

ATHEIST ON TRIAL

**a play by
by Tom Baum**

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ELLERY RUDGE, early 40s, a professor of comparative religion.

AVA FAIRCLOTH, early 20s, his tutorial student.

PHYLLIS RUDGE, early 40s, Ellery's wife.

CUTTER McCREA, late 20s, a former student of Ellery's.

REVEREND BOB SPALDING, mid 50s, outgoing head of the religion department.

JIM FAIRCLOTH, early 50s, a businessman, Ava's father.

RYAN, early 30s, campus security guard.

Scene 1: A lecture platform.

Scene 2. Ellery Rudge's study.

Scene 3: A lecture platform.

Scene 4: Reverend Bob Spalding's office. The next day.

Scene 5: A lecture platform.

Scene 6: Ellery's study. The following morning.

The time is the present.

Scene 1

(ELLERY RUDGE *paces a lecture platform. Behind him is a blackboard.*)

ELLERY: Let's say I go to a fortune teller. She gazes into her crystal ball and comes up with a prediction. Twenty years from now, she tells me, the world will be more religious than it is today. Is that good news or bad news? How many of you would feel worried? How many feel less than comfortable answering the question? Fine. For next time, I want five hundred words on your reaction to that prophecy. Sign your essays or don't, it's up to you. Whether you believe in God or not is none of my concern. If you do, fine. If you don't...

(ELLERY *writes* **PASCAL'S WAGER** *on the board.*)

...why the hell not? According to the latest science, we humans are hard-wired for belief. We're born with the religious impulse, so why bet against your DNA? What's the downside to believing in God? If God turns out not to exist, no skin off your nose. Whereas if God does exist, you're saved from going to hell.

(ELLERY *underlines* **PASCAL.**)

Blaise Pascal, ace mathematician and physicist. At age 31 Pascal walked out on science. Gave it up. Became a mystic. Give me another five hundred words on your reaction to Pascal and his Wager. And speaking of dummies, the answer's yes, I will be assigning *Religion for Dummies* in this course. Why, because you're going to read it anyway. I sense your deep relief.

(*Blackout.*)

Scene 2

(ELLERY'S home office. The room contains a desk, a couch, two chairs, a liquor cabinet, bookcases, a coffee table, a hatrack, and is in serious disarray. Outside the single large window, it's dusk. ELLERY paces before his tutorial student, AVA FAIRCLOTH.)

ELLERY: —Could he read and write?

AVA: Sure he could read. He quoted Torah all the time.

ELLERY: Could he speak English?

AVA: No. Why would he speak English?

ELLERY: His father could. His father knows every language, doesn't he? Even the ones that don't exist yet?

AVA: He wasn't his Father.

ELLERY: No? I thought he was.

AVA: He is and he isn't. He's human and he's God.

ELLERY: Fair enough. When did he perform his first miracle?

AVA: OK. According to John, it was the marriage in Cana. Turning water into wine.

ELLERY: What about as a child? Did he experiment with his powers?

AVA: What do you mean, experiment?

ELLERY: Free flies from spider webs? Torture snails then raise them from the dead?

AVA: Oh here we go. We don't know a thing about his childhood.

ELLERY: Did he know his mom was a virgin?

AVA: I don't think he worried about it. You're just being blasphemous to trap me.

ELLERY: Was the world was created in six days?

AVA: Ohmigosh. You keep testing me for that. OK, there's this concept, "God years"? A "God year" is like 900 million years in our time frame? Which means the Earth is like five billion years old.

ELLERY: Where did you hear about this concept?

AVA: My dad.

ELLERY: Thought so. Does your dad believe in evolution?

AVA: No. What God made, He made.

ELLERY: And that's what you believe?

AVA: Well, not exactly.

ELLERY: Not exactly.

AVA: I believe evolution is God's plan for change.

ELLERY: God's plan, I see. You eat too much Mexican food and get a pain in your heart. Your appendix is useless, but if it bursts you die. The more you procreate, the greater your chances of cervical cancer. But you love God no matter what.

AVA: Yes. I do.

ELLERY: Sounds like Battered Woman Syndrome to me.

AVA: Wow. Why do you always do this.

ELLERY: Do what, Ava?

AVA: All you want to do is argue lately. You know what happens? The more you attack religion, the more I respect it.

(PHYLLIS RUDGE *enters in a winter coat, eavesdropping.*)

ELLERY: In other words, I'm enabling your faith.

AVA: Oh what, now you're calling religion an addiction? Talk about snails, I don't think I can take this torture. (*sees PHYLLIS*) Oh hello, Mrs. Rudge.

PHYLLIS: Hello, Ava. (*to ELLERY*) Some heavy bags in the car, could you be a dear?

ELLERY: What, right now?

PHYLLIS: Perishables, darling.

ELLERY: Right. Ava, I'll be back in a sec.

(*ELLERY exits.*)

PHYLLIS: What was the problem today?

AVA: I don't know what his problem is. All he wants to do is argue lately.

PHYLLIS: You know he thinks the world of you.

AVA: Well, it sure doesn't feel like it.

PHYLLIS: Oh gracious yes, he thinks you're wildly talented. He'd like to bring you onto the faculty if he can.

AVA: Really? He said that?

PHYLLIS: Repeatedly. (*pause*) You know Bob Spalding is leaving for L.A. after Christmas.

AVA: I heard that, yes.

PHYLLIS: And he wants my husband to take over the department. How's your dad, by the way?

AVA: My dad? He's fine.

PHYLLIS: Is he aware my husband is your tutor?

AVA: Sure. I mean, he asks.

PHYLLIS: And how does he feel about that?

AVA: You know...he's curious.

PHYLLIS: He takes an interest in your education.

AVA: Oh gosh yes. (*pause*) He wouldn't have liked today's session.

PHYLLIS: I see. But you are interested in a teaching fellowship.

AVA: Oh absolutely.

PHYLLIS: My husband can make that happen...if he's the chair. Listen, you've obviously been through the wringer, why don't you just run along.

AVA: Are you sure?

PHYLLIS: I'm sure. Nice to see you, Ava.

(AVA zips up her backpack and exits with her coat. PHYLLIS whips out her cell—and quickly stows it again as ELLERY enters.)

PHYLLIS: Did you get all the groceries? There were four bags.

ELLERY: Yes, I got all four. Where did Ava go?

PHYLLIS: I told her to leave. You should be bribing this girl, Ellery, not badgering.

ELLERY: If God didn't want questions, he'd have stopped with the apes.

PHYLLIS: That's hardly the point. But you do know who Ava's father is.

ELLERY: I know who he is, and I'm not about to be bullied by the Mattress King.

PHYLLIS: Ellery, Jim Faircloth is the school's biggest donor and the trustee chairman. He plays golf with the Provost. We don't want him butting in at this crucial juncture. When are you meeting with Bob Spalding?

ELLERY: That's up to Bobby boy. I'm in no rush.

PHYLLIS: Well, you should be. And when you do sit down, I want you to promise to keep his legacy alive.

ELLERY: What legacy. The man's an idiot.

PHYLLIS: Idiot or not, we need his approval. Goodness, look at the time, I'm running late.

ELLERY: Where are you going tonight?

PHYLLIS: Didn't I say? I have a charity committee meeting.

ELLERY: Again?

PHYLLIS: Yes, how tedious is that. We've decided to go caroling in senior centers. I made you a turkey casserole, it's on the stove.

ELLERY: Will Bob Spalding be at the meeting?

PHYLLIS: He said he might drop by. (*picks up notebook*) What's this?

ELLERY: It's Ava's. She left it behind.

PHYLLIS: Don't you want to snoop a little? Maybe she's written your name on the pages. Dotting the I's with little hearts, let's hope.

(*Doorbell rings.*)

PHYLLIS: Would you get that, dear? I need to hunt up my sheet music.

