

TRUE FRIENDSHIP

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A one-act play based in part upon some of the author's experiences as an opinion columnist for a Northeast Georgia weekly newspaper.

The gazebo in the city park at Vickery, a small town in northeast Georgia. Mark Fredericks sits behind a table working on a laptop computer. He occasionally sips from a transparent plastic cup containing a clear amber liquid. A paper sack containing a whiskey bottle and additional cups is under the table.

Bob *(Enters, carrying a newspaper, from Stage Left and sits at table on Mark's left.)* What's in that cup, Mark?

Mark Water.

Bob *(Holds cup to nose.)* Smells more like Marse Jack's sour mash to me.

Mark Jesus must have passed another miracle. Want some?

Bob My Christian duty compels me to have a goodly portion.

Mark *(Passes whiskey and cup to Bob.)* How do you figure that?

Bob *(Pours whiskey into cup.)* I'm your pastor and the guardian of your immortal soul.

Mark Therefore?

Bob The more of this devil's brew I drink, the less the opportunity for you to sin by overindulgence, a well-known fault of yours.

Mark I appreciate your great sacrifice.

Bob We all have our crosses to bear. *(Both sip whiskey, Bob opens paper.)* Good column this week.

Mark That's a rarity, a compliment from you; but, even a stopped clock's right twice a day.

Bob Your average ain't that good.

Mark What did you like best in the column?

Bob *(Reads from newspaper.)* “For Christians, the most important questions do not concern when life begins, is abortion equivalent to murder or simply an expression of a woman’s right to control her own reproduction. No, the central question in the abortion debate should be: How will we welcome children into the Community of Believers?”

Mark Almost sings, doesn’t it?

Bob A lot better than you do in church.

Mark I’m only following John Wesley’s instructions.

Bob How so?

Mark If God gave you a good voice, sing loudly to his glory; if God gave you a poor voice, sing loudly to remind him of how he deprived you.

Bob No doubt what God did to you. *(Waives newspaper.)* Did you have help writing such a good column?

Mark The Holy Spirit provided the inspiration.

Bob One day, God will finally have enough of your blasphemy and will surely smite you with a thunderbolt.

Mark I pray for mercy, not justice.

Bob I hope the Almighty isn’t so angry that his aim’s off and the thunderbolt strikes me beside you.

Mark No problem. You wear the whole armor of God, like St. Paul instructed.

Bob *(Looks up to the gazebo roof.)* How long, O Lord, must we suffer?

Mark About as long as we have to sit through your abysmally and abominably long sermons.

Bob Retribution may be at hand for you. Your columns on the Confederacy mightily incensed the boys and gals of the New South Restoration Movement.

Mark Seems that way; but, I’d call them a bowel movement.

Bob Rumor has it that, at last week’s convocation, they drew straws for the sacred privilege of offing you.

Mark That’s what I hear. *(Points away from gazebo.)* Here comes Chief Hollis.

Hollis *(Chief Hollis, in uniform, enters from Stage Right and sits at Mark’s right.)* Afternoon, Pastor Bob, Mark. What’re you two drinking?

Bob Started out as water.

Hollis *(Picks up Bob’s cup.)* Smells suspiciously like Black Jack. Preacher Bob, did you miraculously change water into this fine example of *aqua vitae*?

Bob Not me. Had I passed the miracle, we’d be drinking single malt Scotch.

Mark Would you like a snort?

Hollis Consumption of alcohol on public property constitutes a grave offense in our metropolis, and I’m on duty.

Mark So?

Hollis I’m charged with upholding the law.

Bob Be that as it may, I’m sharing this formulation out of religious duty.

Hollis *(Pours generous portion of whiskey into cup.)* In that case, I’ll perform my civic duty. I wouldn’t want Mark to drink so much that he couldn’t walk home.

Bob Sweet Allison for sure won’t pick him up from here or the jailhouse.

Hollis She'd be mortified if one of my cruisers delivered a passed out Mark to her front door.

Bob On the other hand, she probably would like for you to throw him in jail for a few days so she could have some peace from his foolishness.

Hollis (*Downs whiskey, pours more into cup.*) Mark has good taste in adult beverages. Too bad we can't say the same about what he writes for our beloved newspaper.

