

EVERY LIVIN' SOUL

A play by William Cameron

EVERY LIVIN' SOUL

All rights reserved © 2021

Characters

Hannah Winship Grey

Mid 40s. A widowed farmwoman. Generous to a fault and a bit of a dreamer, Hannah longs for a more prosperous future that doesn't include farm labor.

Herk Winship

40. Hannah's younger brother. Herk is a farmhand with a taste for adventure and melodrama.

Dot Winship

Mid-late 30s. Herk's wife. Heartbreak and bitter disappointment have intensified her religious fervor.

Choc

30. A drifter, haunted by his past and looking for a new start.

Time

October 1934, in the depths of the Depression.

Place

A small farm on the outskirts of East Liverpool in Columbiana County, Ohio. We are approximately 60 miles northeast of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and 50 miles south of Youngstown, Ohio.

All the play's action occurs in the kitchen of Hannah's farmhouse. Through a back door, we see the rolling hills of eastern Ohio, all of it planted with corn.

Scene Breakdown

Act I, scene 1 – Sunday afternoon, 1 pm

Act I, scene 2 – That evening, around 7:30 pm

Act I, scene 3 – Monday afternoon, 3:30 pm

Act II – Monday, about 20 minutes later

Act One, Scene Two

The kitchen. That evening, after supper. It is dark outside and the back door is closed.

HANNAH, in bathrobe and slippers, sits at the kitchen table, reading a letter by a small lamp. The tin bread box sits on the table, its lid lying next to it. The table is covered with open letters and envelopes. The college bulletin can be seen, and a Sears and Roebuck catalog sits open. Charlie's radio set is in its same spot.

At present, HANNAH is reading one of Charlie's letters. She laughs for a moment, turns the letter over to read the end. She wipes away a tear, then puts the letter carefully back into its envelope, lays it on the table, and pulls out another one from the bread box.

There is a loud knock on the back door, and HANNAH jumps, startled.

Hannah!

HERK (off)

Herk. Dear God, scared me to death.

HANNAH

HERK opens the door and enters. He carries his shotgun.

Sorry sis.

HERK

Thought it might be John Dillinger knocking on my door.

HANNAH

Dillinger's dead.

HERK

And I forgot to send flowers. What are you doing here so late?

HANNAH

What time is it?

HERK

HANNAH

It's going on eight o'clock. Ah Herk, don't bring that gun in here. What are you—

HERK

With that desperado on the loose we gotta be—

HANNAH

The desperado's not gonna—

HERK

You never know.

HANNAH

I don't like having guns in this house. You know that Herk, so unload it, or leave it on the back porch or—

HERK

But if the desperado—

HANNAH

Can we please stop saying 'desperado'? And put the gun outside!

HERK

OK, OK. I'll leave it right here.

He leans it against the wall by the screen door.

HANNAH

Fine.

(HERK stands looking out the back door. Teasing him.)

See anything suspicious, officer?

HERK

(with a touch of melodrama)

No but he's out there somewhere...lurkin' in the dark. Confrontin' the dire consequences of his nefarious deeds.

(HANNAH can't resist a chuckle. HERK smiles.)

They're puttin' together a posse to track down the desp...the bank robber. Lookin' for volunteers. I was gonna sign up but Dot says with us goin' to market this week it ain't the proper time for me to get myself shot.

(Short beat)

She didn't say when the proper time to get myself shot might be but...figure she'll let me know.

(HANNAH laughs)

Wish I would cross paths with that fella. I'd like to have me an adventure, that's for damn sure.

(HANNAH pats him lovingly on the shoulder. He surveys the table.)

What'cha up to in here, sis?

HANNAH cleans up the table, putting letters into envelopes and putting them in the bread box.

HANNAH

Oh, just reading some of Charlie's letters from school. Writes his mama every week, like he promised.

HERK

Don't put 'em away on my account.

HANNAH

No, it's late, I should...

HANNAH takes the letter she was just reading, hands it to HERK. Taps a spot on the letter.

HANNAH (cont'd)

Read that, right there.

(HERK reads it quietly to himself, looks at HANNAH.)

Told you he loved it at that school.

HERK smiles and nods. HANNAH takes the letter, puts it in the box with the others, replaces the lid and moves the box to its place on the counter. The Sears-Roebuck catalog remains open on the table.

HANNAH (cont'd)

I made supper for you and Dot this afternoon. You didn't show.

HERK

Dot fried up some okra.

HANNAH

Yum.

(HERK can't hold back a chuckle.)

Dot OK?