(*ELLERY exits. PHYLLIS quickly takes out her cell phone, hits a speed-dial, lowers her voice.*)

PHYLLIS: (*into phone*) Bobby, hi, I hope you're monitoring your voice mail. We have to move faster on Ellery's appointment. He's getting testy with Faircloth's daughter and the last thing we want is that hanyocker breathing down our necks. We'll discuss it all when I get there. Leave the key in the door so I'll know which room this time.

(*ELLERY enters, sees PHYLLIS pocket her cell.*)

PHYLLIS: Who was at the door?

ELLERY: No one. Why, were you expecting anybody?

PHYLLIS: That's disturbing.

ELLERY: Why?

PHYLLIS: I didn't want to worry you. There was an incident at the library. Involving you.

ELLERY: What do you mean, involving me?

PHYLLIS: Someone was hogging all your texts.

ELLERY: That happens.

PHYLLIS: People were complaining. This scruffy young man was hiding in a back carrel. He had every book you assign, every journal article you've ever written—as if he were cramming for an exam. I asked for an I.D. and the only one he had was a student I.D. from ten years ago.

ELLERY: What was his name?

PHYLLIS: McCrea.

ELLERY: Cutter McCrea?

PHYLLIS: Yes, why, you recognize it?

ELLERY: It rings a bell.

PHYLLIS: By the time I called Security he was gone. Keep the doors locked, all right? I'm serious. He had a really wild look in his eyes. And don't wait up, all right, darling? I'll probably be late.

(PHYLLIS exits. ELLERY sits down at his desk, his back to the door, starts leafing through Ava's notebook. CUTTER McCREA enters, dressed in loose-fitting pants, a plain white shirt, and a windbreaker. ELLERY swings around, startled.)

ELLERY: What do you want? Who are you?

CUTTER: I'm the guy just rang your bell. Didn't want to spook your wife again, so I went around the back. Like I used to?

ELLERY: Cutter? Cutter McCrea?

CUTTER: In the flesh.

ELLERY: With the short hair I didn't recognize you.

CUTTER: Neither did your wife.

ELLERY: You gave her a scare in the library.

CUTTER: Yeah, didn't mean to. Place hasn't changed much, has it. Same old mess.

ELLERY: You in town to see your folks?

CUTTER: Afraid not. My mom, she moved down to Florida—after my dad died? Where was Mrs. Rudge going, by the way? I saw the old Volvo pull out.

ELLERY: She went to a church meeting.

CUTTER: They make her a deacon yet?

ELLERY: Last year. So what have you been doing with yourself?

CUTTER: You mean after I got the boot from Spalding? I finished my education elsewhere, you'll be happy to hear.

ELLERY: Congratulations.

CUTTER: Haven't actually landed anyplace yet. Had a couple of rough years, you know? Spent some time in the wilderness. So how've you been, Professor? Still just you and Mrs. Rudge?

ELLERY: Still just the two of us.

CUTTER: Well, listen, Our Savior was childless. Anti-family, when you get right down to it. "And a man's foes shall be in his own household..." I don't mean you, Professor. I consider you family. What was your word for God the Father? The floating something something—

ELLERY: The universal floating signifier.

CUTTER: That's right. Even to himself. Would Jesus know he was Jesus when he came back? Or would he look around, see all the people claiming to be him, and figure he was just another nutcase?

ELLERY: Not if he could perform miracles.

CUTTER: "I should not be a Christian except for the miracles." St. Augustine. (*picks up Bible*) Here, test me.

ELLERY: I'm sure you're still solid.

CUTTER: Better than ever. Indulge me.

ELLERY: Mark 3:35.

CUTTER: Which translation?

ELLERY: Make it easy on yourself.

CUTTER: (*closes eyes, recites*) "Whosoever shall do the will of God, they are my brother, my sister, and my mother."

ELLERY: Word for word. So you got your Master's?

CUTTER: Would have preferred to get it here. But yeah, I'm fully credentialed. (*pause*) There's a rumor you're up for the Religion chair.

ELLERY: God isn't finished with me yet. According to my wife.

CUTTER: But are you finished with Him? Some of your articles I read, sure sounds like it.

ELLERY: We live in doubt, Cutter.

CUTTER: Hey, look. After 9/11 I was having doubts myself. Is this the End of Days? Is it part of God's plan? And where do I fit in?

ELLERY: And what answer did you find?

CUTTER: Well...you know I'd kill to work under you, Professor. Do anything to help you get that post.

ELLERY: So you're here for a job.

CUTTER: Why not? You get Reverend Spalding's job, you get his hiring privileges. But listen, I'm not pushing it. (*A beeper goes off*) Excuse me a second. (*Takes beeper out of his pocket, turns it off.*)

ELLERY: What's the beeper for?

CUTTER: It's to remind me to do something. What if I can prove to you that God exists?

ELLERY: You're welcome to try. (*Doorbell rings.*) Sit tight, I'm enjoying this.

(ELLERY *exits to answer the door*. CUTTER *quickly takes a pill vial out of his pocket, opens it, swallows a pill dry*. ELLERY's desk phone rings. *Without an instant's hesitation*, CUTTER *picks it up*.)

CUTTER: (*into phone*) Professor Rudge's office....He stepped out for a second, who shall I say is calling?...Hang on, Reverend Spalding, I hear him coming.

(ELLERY *enters, with AVA*.)

AVA: (*entering*) I got all the way to the quad and I realized I left my notebook behind— (*breaks off, seeing CUTTER*) Oh, someone's here, I'm sorry.

CUTTER: (*to AVA*) Hi. I'm Cutter McCrea.

AVA: Ava. Ava Faircloth.

CUTTER: Nice to meet you, Ava. (*to ELLERY*) Reverend Spalding for you.

ELLERY: (*takes phone*) Hello, Bob....No, just a friend who dropped in unexpectedly....(*moves off*)

CUTTER: (*to AVA*) You're a student of the professor's?

AVA: Yes, I'm in graduate school.

CUTTER: You went to high school here in town, didn't you?

AVA: Yes, that's right.

CUTTER: So did I. I think I was a few years ahead. Your dad's the Mattress King? With the ads on TV?

AVA: Yes, Jim Faircloth, that's him.

ELLERY: Hold on, Bob. (*to AVA*) I'm going to take this in the other room.

(ELLERY *exits, taking the cordless phone with him*. When he's gone, AVA *whirls on CUTTER*.)

AVA: (*hushed*) What are you doing here? I asked you not to.

CUTTER: Relax. It's on track. I could ask you the same question.

AVA: I left my notebook.

CUTTER: Right. Like I used to leave my cigarettes in your bedroom.

AVA: Meaning what?

CUTTER: Meaning an excuse to come back.

AVA: Oh please. Stop making such a big deal of everything.

CUTTER: Hey, no problem. If I know the Professor, he's flattered. Run with it. Flirt with him. Kiss his butt. It'll boost his confidence. He's got that meeting with Reverend Creepo coming up.

AVA: I'm so afraid he's going to do something weird.

CUTTER: Yeah, I know what you mean.

AVA: He's so confrontational lately.

CUTTER: He's like a rat in a maze. The closer to the cheese, the faster he runs.

(During the above, ELLERY has edged into the room, eavesdropping. AVA and CUTTER spot him and snap to.)

AVA: Bad news?

ELLERY: No, just news. Reverend Bob wants to see me tomorrow. About the chairmanship.

AVA: That's awesome.

CUTTER: Yeah, it's epic. Listen, Professor, I'll get out of your way. *(to AVA)* Nice to see you again, um—

AVA: Ava.

CUTTER: Ava. *(going; re ELLERY)* He's the best, isn't he? *(to ELLERY)* See ya, Professor.

(CUTTER exits, miming "Go for it" behind ELLERY'S back.)

ELLERY: So. You came back for your notebook.