Mark How 'bout my talents as a sacrificial lamb?

Bob Chief, you're pretty sure the wannabe executioner will make the hit this afternoon?

Hollis According to my sources.

Bob Mine, too.

Mark The whole town knows it's this afternoon but nobody has any idea who's doing the deed?

Hollis Don't worry. My people are hidden all around here. Nobody can touch you.

Bob The worst that can happen is you'll get a front-page story out of the experience. You might even win a Pulitzer Prize, especially if the shooter only wings you.

Hollis You could get on TV.

Bob CNN or PBS, not Fox News Network.

Hollis No, Fox might run the story if Mark's killed.

Bob Why?

Hollis They'd want to celebrate the demise of a pointy-headed, liberal Democrat, evolution-loving, secular humanist.

Bob If we fail in our duty to protect Mark, Bill O'Riley would mention your passing in passing.

Hollis Preacher Bob, are you going to sit here with Mark and offer him spiritual comfort?

Bob That's my clear intention.

Mark I'd like it better if you'd sit in front of me rather than at my side.

Bob You want me to take the bullet for you?

Mark It would be your bounden duty, the ultimate sacrifice.

Hollis (*Stands up.*) Y'all work out the seating arrangements. I'm going to my command center. (*Leaves to Stage Right.*)

Mark I hope Chief Hollis is right about this afternoon.

Bob It's a good call. The whole county knows you're here on Friday afternoons to hear comments on the Thursday editions of *The Citizen*.

Mark It cuts down on a lot of stupid Letters To The Editor.

Bob Hey, you for sure aren't receiving acclamations from your admiring public, a vanishing small number of people, most of whom can't read.

Mark I should pin a bull's eye over my heart.

Bob Might save your life 'cause you don't have a real heart. (*The roar of a powerful truck engine breaks the silence.*) That's Wilbur's new truck, a Ford F-350 with four-by-six dual rear wheels, and a ten-cylinder high output diesel engine. A rolling redneck dream come true.

Mark All decked out in UGA colors, decals, and flags. Those chromed exhaust pipes must rise six feet above the extended cab. Reckon what he's carrying in the gun rack?

Bob Knowing Wilbur, he probably has a twelve-gauge Browning automatic shotgun, a rod and reel, and an umbrella.

Mark Prepared for anything, and he was kicked out of the Boy Scouts for being disruptive.

Bob At the same time you were.

Wilbur *(Enters from Stage Right, sits on Mark's right.)* Preacher Bob, Mark. Good day for a killing.

Mark Nice truck. Hate to see you mess it up working on your farm.

Wilbur Won't happen. This one's my going-to-town truck.

Mark Don't you need a big truck for your farm?

Wilbur I got another new one for the farm. It's painted in Florida Gator colors, dirty blue and putrid orange.

Mark Why?

Wilbur I use it for hauling chicken litter, cow manure, and sundry other kinds of smelly stuff.

Bob When you can't beat 'em in football, you can cover 'em with muck?

Wilbur *(Shrugs.)* What're y'all drinking?

Mark Jack Daniel's Black Label.

Bob *(To Wilbur.)* Don't guess you'll have any because you're driving.

Wilbur Pour me some of that nectar. I'm hanging around for the fun.

Bob *(Passes bottle and cup to Wilbur.)* Pour it yourself. I won't corrupt a member of my congregation.

Wilbur *(Pours whiskey, takes a big swallow.)* What about Mark?

Bob He's polluting himself. I'm setting a good example by drinking in moderation.

Mark *(Sighs loudly, looks up.)* O Lord, how long must we suffer?

Wilbur Mark, good buddy, if you survive this afternoon, I know a good way for you to get back into most people's good graces.

Bob Pray tell.

Mark Why would I want to get on the good side of a bunch of KDP's?

Wilbur KDP's?

Bob Knuckle-Dragging Philistines, present company excluded.

Wilbur See, Mark. You can't help insulting people.

Mark How do you suggest I rectify the situation?

Wilbur And you talk funny. Who the heck around here, present company excluded, knows the definition of rectify?

Bob I'll use that word in my sermon Sunday.

Wilbur Make it short for once.

