

DOUBT

By John Patrick Shanley

This play is dedicated to the many orders of Catholic nuns who devoted their lives to serving others in hospitals, schools, and retirement homes. Though they have much maligned and ridiculed, who among us has been so generous?

QUOTES: "The Bad Sleep Well." The title of a Akira Kurosawa film.

"In much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge, increaseth sorrow." Ecclesiastes

"Everything that is hard to attain is easily assailed by the mob." Ptolemy

Scene 1

A priest, FATHER FLYNN, in his late 30's, in green and gold vestments, stands at a pulpit, LEFT, giving a sermon. He working class, from the Northeast.

FLYNN

What do you do when you're not sure? That's the topic of my sermon today. You look for God's direction and can't find it. Last year when President Kennedy was assassinated, who among us did not experience the most profound disorientation. Despair. 'What now? Which way? What do I say to my kids? What do tell myself?' It was a time of people sitting together, bound together by a common feeling of hopelessness. But think of that! Your BOND with your fellow beings was your Despair. It was a public experience, shared by everyone in our society. It was awful, but we were in it together! How much worse is it then for the lone man, the lone woman, stricken by a private calamity? 'No one knows I'm sick. No one knows I've lost my last real friend. No one knows I've done something wrong.' Imagine the isolation. You see the world as through a window. On the one side of the glass: happy, untroubled people. On the other side: You. Something has happened, you have to carry it, and it's incommunicable. For those so afflicted, only God knows their pain. Their secret. The secret of their alienating sorrow. And when such a person, as they must, howls to the sky, to God: Help me! What if no answer comes? Silence. I want to tell you a story. A cargo ship sank and all her crew was drowned. Only this one sailor survived. He made a raft of some spars and, being of a nautical discipline, turned his eyes to the Heavens and read the stars. He set a course for his home and exhausted, fell

(MORE)

FLYNN (CONT'D)

asleep. Clouds rolled in and blanketed the sky. For the next twenty nights, as he floated on the vast ocean, he could no longer see the stars. He thought he was on course but there was no way to be certain. As the days rolled on, and he wasted away with fevers, thirst and starvation, he began to have doubts. Had he set his course right? Was he still going on towards his home? Or was he horribly lost and doomed to a terrible death? No way to know. The message of the constellations--had he imagined it because of his desperate circumstance? Or had he seen Truth once and now had to hold on to it without further reassurance? That was his dilemma on a voyage without apparent end. There are those of you in church today who know exactly the crisis of faith I describe. I want to say to you. Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty. When you are lost, you are not alone. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

He steps down from the pulpit as

Scene 2

The lights crossfade up on to a corner office in a Catholic church school in The Bronx. The principal, SISTER ALOYSIUS BEAUVIER, sits at her desk, writing with a fountain pen in a ledger. She is in her 50's or 60, and she is watchful, reserved, unsentimental. She is of the order of the Sisters of Charity. She wears a black bonnet and floor length black habit. Rimless glasses. A knock at the door.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Come in.

SISTER JAMES enters, also of the Sisters of Charity. She is in her 20's or 30. There's a bit of sunshine in her heart, though she's reserved as well.

SISTER JAMES

Have you a moment, Sister Aloysius?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Come in, Sister James.

She enters.

SISTER ALOYSIUS (CONT'D)

Who's watching your class?

SISTER JAMES
They're having Art.

Art. Waste of time.

SISTER JAMES
It's only an hour a week.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Much can be accomplished in 60 minutes.

SISTER JAMES
Yes, Sister Aloysius. I wondered if I might know what you did
about William London?

I sent him home.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

SISTER JAMES

Oh dear. So he's still bleeding?

Oh yes.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

SISTER JAMES
His nose just let loose and started gushing during The Pledge of
Allegiance.

Was it spontaneous? SISTER ALOYSIUS

SISTER JAMES

What else would it be?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Self-induced.

SISTER JAMES
You mean, you think he might've intentionally given himself a
nosebleed?

Exactly. SISTER ALOYSIUS

No! SISTER JAMES

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You are a very innocent person, Sister James. William London is a fidgety boy and if you do not keep right on him, he will do anything to escape his chair. He would set his foot on fire for half a day out of school.

SISTER JAMES

But why?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

He has a restless mind.

SISTER JAMES

But that's good.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

No, it's not. His father's a policeman and the last thing he wants is a rowdy boy. William London is headed for trouble. Puberty has got hold of him. He will be imagining all the wrong things and I strongly suspect he will not graduate high school. But that's beyond our jurisdiction. We simply have to get him through, out the door, and then he's somebody else's project. Ordinarily, I assign my most experienced sisters to 8th grade but I'm working within constraints. Are you in control of your class?

SISTER JAMES

I think so.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Usually more children are sent down to me.

SISTER JAMES

I try to take care of things myself.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

That can be an error. You are answerable to me, I to the monsignor, he to the Bishop, and so on up to the Holy Father. There's a chain of discipline. Make use of it.

SISTER JAMES

Yes, Sister.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

How's Donald Muller doing?

SISTER JAMES

Steady.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Good. Has anyone hit him?

SISTER JAMES

No.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Good. That girl Linda Conte, have you seated her away from the boys?

SISTER JAMES

As far as space permits. It doesn't do much good.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Just get her through. Intact.

Sister Aloysius is staring absently at
Sister James. A silence falls.

SISTER JAMES

So. Should I go? (No answer) Is something the matter?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

No. Why? Is something the matter?

SISTER JAMES

I don't think so.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Then nothing's the matter then.

SISTER JAMES

Well. Thank you, Sister. I just wanted to check on William's nose.

She starts to go.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

He had a ballpoint pen.

SISTER JAMES

Excuse me, Sister?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

William London had a ballpoint pen. He was fiddling with it while he waited for his mother. He's not using it for assignments, I hope.

SISTER JAMES

No, of course not.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I'm sorry I allowed even cartridge pens into the school. The students really should only be learning script with true fountain pens. Always the easy way these days. What does that teach? Every easy choice today will have its consequence tomorrow. Mark my words.

SISTER JAMES

Yes, Sister.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Ballpoints make them press down, and when they press down, they write like monkeys.

SISTER JAMES

I don't allow them ballpoint pens.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Good. Penmanship is dying all across the country. You have some time. Sit down.

Sister James hesitates and sits down.

SISTER ALOYSIUS (CONT'D)

We might as well have a talk. I've been meaning to talk to you. I observed your lesson on the New Deal at the beginning of the term. Not bad. But I caution you. Do not idealize Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He was a good president, but he did attempt to pack the Supreme Court. I do not approve of making heroes of lay historical figures. If you want to talk about saints, do it in Religion.

SISTER JAMES

Yes, Sister.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Also. I question your enthusiasm for History.

SISTER JAMES

But I love History!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

That is exactly my meaning. You favor History and risk swaying the children to value it over their other subjects. I think this is a mistake.

SISTER JAMES

I never thought of that. I'll try to treat my other lessons with more enthusiasm.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

No. Give them their history without putting sugar all over it. That's the point. Now. Tell me about your class. How would you characterize the condition of 8 B?

SISTER JAMES

I don't know where to begin. What do you want to know?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Let's begin with Stephen Inzio.

SISTER JAMES

Stephen Inzio has the highest marks in the class.

Noreen Horan? SISTER ALOYSIUS

SISTER JAMES
Second highest marks.

Brenda McNulty? SISTER ALOYSIUS

Third highest. SISTER JAMES

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You see I am making a point, Sister James. I know that Stephen Inzio, Noreen Horan, and Brenda McNulty are one, two, and three in your class. Schoolwide, there are 48 such students each grade period. I make it my business to know all 48 of their names. I do not say this to aggrandize myself, but to illustrate the importance of paying attention. You must pay attention as well.

Yes, Sister Aloysius. SISTER JAMES

I cannot be everywhere.

SISTER JAMES
Am I falling short, Sister?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

These three students with the highest marks. Are they the most intelligent children in your class?

SISTER JAMES
No, I wouldn't say they are. But they work the hardest.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Very good! That's right! That's the ethic. What good's a gift if it's left in the box? What good is a high I.Q. if you're staring out the window with your mouth agape? Be hard on the bright ones, Sister James. Don't be charmed by cleverness. Not theirs'. And not yours. I think you are a competent teacher, Sister James, but maybe not our best teacher. The best teachers do not perform, they cause the students to perform.