AVA: Yeah, I guess maybe that was Freudian.

ELLERY: In what sense?

AVA: I guess I felt bad about leaving. Without saying goodbye.

ELLERY: I upset you before.

AVA: No, it's OK.

ELLERY: It's not OK. Can I offer you anything?

AVA: No, I really can't stay long. I have papers to grade.

ELLERY: What course?

AVA: Religion in the Media?

ELLERY: Right, I forgot, you're T.A.ing for Reverend Bob. How's that going?

AVA: We're doing angels.

ELLERY: What's he making them watch?

AVA: *Heaven Can Wait. Ghost.*

ELLERY: Now I definitely need a drink. Sure you won't have anything?

AVA: Is your wife here?

ELLERY: No, she left.

AVA: Maybe a glass of water?

ELLERY: Coming up. (*rummaging in cabinet*) My wife? Is at a church meeting. With the aforementioned Reverend Bob. What are they up to tonight? Are they merging foster homes and retirement centers? No, that was last week. Something about Christmas carols. Here we go.

(*ELLERY takes a bottle of Scotch and a small bottle of water out of the cabinet, gives AVA the bottle, pours his Scotch, during:*)

AVA: Thank you. I feel bad about what I said.

ELLERY: Said when?

AVA: Accusing you of torture. It's not torture. I love coming here. I love our sessions.

ELLERY: Thank you. Cheers.

AVA: Cheers. I was walking across the quad just now? And I got this eerie feeling, like when you're up at three in the morning and your room's making weird noises? I was like, yes, I get it, Battered Woman Syndrome. Why bother creating the universe, if it's just gonna run perfectly? Things have to go wrong. Well, I'm always thinking they will go wrong. When I used to go on car trips with my parents—when they were still together? Every car we passed, coming the other way, I was like, either it's gonna hit us or it's not. Equal chance of both.

ELLERY: Sounds like something I might say.

AVA: I know! Exactly.

(Pause.)

ELLERY: So how long have you known Cutter McCrea?

AVA: Never! I mean I knew of him. He was like your most brilliant student, wasn't he?

ELLERY: Until you.

AVA: Um, what exactly was he doing here?

ELLERY: He's looking for a job on the faculty.

AVA: Oh. So he has his Master's?

ELLERY: Apparently.

AVA: Well...when Reverend Bob leaves, you'll have at least one slot to fill.

ELLERY: You think your dad would approve of Cutter McCrea?

AVA: He might. I mean how would I know.

ELLERY: Was your dad very strict with you? Growing up.

AVA: Was and is. He's very protective.

ELLERY: About boys?

AVA: Well, yeah. Like fanatical. When I was sixteen...he was my date at a Purity Ball.

ELLERY: He took the pledge.

AVA: We both did. He promised to protect my chastity. I promised to remain a virgin until marriage.

ELLERY: And how has that worked out?

AVA: It's worked out fine.

ELLERY: In spite of temptations.

AVA: Yes, there've been temptations. *(pause)* It wasn't just...boys.

ELLERY: What else?

(Pause.)

AVA: I wanted to go to Princeton? And I applied there and I got in, but my dad nixed it at the last minute. He's got a thing about the Ivies. And he wanted me close. So I commuted. After my mother left us is when we really bonded. He's really smart. He's like he seems in those TV commercials? Larger than life.

ELLERY: Your dad is going to be there. When I meet with Reverend Spalding tomorrow.

AVA: Ohmigosh.

ELLERY: Yes, that's what that call was about. Why, what's the matter?

AVA: Eesh. How badly do you want this job?

ELLERY: It's not just a question of what I want. If I don't get the chair, they'll hire someone from outside... someone who thinks exactly like your dad. Turn this place into a Bible College.

AVA: Then you're going to have to lie.

ELLERY: About what?

AVA: “No atheist ever laid claim to Jerusalem”?

ELLERY: Yes, I wrote that.

AVA: So? What does it prove?

ELLERY: What does it have to prove? It’s a fact.

AVA: Oh, so there’s no such thing as Holy Ground? Nothing sacred worth fighting for?

ELLERY: What did I just say? I’m fighting for this job.

AVA: Just to keep people like my dad out?

ELLERY: No. So I can teach what I want to teach.

AVA: Well, OK.

ELLERY: You approve.

AVA: Yes, we approve. We want you to have that job.

ELLERY: We?

AVA: All of us. All your students. Listen, I really have to go now.
Thank you for the water.

(AVA starts out.)

ELLERY: Ava? You’re forgetting something, aren’t you?

(ELLERY picks up her notebook, opens it.)

ELLERY: *(reading)* “I want Professor R to have the chair but I’m so concerned about him. I have a feeling he’s headed for a huge fall.”
Is this the real reason you left this behind? You wanted me to read this?

AVA: Maybe. I don’t know.

ELLERY: Well, I appreciate the warning.

AVA: It's true, though. Every session lately, you go out of your way to bash God. You think God doesn't care what happens at this school?

ELLERY: I think God is indifferent at best.

AVA: Well, you're wrong. Sometimes, when I'm writing an essay for you? And I'm fighting to say what I think you don't want me to say? The words start to flow like God is directing my fingers.

ELLERY: We've all had that feeling. I have it every time I teach. It's called an alpha state.

AVA: *(pause; then suddenly)* What if I told you I'd seen Jesus?

ELLERY: I'd have to say you were hallucinating.

AVA: Gee, what a surprise.

ELLERY: Let me guess. You'd had too much to drink, you passed out, you woke up, he was standing at the foot of the bed.

AVA: Ohmigosh. I'm sorry I brought it up.

ELLERY: Did he look like anyone you know? Would I recognize him? What if your dad had caught you?

AVA: You are so wrong. About everything.

ELLERY: Cutter McCrea used to have long hair. Did that make him look like Jesus?

AVA: I never slept with Cutter McCrea, OK? If that's what you're insinuating. Or anybody else, and I resent you implying I did. Tell me, Professor, have you ever once prayed in your life?

ELLERY: I've been known to say "Give me strength."

AVA: Out loud?

ELLERY: Occasionally out loud.

AVA: If you really want this job? I suggest you pray louder.

(AVA exits. The door slams. ELLERY drains his drink. Blackout.)

Scene 3

(*ELLERY in front of a blackboard with the words **GOD, JESUS, LAIUS** and **OEDIPUS**. He's drawing arrows between them.*)

ELLERY: —Now remember, it was Laius who struck the first blow against Oedipus. The oracle told Laius his son was fated to murder him. So Laius tied Oedipus up on that hillside for the wild animals to eat. Bound his feet together. Crucified him, in effect. And why did God, the father, allow his son to die on the cross? Was it because he “so loved the world”? Jesus wondered about that, too, in his moment of crucifixion. See, the pagan roots of Christianity can be embarrassing. But why do people deny them? Are they afraid their faith will suffer? And if they stopped believing, what would happen? Is the Christian God the source of all morality?

(*ELLERY writes **WHAT IS MORAL IS SELF-EVIDENT** on the blackboard.*)

Sigmund Freud's favorite saying. On the other hand, if God is dead, then according to Nietzsche everything is permitted, and we get the horrors of the last century...perpetrated, in large measure, by godless men who placed themselves at the center of the universe....while, in this century, men of God continue to butcher each other over who owns the Holy Land.

(*Pause*)

Which reminds me. I was planning to take several students to Jerusalem this summer, but my wife refuses to chaperone. Holy relics really aren't her thing. Or holiness in general. She's a deacon of her church, never misses a Sunday, joins every committee, works tirelessly on behalf of the old, the orphaned, and the needy...but, as she likes to say, why make a religion out of it?

(*Pause.*)

Of course, when women do create religions they tend to be social in nature. Wicca, for example...