Mark That's a forlorn hope. What scheme do you have in mind?

Wilbur Write some front-page articles in *The Citizen* to raise funds for erection of a Confederate Soldier stature, right here in the city park.

Bob Might work. People would love for Mark to come to his senses about the glorious War for Southern Independence.

Mark It was an insurrection, a rebellion.

Bob But for a bonnie good cause.

Mark *(To Wilbur.)* The stature should face north?
 Wilbur That's where the enemy comes from.
 Mark I have some conditions.
 Bob O Lord!
 Wilbur What conditions?
 Mark Stand up, face north.
 Wilbur Me?
 Mark Yes.
 Wilbur OK. *(Stands up at side of table with back to audience.)*
 Mark Lean over and put your head as far down as you can.
 Wilbur Are you crazy? I've never seen a stature like that.
 Mark Humor me.
 Wilbur *(Puts head between his knees.)* Like this?
 Mark That'll do.
 Bob O Lord!
 Mark Try to bend your neck up as far as you can.
 Wilbur This is stupid. *(Does his best to look up.)*
 Mark What do you see?
 Wilbur My butt. What do you think?
 Bob O Lord!
 Mark One last thing.
 Wilbur Hurry up. People might be looking this way.
 Mark My last condition.
 Bob O Lord!

Mark The inscription on the pedestal will come from Walt Kelly's Pogo comic strip.
 Wilbur Spit it out!
 Mark "We have met the enemy and he is us."
 Wilbur *(Sits, gulps whiskey.)* And you wonder why people hate your guts?
 Bob He can't help himself. All those years he spent away from here corrupted him.
 Wilbur Turned him into a schizophrenic.
 Bob You have any specific examples of his multiple personalities?
 Wilbur He's a dues-paying, card-carrying member of the ACLU and the NRA.
 Bob A dubious distinction not shared by anyone else in this county, maybe even the whole state.
 Mark Hey, all I want is a level playing field.
 Wilbur That's only part of his mental disease.
 Bob You're talking about how he's a registered Republication but usually votes Democratic?
 Wilbur He pulls that stunt to irritate Allison.
 Bob Claims he's so committed to fundamentalist . . .
 Mark Fundamental, not fundamentalist.
 Bob . . . principles that he's often mistaken for a liberal.
 Wilbur When he wrote that in one of his columns, it made no sense whatsoever to anyone.
 Bob Present company excluded.
 Wilbur Preacher Bob, why don't you pray for Mark to repent?

Bob I'd rather pray for something the good Lord is more apt to grant.

Mark *(Points to Stage Left.)* Speaking of the power of prayer, looks like the Holy Spirit has descended upon Rev. Bailey.

Bob That'll be the day.

Bailey *(Enters, from Stage Left, in a highly agitated state carrying a briefcase. Stands at end of table near Preacher Bob.)* Is that demon rum in those cups?

Wilbur No, it's Jack Daniel's sipping whiskey.

Mark And mighty good. Want some?

Bailey *(Points finger accusingly at Preacher Bob.)* You're a man of the cloth, the pastor of our largest congregation.

Bob Your point being?

Bailey I would have expected better of you, not this public display of licentiousness.

Bob Brother Bailey, don't you understand the reality of expectations?

Bailey You're not living up to the expectations of your church and this community.

Bob To the contrary, as I can easily demonstrate.

Bailey How?

Bailey Hold both hands in front of you, palms up.

Bailey *(Holds hands, palm up, in front of him.)* What's this prove?

Bob You'll see. I want you to expect in your left hand and expectorate in your right hand.

Mark O Lord!

Bailey You mean, spit in my right hand?

Bob Sure thing. The demonstration won't work if you don't.

Bailey *(Reluctantly spits in right hand.)* Now what more foolishness do you have in mind?

Bob None, because your empty left hand now reveals the reality of expectations.

Bailey *(Wipes spit on trousers, puts hands at his side.)* You have insulted me and our God.

Bob We don't worship the same God.

Mark Rev. Bailey, is our public consumption of demon rum simply a target of opportunity for your wraith or do you have something else in mind?