HERK

Been gnashing her teeth all afternoon.

HANNAH

I'm sorry, Herk. Foolish thing to do, hitting her like that. There I was, telling you to be more tender with her, I haul off and smack her one. Lord. I'll apologize tomorrow, I prom—

HERK

I'd give it a day or two. If it makes you feel any better, she ain't exactly proud of some of the things she said.

HANNAH

Still.

HERK

Yeah.

HANNAH

You hungry? That why you're here?

HERK

Not why I'm here but I'll take me a piece of that pumpkin pie.

HANNAH

Coming right up.

(HANNAH gets the pie from the icebox.)

You been down to Buck Pritchett's tavern tonight?

HERK

Buck don't open up on Sundays.

HANNAH gets out a knife to slice the pie.

HANNAH

Then where'd you get your liquor?

(HERK looks at her, feigning innocence.)

Oh come on Herk. I can smell it on you.

HERK

Still plenty of places to find moonshine.

He takes a flask out of his pocket, sets it on the table, takes an occasional sip.

HANNAH

So...tell me what's going on between you and Calvin Sikes' pretty little niece.

HERK

Don't wanna talk about it.

HANNAH

But if Dot brings her up again what should I—

HERK

Can I please just get me a piece of pie?

HANNAH

Sure, I'll get you a piece of pie Herk...but I'll cut you a bigger slice if you tell me about this girl.

HERK

(emitting a groan as he launches into his story)

Calvin has this niece, Lily and—

HANNAH

How old is she?

HERK

I don't know, nineteen, twenty—

HANNAH

And what's she look—

HERK

You wanna hear this or not?

(HANNAH pulls out a chair and sits.)

Anyway, maybe two weeks ago this Lily comes into Pritchett's lookin' for Calvin 'cause her mama, Calvin's sister, she couldn't find her husband, thought maybe Cal knew where he was. So Calvin—who's a good man no matter what Dot says—he walked outta there on his one good leg to go look for him. Lily, she stayed. I didn't ask her to. She just stayed and I was...well, I was readin' this.

(He pulls the same magazine out of his pocket that we saw earlier.)

Not this one but another one like it. I was readin' about Charlie Lindbergh 'cause you know they found the man killed that baby of his. German fella. That kind of figures, don't it? Anyway, this Lily asked me what I was readin' and I told her and...all right yeah, Lily, she's pretty and she's young but that's not why I... She was interested, OK? She asked me questions. She wanted to know things about Lindbergh, about the kidnapping—things that I knew 'cause I done all this readin' and I felt like I was... Just felt good to talk to a woman doesn't think I'm some no-account jackass.

HANNAH

Oh, Herk.

HERK

And that's all there was to it. We only talked for fifteen minutes. I don't know how Maggie Webb found out but what she told Dot made it sound so wrong or...unclean or...but the thing is, this Lily...she kinda reminded me of Dot. I mean she wasn't pretty as Dot but there was somethin' about...about the way she cocked her head and said "Hm!" when I said somethin' that surprised her. Or the way she...smiled and her face got all crooked and...you know. Like Dot when we was first startin' out, after I come back from the war. Before we lost all the babies.

HERK (cont'd)

Before our sweet little Louise left us and Dot's heart turned to stone. This Lily she just...reminded me.

HANNAH kisses HERK on the forehead, goes to the counter, and cuts him an extra-large slice of pie, sets it in front of him. HERK smiles, takes a bite of his pie. HANNAH picks up his magazine, reads from the cover.

HANNAH

"Startling Detective Adventures. Indiana's Circus Queen Death Mystery."

HERK

That's some first-rate journalism.

HANNAH laughs, HERK joins in.

HANNAH

Oh, Herk is this what you're spending your money on?

HERK

Don't be scoldin' me about money, Hannah Winship.

(HERK reaches for the open Sears catalog, bringing it closer.)

'Specially if you're buyin' from Sears and Roe//buck.

HANNAH

//I'm not buying—

HERK

(looking at the catalog)

Radios?

HANNAH

No I just—

HERK

You got Charlie's homemade deal sittin' here and you're lookin' to buy a—

HANNAH

Not looking to buy anything. I was just curious to see how much a radio cost. Figure if Charlie's gonna be building radios then I should...I don't know.

HERK

(scanning the catalog)

This one here looks like Buck Pritchett's Philco. Twenty-five dollars. Where's Buck gettin' twenty-five dollars to spend on a radio?

HANNAH

Tell you what, take that catalogue outta here. Lots of pretty things to look at but that's all you can do is look at 'em. Maybe Dot'd like to look through it.