(*ELLERY has written **WITCH** on the board. Stares at what he's written. Erases it. Blackout.*)

Scene 4

(A room like the room in Scene 2, similarly furnished—the office of REVEREND BOB SPALDING. The various surfaces are now crowded with religious kitsch, including a Jesus Piggybank, a Star-of-David Slinky, a mosque-shaped prayer clock, Hindu finger puppets, and a TALKING JESUS DOLL. An acoustic guitar rests in one corner. The shuttered window now faces what might be the quad. On the walls, faith-themed movie posters—Going My Way and Ghost; a poster showing a cave man evolving over the centuries into Jesus Christ; and a painted-on-velvet copy of Fra Angelico’s “Christ Crowned with Thorns.” It’s the next day.

REVEREND BOB, *in clerical clothes, is gazing at a photograph. Someone knocks on the door.*)

REVEREND BOB: Just a second. Be right there.

(He goes over to the velvet Fra Angelico painting, unhooks it from the wall. Behind is a wall safe of the hotel variety. He opens it, quickly stows the photograph inside, closes it, replaces the velvet painting, unlocks the door. PHYLLIS enters, very agitated.)

REVEREND BOB: Phyllis. I didn’t expect—

PHYLLIS: Yes, I know you didn’t expect. What’s going on here, Bobby? Why are you garbed?

REVEREND BOB: Ellery didn’t tell you about the meeting.

PHYLLIS: Of course he told me. Why didn’t you tell me?

REVEREND BOB: I didn’t want to spoil the mood last night. Not that it mattered, in the end.

PHYLLIS: And that collar’s supposed to what? Put Jim Faircloth off his game? Why on earth did you invite him?

REVEREND BOB: He invited himself. I can’t afford to cross him.

PHYLLIS: Why not? Ellery will be in and you’ll be gone.

REVEREND BOB: If I ever want to come back.

PHYLLIS: Bobby, that’s never going to happen. They want you out in Hollywood. That’s why they hired you. They’re putting God back in the movies, and they need your advice.

REVEREND BOB: And if the movies don't perform?

PHYLLIS: They have plenty of other people to blame. Jim Faircloth has no business at this meeting. Who you appoint in your place is none of his business.

(REVEREND BOB *locks the door, takes out a pill vial..*)

What do you think you're doing? Bobby?

REVEREND BOB: I'm going to take another V.

PHYLLIS: Oh, don't be asinine.

REVEREND BOB: What if I never see you again?

PHYLLIS: Oh don't be maudlin. Of course we'll see each other.

REVEREND BOB: Is that what God wants? Then why did He send me this career opportunity? Was it to put half a continent between us? I have half a mind to stay right here.

PHYLLIS: Bobby, don't make me say this.

REVEREND BOB: Say what? Go ahead and say it.

PHYLLIS: I could embarrass you.

REVEREND BOB: Embarrass me how?

PHYLLIS: An anonymous post. I'm not saying I would. I'm saying I could be driven to it.

REVEREND BOB: A post about what?

PHYLLIS: You know what. Your little weakness?

REVEREND BOB: You would never. I can't believe it.

PHYLLIS: No, and you're going to Hollywood, and every movie you tell them to make will be a huge success, and Ellery's going to make us both proud. Let's both calm down and get the job done.

REVEREND BOB: All right. You're right. (*ruefully*) Ten dollars a pop, these pills.

(A knock on the door. They both freeze. The doorknob rattles.)

ELLERY: (*off*) Bob? You there? Open up.

REVEREND BOB: Just a second, Ellery.

(REVEREND BOB *opens the door*. ELLERY *enters*.)

ELLERY: Am I early? You said ten o'clock. (ELLERY *sees PHYLLIS and stiffens*.) Hello, Phyllis.

PHYLLIS: Hello, dear.

REVEREND BOB: I was just getting ready for the Mattress King.

ELLERY: And you need Phyllis for that?

PHYLLIS: Well, Phyllis was getting worried.

ELLERY: (*hangs up coat*) Worried about what?

REVEREND BOB: Well, that I was getting cold feet. That's why she came to see me. Something I said at the church last night. About the Hollywood job.

PHYLLIS: He was talking about his Media course.

REVEREND BOB: I showed my students *It's a Wonderful Life*. The greatest religious movie ever made, and all they could do was grumble it's in black and white.

PHYLLIS: And I thought he was putting down Hollywood.

ELLERY: Why would you think that?

PHYLLIS: No. Silly me.

REVEREND BOB: It's the opposite, of course.

ELLERY: Of course.

REVEREND BOB: Outside the academy there's a true religious hunger. You give them a Biblical theme, they book tickets weeks in advance. Do you know what carrot the studio's dangling? I may even get to sit on the ratings board.

ELLERY: Boring from within.

REVEREND BOB: Boring? In what sense?

ELLERY: Old Communist principle. In the other sense too, perhaps.

PHYLLIS: *(to REVEREND BOB)* He's teasing.

REVEREND BOB: Ellery, I know we've had our differences in the past—

ELLERY: *(re PHYLLIS)* —but now we have something in common.

PHYLLIS: Yes, we all want this meeting to go well. And as much as I'd love to stick around, I don't think Jim Faircloth would find that appropriate, do you?

ELLERY: We'll call you when it's over, Phyllis.

PHYLLIS: *(to ELLERY)* You'll watch yourself with Faircloth? Stay off your high horse.

ELLERY: I'll do what has to be done.

PHYLLIS: I know you will. *(kisses ELLERY)* Goodbye, darling. Goodbye, Bob. Good luck to us all.

(PHYLLIS takes her coat and exits.)

REVEREND BOB: Wonderful woman, your wife.

ELLERY: You've always liked her, Bob.

REVEREND BOB: So...because I'm sure Jim Faircloth will ask... which courses of mine are you planning to retain?

ELLERY: Which courses are you worried about?

REVEREND BOB: I wouldn't say I'm worried. I'm proud of my Media course. But you probably wouldn't want to teach it.

ELLERY: I'd rather have root canal.

REVEREND BOB: Right. You're not much interested in popular culture, are you, Ellery?

ELLERY: It's dead as a doornail.

REVEREND BOB: Oh really? I think it's all we really have.

ELLERY: It's over. High culture fell in love with low, and smothered it to death. Headline writers making puns on rock songs. Poets writing poems about the Flintstones. Religion teachers showing Patrick Swayze movies. The corpse is still lurching around, but everybody knows it reeks. But not to worry, Bob. Ava Faircloth can teach your Media course...if she can stand to.

REVEREND BOB: Good carrot to dangle in front of her dad.

ELLERY: You seem to have carrots on the brain, Bob.

REVEREND BOB: Do I? I suppose I do. Ixnay on the eudFray, while the Mattress King is here. So...let's rehearse. (*mock shitkicker accent*) Professor Rudge...do you believe Jesus rose from the dead? Or are you some kind of fence-straddling Deist?

ELLERY: None of your business what I believe.

REVEREND BOB: Ellery: Jim Faircloth is making it his business. (*shitkicker again*) I'll tell you what I think, Professor Rudge. Only a true believer should teach religion. What do you say to that, my friend?

(*During the above, JIM FAIRCLOTH has entered and stands listening at the half-closed door. ELLERY has noticed him, but has done nothing to stop REVEREND BOB, who catches on and stifles a gasp.*)

REVEREND BOB: Mr. Faircloth! Please come in. So glad you could make it.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: (*at door*) Ava, sweetheart, they're ready for us.

(*AVA enters. JIM FAIRCLOTH helps his daughter off with her coat.*)

REVEREND BOB: Ava, I'm surprised to see you here. Don't you have a section to teach?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: (*hanging up coats*) Just came from there. They're watching some sappy movie. Don't need a babysitter for that.

AVA: Daddy, this is Professor Rudge.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: (*shaking hands*) Good to meet you, Professor.

ELLERY: Mr. Faircloth.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Ava talks about you all the time.