Bailey I have here . . . *(Reaches hand into his briefcase. Mark, Bob, Wilbur stand, push aside their sports coats to reveal holstered pistols.)*

Mark You be most careful what you pull out of that briefcase.

Bailey *(Flustered, sputters.)* I never . . . *(Removes packet of papers; Mark, Bob, Wilbur sit.)* . . . I'm presenting this petition to you as the owner, publisher, and editor of *The Vickery Citizen*. All 57 adult members of my congregation at the Baptized By Holy Fire, One True Apostolic, and Sanctified by the Holy Spirit Temple for Worship of God Almighty signed the petition.

Mark No children signed?

Bailey Of course not. They haven't reached the age of reason.

Wilbur Doesn't the same criterion apply to the adults?

Mark What's the subject of this petition?

Bailey That you must write a front page article recanting all your nonsense about evolution and accept Intelligent Design as the exhibition of God's creation of life.

Mark You want me to endorse Creation Science?

Bailey It's the word of God as revealed in Holy Scripture.

Wilbur Creation Science is mumbo jumbo, not true science.

Mark What happens if I don't recant?

Bailey My entire congregation will cancel our subscriptions and our business owners won't advertise in your paper.

Mark Won't happen. *The Citizen's* the only paper in the county.

Bailey Our minds are fixed upon this course. We will not be swayed.

Mark OK, that's your prerogative; however, from now on, the paper won't publish any free notices of engagements, weddings, deaths, funerals, or births of anyone in your congregation. Furthermore, you'll have to pay for any announcements of your worship services and frequent revivals.

Bailey You wouldn't dare! That would violate freedom of the press and separation of Church and State.

Wilbur His mind's fixed upon it, he won't be swayed.

Bob Mark's like Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*: What he's dared, he's willed; and what he's willed, he'll do.

Mark Rev. Bailey, do you have a copy of the Bible in that briefcase?

Bailey The King James Version, the authentic word of God. *(Pulls Bible from briefcase, holds book reverently in front of him.)*

Wilbur With Jesus' words in red, just like they came out of his mouth in Elizabethan English, not the Aramaic he likely spoke?

Bob Wilbur, you're talking over the poor man's head.

Mark Rev. Bailey, please open your Bible to the first chapter of Genesis.

Bailey *(Opens Bible.)* Perhaps the presence of Holy Scripture will bring you to your senses.

Mark I'm a newspaperman so let's look at that first chapter from the perspective of a news story.

Bob He's talking about who, what, when, where, why, and how.

Mark Right on. Rev. Bailey, who's the who in the Genesis creation story?

Bailey God. Says so in the first verse.

Mark What's the what in the story?

Bailey Creation of the universe and all therein.

Mark When?

Bailey In the beginning.

Mark Where did the action take place?

Bailey *(Pauses to think.)* In our time and space.

Mark Any idea of why God created the universe and all therein?

Bailey Who am I to speculate on the Almighty's motives?

Bob Because it pleased God to create, says so in Holy Scripture.

Mark Final question: How did God go about creating?

Bailey I don't understand.

Mark Let's make it simple. What mechanism did God use to create life?

Bailey That's not addressed but God must have worked through his Holy Spirit.

Bob How about, "The work of creation is, God's making all things of nothing, by the word of His power, in the space of six days, and all very good."

Bailey Where did that statement come from?

Bob The Presbyterian Shorter Catechism.

Bailey I rely upon Holy Scripture not false creeds or catechisms.

Mark Elegant as the catechismal declaration may be, it still doesn't explain the nuts and bolts of the actual process.

Bailey You're going to blaspheme by invoking godless evolution?

Mark Let's get one thing straight: I profess that God is the creator and absolute sovereign ruler of all that exists, seen and unseen.

Bob Mighty profound, fundamental, even catechismal.

Mark Based upon all the available evidence – scientific, theological, philosophical, continuing revelation, whatever – evolution is the best explanation for the mechanism God used and uses to create and maintain life.

Bailey I'm am fearfully and wonderfully made by God!

Mark Through evolution.

Bailey (*Shouts.*) I did not evolve from pond scum!

Mark You for sure haven't evolved very much.

Bailey Mark Fredericks, God will surely consign you to the nether regions of hell for the eternal punishment of the damned.

