syrup on Fridays  
 It's a nice break from walkin' highways.  
 So thank you for invitin' me  
 And lettin' me be me.  
 Thank you.

(JOE bows and sits.)

SADIE-MAY  
 Thank you, Joe, for that lovely poem. I'm sure the Pastor  
 would have loved it, too.

(JOE stands back up.)

JOE  
 I only wish he'd've lived ta hear it. 'Cause he's gone and  
 not sittin' right there or anything, right?

SADIE-MAY  
 That's right, Joe.

JOE  
 (Sitting.)  
 Good. 'Cause that'd be weird.

SADIE-MAY  
 Pastor Wilkes will be missed by all of us. He was the  
 leader of our church, a leader in our community, always

willing to counsel the lost and struggling. And, of course, a loving father and my beloved husband for twenty-two years.

PASTOR

Sadie-May Wilkes, what are you *doing*?

SADIE-MAY

(Looking at PASTOR.)

He will certainly be missed. If he were here today, he would certainly tell anyone who might be trying to disrupt his service to sit down and be quiet.

(PASTOR sits.)

SADIE-MAY

He was not a man to mince words. And *I* am not a woman to mince words either. I loved my husband and I miss him dearly. But. I can't help think that only for a few simple changes to his life, he'd still be with us.

PASTOR

Okay. I see where this is going. Sadie-May, this is not the place—

CLAUDIA-JEAN

Sir, this is a funeral. Have some respect. Please stop interrupting.

PASTOR

Fine.

(To SADIE-MAY.)

Do your worst.

SADIE-MAY

Most of all, my husband was a stubborn man. Stubborn as a mule. His faith in the Lord, unrivaled. He used to say: In God, all things are possible. Well, God has sent me a message, brothers and sisters.

BEA

Amen!

SADIE-MAY

The Lord helps those who help themselves.

RUTH

Hallelujah!

CLAUDIA-JEAN

Preach on, sister-friend!

SADIE-MAY

We have strict rules in this House of Worship. We only allow music in these walls that praises and sends a joyful noise unto our Lord.

CHOIR

(Ad-lib.)

Amen! Hallelujah! Praise Jesus! Etc.

(MARY begins the introduction to *The Sugar Blues*.)

SADIE-MAY

But, the Lord has spoken to me. He has sent his angels to me with a different kind of musical gift, brothers and sisters. On this day, when we say goodbye to our beloved Pastor, I hope that you will forgive me this one, shall we say, *relaxation* of our rules regarding music in this house. For in these words, someone may hear and heed their message. It's too late for my beloved Emmet, but it may not be too late for you, brothers and sisters.

(Singing.)

HAVE YOU HEARD THESE BLUES  
 THAT I'M GONNA SING TO YOU?  
 WHEN YOU HEAR THEM  
 THEY WILL CHILL YOU THROUGH AND THROUGH.  
 THEY'RE THE SADDEST BLUES YOU EVER HEARD.  
 NOW LISTEN AND DON'T SAY A WORD.

SUGAR BLUES.  
 EV'RYBODY'S SINGIN' THE SUGAR BLUES.  
 THE WHOLE TOWN IS RINGIN'.  
 MY LOVIN' MAN'S SWEET AS CAN BE,  
 BUT THE DOGGONE FOOL TURNED SOUR ON ME.

CHOIR

SHE'S SO UNHAPPY.  
 SHE FEELS SO BAD.

SADIE-MAY

I COULD LAY ME DOWN AND DIE.  
 YOU CAN SAY WHAT YOU CHOOSE,

BUT I'M ALL CONFUSED.  
I'VE GOT THE SWEET, SWEET SUGAR BLUES.  
MORE SUGAR.

CHOIR

SHE'S GOT THE SWEET, SWEET SUGAR BLUES.

SADIE-MAY

HE JUST LOVED SWEET FOOD.  
PUT HIM IN AN AWFUL MOOD.  
WHEN HE'S LIKE THAT,  
YOU CAN BET THAT HE WAS RUDE.  
HE WAS SWEET AS CAN BE, SO I SAID,  
BUT NOW IT'S TOO BAD THAT HE'S DEAD.  
SUGAR BLUES.  
EV'RYBODY'S SINGIN' THE SUGAR BLUES.  
THE WHOLE TOWN IS RINGIN'.  
MY LOVIN' MAN'S SWEET AS CAN BE,  
BUT THE DOGGONE FOOL TURNED SOUR ON ME.

CHOIR

SHE'S SO UNHAPPY.  
SHE FEELS SO BAD.

SADIE-MAY

I COULD LAY ME DOWN AND DIE.  
YOU CAN SAY WHAT YOU CHOOSE,  
BUT I'M ALL CONFUSED.  
I'VE GOT THE SWEET, SWEET SUGAR BLUES.  
MORE SUGAR.

CHOIR

SHE'S GOT THE SWEET, SWEET SUGAR BLUES.

(MARY continues to play under the  
following.)

SADIE-MAY

(To audience.)

The power of prayer is strong, brothers and sisters.

DAHLIA

Hallelujah!

SADIE-MAY

The power of faith is like a bulwark never failing.