REVEREND BOB: Mr. Faircloth, please sit down. I'm afraid we're shy a chair.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: That's all right, I don't mind if you stand.
 (REVEREND BOB *starts to wheel his desk chair over.*) I'm kidding, Reverend. Sit down, sweetheart. I'll perch here. (AVA *sits in a chair*; JIM FAIRCLOTH *on a low bookcase.* To REVEREND BOB) That your guitar there, Reverend?

REVEREND BOB: Yes, I play a little.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: For services?

REVEREND BOB: On occasion.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Makes me glad I'm a Baptist. So...where were you at when we came in?

REVEREND BOB: We were just, ah, going over the curriculum? What courses Professor Rudge might teach in my absence.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: (*to ELLERY*) You could drop that movie course, for starters. When I went to college here, we read books. Movies were strictly junk food. Where'd you take your degree, Reverend?

REVEREND BOB: Harvard.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Is that right. (*lightly*) I didn't know they had a film school.

REVEREND BOB: The Divinity School.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Harvard was founded by a preacher, wasn't it?

REVEREND BOB: Yes, I believe it was.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: And look at Harvard now. Sometimes the Ivory Tower is the Devil's second home.

ELLERY: You don't think it's his primary residence?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: The Ivy Tower, yes. Harvard, for sure. Ninth Circle of Hell, from what I hear.

REVEREND BOB: (*squirming*) Regrettably, you're right. Though a man with Professor Rudge's qualifications....his deep learning...his passion....his breadth of publication...he could probably teach anywhere, Harvard, Princeton....and yet...for that very reason....he prefers to remain here.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: His courses are popular?

REVEREND BOB: They fill up faster than anyone's in the department. Mine included.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: No surprise there. And no guarantee of quality either. The best teachers in my experience? Are feared. Hated, even. Now Ava doesn't hate you, Professor, or this meeting would be over before it started. But I do get the sense, little things she says, books of yours she brings home, that her spiritual development is being seriously tampered with. Reverend, you were posing a question when we came in, and I'm gonna put it to my daughter now. Ava, does Professor Rudge strike you as a man of faith?

AVA: We all are, Daddy.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Are what? All who?

AVA: Programmed for belief. Isn't that right, Professor?

ELLERY: That's right.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Explain that please. Pretend I'm your student.

ELLERY: We fear the unknown. We give it a godly face. That brings the tribe together. The tribe survives.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: You're saying God is built into our genes.

ELLERY: We're also hard-wired to kill people who don't resemble us. Have as much sex as we can get away with. Devour the menopausal in time of famine.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: So the Devil's in our DNA as well.

ELLERY: Your terminology, not mine.

REVEREND BOB: Yes, but we take some of this Darwinism on faith too, don't we? Isn't that fair to say?

ELLERY: Darwin can be proved or disproved. Unlike, say, the Assumption of the Virgin.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: If I was a Catholic, I might give you an argument.

ELLERY: You are giving me an argument.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Hey, I'm just getting warmed up. You really think religions are "out of control"?

ELLERY: Out of control and running half the world.

AVA: Daddy, he's not talking about the Baptists.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Who then? The Muslims?

ELLERY: The Islamists, yes, and the Christianists—

JIM FAIRCLOTH: —and the Zionists? You wouldn't leave them out, would you? You're not Jewish, are you?

ELLERY: No, but thanks for asking.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: You kinda harp on the Jews, Professor. Half the books my daughter brings home.

ELLERY: I have a soft spot in my heart for the Jews. They revere a book—the Talmud—which teaches them to question everything. That's why the great revolutionaries are Jews: Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Karl Marx—

JIM FAIRCLOTH: You're calling Karl Marx great?

ELLERY: Marx, Freud, Einstein—and Jesus. It's why Judaism never caught on with the masses. Too bookish. Too ambiguous. Too vague. No heaven, no hell, no graven images. How can you sell a religion without graven images? Christianity was a brilliant improvement. All that blood and suffering—surefire stuff.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: You saying Jews don't know how to suffer?

ELLERY: It may be why they suffer. It may be the Jews killed Moses in the desert. They didn't want the Commandments, they wanted the Golden Calf. So they murdered him. Jesus Christ is the risen Moses. The crucifixion enacts the murder, and the resurrection undoes it. And the Jews get blamed for killing him again.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: I don't follow that at all.

AVA: It's a mythic explanation, Daddy.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Whatever that is.

ELLERY: A highbrow fairy tale. Like the Bible, only fancier.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Well, it sounds anti-Semitic to me.

ELLERY: It is. It's the root of anti-Semitism.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: What about Islam? And keep it short.

ELLERY: Islam has its virtues, but it's fairly one-note. It's got a made-up-in-one-night quality, like Mormonism.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: And this Shia/Sunni business?

ELLERY: Narcissism of small differences.

AVA: Like the Serbs and the Croats, Daddy.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Texas chili, Mexican chili.

ELLERY: There you go.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Sealy and Certa.

ELLERY: All good examples.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: OK, we're getting someplace. What about Jesus? Did he rise from the dead, in your opinion?

ELLERY: I can't prove he did. I can't prove he didn't. Will all the air suddenly leave this room? Will Reverend Bob burst into flame? Could happen. Theoretically. But highly unlikely.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Do you go to church, Professor?

ELLERY: You think God really cares if I go to church? It ever occur to you God might not want to be worshipped? It might actually annoy him, people singing his praises all the time? You think God doesn't cringe when he's thanked at the Grammys?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: I don't pretend to know how God feels about anything. All I know is, he answers my prayers.

ELLERY: For instance.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: When my wife left me and I had to raise Ava by myself—I never could have done it without God's help.

ELLERY: God was your *au pair*. Why did your wife leave you?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Not sure that's any of your concern. She joined a rock band.

ELLERY: Christian rock?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: More in the Joan Jett arena.

ELLERY: And God consoled you for your loss.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: He's never failed me yet.

ELLERY: And for every lottery winner who prayed for a million bucks there's a million people out a dollar. For every boxing champ genuflecting before his Creator there's a million poor Haitians sticking pins in rag dolls.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: (*to AVA*) Is this what he wants you to believe?

AVA: No! He wants us to think for ourselves.

REVEREND BOB: Exactly! He's not undermining anybody's faith. He's just trying things on for size, aren't you, Ellery?

(ELLERY *hands* REVEREND BOB *his guitar*.)

ELLERY: Here, Bob, play us something. How about a chorus of "Why Can't We All Just Get Along"?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: He's got your number, Reverend.

REVEREND BOB: (*to ELLERY*) I'm starting to think you are the Devil after all.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: (*to REVEREND BOB*) If you think he's the Devil, why would you turn your department over to him?

(REVEREND BOB *stares balefully at ELLERY.*)

ELLERY: What's the matter, Bob, cat got your tongue?

REVEREND BOB: How does your wife put up with you.

ELLERY: Same way she puts up with you. Leads us both around by the nose.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: (*to AVA*) Am I sensing something here?

REVEREND BOB: Ava, it's time you got back to your class. Mr. Faircloth, thank you for coming in.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Whoa, Ava's not going anyplace. We are not done here, no way. You aim to promote this man or not?

(*During the above, CUTTER has entered, unnoticed.*)

REVEREND BOB: When I've made my decision, I'll notify the board. (*sees CUTTER*) I'm sorry, what do you want? We're in a meeting.

CUTTER: (*to ELLERY*) Looks like I got here just in time.

REVEREND BOB: Who are you? I know you. You're in my Holocaust class, aren't you?

CUTTER: Yeah, that was only ten years ago—before you 86ed me from the Masters program. (*to JIM FAIRCLOTH*) You must be Jim Faircloth. I'm Cutter McCrea. An honor to meet you, sir. (*to REVEREND BOB*) Whoa, this is some museum, Reverend. Fra Angelico on velvet, that is way cool. (*picks up piggybank*) Jesus Saves. I get it. Hey, a Jewish Slinky. Awesome. (*picks up JESUS DOLL*) Wow, this is vintage.