Do I perform?

SISTER JAMES

SISTER ALOYSIUS

As if on a Broadway stage.

SISTER JAMES

Oh dear. I had no conception!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You're showing off. You like to see yourself ten feet tall in their eyes. Another thing occurs to me. Where were you before?

SISTER JAMES

Mount St. Margaret's.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

All girls.

SISTER JAMES

Yes.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I feel I must remind you. Boys are made of gravel, soot, and tar paper. Boys are a different breed.

SISTER JAMES

I feel I know how to handle them.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

But perhaps you are wrong. And perhaps you are not working hard enough.

SISTER JAMES

Oh.

Sister James cries a little.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

No tears.

SISTER JAMES

I thought you were satisfied with me.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Satisfaction is a vice. Do you have a handkerchief?

SISTER JAMES

Yes.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Use it. Do you think that Socrates was satisfied? Good teachers are never content. We have some three hundred and seventy-two students in this school. It is a society which requires constant educational, spiritual, and human vigilance. I cannot afford an excessively innocent instructor in my 8th grade class. It's self-indulgent.

(MORE)

SISTER ALOYSIUS (CONT'D)

Innocence is a form of laziness. Innocent teachers are easily duped. You must be canny, Sister James.

SISTER JAMES

Yes, Sister.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

When William London gets a nosebleed, be skeptical. Don't let a little blood fuddle your judgement. God gave you a brain and a heart. The heart is warm, but your wits must be cold. Liars should be frightened to lie to you. They should be uncomfortable in your presence. I doubt they are.

SISTER JAMES

I don't know. I've never thought about it.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

The children should think you see right through them.

SISTER JAMES

Wouldn't that be a little frightening?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Only to the ones that are up to no good.

SISTER JAMES

But I want my students to feel they can talk to me.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

They're children. They can talk to each other. It's more important they have a fierce moral guardian. You stand at the door, Sister. You are the gatekeeper. If you are vigilant, they will not need to be.

SISTER JAMES

I'm not sure what you want me to do.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

And if things occur in your classroom which you sense require understanding, but you don't understand, come to me.

SISTER JAMES

Yes, Sister.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

That's why I'm here. That's why I'm the Principal of this school. Do you stay when the specialty instructors come in?

SISTER JAMES

Yes.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

But you're here now while the Art class is going on.

SISTER JAMES

I was a little concerned about William's nose.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Right. So you have Art in class.

SISTER JAMES

She comes in. Mrs. Bell. Yes.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

And you take them down to the basement for Dance with Mrs. Shields.

SISTER JAMES

On Thursdays.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Another waste of time.

SISTER JAMES

Oh, but everyone loves the Christmas pageant.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I don't love it. Frankly it offends me. Last year the girl playing Our Lady was wearing lipstick. I was waiting in the wings for that little jade.

SISTER JAMES

Then there's Music.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

That strange woman with the portable piano. What's wrong with her neck?

SISTER JAMES

Some kind of goiter. Poor woman.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes. Mrs. Carolyn.

SISTER JAMES

That's right.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

We used to have a Sister teaching that. Not enough Sisters. What else?

SISTER JAMES

Physical Education and Religion.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

And for that we have Father Flynn. (Pause.) Two hours a week. And you stay for those?

SISTER JAMES

Mostly. Unless I have reports to fill out or...

SISTER ALOYSIUS

What do you think of Father Flynn?

SISTER JAMES

Oh, he's a brilliant man. What a speaker!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes. His sermon this past Sunday was poetic.

SISTER JAMES

He's actually very good, too, at teaching basketball. I was surprised. I wouldn't think a man of the cloth the personality type for basketball, but he has a way he has, very natural with dribbling and shooting.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

What do you think that sermon was about?

SISTER JAMES

What?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

This past Sunday. What was he talking about?

SISTER JAMES

Well, Doubt. He was talking about Doubt.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Why?

SISTER JAMES

Excuse me, Sister?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Well, sermons come from somewhere, don't they? Is Father Flynn in Doubt, is he concerned that someone else is in Doubt?

SISTER JAMES

I suppose you'd have to ask him.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

No. That would not be appropriate. He is my superior. And if he were troubled, he should confess it to a fellow priest, or the Monsignor. We do not share intimate information with priests.

A pause.

SISTER JAMES

I'm a little concerned.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

About what?

SISTER JAMES

The time. Art class will be over in a few minutes. I should go up.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Have you noticed anything, Sister James?

SISTER JAMES

About what?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I want you to be alert.

SISTER JAMES

I don't believe I'm following you, Sister.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I'm sorry I'm not more forthright, but I must be careful not to create something by saying it. I can only say I am concerned, perhaps needlessly, about matters in St. Nicholas School.

SISTER JAMES

Academically?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I wasn't inviting a guessing game. I want you to pay attention to your class.

SISTER JAMES

Well, of course I'll pay attention to my class, Sister. And I'll try not to perform. And I'll try to be less innocent. I'm sorry you're disappointed in me. Please know that I will try my best. Honestly.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Look at you. You'd trade anything for a warm look. I'm telling you here and now, I want to see the starch in your character cultivated. If you are looking for reassurance, you can be fooled. If you forget yourself and study others, you will not be fooled. It's important. One final matter and then you really must get back. Sister Veronica is going blind.

SISTER JAMES

Oh how horrible!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

This is not generally known and I don't want it known. If they find out in the Rectory, she'll be gone. I cannot afford to lose her. But now if you see her making her way down those stone stairs into the courtyard, for the love of Heaven, lightly take her hand as if in fellowship and see that she doesn't destroy herself. Alright, go.

Scene 3

The lights crossfade up on to Father Flynn, whistle around his neck, in a sweat shirt and pants, holding a basketball.

FLYNN

Alright, settle down, boys. Now the thing about shooting from the foul line: It's psychological. The rest of the game you're cooperating with your teammates, you're competing against the other team. But at the foul line, it's you against yourself. And the danger is: You start to think. When you think, you stop breathing. Your body locks up. So you have to remember to relax. Take a breath, unlock your knees--this is something for you to watch, Jimmy. You stand like a parking meter. Come up with a routine of what you do. Shift your weight, move your hips... You think that's funny, Ralph? What's funny is you never getting a foul shot. Don't worry if you look silly. They won't think you silly if you get the basket. Come up with a routine, concentrate on the routine, and you'll forget to get tensed up. Now on another matter, I've noticed several of you guys have dirty nails. I don't want to see that. I'm not talking about the length of your nails, I'm talking about cleanliness. See? Look at my nails. They're long, I like them a little long, but look at how clean they are. That makes it okay. There was a kid I grew up with, Timmy Mathisson, never had clean nails, and he'd stick his fingers up his nose in his mouth--This is a true story, learn to listen!--he got spinal meningitis and died a horrible death. Sometimes it's the little things that get you. You try to talk to a girl with those filthy paws, Mister Conroy, she gonna take off like she's being chased by the Red Chinese! (Reacting genially to laughter.) Alright, alright. You guys, what am I gonna do with you? Get dressed, come on over the rectory, have some kool aid and cookies, we'll have a bull session. (Blows his whistle.) Go!

Scene 4

Crossfade up to a bit of garden, a bench, and the brick wall of an unseen building.

Sister Aloysius, in full habit and a black shawl, is wrapping a pruned rosebush in burlap. Sister James appears.

SISTER JAMES

Good afternoon, Sister.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Good afternoon, Sister James. Mr. McGinn pruned this bush, which was the right thing to do, but he neglected to protect it from the frost.

SISTER JAMES

Have we had a frost?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

When it comes, it's too late.

SISTER JAMES

You know about gardening?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

A little. Where is your class?

SISTER JAMES

The girls are having Music.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

And the boys?

SISTER JAMES

They're in the Rectory.

Sister James indicates the Rectory, which is out of view, just on the other side of the garden.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

With Father Flynn.

SISTER JAMES

Yes. He's giving them a talk.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

On what subject?

SISTER JAMES

How to be a man.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Well, if Sisters were permitted in the Rectory, I would be interested to hear that talk. I don't know how to be a man.