RUTH

Amen!

SADIE-MAY

But, God cannot do it alone. He has given us the power, brothers and sisters, to fight our own enemies in his name. Who are your enemies, brothers and sisters? I have been told the story of a woman, diagnosed with diabetes, who got mad. Real mad. Right, Bea?

BEA

Yes, she did! That's my sister!

SADIE-MAY

She made diabetes her enemy. She fought with it, swore at it, determined it would never limit her. She gave her energy to repelling it and made decisions about her life based on what she was fighting. She did what we all do with our enemies. She tried to win over it, ignore it, trick it, kick its butt. She lived as if her time was limited, as if she had no time.

(Beat.)

If only Emmet had learned that lesson. Take a walk.

BEA

Yes!

SADIE-MAY

Talk to your doctor. To your family.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

To your friends!

SADIE-MAY

Yes. You cannot defeat your enemies alone, brothers and sisters. I want to know: who are *your* enemies? The government? Taxes? Your neighbor's dog who does his business on your lawn every night? Are your enemies the racists? Conservatives? Liberals? Atheists? Is the enemy your alcoholic mother, your wandering, abusive father, your boss, your disease, your addiction, your empty womb, your spouse-less home, your body fat or lack thereof? Your face without make up, the lack of muscle or the abundance of belly? Your tendency to talk too much or too little? Are you...your own...enemy?

(Breaking down.)

Are you? Were you, Emmet? Ask for—. Were you your own—?

DAHLIA

(Helping SADIE-MAY to her seat. To audience.)

Uh, perhaps now would be a good time for us to recall some happy memories of our beloved Pastor, Emmet Wilkes.

(Taking the podium.)

I know, for me, I'll always remember his stubborn nature in a different way. He was a man of his word. If you had a problem, he was the first to volunteer to help. And if he set his mind to helping you, it was like havin' Goliath in your corner. He'd be right there, at your side 'til the problem was solved. And you knew he had made his decision when he put his hands in his pockets and looked up. Like he was lookin' up at God and sayin': *See? I'm doin' what you asked me to do? Proud o' me yet? I'd...I'd never really had that in my life. Somebody who'd fight with me. Not for me. He made me not afraid to ask for help. I had no fear that he would take the problem as his own, but would help me find my own way. I'm gonna miss that.*

(She sits. CLAUDIA-JEAN takes the podium.)

CLAUDIA-JEAN

As most of you know, my son, Tommy, is overseas. He emails me everyday. A couple months ago, a week went by without an email. I was worried sick. Out of my mind. For three nights, Pastor Wilkes prayed with me. And he called our Senator's office, trying to find out something. Anything. Nobody could tell us IF Tommy was okay. Or, they wouldn't tell-

(CLAUDIA-JEAN begins to break down.  
DALE stands from the congregation and crosses to her.)

DALE

(To CLAUDIA-JEAN.)

It's alright, sweetie. I got the rest of this.

(To congregation.)

And on the fourth night, an email. He'd been relocated to another base. With me always on the road - I do construction work - it's nice to know there was always somebody there for Claudia-Jean, for my family. For Tommy. Someone I could trust. I only wish I could've been there for Pastor Wil-

PASTOR

You roped the men into this now, too? Alright, I think we've all heard enough.

SADIE-MAY

Have we?

PASTOR

I get it, okay? I'll...try to do better.

(The CHOIR freezes, watching the PASTOR's every move.)

PASTOR

What?

BEA

(Craning to see. To MARY.)

Did he do it? I can't see.

MARY

(To BEA.)

Nope. No pockets. No smile.

BEA

Darn it.

SADIE-MAY

Sir, please don't make me ask you to be quiet again. This is a very painful time for all of us and—

PASTOR

I'm not dead.

SADIE-MAY

Ruth, would you like to say a word?

PASTOR

I. Am. Not. Dead.

RUTH

Yes. Yes, I would. My Regina's always been a handful. She was always sick as a child. There were many nights when I wasn't sure she'd ever make it to her next birthday. But, Pastor Wilkes was always right there with me, at the side of her hospital bed. He always made me feel safe.

Like everything would be alright. When she started high school and got mixed-up with the wrong crowd, well, it was like all those nights in the hospital all over again. Times twelve. The night I got the call that she'd...been in an accident--. The first call I made after Jerry and I arrived at the hospital was to Pastor Wilkes. We prayed together for all those hours 'til Regina was out of surgery. Weeks later when she was released from the hospital, they took her straight to jail. At her hearing, Pastor stood up in that courtroom and personally vouched for Regina, promising to get her the help she needed. And he did, too. And now my little girl's getting married. In June. A June wedding. *I* didn't even get that. And it was all because of Pastor Emmet Wilkes. I'll never forget him. And I'll never forgive him for leaving us before his time.

PASTOR

(Standing up.)

Now, you wait just a doggone minute, Ruth-Ann Babbage. And all the rest of you. Who do you think you are? Now, I have had enough of this.

SADIE-MAY

(To no one in particular.)

He's gonna fight.

PASTOR

I'll ask again: Who do you think you are? Hypocrites. Hypocrites in the house of the Lord.