(*CUTTER pulls the string on the JESUS DOLL.*)

JESUS DOLL: *BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS.*

CUTTER: My sentiments exactly. (*to JESUS DOLL*) You read my mind.

REVEREND BOB: Put that down and leave my office.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Keep your shirt on, Reverend. (*to CUTTER*) You say you went to this school? (*re ELLERY*) Did you study with this man?

CUTTER: Best teacher I ever had. An inspiration to us all. Where do you keep your Bibles, Reverend? Never mind, I see where.
(*hands Bible to JIM FAIRCLOTH*)

JIM FAIRCLOTH: What do you want me to do with it?

ELLERY: Pick a verse, any verse.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: OK, here's one of my personal favorites. John 2:15.

CUTTER: "And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables, and said Take these things hence—"

ELLERY: (*indicating the "museum"*) "—Make not my Father's house a house of merchandise"!

JIM FAIRCLOTH: That's the one. So...this man didn't discourage you from reading the Bible?

CUTTER: Are you kidding? He helped me understand the grisly parts. I never did get the Old Testament until Professor Rudge gave me the key.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: And what's the key?

CUTTER: God's an asshole.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: (*to AVA*) Is that what he told you too?

AVA: (*uneasily*) He's paraphrasing.

CUTTER: He didn't start out to be an asshole. No father wishes his son ill from the cradle. Strike that. Some do—may my dad rest in peace. Anyhow, God got impatient with His creation. Man turned out worse than He ever intended, and in His image, too. He punished us with plagues and floods, slaughtered folks left and right, till nobody loved Him anymore. So He sent his only begotten son to make friends with humankind. But Jesus wouldn't stick with the program. When Christ said, "Father, forgive them," what he really meant was, "Dad, I forgive you. (*points to himself*) From now on, I'm in charge."

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Is that what the Professor taught you?

CUTTER: Learned some of it first hand.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: You don't think he risks going to Hell?

CUTTER: No, sir, because he's not a hypocrite. Hell was invented to punish the Pharisees, isn't that right, Professor?

ELLERY: That's right. (*to REVEREND BOB*) The ones who'd rather preach morality than practice it. The ones who sneer at fundamentalists in private, and kiss their ass in public.

CUTTER: Whereas people like Professor Rudge, they're passionate. You gotta learn to tolerate their passion, like they learned to tolerate you.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: But he doesn't tolerate me. He thinks I'm deluded.

CUTTER: And who's to say you're not? Who's to say we're not all living in God's dream?

AVA: Cutter.

CUTTER: What.

(*CUTTER'S beeper is going off.*)

REVEREND BOB: What's that.

CUTTER: Nothing. A little reminder. (*turns beeper off*) Here's the thing, sir. Professor Rudge keeps the rest of us honest.

AVA: He tests our faith to strengthen it.

CUTTER: Exactly. You got these fanatics today in every denomination. They've kidnapped God and they're holding him for ransom. How'd you use to put it, Professor?

ELLERY: Bad Christians drive out good Christians.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: I know who you mean. They're hell to do business with. Whatever they propose, it's Gospel. Walking with Jesus, 24/7.

CUTTER: Next best thing to being Jesus.

REVEREND BOB: That's enough. I've heard enough. The meeting's adjourned.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Hell it is. You haven't said if you're promoting him.

REVEREND BOB: No, I haven't said....and it's still my decision and my decision alone and....no, in fact, I'm not promoting him.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Well, I might be with you there.

AVA: Daddy!

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Listen, I'm glad he inspired you. But not everyone is as smart as you, Ava. Or you, Cutter. There are some very shaky people in this world, and they could end up faithless and godless behind what this atheist is preaching.

AVA: Daddy, it's so wrong to call him that.

CUTTER: It's a lame word. Atheist. We all have God in us. Some more than others.

AVA: Anyhow, most atheists are kinder, gentler people.

CUTTER: That's true. They've done studies.

REVEREND BOB: Kind like Stalin. Gentle like Hitler.

CUTTER: I've got news for you, Reverend. If Christ was walking the Earth today—and who's to say he isn't—for all the evil done in God's name, he'd be practically forced to preach atheism.

(ELLERY *shuffles the Jewish Slinky.*)

ELLERY: And he certainly wouldn't put up with this crap.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: (*to* REVEREND BOB) They're making some interesting points, Reverend.

REVEREND BOB: They're talking rubbish! I've heard enough sophistry to last me the rest of my days! As soon as you all leave I'm calling a headhunter. (*to* ELLERY) Not only am I not promoting you, you're fired.

AVA: (*appalled*) No! You can't fire him.

CUTTER: He has tenure.

REVEREND BOB: Yes, and his tenure is subject to moral review.
The fact is, and it's a well-known fact, Professor Rudge flirts openly with his female students.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Hell, that sounds like every professor I ever had.

REVEREND BOB: He drifts off in class. Falls silent for minutes at a time.

CUTTER: He's communing with the mysteries!

REVEREND BOB: *(to CUTTER)* And you. You go back wherever you came from. They must have repadded your room by now.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Now just a minute, Reverend—

(CUTTER pulls a string on the JESUS DOLL.)

JESUS DOLL: *JUDGE NOT, THAT YE BE NOT JUDGED.*

CUTTER: You hear that? That's the word of God right there.

(A knock on the door. ELLERY opens it. PHYLLIS enters.)

PHYLLIS: How is it going? I expected a call by now.

ELLERY: Not as smoothly as you hoped.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: I'm sorry, who is this?

PHYLLIS: I'm Phyllis. Professor Rudge's wife? We met at the Provost's tea. Ava, hello dear. Bob, what's happening?

REVEREND BOB: It's just as well you weren't here, Phyllis. Your husband, I'm sorry to report, has sabotaged his career—with the assistance of this rude young man.

PHYLLIS: Ohmigod, it's the boy from the library! What is he doing here, Ellery, have you completely lost your senses—

(During the above, CUTTER has gone over to the Fra Angelico painting and taken it down. He's punching out a code on the number panel of the safe.)

REVEREND BOB: No! Get away from there!

CUTTER: Professor? Check it out.

(REVEREND BOB *grabs* CUTTER.)

PHYLLIS: Somebody help. He's crazy.

(PHYLLIS *takes out her iPhone, trains it on* CUTTER.
REVEREND BOB *punches out a number on his desk phone.*)

REVEREND BOB: Security? This is Reverend Spalding. Please send someone to my office, ASAP. I need you to quell a disturbance. Durwood Hall, room 119.

(ELLERY *opens the safe and extracts a pile of photos.*)

ELLERY: Well, well. What have we here.

REVEREND BOB: On second thought...don't send anybody. Hello? Hello? (*hangs up*) Please. I want you all to leave now.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Hold on, Reverend. (*peers over* ELLERY'S *shoulder*) What is this. What am I looking at.

ELLERY: The Naked Nativity.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Good Lord.

ELLERY: (*passing out photos*) Solomon and his Bitches....Onan spilling his seed.... John the Baptist's head...giving head....

CUTTER: Yeah, and check this out too.

(CUTTER *takes a strap-on out of the safe.*)

ELLERY: Aaron's Rod.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: (*re photo*) Great green Jesus. Is this what I think it is?

ELLERY: Yes. That's Our Lord—servicing Mary. Mary Magdalene, that is. You have to draw the line somewhere.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Where the devil did these come from?

REVEREND BOB: Well, that's precisely the point. This was research! I teach courses in this material!

ELLERY: Images of Satan.

REVEREND BOB: That's right. That was the class.

ELLERY: Porn is the Devil's way of mocking God's world.