Bob (*Stands up threateningly.*) Aloysius Percival Bailey, if you don't get away from here, I'll open a can of whoop-ass on you, like I used to when we were kids.

Wilbur No, let me bring him to Jesus.

Bob How?

Wilbur By beating the hell out of him. (*Rev. Bailey, gesturing wildly, rushes off to Stage Left.*)

Mark What's he doing now?

Bob Performing an exorcism to drive the unclean spirits out of us.

Wilbur Might work for you and me, but not for Mark. (*Three men lift their cups to toast each other.*)

Mark Amen.

Bob Look who's crossing the street, waving her cane to stop traffic.

Wilbur Miss Helen, as spry as when she taught us English in high school.

Mark Reckon how old she is?

Bob That's a closely guarded secret; but I double-dog dare you to ask her.

Mark No way. I've already got enough trouble.

Wilbur Her nose boogers and earwax are older than most people around here.

Helen (*Enters from Stage Right carrying a large purse and using a cane to walk. She sits on Wilbur's right. Points*

cane at bottle.) Are you three miscreants drinking alcohol in public, where the whole town can see you?

Bob Yes, Miss Helen.

Helen I'm not surprised at Mark and Wilbur but you, Bob Jenkins, should know better.

Bob I agree. This miraculously transformed liquid should be a fine, single malt whiskey rather than Tennessee sipping whiskey.

Wilbur Would you like some, Miss Helen?

Helen *(Miss Helen sits, puts purse on table with large thud.)* So all my former students can see me?

Mark Miss Helen, the entire town knows Chief Hollis brings you a quart of Wild Turkey bourbon the first and third Friday afternoons of each month.

Helen I shamed him into it. Only serves him right.

Wilbur Because he took away your driver's license and car keys?

Helen Said I was a menace to society.

Bob Many of us prayed for that blessed event, for our safety and for yours.

Mark *(Pours whiskey into cup, passes it to Miss Helen.)* Would you like some?

Helen I'll have a touch, only to be sociable. *(Takes small swallow of whiskey.)* Aloysius Percival appears to have been quite upset when he left you three troublemakers.

Bob Lost his equilibrium when he came face to face with St. Augustine's dictum.

Helen Which one of the several?

Bob If a man believes what he observes with his own eyes conflicts with Holy Scripture, he's mistaken about what Holy Scripture actually says.

Helen You three adult delinquents certainly must realize that Aloysius Percival suffers from optico-annal malocclusion.

Wilbur Say what?

Helen It's a birth defect, a congenital disease.

Mark What are the symptoms?

Helen He has a crappy outlook on life because his rectum and optic nerve were crossed at birth.

Mark Miss Helen, I am flabbergasted, nay, dismayed at your description of a former student.

Helen Aloysius Percival was a poor student with no intellectual acumen; therefore, I don't hold him in high regard.

Bob She only tells the truth.

Wilbur The twerp always has an expression on his face like death eating a sour pickle.

Mark What compels you to join us this afternoon, Miss Helen? Surely you're not here for a discussion of Rev. Bailey's many shortcomings.

Helen Mark Fredericks, I want you to know, before the bloodletting begins, that I've discovered your secret.

Mark My life's an open book.

Helen Books. That's the operative word. I've read all of the Bruce Langley novels.

Wilbur "To Duty Called," "Duty To Kill," "Duty To Love," "Called To Duty"?

Helen And “Triumphant Duty”.

Mark You want to write book reports for *The Citizen*?

Helen Don’t be impertinent. I finally determined why the author’s writing style seems so familiar.

Mark You’ve been engaged in literary criticism?

Helen (*Shakes cane at Mark.*) You’re the author. The similarities among the novels, your columns, and your old high school compositions prove the point. (*Downs the whiskey, holds out cup for more.*)

Mark (*Three friends exchange glances.*) What do you plan to do with this knowledge?

Helen Nothing. I wouldn’t want the general public to realize my best student writes such explicit sex scenes and uses so much profanity, not to mention putting all that violence in the Bruce Langley novels.

Bob But none of those things shocked you, did they?

Helen (*Raps Bob’s knuckles with her cane.*) I hope Mark doesn’t engage in that type of sexual behavior with Allison.