(CHOIR gasps.)

PASTOR

(To CLAUDIA-JEAN.)

Yes, I have been there for you and Tommy and Dale, too. And I pray everyday for his safe return.

(To RUTH.)

Yes, Lord, we have prayed a lot for that girl, didn't we? And I will be there to officiate on the day she's wed.

(To BEA.)

I didn't know about your sister, Bea. She'll be in my prayers tonight. We'll keep her strong.

(To DAHLIA.)

Truth be told, Dahlia, I like being Goliath. Only, in my version Goliath wins. I protect those I care about with the might of a giant. And I will continue to do so until the day I pass from this Earth.

(To SADIE-MAY.)

Which will not be anytime soon.

(To all.)

But...I cannot do it alone. A father is only as strong as the family he's made. I cannot do this alone. I cannot. Are you going to help? You? What about you? Are you going to help me?

BEA

Of course we will.

PASTOR

I don't need your prayers. I need your word. I need your deeds.

SADIE-MAY

What are you talking about, Emmet?

PASTOR

Every Sunday after service. Every Tuesday after choir practice. Wednesday's Youth Group. Thursday's bible study. What do I see before me? A bountiful table so full as to make Solomon himself blush with envy. Cookies, cakes. Every birthday, anniversary. Baptism and every Sunday. Every Sunday. I'm just a man. I cannot resist temptation when it surrounds me. And when I hear: *Oh, come on, Pastor. Surely one piece couldn't hurt you. It's a celebration. It's St. Valentine's Day. It's Genie's birthday. Or Burt's retirement.* I cannot do this alone.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

I feel awful.

PASTOR

You should. Barbara Walters' crumpets, for Pete's sake. Not one of you ever stopped to think about the diabetic in the room. Not one of you.

SADIE-MAY

Did we buy those Twinkies®? Those jelly beans?

PASTOR

No. No, you didn't. I will take responsibility for that.

SADIE-MAY

And did we tell you to sit in that big, comfy chair every night 'til you fall asleep?

PASTOR

No. But, my job isn't easy. Sometimes I just like to-

SADIE-MAY

Sometimes? Every night that you are home, Emmet.

(A beat. New tactic.)

Mr. Wilkes?

PASTOR

Yes, Mrs. Wilkes?

SADIE-MAY

I would like to ask you to take a walk with me every night after dinner. If you're available, that is. I have been told that I can be most pleasant company.

PASTOR

I'm sure of it.

SADIE-MAY

And I will get all those sugar-free recipes from Bea's sister and you will always have something on the table after service.

PASTOR

Thank you.

DAHLIA

Us, too.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

It wouldn't hurt any of us to have a little less sugar.

BEA

I'll call my sister as soon as I get home.

RUTH

We're sorry, Pastor. *I'm* sorry.

MARY

I don't like sweets, anyway.

CLAUDIA-JEAN

Just because she can't cook.

MARY

What a horrible thing to say.

DAHLIA

Oh, she's said worse.

PASTOR

So, am I alive, ladies?

SADIE-MAY

(To CHOIR.)

What do ya think?

DAHLIA

Do you promise to take better care of yourself?

RUTH

Do you promise to ask for help when you need it?

BEA

To lay off the sweets?

CLAUDIA-JEAN

And quit stashin' stuff?

SADIE-MAY

And to go for a walk with your lovely wife after dinner?

PASTOR

Yes, ladies. Yes, to all of that. That is, if I can get some help. Some education maybe. Right son?

(MILLER stands from the congregation.)

MILLER

Anytime, dad.

PASTOR

Promise?

MILLER

I promise.

(All eyes are on the PASTOR. After a moment, he puts his hands in his pockets, smiles and looks toward the heavens.)

PASTOR

Me, too then. I promise, too.

(All cheer. BEA crosses to MARY at piano. They speak conspiratorially.)

BEA

I told ya it'd work.

MARY

I'll be sure to thank your mother for her love of Ella Fitzgerald in my prayers tonight.

BEA

Amen-hallelujah. But how'd you get it into her music folder? Ya never told me.

MARY

The Lord works in mysterious ways, Bea.

(Aside to MILLER.)

Right, Young Mister Wilkes?

MILLER

Right, Miss Mary. My dad always said when mom sang to him, she could get him to do anything.

SADIE-MAY

Well then: hit it, Mary.

(MARY starts playing a rousing hymn of your choosing, such as *The Black Sheep Returns to the Fold*. After the song is over, the congregation stays for coffee and sugar-free coffee cake.)

ALL

OH LONG IS THE NIGHT I HAVE TRAVELED.  
THE WAY WAS SO BITTER AND COLD.  
I LONG FOR THE DAY  
WHEN MY SHEPHERD WILL SAY:  
THE BLACK SHEEP RETURNED TO THE FOLD.

FOR NOW ALL MY DREAMS ARE OF LIVING.  
A TREASURE MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD.  
THE CHURCHBELLS WILL RING  
AND THE ANGELS WILL SING:

THE BLACK SHEEP RETURNED TO THE FOLD.

END OF PLAY.