(MORE)

SISTER ALOYSIUS (CONT'D)

I would like to know what's involved. Have you ever given the girls a talk on how to be a woman?

SISTER JAMES

No. I wouldn't be competent.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Why not?

SISTER JAMES

I just don't think I would. I took my vows at the beginning... Before... At the beginning.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

The founder of our order, The Blessed Mother Seton, was married and had five children before embarking on her vows.

SISTER JAMES

I've often wondered how she managed so much in one life.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Life perhaps is longer than you think and the dictates of the soul more numerous. I was married.

SISTER JAMES

You were!

Sister Aloysius smiles for the first time.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You could at least hide your astonishment.

SISTER JAMES

I...didn't know.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

When one takes on the habit, one must close the door on secular things. My husband died in the war against Adolph Hitler.

SISTER JAMES

Really! Excuse me, Sister.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

But I'm like you. I'm not sure I would feel competent to lecture tittering girls on the subject of womanhood. I don't come into this garden often. What is it, 40 feet across? The convent here, the rectory there. We might as well be separated by the Atlantic Ocean. I used to potter around out here, but Monsignor Benedict does his reverie at quixotic times and we are rightly discouraged from crossing paths with priests unattended. He is 79, but nevertheless.

SISTER JAMES

The Monsignor is very good, isn't he?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes. But he is oblivious.

SISTER JAMES

To what?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I don't believe he knows who's President of the United States. I mean him no disrespect of course. It's just that he's otherworldly in the extreme.

SISTER JAMES

Is it that he's innocent, Sister Aloysius?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You have a slyness at work, Sister James. Be careful of it. How is your class? How is Donald Muller?

SISTER JAMES

He is 13th in class.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I know. That's sufficient. Is he being accepted?

SISTER JAMES

He has no friends.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

That would be a lot to expect after only two months. Has anyone hit him?

SISTER JAMES

No.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Someone will. And when it happens, send them right down to me.

SISTER JAMES

I'm not so sure anyone will.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

There is a statue of St. Patrick on one side of the Church altar and a statue of St. Anthony on the other. This parish serves Irish and Italian families. Someone will hit Donald Muller.

SISTER JAMES

He has a protector.

Who? SISTER ALOYSIUS

Father Flynn. SISTER JAMES

Sister Aloysius, who has been fussing with mulch, is suddenly rigid. She rises.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

What?

SISTER JAMES

He's taken an interest. Since Donald went on the altar boys.
(Pause.) I thought I should tell you.

SISTER ALOYSIUS
I told you to come to me, but I hoped you never would.

SISTER JAMES

Maybe I shouldn't have.

SISTER ALOYSIUS
I knew once you did, something would be set in motion. So it's happened.

SISTER JAMES

What?! I'm not telling you that! I'm not even certain what you mean.

SISTER ALOYSIUS
Yes, you are.

SISTER JAMES

I've been trying to become more cold in my thinking as you suggested... I feel as if I've lost my way a little, Sister Aloysius. I had the most terrible dream last night. I want to be guided by you and responsible to the children, but I want my peace of mind. I must tell you I have been longing for the return of my peace of mind.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You may not have it. It is not your place to be complacent. That's for the children. That's what we give them.

SISTER JAMES

I think I'm starting to understand you a little. But it's so unsettling to look at things and people with suspicion. It feels as if I'm less close God.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

When you take a step to address wrongdoing, you are taking a step away from God, but in His service. Dealing with such matters is hard and thankless work.

SISTER JAMES

I've become more reserved in class. I feel separated from the children.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

That's as it should be.

SISTER JAMES

But I feel. Wrong. And about this other matter, I don't have any evidence. I'm not at all certain that anything's happened.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

We can't wait for that.

SISTER JAMES

But what if it's nothing?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Then it's nothing. I wouldn't mind being wrong. But I doubt I am.

SISTER JAMES

Then what's to be done?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I don't know.

SISTER JAMES

You'll know what to do.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I don't know what to do. There are parameters which protect him and hinder me.

SISTER JAMES

But he can't be safe if it's established. I doubt he could recover from the shame.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

What have you seen?

SISTER JAMES

I don't know.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

What have you seen?

SISTER JAMES

He took Donald to the Rectory.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

What for?

SISTER JAMES

A talk.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Alone?

SISTER JAMES

Yes.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

When?

SISTER JAMES

A week ago.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Why didn't you tell me?

SISTER JAMES

I didn't think there was anything wrong with it. It never came into my mind that he...that there could be anything wrong.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Of all the children. Donald Muller. I suppose it makes sense.

SISTER JAMES

How does it make sense?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

He's isolated. The little sheep lagging behind is the one the wolf goes for.

SISTER JAMES

I don't know that anything's wrong!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Our first Negro student. I thought there'd be fighting, a parent or two to deal with... I'd should've foreseen this possibility.

SISTER JAMES

How could you imagine it?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

It is my job to outshine the fox in cleverness! That's my job!

SISTER JAMES

But maybe it's nothing!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Then why do you look like you've seen the Devil?

SISTER JAMES

It's just the way the boy acted when he came back to class.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

He said something?

SISTER JAMES

No. It was his expression. He looked frightened and...he put his head on the desk in the most peculiar way. (Struggles.) And one other thing. I think there was alcohol on his breath. There was alcohol on his breath.

Sister Aloysius looks at the Rectory.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

8 years ago at St. Boniface we had a priest who had to be stopped. But I had Monsignor Scully then...who I could rely on. Here. There's no man I can go to, and men run everything. We are going to have to stop him ourselves.

SISTER JAMES

Can't you just...report your suspicions?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

To Monsignor Benedict? The man's guileless! He would just ask Father Flynn!

SISTER JAMES

Well, would that be such a bad idea?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

And he would believe whatever Father Flynn told him. He would think the matter settled.

SISTER JAMES

But maybe that is all that needs to be done. If it's true. If I had done something awful, and I was confronted with it, I'd be so repentant.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Sister James, my dear, you must try to imagine a very different kind of person than yourself. A man who would do this has already denied a great deal. If I tell the Monsignor and he is satisfied with Father Flynn's rebuttal, the matter is suppressed.

SISTER JAMES

Well then tell the Bishop.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

The hierarchy of the Church does not permit my going to the Bishop. No. Once I tell the Monsignor, it's out of my hands, I'm helpless. I'm going to have to come up with a pretext, get Father Flynn into my office. Try to force it. You'll have to be there.

SISTER JAMES

Me? No! Why? Oh no, Sister! I couldn't!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I can't be closeted alone with a priest! Another Sister must be in attendance and it has to be you. The circle of confidence mustn't be made any wider. Think of the boy if this gets out.

SISTER JAMES

I can't do it!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Why not? You're squeamish?

SISTER JAMES

I'm not equipped! It's... I would be embarrassed. I couldn't possibly be present if the topic were spoken of!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Please, Sister, do not indulge yourself in witless adolescent scruples. I assure you I would prefer a more seasoned confederate. But you are the one who came to me.

SISTER JAMES

You told me to!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Would you rather leave the boy to be exploited? And don't think this will be the only story. If you close your eyes, you will be a party to all that comes after.

SISTER JAMES

You're supposed to tell the Monsignor!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

That you saw a look in a boy's eye? That PERHAPS you smelled something on his breath? Monsignor Benedict thinks the sun rises and sets on Father Flynn. You'd be branded an hysteric and transferred.

SISTER JAMES

We can ask him.

Who? SISTER ALOYSIUS

SISTER JAMES
The boy. Donald Muller.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

He'll deny it.

Why? SISTER JAMES

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Shame.

SISTER JAMES
You can't know that.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

And if he does point the finger, how do you think that will be received in this community? A black child. (No answer.) I am going to think this through. Then I'm going to invite Father Flynn to my office on an unrelated matter. You will be there.

SISTER JAMES
But what good can I do?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Aside from the unacceptability of a priest and nun being alone, I need a witness.

To what?

SISTER JAMES

SISTER ALOYSIUS
He may tell the truth and lie afterwards.

Sister James looks towards the Rectory.

SISTER JAMES

The boys are coming out of the Rectory. They look happy enough.

SISTER ALOYSIUS
They look smug. Like they have a secret.

SISTER JAMES

There he is.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

If I could, Sister James, I would certainly choose to live in innocence.