Wilbur He doesn’t. Allison wouldn’t put up with it.

Bob He fantasizes the sex. Allison cut him off years ago.

Wilbur I know for a fact that Doctor Mary refused to prescribe Viagra for Mark.

Bob Why?

Wilbur Said it would be like putting a new flagpole on a condemned building.

Helen Lord, how Mark ever convinced that sweet, intelligent Allison to marry him mystifies me.

Bob Perhaps he has hidden talents.

Helen I wish you’d hide your talents for long-winded sermons.

Bob I want to make sure the congregation gets the point.

Helen The point is that we’re getting tired of having to wait in the back of the line at Sweet Gum Barbecue and Fish Lodge for Sunday dinner.

Wilbur It’s bad enough to get behind the Baptists with their big appetites but it’s down right unacceptable when the Holiness and Church of God crowd beats us to Sweet Gum.

Helen Those people eat like swarms of starving locusts.

Mark I wish their preachers would bless the food before they leave church.

Wilbur Why?

Mark The members of those churches take up too much time saying long-winded blessings and shouting “Praise God” and “Hallelujah”, not too mention the speaking in tongues.

Helen They should get right to the business at hand, eating.

Bob With respect to my sermons, humans cannot live by bread alone. Focus on hearing and believing the Word.

Helen Obviously, you’re not putting sufficient time into preparing your sermons, a problem that’s plagued you ever since you sat in my classes.

Bob How’d you reach that conclusion?

Helen Don’t you remember what you were supposed to have learned when you studied Mark Twain?

Mark “Had I more time, I would have written you a shorter letter?”

Helen Correct. Simply exchange sermon for letter.

Mark Next time Bob gets carried away, why don't you throw your cane at him?

Helen I may do that. Now, Bob and Wilbur, are you here to protect Mark?

Wilbur We are.

Helen Are you sufficiently armed?

Wilbur I have my Sig Sauer.

Bob A Colt model 1911's at my side.

Helen Mark, surely you're not totally relying on these two?

Mark No ma'am. I have my Glock.

Helen You boys shoot fast but straight. You hear me?

Bob We will.

Helen See that you do. I want to keep reading Bruce Langley novels. *(Leaves to Stage Right.)*

Mark What do you suppose she has in that handbag? It sounded awfully heavy when she put it on the table.

Wilbur I know better than to ask her something personal like that. We're lucky she didn't beat us around the head with that cane.

Bob Tough love personified.

Mark *(Cell phone rings.)* Hey, Allison. What's shaking? *(Listens.)* No, Bob and Wilbur are here with me. *(Listens, looks upward.)* What are we drinking? Mostly water.

Wilbur He's dissembling.

Bob Lying by omission of the full truth.

Mark *(Listens, grimaces.)* It's sixty-percent water. *(Listens.)* All right, sweetheart, we're drinking Jack Danniell's.

(Looks at Bob and Wilbur.) Mary Anne and Janice are with you? What do you mean, do I know why they chose today to visit you?

Bob *(To Wilbur.)* They're there to comfort the grieving widow.

Wilbur *(To Bob.)* Who says Allison will be grieving?

Mark *(Has been listening to Allison during the above exchange.)* No, honey, I don't know why Officers Missy and Harold are in an unmarked car across the street in Miss Helen's driveway. *(Listens.)* I have no idea why they're out of uniform.

Wilbur The truth's not in him.

Bob He's trying not to worry Allison about the forthcoming bloodletting.

Wilbur Be the first time he's ever considered her feelings.

Mark *(On phone to Allison.)* I have a little business to finish here. I'll bring Preacher Bob and Wilbur home with me. *(Listens.)* For supper? They'll eat anything that won't eat them first. *(Listens.)* As soon as I can. I love you. Goodbye. *(Closes cell phone.)*

Bob All this talk about food has stimulated my appetite.

Wilbur Mine too. Hope this business is concluded before too much longer.

(The three friends unholster their pistols, check and reholster them.)

Mark Preacher Bob, not that I object to your being here but have you considered how incongruous it appears for a minister to be armed and dangerous?

Wilbur There you go again, using big words like incongruous.

Bob You mean odd, strange, out of place, inappropriate? That's what you're trying to say?