HERK

Nah, Dot's mad at Sears and Roebuck.

HANNAH

What'd Sears and Roebuck ever do to her?

HERK

Last spring she copied the address outta one of your catalogs, put two dollars in an envelope and sent it off to 'em with a note that said "send me two dollars' worth of toilet paper." Sears and Roebuck sent the money back to her with a note sayin' 'please order from the catalog.' Dot got mad, wrote 'em back, "if I had your catalog I wouldn't have to buy no toilet paper."

(HANNAH laughs, HERK joins in.)

True story.

Laughter winds down; short beat. HANNAH takes HERK's hand.

HANNAH

Glad you stopped by little brother. Gets awful lonely here at night, what with Charlie away and Jack... Just gets lonely.

HANNAH sighs. HERK smiles at her, pulls his hand away, takes a shot from his flask.

HERK

So...whatcha gonna do about the bank?

HANNAH

Needed a nip of moonshine before you ask me that?

(HERK takes another sip, not looking at HANNAH.)

Wish Pete Riley'd keep his mouth shut. And that bank, those... Friend to the farmer, that's what it says on that billboard just across the way on Sprucevale Road. "Friend to the farmer!" We had this farm almost paid off when all that depression stuff started but that bank calls in our loan. Can't pay it so the bank says we gotta refinance. I told Jack not to go back to them. Told him we'd spend the rest of our lives—and I was right, Jack did spend the rest of his life paying everything we had back to that bank. It's not fair. We put in all the work; who says they can own us this way?

HERK

Way it is.

HANNAH

Well it's wrong!

HERK

You ain't really thinkin' about sellin' the farm, are you?

(Beat)

Sis?

HANNAH

No. Dot's right. Nobody's gonna buy this place, not the way things're...no.

HERK

I never knew Charlie's school was costin' so much. How they expect regular folks to—

HANNAH

Herk—

HERK

But, geez sis, you ain't just payin' for the learnin'. Boy's gotta have a place to sleep, food to—

HANNAH

I know what I'm paying //for, Herk—

HERK

//On top of that, that book of yours, Dot says it's got a list of things Charlie's gotta buy—pencils and rulers and...I ain't seen it but thirty-six dollars it all come to. That's what Dot says. Hell, that's more'n Buck Pritchett's Philco. Thirty-six dollars for pencils! What the hell, they some kinda magic pencils or—

HANNAH

Herk, the day Doc Maxwell told me I was gonna have a baby, I came home and got an old Mason jar and—

HERK

You got enough in that jar to pay for Charlie's schoolin' *and* catch up on them two missed payments to the bank? With the first of November comin' up in a week? That'd make three missed—

HANNAH

We can still make money. Had a good harvest. Going to market end of this week and—

HERK

We ain't gonna make enough. Corn prices are droppin', case you haven't heard. Most of the money we was makin' come from sellin' eggs. We gotta rebuild that henhouse, buy some new chickens and get back into the egg sellin' business.

HANNAH

We can't afford to make that investment right—

HERK

We can if you take Charlie outta that—

HANNAH

No!

HERK

—school and—

HANNAH

I said no!!!

HERK

Hannah—

HANNAH

And hey, next time you and Dot decide to skip dinner, how about letting me know? Work hard on those meals—take pride in them. We can't afford to waste food in the best of times and these are not the best of times.

HERK

Sorry.

HANNAH

And if Dot's figuring not to come around here again, you can tell her for me—

HERK

Hannah, it's not like—

HANNAH

You tell her Charlie wanting to leave the farm is not what killed Jack.

HERK

She didn't mean—

HANNAH

That's what she said! "What put Jack Grey in his grave was his son tellin' him I don't wanna be a farmer."

HERK

I know.

HANNAH

That's why I hit her.

HERK

I know.

HANNAH

She says it again I'll hit her again only harder. Jack didn't want a farming life for Charlie. Sure not the life I wanted...Jack neither, tell the truth.

HERK

Jack? Come on. That fella was a farmer through and through.

HANNAH

You didn't know him like I did, Herk. Jack, he wanted to...well he never did figure out what he wanted, that was part of the problem. We got married and his Pa built us that bungalow—one you and Dot are in now. No place else to go so...there we were living and working on the farm. Miserable as can be. Oh, we made all kinds of plans. Talked about going off to...we were gonna move to Michigan. Jack was gonna design cars for Henry Ford...

(She laughs warmly at the memory of it.)