(MORE)

SISTER ALOYSIUS (CONT'D)

But innocence can only be wisdom in a world without evil.
Situations arise and we are confronted with wrongdoing and the
need to act.

SISTER JAMES

I have take the boys up to class.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Go on, then. Take them. I will be talking to you.

The SOUND of WIND. Sister Aloysius pulls
her shawl more tightly about her and
goes.

Scene 5

A phone rings. The principal's office
appears. Sister Aloysius reappears with a
pot of tea and no shawl, walking quickly
to answer the phone.

SISTER ALOYSIUS (CONT'D)

Hello, St. Nicholas School? Oh yes, Mr. McGinn. Thank you for
calling back. That was quite a windstorm we had last night. No, I
didn't know there was a Great Wind in Ireland and you were there
for it. That's fascinating. Yes. I was wondering if you would be
so kind as to remove a tree limb that's fallen in the courtyard of
the church. Sister Veronica tripped on it this morning and fell on
her face. I think she's alright. She doesn't look any worse, Mr.
McGinn. Thank you, Mr. McGinn.

She hangs up the phone and looks at her
watch, a bit anxious. A knock at the
door.

SISTER ALOYSIUS (CONT'D)

Come in.

The door opens. Father Flynn is standing
there in his black cassock. He doesn't
come in.

FLYNN

Good morning, Sister Aloysius! How are you today?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Good morning, Father Flynn. Very well. Good of you to come by.

FLYNN

Are we ready for the meeting?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

We're just short Sister James. Did you hear that wind last night?

FLYNN

I certainly did. Imagine what it must've been like in the frontier days when a man alone in the woods sat by a fire in his buckskins and listened to a sound like that. Imagine the loneliness! The immense darkness pressing in! How frightening it must've been!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

If one lacked faith in God's protection, I suppose it would be frightening.

FLYNN

Did I hear Sister Veronica had an accident?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes. Sister Veronica fell on a piece of wood this morning and practically killed herself.

FLYNN

Is she alright?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Oh, she's fine.

FLYNN

Her sight isn't good, is it?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Her sight is fine. Nuns fall, you know.

FLYNN

No, I didn't know that.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

It's the habit. It catches us up more often than not. What with our being in black and white, and so prone to falling, we're more like dominos than anything else.

Sister James appears at the door,
breathless.

SISTER JAMES

Am I past the time?

FLYNN

Not at all. Sister Aloysius and I were just having a nice chat.

SISTER JAMES

Good morning, Father Flynn. Good morning, Sister. I'm sorry I was delayed. Mr. McGinn has closed the courtyard to fix something so I had to go back through the convent and out the side door and then I ran into Sister Veronica.

FLYNN

How is she?

SISTER JAMES

She has a bit of a bloody nose.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I'm beginning to think you're punching people.

SISTER JAMES

Sister?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Well, after the incident with... Never mind. Well, come in, please. Sit down.

They come in and sit down.

SISTER ALOYSIUS (CONT'D)

I actually have a hot pot of tea. (Closes the door but for an inch.) And close this but not quite for form's sake. Would you have a cup of tea, Father?

FLYNN

I would love a cup of tea.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Perhaps you could serve him, Sister?

SISTER JAMES

Of course.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

And yourself of course.

SISTER JAMES

Would you like tea, Sister Aloysius?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I've already had my cup.

FLYNN

Is there sugar?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Sugar? Yes! (Rummages in her desk) It's here somewhere. I put it in the drawer for Lent last year and never remembered to take it out.

FLYNN

It mustn't have been much to give up then.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

No, I'm sure you're right. Here it is. I'll serve you, though for want of practice, I'm...(clumsy)

She's come to him with the sugar bowl.
She's poised over him with a lump of
sugar in a small pair of tongs.

SISTER ALOYSIUS (CONT'D)

Your fingernails.

FLYNN

I wear them a little long. The sugar?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Oh yes. One?

FLYNN

Three.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Three.

She's appalled but tries to hide it.

FLYNN

Sweet tooth.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

One, two, three. Sister do you take sugar?

Sister Aloysius looks at Sister James.

SISTER JAMES

Never. Not that there is anything wrong with sugar. Thank you.

Sister Aloysius puts the sugar away in
her desk again.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Well, thank you, Father, for making the time for us. We're at our
wit's end.

FLYNN

I think it's excellent idea to rethink the Christmas pageant. Last year's effort was a little woebegone.

SISTER JAMES

No! I loved it! (Becomes self-conscious) But I love all Christmas pageants. I just love the Nativity. The birth of the Savior. And the hymns of course. O Little Town of Bethlehem...

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Thank you, Sister James. Sister James will be co-directing the pageant with Mrs. Shields this year. So what do you think, Father Flynn? Is there something new we could do?

FLYNN

Well, we all love the Christmas hymns, but it might be jolly to include a secular song.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Secular.

FLYNN

Yes. IT'S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE CHRISTMAS. Something like that.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

What would be the point of performing a secular song?

FLYNN

Fun.

SISTER JAMES

Or FROSTY THE SNOWMAN.

FLYNN

That's a good one. We could have one of the boys dress as a snowman and dance around.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Which boy?

FLYNN

We'd do tryouts.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

FROSTY THE SNOWMAN espouses a pagan belief in magic. The snowman comes to life when an enchanted hat is put on his head. If the music were more somber, people would realize the images are disturbing and the song heretical.

Sister James and Father Flynn exchange a look.

SISTER JAMES
I've never thought about FROSTY THE SNOWMAN like that.

SISTER ALOYSIUS
It should be banned from the airwaves.

FLYNN
So. Not FROSTY THE SNOWMAN.

Father Flynn writes something in a small notebook.

SISTER ALOYSIUS
I don't think so. IT'S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE CHRISTMAS would be fine I suppose. The parents would like it. May I ask what you wrote down? With that ballpoint pen.

FLYNN
Oh. Nothing. An idea for a sermon.

SISTER ALOYSIUS
You had one just now?

FLYNN
I get them all the time.

SISTER ALOYSIUS
How fortunate.

FLYNN
I forget them so I write them down.

SISTER ALOYSIUS
What is the idea?

FLYNN
Intolerance.

Sister James tries to break a bit of tension, addressing the priest.

SISTER JAMES
Would you like a little more tea, Father?

FLYNN
Not yet. I think a message of the Second Ecumenical Council was that the church needs to take on a more familiar face. Reflect the local community. We should sing a song from the radio now and then. Take the kids out for ice cream.

SISTER ALOYSIUS
Ice cream.

FLYNN

Maybe take the boys on a camping trip. We should be friendlier. The children and the parents should see us as members of their family rather than emissaries from Rome. I think the pageant should be charming, like a community theatre doing a show.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

But we are not members of their family. We're different.

FLYNN

Why? Because of our vows?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Precisely.

FLYNN

I don't think we're so different. You know, I would take some more tea, Sister. Thank you.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

And they think we're different. The working class people of this parish trust us to be different.

FLYNN

I think we're getting off the subject.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes, you're right, back to it. The Christmas pageant. We must be careful how Donald Muller is used in the pageant.

Sister James shakes as she pours the tea.

FLYNN

Easy there, Sister, you don't spill.

SISTER JAMES

Oh, uh, yes Father.

FLYNN

What about Donald Muller?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

We must be careful, in the pageant, that we neither hide Donald Muller nor put him forward.

FLYNN

Because of the color of his skin.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

That's right.

FLYNN

Why?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Come, Father. You're being disingenuous.

FLYNN

I think he should be treated like every other boy.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You yourself singled the boy out for special attention. You held a private meeting with him at the Rectory. (Turning to Sister James.) A week ago?

SISTER JAMES

Yes.

He realizes something's up.

FLYNN

What are we talking about?

SISTER JAMES

Donald Muller?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

The boy acted strangely when he returned to class.

The priest turns to Sister James.

FLYNN

He did?

SISTER JAMES

When he returned from the Rectory. A little odd, yes.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Can you tell us why?

FLYNN

How did he act strangely?

SISTER JAMES

I'm not sure how to explain it. He laid his head on the desk...

FLYNN

You mean you had some impression?

SISTER JAMES

Yes.

FLYNN

And he'd come from the Rectory so your asking me if I know anything about it?

SISTER JAMES

That's it.