Mark Yes, but I like incongruous. Anyway, you have a theological explanation?

Wilbur I can guarantee that he doesn't intend to lay down his life for you or anyone else.

Bob Indeed not. God gave me my life; hence, I can't let somebody kill me. Only God has the right to take my life.

Mark But you could have stayed home today and avoided the threat of being killed.

Wilbur No he couldn't. He's as bloodthirsty as the Israelites of the Old Testament.

Bob Well, I'm here because God sanctioned great friendship, even if it's sometimes difficult with a person like our Mark.

Mark Then, if the shooter aims at me and you're beside me, you figure that you'll be in the line of fire and can justifiably shoot back?

Wilbur Preacher Bob, like me and hopefully you, will try to shoot first, as a theologically condoned act of preventive violence.

Mark My intellect is now satisfied by both of your impeccable reasoning.

Bob To change the subject, I was most gratified to see your two daughters with you and Allison in church Sunday.

Mark They were here for a short visit.

Wilbur A short visit with their father's all they can take. That's why Allison goes alone to see them so often in Texas.

Bob I'm surprised they come at all, the way he treated them when they were children.

Wilbur You have specific examples of his child abuse?

Bob He never let them win any games, always beat them.

Mark I wanted to prepare them for life.

Bob Both girls have told me they didn't mind Mark winning all the time but they powerfully resented the way he gloated about it.

Wilbur The girls will get their revenge because they get to choose his nursing home, if he survives today.

Bob You think they have a plan?

Wilbur More'n likely they've already selected a place like GITMO.

Bob Guantanamo Bay, with all the other terrorists?

Wilbur Be only fitting, proper, and just.

Bob *(Points away from front of table.)* Why's that county sheriff's patrol car coming this way?

Mark It's not Sheriff Smith's tricked out Hummer.

Bob Must be a deputy.

Wilbur Look out! The fool's aiming a shotgun at us!

(A shotgun blasts as the three men dive under the table and begin firing their pistols.)

Bob Aim for his head, men. He's wearing a bulletproof vest. *(Rapid firing that concludes with two smaller sounding shots.)*

Hollis *(From off stage.)* Hold your fire, he's down.

(Mark, Bob, and Wilbur stand up, continuing to aim their pistols.)

Wilbur Which one of us got him?

Hollis The way y'all were firing, I doubt that either of you hit him.

Wilbur You're kidding. I shot him at least six times.

Bob The Holy Spirit gave me true aim, right to his forehead.

Hollis *(Enters from Stage Left, carries a huge long barreled revolver.)* Put those pistols away before you hurt yourselves. *(Three friends comply.)* What caliber were you firing?

Wilbur Nine-millimeter.

Bob Forty-five.

Mark Forty.

Hollis From the small size of the holes in his forehead, I'm thinking someone hit him with a couple of twenty-two long rounds, probably hollow points. *(Three friends look quizzically at each other.)* Well, it doesn't matter.

Mark Why?

Hollis The coroner will list the cause of death as suicide by terminal stupidity.

Bob Let's have a moment of disrespect on behalf of our dearly departed brother.

(All stand; Chief holsters his pistol, takes off his hat.)

Mark You're going to pray for this idiot?

Wilbur He prays for you, doesn't he?

Bob I pray for all sinners, even Mark, our chief sinner.

Mark Get on with it.

Hollis Make it short. I got to get back to protecting our great metropolis from the criminal element, present company excluded.

Bob *(Raises head and hands to the sky.)* Almighty, we beseech you to have mercy on this fool's soul. He tried to do his duty to rid our community of an unsavory element. Little did he know that you have a great purpose in mind for Mark. Would you please, however, soon reveal that purpose. We grow faint and weary for that happy day of revelation. One more thing, Lord . . .

Others Amen. *(Pull, push Bob off stage to Stage Left.)*

Helen *(Enters from Stage Right, goes to center of stage in front of table; carries a .22-caliber automatic pistol.)* Lord, won't those three ever grow up? With great difficulty I taught them English grammar . . . *(Smiles wickedly at audience.)* . . . but they for damn sure didn't learn how to shoot straight. *(Exits Stage Left.)*