REVEREND BOB: Yes, and you can spare us your usual sarcasm. Phyllis, what are you doing, don't look at those.

ELLERY: You haven't seen them, Phyllis?

PHYLLIS: No! Why would you even say that?

REVEREND BOB: *(re strap-on)* Young man, stop waving that thing around and leave this office.

ELLERY: Relax, Reverend. The Lord forgives you...*(to PHYLLIS)* as he forgave the woman taken in adultery.

CUTTER: Amen!

PHYLLIS: *(re CUTTER)* Will someone get him out of here!

AVA: *(to CUTTER)* Please, you should go.

CUTTER: Don't worry, I'm going. Mr. Faircloth, nice to make your acquaintance at last.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Good to meet you, Cutter McCrea.

CUTTER: Professor?

ELLERY: So long, Cutter.

(CUTTER exits. REVEREND BOB slams the material back in the safe, starts out.)

PHYLLIS: Where are you going? Don't rush off.

REVEREND: If you'll all excuse me, I have a class to teach.

(REVEREND BOB exits.)

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Guess I oughta be leaving too. *(to ELLERY)* Unless you have something else to say to me.

ELLERY: I've said all I want to, Jim.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Right. *(to AVA)* Sweetheart, can I drop you anyplace?

AVA: No, Daddy, I'm OK.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Mrs. Rudge? Nice to see you again.

(JIM FAIRCLOTH grabs his coat and exits.)

PHYLLIS: Well. That was hideous.

ELLERY: But fairly enlightening.

(RYAN, a security guard, knocks on the door jamb. He's wearing a heavy jacket, and is fingering the taser at his belt.)

RYAN: Hello? Someone called Security? Report of a disturbance?

PHYLLIS: You're a little late. A young man was here creating havoc.

RYAN: Was anybody hurt?

PHYLLIS: Not yet. I did manage to get him on video. *(shows RYAN her cell)* See there? Wait till he turns around. There. That's him. You have a Watch List, don't you? For homeless drifters, that sort of thing?

RYAN: Yes, ma'am.

PHYLLIS: I'd check to see if Cutter McCrea is on it. And if you're smart you'll put a cordon around the campus.

AVA: Why? You don't have to do that!

PHYLLIS: I'm sorry, what's your interest in this boy?

AVA: I just don't think it's called for, that's all. He's not a drifter.

PHYLLIS: *(to RYAN)* I'm sending Security the video.

RYAN: Thank you, ma'am. Appreciate it. Bye, all.

(RYAN exits. ELLERY has picked up the JESUS DOLL.)

PHYLLIS: What are you doing with that? Put it down. What's in heaven's name has happened to you, Ellery?

(ELLERY *pulls the string on the JESUS DOLL.*)

JESUS DOLL: *I AM WHO I AM.*

PHYLLIS: When you've pulled yourself together, I'll be at the house. This is what comes of taking God too seriously.

(PHYLLIS *exits.*)

AVA: (*pause*) We should've warned you. I'm sorry.

ELLERY: How long have you and Cutter been together?

AVA: We met in Bible Study. I was eight, he was thirteen.

ELLERY: And your dad? He didn't know about it.

AVA: Oh no. He'd have killed us both. Oh gosh, what are we gonna do now?

(ELLERY *pulls a string on the JESUS DOLL.*)

JESUS DOLL: *FOLLOW ME.*

AVA: You were so brave to stand up to my dad. (*no response*) Professor? Hello? Are you OK?

ELLERY: I was just thinking.

AVA: About what?

ELLERY: This lemonade stand I used to have.

AVA: OK. (*pause*) What about it?

ELLERY: I was so proud of that lemonade stand. I built it myself...lettered the sign: Lemonade Five Cents....One day this girl comes up to the stand....beautiful little girl....from the neighborhood.....She's got a shiny new dime in her hand....She gives me the dime....I give her back a nickel....Now we've both got five cents...But she's got my lemonade.

AVA: Is that some kind of parable? Professor Rudge?

ELLERY: You'd better try and find Cutter, don't you think? Before Security does?

AVA: Right. You're right. *(heads out, turns)* I'm sorry...about everything. Goodbye.

(AVA waits for a reply, doesn't get it, heads out.)

ELLERY: Ava?

(AVA's gone. ELLERY picks up the JESUS DOLL again. Slowly pulls the string.)

JESUS DOLL: *REPENT: FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND.*

(Blackout.)

Scene 5

(*ELLERY on the lecture platform.*)

ELLERY: The lecture today was going to be on Jesus—Jesus the political revolutionary, Jesus the denouncer of the rich and powerful, Jesus the advocate for the poor. Christ was all of these things, but today I'd like to focus on his miracles. I have a theory about the miracles of Jesus. I think in ancient times the human psyche was more suggestible than the modern mind. There was no bright line between dreams, hallucinations, and reality. And if Jesus had delusions of grandeur, as his harshest critics claim, then who knows? When Jesus talked about walking on water, maybe his followers saw him walking on water. Maybe Jesus was a master hypnotist. A spiritual transmitter. Wouldn't that be a greater miracle than turning water into wine? To make others see your thoughts, strange as they might be?

(*A fire alarm bell starts ringing.*)

It's OK. Keep your seats. No reason to panic. It's not a drill. They're just testing the system. They're just testing the system.

(*The alarm stops.*)

There. So. Where was I. Yes. What crazy courage Jesus had. What sublime courage. He didn't have to be crucified. He could have avoided the whole ordeal. He went willingly to his fate, and with no thought of founding a religion. That was all Paul's doing. All Jesus asked is that we emulate him. Follow him. Wherever it leads us....through suffering....toward the light of the soul's true nature....

(*Pause.*)

...what the Jains call *moksha*.

(*ELLERY writes **MOKSHA** on the board.*)

Moksha. When we know who we truly are and what we must do to fulfill that knowledge. *Moksha!*

(*Blackout.*)

Scene 6

(ELLERY, fully clothed, including his shoes, is lying on the couch in his office. His overcoat lies in a heap on the floor. It's early the next morning.)

AVA appears at the office window, raps on the glass. ELLERY stirs from his reverie, goes to the window, lighting up when he sees who it is. Opens the window.)

ELLERY: Ava! What are you doing out here?

(ELLERY helps her climb in. Then, outside, someone whistles.)

ELLERY: Is that who I think it is?

AVA: Please, you have to help us. *(no answer)* I didn't know where else to bring him. Is it OK?

(Pause.)

ELLERY: Yes, it's OK.

AVA: *(whispers out window)* Cutter! It's OK! *(to ELLERY)* Thank God for you.

(CUTTER climbs in the window.)

CUTTER: Sorry about this, man.

AVA: They've been searching all the dorms.

CUTTER: They even posted a man at my motel.

AVA: Is she up yet?

ELLERY: Is who up?

AVA: Your wife.

ELLERY: *(vaguely)* What day is it?

CUTTER: It's Saturday, dude. OK if I lock this door? *(locks it)* Spend the night here?

ELLERY: Can you spend the night—? Here?

CUTTER: I'm asking did you sleep here. In your office.

ELLERY: Yes. I slept here. At least I think I slept.

CUTTER: With your shoes on. That's not a great sign.

ELLERY: *(to AVA)* Were you gone all night? Your dad's apt to call the real police.

CUTTER: No, that's not gonna happen.

AVA: He wouldn't risk losing face.

CUTTER: Her dad's a proud guy. That's why we came at him sidewise. That guy Spalding, man. I was this close to getting my Master's when my dad died. I'm the first to admit, I did go a little squirrely. I'll never forget the intake shrink. She goes, "Oh, that's who you think you are? We've got two Jesuses already, what are we gonna tell them?" This old black dude in lockdown? He kept addressing me as Lord. "Lord Mountbatten, is it I?" He used to get on my case in Group. "Let's think this over, people. What would Lord Mountbatten do." I had to laugh, 'cause by that time they gave me Depakote and the whole thing was under control. So what do you think, Professor? I think we're still in the game. God doesn't give us more than we can bear. You, me and Ava, we can still wrestle this whole deal around.