FLYNN

Hmmm. Did you want to discuss the pageant, is that why I'm here, or is this what you wanted to discuss?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

This.

FLYNN

Well. I feel a little uncomfortable.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Why?

FLYNN

Why do you think? Something about your tone.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I would prefer a discussion of fact rather than tone.

FLYNN

Well. If I had judged my conversation with Donald Muller to of concern to you, Sister, I would have sat you down and talked to you about it. But I did not judge it to be of concern to you.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Perhaps you are mistaken in your understanding of what concerns me. The boy is in my school and his well-being is my responsibility.

FLYNN

His well-being is not at issue.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I am not satisfied that that is true. He was upset when he returned to class.

FLYNN

Did he say something?

SISTER JAMES

No.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

What happened in the Rectory?

FLYNN

Happened? Nothing happened. I had a talk with a boy.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

What about?

FLYNN

It was a private matter.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

He's twelve years old. What could be private?

FLYNN

I'll say it again, Sister. I object to your tone.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

This is not about my tone or your tone, Father Flynn. It's about arriving at the truth.

FLYNN

Of what?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You know what I'm talking about. Don't you? You're controlling the expression on your face right now. Aren't you?

FLYNN

My face? You said you wanted to talk about the pageant, Sister. That's why I'm here. Am I to understand that you brought me into your office to confront me in some way? It's outrageous. I'm not answerable to you. What exactly are you accusing me of?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I am not accusing you of anything, Father Flynn. I am asking you to tell me what happened in the Rectory.

The priest stands.

FLYNN

I don't wish to continue this conversation at all further. And if you are dissatisfied with that, I suggest you speak to Monsignor Benedict. I can only imagine that your unfortunate behavior this morning is the result of overwork. Perhaps you need a leave of absence. I may suggest it. Have a good morning. (To Sister James.) Sister?

SISTER JAMES

Good morning, Father.

Sister Aloysius' next words stop him.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

There was alcohol on his breath. (He turns.) When he returned from his meeting with you.

He comes back and sits down. He rubs his eyes.

FLYNN

Alcohol.

SISTER JAMES

I did smell it on his breath.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Well?

FLYNN

Can't you let this alone?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

No.

FLYNN

I see there's no way out of this.

SISTER JAMES

Take your time, Father. Would you like some more tea?

FLYNN

You should've let it alone.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Not possible.

FLYNN

Donald Muller served as altar boy last Tuesday morning. After Mass, Mr. McGinn caught him in the sacristy drinking altar wine. When I found out, I sent for him. There were tears. He begged not to be removed from the altar boys. And I took pity on him. I told him if no one else found out, I would let him stay on.

Sister James is overjoyed. Sister Aloysius is unmoved.

SISTER JAMES

Oh, what a relief! That explains everything! Thanks be to God! Oh Sister, look, it's all a mistake!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

And if I talk to Mr. McGinn?

FLYNN

Talk to Mister McGinn by all means. But now that the boy's secret's out, I'm going to have remove him from the altar boys. Which I think is too bad. That's what I was trying to avoid.

SISTER JAMES

You were trying to protect the boy!

FLYNN

That's right.

SISTER JAMES

I might've done the same thing! (To Sister Aloysius) Is there a way Donald could stay on the altar boys?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

No. If the boy drank altar wine, he cannot continue as an altar boy.

FLYNN

Of course you're right. I'm just not the disciplinarian you are, Sister. And he is the only Negro in the school. That did affect my thinking on the matter. It will be commented on that he's no longer serving at Mass. It's a public thing. A certain ignorant element in the parish will be confirmed in their beliefs.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

He must be held to the same standard as the others.

FLYNN

Of course. Do we need to discuss the pageant or was that just...

SISTER ALOYSIUS

No, this was the issue.

FLYNN

Are you satisfied?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes.

FLYNN

Then I'll be going. I have some writing to do.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Intolerance.

FLYNN

That's right.

He goes stops at the door.

FLYNN (CONT'D)

I'm not pleased with how you handled this, Sister. Next time you are troubled by dark ideas, I suggest you speak to the Monsignor.

He goes. After a moment, Sister James weakly launches into optimism.

SISTER JAMES

Well. What a relief! He cleared it all up.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You believe him?

SISTER JAMES

Of course.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Isn't it more that it's easier to believe him?

SISTER JAMES

But we can corroborate his story with Mr. McGinn!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes. These types of people are clever. They're not so easily undone.

SISTER JAMES

Well, I'm convinced!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You're not. You just want things to be resolved so you can have simplicity back.

SISTER JAMES

I want no further part of this.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I'll bring him down. With or without your help.

SISTER JAMES

How can you be so sure he's lying?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Experience.

SISTER JAMES

You just don't like him! You don't like it that he uses a ballpoint pen. You don't like it that he takes three lumps of sugar in his tea. You don't like it that he likes FROSTY THE SNOWMAN.

(MORE)

SISTER JAMES (CONT'D)

And you're letting that convince you of something terrible, just terrible! Well, I like FROSTY THE SNOWMAN! And it would be nice if this school weren't run like a prison! And I think it's a good thing that I love to teach History and that I might inspire my students to love it, too! And if you judge that to mean I'm not fit to be a teacher, then so be it!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Sit down. (Sister James does.) In ancient Sparta, important matters were decided by who shouted loudest. Fortunately, we are not in ancient Sparta. Now. Do you honestly find the students in this school to be treated like inmates in a prison?

SISTER JAMES

(Relenting)

No, I don't. Actually, by and large, they seem to be fairly happy. But they're all uniformly terrified of you!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes. That's how it works. Sit there.

Sister Aloysius looks in a notebook,
picks up the phone, dials.

SISTER ALOYSIUS (CONT'D)

Hello, this is Sister Aloysius Beauvier, the principal of St. Nicholas. Is this Mrs. Muller? I'm calling about your son Donald. I would like you and your husband to come down here for a talk. When would be convenient?

The lights go down.

END OF ACT I

ACT II

Scene 1

Father Flynn in blue and white vestments
is again at the pulpit.

FLYNN

A woman was gossiping with a friend about a man she hardly knew--I know none of you have ever done this--and that night she had a dream. A great hand appeared over her and pointed down at her. She was immediately seized with an overwhelming sense of guilt. The next day she went to confession. She got the old parish priest, Father O'Rourke, and she told him the whole thing. "Is gossiping a sin?" she asked the old man. "Was that the Hand of God Almighty pointing a finger at me?"

(MORE)

FLYNN (CONT'D)

Should I be asking your absolution? Father, tell me, have I done something wrong?" (Irish brogue) "Yes!" Father O'Rourke answered her. "Yes, you ignorant badly brought up female! You have borne false witness against your neighbor, you have played fast and loose with his reputation, and you should be heartily ashamed!" So the woman said she was sorry and asked forgiveness. "Not so fast!", says O'Rourke. "I want you to go home, take a pillow up on your roof, cut it open with a knife, and return here to me!" So she went home, took the pillow off her bed, a knife from the drawer, went up the fire escape to the roof, and stabbed the pillow. Then she went back to the old priest as instructed. "Did you gut the pillow with the knife?", he says. "Yes, Father." "And what was the result?" "Feathers," she said. "Feathers?, he repeated." "Feathers everywhere, Father!" "Now I want you to go back and gather up every last feather that flew out on the wind!" "Well," she says. "It can't be done. I don't know where they went. The wind took them all over." "And that," said Father O'Rourke, is GOSSIP!" In the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost, Amen.

Scene 2

The lights crossfade to the sound of a crow cawing. We're in the garden. Sister James sits on the bench, deep in thought. Father Flynn appears.

FLYNN (CONT'D)

Good afternoon, Sister James.

SISTER JAMES

Good afternoon, Father.

FLYNN

What is that bird complaining about? What kind of bird is that? A starling? A grackle?

SISTER JAMES

A crow?

FLYNN

Of course it is. Are you praying? I didn't mean to interrupt.

SISTER JAMES

I'm not praying, no.

FLYNN

You seem subdued.

SISTER JAMES

Oh. I can't sleep.

FLYNN

Why not?

SISTER JAMES

Bad dreams. Actually one bad dream and then I haven't slept right since.

FLYNN

What about?

SISTER JAMES

I looked in a mirror and there was a darkness where my face should be. It frightened me.