...or we were gonna head out to California, meet up with Charlie Chaplin, learn all about making motion pictures. Crazy stuff we talked about. Jack even signed up for a correspondence course. Gonna learn about electricity and he was all set to get started...but then his father died. Planting a row of corn, dropped dead right there in the lower twenty. Next thing you know Jack's running the farm. Not what he wanted, not what I wanted but by then I was pregnant with Charlie. So... Except for our honeymoon, never even had a vacation. Just...worked every day. Every. Day.

Pause.

HERK

Where'd you go on that honeymoon? I forget.

HANNAH

Pittsburgh.

HERK

Right. Grandpap paid for it?

HANNAH

Mm-hm. Two nights.

HERK

Yeah, Grandpap paid for me and Dot, too. 'Cept we went to Cleveland.

HANNAH

That must've been nice.

HERK

We didn't do much. Walked around, looked in store windows. Paid seven whole dollars for a fancy meal. I was kinda glad to get home.

HANNAH

Not me. I loved it. We stayed at the William Penn Hotel.

(She brings her bread box back to the table and digs through it.)

They had a restaurant inside the hotel—the Italian Terrace they called it—and they had some fella come in and paint a picture right on the wall of that restaurant. Right on the wall!

(She pulls out an old post card and carefully lays it on the table.)

Kinda faded on here...but look at that. "The Taking of Fort Pitt" it's called. See the soldiers on their horses and that woman dancing with her baby. I love that. Couldn't tell you what's going on in this picture but it was so...beautiful. And big. Bigger than this room. That hotel...geez, you could pick up this whole house, drop it right in the middle of the lobby, hardly take up any space at all. We went walking around the city, too. Jack kept saying how dirty it was and sure, I guess it was...but he was looking down in the street. Not me, I looked up at the sky. Looked up at those tall buildings and the electric lights and the streetcars and...all those people. Dressed so fancy, going so fast, making money, changing the world. Oh, I'm going back there someday, Herk. Stay in that hotel, maybe just live right there in that city, 'cause Charlie, he's gonna be...I mean, once he's an engineer, he can...build things. Design things. Make 'em run. Make the whole world run, make it crackle and buzz and...come alive!

HERK

Sis—

HANNAH

That's what I want for my boy, Herk. Why can't I...

Her eyes fill with tears. Beat.

HERK

You keep Charlie in that school, you're gonna lose this farm, Hannah.

HANNAH

I don't care.

HERK

Don't say that sis. You love this farm. This is your—

HANNAH

I watched this farm bleed my husband dry 'fore he dropped dead—forty-five years old—dropped stone cold dead in the same godforsaken field that killed his Pa. I do not love this farm!

HERK

Well, it's all you got. And if this farm fails how you gonna pay for Charlie's schoolin' then? Think about that. No farm, no school, and we're all diggin' ditches for the WPA. Charlie too. That ain't what you want for him, is it?

HANNAH

Course not.

HERK

And his school's all paid up through December, right?

(HANNAH nods)

So...that's something. He got to go to that college for a little while. More'n a lot of folks get, 'specially these days. Right?

(Beat)

Got to bring Charlie home, Hannah.

HANNAH

I'll think about it.

HERK

Sis—

HANNAH

I said I'll think about it.

HANNAH stands angry and upset, her back to her brother. HERK sighs, takes a swig from his flask.

HERK

Turns out moonshine ain't the best chaser for your pumpkin pie.

(He stands, preparing to leave.)

That desperado's still out there so you lock the door after I leave. You hear me, sister?

HANNAH

I hear you.

HERK

And don't be takin' in strangers and feedin' 'em.

HANNAH

Oh, Herk, please—

HERK

At least while these desperados are still on the loose. OK?

(HANNAH sighs. HERK comes up behind her, puts a hand on her shoulder.)

Just tryin' to look out for you, that's all.

HANNAH

I know.

HANNAH turns to him and HERK kisses her on the forehead and holds her for a beat. HERK walks to the door. HANNAH sees that there is still some pie left on his plate.

HANNAH (cont'd)

Don't you want to finish your pie?

HERK backs up, picks up the pie with his hand and takes a bite. HANNAH smiles.

HANNAH (cont'd)

'Night, Herk.

HERK smiles at her and exits, carrying his pie, picking up his shotgun as he leaves.

HANNAH crosses to the door, watches him go for a moment, then closes and locks the door behind her.

She goes to pick up the pie plate but, defeated, sits at the table.

She picks up the post card and looks at it before putting it back in the box.

She puts the lid on, pulls the bread box to her, and holds it closely to her chest.

BLACKOUT