FLYNN

I can't sleep on occasion.

SISTER JAMES

No? Do you see that big hand pointing a finger at you?

FLYNN

Yes. Sometimes.

SISTER JAMES

Was your sermon directed at anyone in particular?

FLYNN

What do you think?

SISTER JAMES

Did you make up that story about the pillow?

FLYNN

Yes. You make up little stories to illustrate. In the tradition of the parable.

SISTER JAMES

Aren't the things that actually happen in life more worthy of interpretation than a made up story?

FLYNN

No. What actually happens in life is beyond interpretation. The truth makes for a bad sermon. It tends to be confusing and have no clear conclusion.

SISTER JAMES

I received a letter from my brother in Maryland yesterday. He's very sick.

FLYNN

Maybe you should go and see him.

I can't leave my class.

SISTER JAMES

How's Donald Muller doing?

FLYNN

I don't know.

SISTER JAMES

You don't see him?

FLYNN

I see him every day, but I don't know how he's doing. I don't know how to judge these things. Now.

SISTER JAMES

I stopped speaking to him for fear of it being misunderstood. Isn't that a shame? I actually avoided him the other day when I might've passed him in the hall. He doesn't understand why. I noticed you didn't come to me for confession.

FLYNN

No. I went Monsignor Benedict. He's very kind.

SISTER JAMES

I wasn't?

FLYNN

It wasn't that. As you know. You know why.

SISTER JAMES

You're against me?

FLYNN

No.

SISTER JAMES

You're not convinced?

FLYNN

It's not for me to be convinced, one way or the other. It's Sister Aloysius.

SISTER JAMES

Are you just an extension of her?

FLYNN

She's my superior.

SISTER JAMES

But what about you?

FLYNN

SISTER JAMES

I wish I knew nothing whatever about it. I wish the idea had never entered my mind.

FLYNN

How did it enter your mind?

SISTER JAMES

Sister Aloysius.

FLYNN

I feel as if my reputation has been damaged through no fault of my own. But I'm reluctant to take the steps necessary to repair it for fear of doing further harm. It's frustrating, I can tell you that.

SISTER JAMES

Is it true?

FLYNN

What?

SISTER JAMES

You know what I'm asking.

FLYNN

No, it's not true.

SISTER JAMES

Oh, I don't know what to believe.

FLYNN

How can you take sides against me?

SISTER JAMES

It doesn't matter.

FLYNN

It does matter! I've done nothing. There's no substance to any of this. The most innocent actions can appear sinister to the poisoned mind. I had to throw that poor boy off the altar. He's devastated. The only reason I haven't gone to the Monsignor is I don't want to tear apart the school. Sister Aloysius would most certainly lose her position as principal if I made her accusations known. Since they're baseless. You might lose your place as well.

SISTER JAMES

Are you threatening me?

FLYNN

What do you take me for? No.

SISTER JAMES

I want to believe you.

FLYNN

Then do. It's as simple as that.

SISTER JAMES

It's not me that has to be convinced.

FLYNN

I don't have to prove anything to her.

SISTER JAMES

She's determined.

FLYNN

To what?

SISTER JAMES

Protect the boy.

FLYNN

It's me that cares about that boy, not her. Has she ever reached out a hand to that child or any child in this school? She's like a block of ice! Children need warmth, kindness, understanding! What does she give them? Rules. That black boy needs a helping hand or he's not going to make it here! But if she has her way, he'll be left to his own undoing. Why do you think he was in the sacristy drinking wine that day? He's in trouble! She sees me talk in a human way to these children and she immediately assumes there must be something wrong with it. Something dirty. Well, I'm not going to let her keep this parish in the dark ages! And I'm not going to let her destroy my spirit of compassion!

SISTER JAMES

I'm sure that's not her intent.

FLYNN

I care about this congregation!

SISTER JAMES

I know you do.

FLYNN

Like you care about your class! You love them, don't you?

SISTER JAMES

Yes.

FLYNN

That's natural. How else would you relate to children? I can look at your face and know your philosophy: kindness.

SISTER JAMES

I don't know. I mean, of course.

FLYNN

What is Sister Aloysius' philosophy do you suppose?

A pause.

SISTER JAMES

I don't have to suppose. She's told me. She discourages...warmth. She's suggested I be more...formal.

FLYNN

There are people who go after your humanity, Sister James, who tell you the light in your heart is a weakness. That your soft feelings betray you. I don't believe that. It's an old tactic of cruel people to kill kindness in the name of virtue. Don't believe it. There's nothing wrong with love.

SISTER JAMES

Of course not, but...

FLYNN

Have you forgotten that was the message of the Savior to us all. Love. Not suspicion, disapproval, and judgement. Love of people. Have you found Sister Aloysius a positive inspiration?

SISTER JAMES

I don't want to misspeak, but no. She's taken away my joy of teaching. And I loved teaching more than anything.
(She cries a little. He pats her uneasily, looking around.)

FLYNN

It's alright. You're going to be alright.

SISTER JAMES

I feel as if everything is upside down.

FLYNN

It isn't though. There are just times in life when we feel lost. You're not alone with it. It happens to many of us.

SISTER JAMES

A bond. (Becomes self-conscious) I'd better go in.

FLYNN

I'm sorry your brother is ill.

SISTER JAMES

Thank you, Father. (Starts to go, stops.) I don't believe it!

You don't?

FLYNN

No.

SISTER JAMES

Thank you, Sister. That's a great relief to me. Thank you very much.

FLYNN

She goes. He takes out his little black book and writes in it. The crow caws. He yells at it.

Oh, be quiet.

FLYNN (CONT'D)

Then he opens a prayerbook, and starts to walk away.

Scene 3

Crossfade to the principal's office. Sister Aloysius is sitting looking out the window, very still. A knock at the door. She doesn't react. A second knock, louder. She pulls a small earplug out of her ear and scurries to the door. She opens it. There stands MRS. MULLER, a black church lady type of about 38. She's in her Sunday best and she's on red alert.

Mrs. Muller?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes.

MRS. MULLER

Come in.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Sister Aloysius closes the door.

Please have a seat.

SISTER ALOYSIUS (CONT'D)

I thought I mighta had the wrong day when you didn't answer the door.

MRS. MULLER

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Oh. Yes. Well, just between us, I was listening to a transistor radio with an earpiece.

She shows the woman a very small transistor radio.

SISTER ALOYSIUS (CONT'D)

Look at how tiny they're making them now. I confiscated it from one of the students and now I can't stop using it.

MRS. MULLER

You like music?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Not really. News reports. Years ago I used to listen to all the news reports because my husband was in Italy in the war. When I came into possession of this little radio, I found myself doing it again. Though there is no war and the voices have changed.

MRS. MULLER

You were a married woman?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes. But then he was killed. Is your husband coming?

MRS. MULLER

Couldn't get off work.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I see. Of course. It was a lot to ask.

MRS. MULLER

How's Donald doing?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

He's passing his subjects. He has average grades.

MRS. MULLER

Oh. Good. He was upset about getting taken off the altar boys.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Did he explain why?

MRS. MULLER

He said he was caught drinking wine.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

That is the reason.

MRS. MULLER

Well, that seems fair. But he's a good boy, sister. He fell down there, but he's a good boy pretty much down the line. And he knows what an opportunity he has here. I think the whole thing was just a bit much for him.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

What do you mean, the whole thing?

MRS. MULLER

He's the only colored here. He's the first in this school. That'd be a lot for a boy.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I suppose it is. But he has to do the work of course.

MRS. MULLER

He is doing it though, right?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes. He's getting by. He's getting through. How is he at home?

MRS. MULLER

His father beat the hell out of him over that wine.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

He shouldn't do that.

MRS. MULLER

You don't tell my husband what to do. You just stand back. He didn't want Donald to come here.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Why not?

MRS. MULLER

Thought he'd have a lot of trouble with the other boys. But that hasn't really happened as far as I can make out.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Good.

MRS. MULLER

That priest, Father Flynn, been watching out for him.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes. Have you met Father Flynn?

MRS. MULLER

Not exactly, no. I seen him on the altar, but I haven't met him face to face. No. Just, you know, heard from Donald.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

What does he say?

MRS. MULLER

You know, Father Flynn, Father Flynn. He looks up to him. The man gives him his time, which is what the boy needs. He needs that.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Mrs. Muller, we may have a problem.

MRS. MULLER

Well, I thought you musta had a reason for asking me to come in. Principal's a big job. If you stop your day to talk to me, must be something. I just want to say though, it's just till June.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Excuse me?

MRS. MULLER

Whatever the problem is, Donald just has to make it here till June. Then he's off into high school.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Right.

MRS. MULLER

If Donald can graduate from here, he has a better chance of getting into a good high school. And that would mean an opportunity at college. I believe he has the intelligence. And he wants it, too.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I don't see anything at this time standing in the way of his graduating with his class.

MRS. MULLER

Well, that's all I care about. Anything else is alright with me.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I doubt that.

MRS. MULLER

Try me.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I'm concerned about the relationship between Father Flynn and your son.

MRS. MULLER

You don't say. Concerned. What do you mean, concerned?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

That it may not be right.

MRS. MULLER

Uh-huh. Well, there's something wrong with everybody, isn't that so? Got to be forgiving.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I'm concerned, to be frank, that Father Flynn may have made advances on your son.

MRS. MULLER

May have made.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I can't be certain.

MRS. MULLER

No evidence?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

No.

MRS. MULLER

Then maybe there's nothing to it?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I think there is something to it.

MRS. MULLER

Well, I would prefer not to see it that way if you don't mind.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I can understand that this is hard to hear. I think Father Flynn gave Donald that altar wine.

MRS. MULLER

Why would he do that?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Has Donald been acting strangely?

MRS. MULLER

No.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Nothing out of the ordinary?

MRS. MULLER

He's been himself.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Alright.

MRS. MULLER

Look, Sister, I don't want any trouble and I feel like you're on the march somehow.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I'm not sure you completely understand.

MRS. MULLER

I think I understand the kind of thing you're talking about. But I don't want to get into it.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

What's that?

MRS. MULLER

Not to be disagreeing with you, but if we're talking about something floating around between this priest and my son, that ain't my son's fault.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I'm not suggesting it is.

MRS. MULLER

He's just a boy.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I know.

MRS. MULLER

Twelve years old. If somebody should be taking blame for anything, it should be the man, not the boy.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I agree with you completely.

MRS. MULLER

You're agreeing with me but I'm sitting in the principal's office talking about my son. Why isn't the priest in the principal's office if you know what I'm saying and you'll excuse my bringing it up.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You're here because I'm concerned about Donald's welfare.

MRS. MULLER

You think I'm not?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Of course you are.

MRS. MULLER

Let me ask you something. You honestly think that priest gave Donald that wine to drink?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes, I do.

MRS. MULLER

Then how come my son got kicked off the altar boys if it was the man that gave it to him?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

The boy got caught, the man didn't.

MRS. MULLER

How come the priest didn't get kicked off the priesthood?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

He's a grown man, educated. And he knows what's at stake. It's not so easy to pin someone like that down.

MRS. MULLER

So you give my son the whole blame. No problem my son getting blamed and punished. That's easy. You know why that is?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Perhaps you should let me talk. I think you're getting upset.

MRS. MULLER

That's because that's the way it is. You're just finding out about it, but that's the way it is and the way it's been, Sister. You're not going against no MAN in a ROBE and win, Sister. He's got the position.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

And he's got your son.

MRS. MULLER

Let him have 'em then.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

What?

MRS. MULLER

It's just till June.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Do you know what you're saying?

MRS. MULLER

Know more about it than you.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I believe this man is creating or has already brought about a improper relationship with your son.

MRS. MULLER

I don't know.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I know I'm right.

MRS. MULLER

Why you need to know something like that for sure when you don't? Please, Sister. You got some kinda righteous cause going with this priest and now you want to drag my boy into it. My son doesn't need additional difficulties. Let him take the good and leave the rest when he leaves this place in June. He knows how to do that. I taught him how to do that.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

What kind of mother are you?

MRS. MULLER

Excuse me, but you don't know enough about life say a thing like that, sister.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I know enough.

MRS. MULLER

You know the rules maybe, but that don't cover it.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I know what I won't accept!

MRS. MULLER

You accept what you gotta accept and you work with it. That's the truth I know. Sorry to be so sharp, but you're in here in this room...

SISTER ALOYSIUS

This man is in my school.

MRS. MULLER

Well, he's gotta be somewhere and maybe he's doing some good, too. You ever think of that?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

He's after the boys.

MRS. MULLER

Well, maybe some of them boys want to get caught. Maybe what you don't know maybe is my son is...that way.

(MORE)

SISTER ALOYSIUS (CONT'D)

That's why his father beat him up. Not the wine. He beat Donald for being what he is.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

What are you telling me?

MRS. MULLER

I'm his mother. I'm talking about his nature now, not anything he's done. But you can't hold a child responsible for what God gave him to be.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Listen to me with care, Mrs. Muller. I'm only interested in actions. It's hopeless to discuss a child's possible inclination. I'm finding it difficult enough to address a man's deeds. This isn't about what the boy may be, but what the man is. It's about the man.

MRS. MULLER

But there's the boy's nature.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Let's leave that out of it.

MRS. MULLER

Forget it then. You're the one forcing people to say these things out loud. Things are in the air and you leave them alone if you can. That's what I know. My boy came to this school cause they were gonna kill him at the public school. So we were lucky enough to get him in here for his last year. Good. His father don't like him. He comes here, the kids don't like him. One man is good to him. This priest. Puts out a hand to the boy. Does the man have his reasons? Yes. Everybody has their reasons. YOU have your reasons. But do I ask the man why he's good to my son? No. I don't care why. My son needs some man to care about him and see him through to where he wants to go. And thank God, this educated man with some kindness in him wants to do just that.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

This will not do.

MRS. MULLER

It's just till June. Sometimes things aren't black and white.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

And sometimes they are. I'll throw your son out of this school. Make no mistake.

MRS. MULLER

But why would you do that? If nothing started with him?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Because I will stop this whatever way I must.

MRS. MULLER

You'd hurt my son to get your way?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

It won't end with your son. There will be others, if there aren't already.

MRS. MULLER

Throw the priest out then.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I'm trying to do just that.

MRS. MULLER

Well, what do you want from me?

A pause.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Nothing. As it turns out. I was hoping you might know something that would help me, but it seems you don't.

MRS. MULLER

Please leave my son out of this. My husband would kill that child over a thing like this.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I'll try.

Mrs. Muller stands up.

MRS. MULLER

I don't know, Sister. You may think you're doing good, but the world's a hard place. I don't know that you and me are on the same side. I'll be standing with my son and those who are good with my son. It'd be nice to see you there. Nice talking with you, Sister. Good morning.

She goes, leaving the door open behind her. Sister Aloysius is shaken. After a moment, Father Flynn appears at the door. He's in a controlled fury.

FLYNN

May I come in?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

We would require a third party.

FLYNN

What was Donald's mother doing here?

SISTER ALOYSIUS
We were having a chat.

FLYNN
About what?

SISTER ALOYSIUS
A third party is truly required, Father.

FLYNN
No, Sister. No third party. You and me are due for a talk.

He comes in and slams the door behind
him. They face each other.

FLYNN (CONT'D)
You have to stop this campaign against me!

SISTER ALOYSIUS
You can stop it at any time.

FLYNN
How?

SISTER ALOYSIUS
Confess and resign.

FLYNN
You are attempting to destroy my reputation! But the result of all
this is going to be your removal, not mine!

SISTER ALOYSIUS
What are you doing in this school?

FLYNN
I am trying to do good!

SISTER ALOYSIUS
Or even more to the point, what are you doing in the priesthood?

FLYNN
You are single-handedly holding this school and this parish back!

SISTER ALOYSIUS
From what?

FLYNN
Progressive education and a welcoming Church.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You can't distract me, Father Flynn. This isn't about my behavior, it's about yours.

FLYNN

It's about your unfounded suspicions.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

That's right. I have suspicions.

FLYNN

You know what I haven't understood through all this? WHY do you suspect me? What have I done?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You gave that boy wine to drink. And you let him take the blame.

FLYNN

That's completely untrue! Did you talk to Mr. McGinn?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

All McGinn knows is the boy drank wine. He doesn't how he came to drink it.

FLYNN

Did his mother have something to add to that?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

No.

FLYNN

So that's it. There's nothing there.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I'm not satisfied.

FLYNN

Well, if you're not satisfied, ask the boy then!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

No, he'd protect you. That's what he's been doing.

FLYNN

Oh, and why would he do that?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Because you have seduced him.

FLYNN

You're insane! You've got it in your head that I've corrupted this child after giving him wine, and nothing I say will change that.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

That's right.

FLYNN

But correct me if I'm wrong. This has nothing to do with the wine, not really. You had a fundamental mistrust of me before this incident! It was you that warned Sister James to be on the lookout, wasn't it?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

That's true.

FLYNN

So you admit it!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Certainly.

FLYNN

Why?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I know people.

FLYNN

That's not good enough!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

It won't have to be.

FLYNN

How's that?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You will tell me what you've done.

FLYNN

Oh I will?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes.

FLYNN

I'm not one of your truant boys you know. Sister James is convinced I'm innocent.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

So you talked to Sister James? Well, of course you talked to Sister James.

FLYNN

Did you know that Donald's father beats him?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes.

FLYNN

And might that not account for the odd behavior Sister James noticed in the boy?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

It might.

FLYNN

Then what is it? What? What did you hear, what did you see that convinced you so thoroughly?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

What does it matter?

FLYNN

I want to know.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

On the first day of the school year, I saw you touch William London's wrist. And I saw him pull away.

FLYNN

That's all?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

That was all.

FLYNN

But that's nothing.

He writes in his book.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

What are you writing now?

FLYNN

You leave me no choice. I'm writing down what you say. I tend to get too flustered to remember the details of an upsetting conversation, and this may be important. When I talk to the Monsignor and explain why you have to be removed as the principal of this school.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

This morning, before I spoke with Mrs. Muller, I took the precaution of calling the last parish to which you were assigned.

FLYNN

What did he say?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Who?

FLYNN

The Pastor?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I did not speak to the Pastor. I spoke to one of the nuns.

FLYNN

You should've spoken to the Pastor.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I spoke to a nun.

FLYNN

That's not the proper route for you to have taken, Sister! The Church is very clear. You're supposed to go through the Pastor.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Why? Do you have an understanding, you and he? Father Flynn, you have a history.

FLYNN

You have no right to go rummaging through my past!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

This is your third parish in five years.

FLYNN

Call the Pastor and ask him why I left! It was perfectly innocent.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I'm not calling the Pastor.

FLYNN

I am a good priest! And there is nothing in my record to suggest otherwise.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You will go after another child and another, until you are stopped.

FLYNN

What nun did you speak to?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I won't say.

FLYNN

I've not touched a child.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You have.

FLYNN

You have not the slightest proof of anything.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

But I have my certainty, and armed with that, I will go to your last parish, and the one before that if necessary. I will find a parent, Father Flynn! Trust me I will. A parent who probably doesn't know that you are STILL WORKING WITH CHILDREN! And once I do that, you will be exposed. You may even be attacked, metaphorically or otherwise.

FLYNN

You have no right to act on your own! You are a member of a religious order. You have taken vows, obedience being one! You answer to us! You have no right to step outside the church!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I will step outside the church if that's what needs to be done, though the door should shut behind me! I will do what needs to be done, Father, if it means I'm damned to Hell! You should understand that, or you will mistake me. Now, did you give Donald Muller wine to drink?

FLYNN

Have you never done anything wrong?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I have.

FLYNN

Mortal sin?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes.

FLYNN

And?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I confessed it! Did you give Donald Muller wine to drink?

FLYNN

Whatever I have done, I have left in the healing hands of my confessor. As have you! We are the same!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

We are not the same! A dog that bites is a dog that bites! I do not justify what I do wrong and go on.

(MORE)

SISTER ALOYSIUS (CONT'D)

I admit it, desist, and take my medicine. Did you give Donald Muller wine to drink?

FLYNN

No.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Mental reservation?

FLYNN

No.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You lie. Very well then. If you won't leave my office, I will. And once I go, I will not stop.

She goes to the door. Suddenly, a new tone comes into his voice.

FLYNN

Wait!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You will request a transfer from this parish. You will take a leave of absence until it is granted.

FLYNN

And do what for the love of God? My life is here.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Don't.

FLYNN

Please! Are we people? Am I a person flesh and blood like you? Or are we just ideas and convictions. I can't say everything. Do you understand? There are things I can't say. Even if you can't imagine the explanation, Sister, remember that there are circumstances beyond your knowledge. Even if you feel certainty, it is an emotion and not a fact. In the spirit of charity, I appeal to you. On behalf of my life's work. You have to behave responsibly. I put myself in your hands.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I don't want you.

FLYNN

My reputation is at stake.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You can preserve your reputation.

FLYNN

If you say these things, I won't be able to do my work in the community.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Your work in the community should be discontinued.

FLYNN

You'd leave me with nothing.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

That's not true. It's Donald Muller who has nothing, and you took full advantage of that.

FLYNN

I have not done anything wrong. I care about that boy very much.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Because you smile at him and sympathize with him, and talk to him as if you were the same?

FLYNN

That child needed a friend!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You are a cheat. The warm feeling you experienced when that boy looked at you with trust was not the sensation of virtue. It can be got by a drunkard from his tot of rum. You're a disgrace to the collar. The only reason you haven't been thrown out of the church is the decline in vocations.

FLYNN

I can fight you.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

You will lose.

FLYNN

You can't know that.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I know.

FLYNN

Where's your compassion?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Nowhere you can get at it. Stay here. Compose yourself. Use the phone if you like. Good day, Father. I have no sympathy for you. I know you're invulnerable to true regret. (Starts to go. Pauses.) And cut your nails.

She goes, closing the door behind her.
After a moment, he goes to the phone and
dials.

FLYNN

Yes. This is Father Brendan Flynn of St. Nicholas parish. I need
to make an appointment to see the bishop.

The lights fade on Father Flynn as

Scene 4

Sister Aloysius walks into the garden.
It's a sunny day. She sits on the bench.
Sister James enters.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

How's your brother?

SISTER JAMES

Better. Much better.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I'm very glad. I prayed for him.

SISTER JAMES

It was good to get away. I needed to see my family. It had been
too long.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Then I'm glad you did it.

SISTER JAMES

And Father Flynn is gone.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes.

SISTER JAMES

Where?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

St. Jerome's.

SISTER JAMES

So you did it. You got him out.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes.

SISTER JAMES

Donald Muller is heartbroken that he's gone.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Can't be helped. It's just till June.

SISTER JAMES

I don't think Father Flynn did anything wrong.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

No? He convinced you?

SISTER JAMES

Yes, he did.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Hmmm.

SISTER JAMES

Did you ever prove it?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

What?

SISTER JAMES

That he interfered with Donald Muller?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Did I ever prove it to whom?

SISTER JAMES

Anyone but yourself?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

No.

SISTER JAMES

But you were sure.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes.

SISTER JAMES

I wish I could be like you.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Why?

SISTER JAMES

Because I can't sleep at night anymore. Everything seems uncertain to me.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Maybe we're not supposed to sleep so well. They've made Father Flynn the Pastor of St. Jerome.

SISTER JAMES

Who?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

The bishop appointed Father Flynn the Pastor of St. Jerome Church and School. It's a promotion.

SISTER JAMES

You didn't tell them?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I told our good Monsignor Benedict. I crossed the garden and told him. He did not believe it to be true.

SISTER JAMES

Then why did Father Flynn leave? What did you say to him to make him go?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

That I had called a nun in his previous parish. That I had found out his prior history of infringements.

SISTER JAMES

So you did prove it!

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I was lying. I made no such call.

SISTER JAMES

You lied?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes. But if he had no such history, the lie wouldn't have worked. His resignation was his confession. He was what I thought he was. And he's gone.

SISTER JAMES

I can't believe you lied.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

In the pursuit of wrongdoing, one steps away from God. Of course there's a price.

SISTER JAMES

I see. So now he's in another school.

SISTER ALOYSIUS

Yes. Oh, Sister James!

SISTER JAMES

What is it, Sister?

SISTER ALOYSIUS

I have doubts! I have such doubts!

Sister Aloysius is bent with emotion.
Sister James comforts her. The lights
fade.

THE END