(Doorbell.)

CUTTER: Oh shit.

PHYLLIS: *(off)* Ellery, can you get the door? I'm not dressed!

CUTTER: *(hushed)* Hand to God, we were only trying to get you the job.

(Doorbell again.)

PHYLLIS: *(off)* Ellery, will you please get that!

(ELLERY hesitates.)

AVA: Please....for me.

(Pause.)

ELLERY: Second door on the right is the cellar. Watch out for the traps in the crawlspace. And the rat-turds.

CUTTER: God will reward you, Professor. I guarantee.

(ELLERY unlocks the office door. CUTTER and AVA exit hastily. Doorbell again.)

PHYLLIS: *(off)* Oh for God's sake! I'm coming, I'm coming!

(ELLERY lies back down on the couch.)

PHYLLIS: *(off; approaching)* Ellery, what in the world are you doing?—

(PHYLLIS enters, in a nightgown and robe.)

PHYLLIS: —Why didn't you answer the door?

ELLERY: *(pretending to wake)* What is it. What time is it.

PHYLLIS: You slept in your clothes?

ELLERY: Apparently I did.

PHYLLIS: Well get up, we have a visitor. *(calls)* Ryan, you can come in.

(RYAN enters, hand on his taser.)

RYAN: Sorry to bother you, sir. We're looking for Cutter McCrea? He was seen heading for your house. A girl was with him.

PHYLLIS: Ava Faircloth.

RYAN: You hear from either of these people, sir?

ELLERY: I can't help you, Ryan.

RYAN: Cutter McCrea hasn't tried to contact you?

ELLERY: I'm not clear on what he's done.

PHYLLIS: Turns out I was right. He is on a Watch List. He was hospitalized three years ago. Two weeks on a locked ward. I suppose that doesn't worry you.

ELLERY: Not especially, no.

RYAN: Sir, you mind if I take a look around the property?

PHYLLIS: Of course he doesn't mind. That's what you're here for.

(RYAN *exits.*)

PHYLLIS: Don't you think we should call Ava's father?

ELLERY: Absolutely not.

PHYLLIS: Why? *In loco parentis*, after all. We're skating on very thin ice here.

ELLERY: I said leave it alone.

(*Pause.*)

PHYLLIS: Maybe you're right. It might not reflect well on us. Why did this boy show up in Bob's office? What did he expect to gain?

ELLERY: He wants to teach here.

PHYLLIS: Oh please. He's out of his mind.

ELLERY: That might not disqualify him.

PHYLLIS: Ellery, please, will you stop talking nonsense!

(*Doorbell.*)

PHYLLIS: Are you going to get that?

ELLERY: No.

(PHYLLIS *exits*. ELLERY *lies back on the couch*. After a moment, PHYLLIS *enters*, with JIM FAIRCLOTH. JIM FAIRCLOTH *has a sleepless, agitated look.*)

PHYLLIS: Darling, look who's here.

(ELLERY *doesn't budge.*)

PHYLLIS: El-le-ry!

(ELLERY *comes to.*)

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Mind if we talk a minute, Professor?

PHYLLIS: Of course he doesn't mind. May I take your coat, Mr. Faircloth?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: No, ma'am, I have a plane to catch. OK if I speak to your husband alone?

PHYLLIS: Not at all. I'll go get dressed. We're so glad you're here.

(PHYLLIS *exits, miming encouragement to ELLERY.*)

JIM FAIRCLOTH: You do know why I'm here, don't you.

ELLERY: Haven't a clue.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Has my daughter been in touch with you?

ELLERY: You mean today.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Yes, of course I mean today.

ELLERY: Why don't you tell me what this is about.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Ava didn't sleep home last night.

ELLERY: Is that unusual?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: It's not the first time, no. She's got friends in the dorms, now and then she sleeps there. Listen, can I trouble you for an eye-opener? Unless you don't keep spirits in the house.

ELLERY: All I have is Scotch.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Scotch is fine. I'll take it neat.

(ELLERY *rummages in the cabinet.*)

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Three fingers is good. (ELLERY *pours, hands him the drink.*) Before a flight, you know? Didn't used to get so nervous.

ELLERY: Success will do that to people.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: And no amount of praying seems to help. And I hate drinking at airports and I do so much traveling lately.

ELLERY: Which makes it hard to keep an eye on Ava.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: That is true. And maybe it's why I'm afraid to fly. See, it came to me, Professor. Where I saw that Cutter McCrea before. He was shimmying up my drainpipe. I believe he once left his smokes in my daughter's bedroom. Did you know they knew each other?

ELLERY: Not until yesterday.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: How did he memorize all those verses? That would take some kind of idiot savant, and for sure that boy's no idiot. And how did he know about the dirty pictures? You think he sneaked into Spalding's office when the Reverend wasn't looking?

ELLERY: All's fair in the war against the Evil One.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: So what's your guess? Did my daughter spend the night with Cutter McCrea?

ELLERY: I can't tell you, Jim.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Can't or won't? Never mind. If her virtue's been corrupted, I'm gonna hold you responsible.

(Knock on door.)

JIM FAIRCLOTH: That better not be Cutter McCrea.

(REVEREND BOB enters, in civilian clothes and an overcoat, carrying a briefcase.)

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Well well. We were just referencing you, Reverend.

REVEREND BOB: *(to ELLERY)* Excuse me, Phyllis didn't say you had company.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Sit down, Reverend.

REVEREND BOB: Are you sure? *(to ELLERY)* I can come back later.

ELLERY: What do you want, Bob?

REVEREND BOB: I've come to apologize.

ELLERY: No need, Bob.

REVEREND BOB: Oh yes. I've had a dark night of the soul.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: I certainly hope so.

REVEREND BOB: Yesterday? Was the worst day of my life.
Ellery, Jim, you were right about my Media Course. Movies can take care of themselves. As for that course in satanic imagery...no question about it, I did cross a line there. From now on, I'm sticking to theology.

ELLERY: What do you mean, from now on?

REVEREND BOB: I want to atone for my mistakes. I can't possibly do penance amid the fleshpots of Los Angeles. And that's why I've decided to stay on at the university. No hard feelings on my part, Ellery, and I hope not on yours. Status quo ante bellum.

(PHYLLIS, *now wearing a housedress, bursts into the room.*)

PHYLLIS: So...what can I get anybody?

ELLERY: Sit down, Phyllis.

PHYLLIS: Why? What's wrong?

ELLERY: Reverend Bob has decided to stay on as department chair.

PHYLLIS: No. Why.

ELLERY: Obviously, my wife has mixed feelings.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Well, I don't. And neither does the Provost.

REVEREND BOB: I'm not sure I understand.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Don't bullshit me, Reverend. Pardon my language, ma'am. (to REVEREND BOB) You think I didn't inform the Provost about your secret hobby?

REVEREND BOB: It's not a hobby. I thought I explained its academic relevance—

JIM FAIRCLOTH: I said cut the bullshit! Do you really want to end up on YouTube?

REVEREND BOB: YouTube? How could I end up on YouTube?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: (*to PHYLLIS*) You got it all on your cellphone, didn't you.

PHYLLIS: Yes, I did.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: There you are. You don't want Hollywood to hear about it, do you? Granted, it might relax the creative types in Gomorrah. Prove you're not just another Holy Joe. But I wouldn't bank on it.

(*Silence.*)

REVEREND BOB: All right.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: All right what?

REVEREND BOB: I won't fight you. I'll go to Los Angeles as planned. Will a letter of resignation help? With the YouTube issue, I mean.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Won't be necessary. Just make sure you clear out your office—of everything, you understand me?

REVEREND BOB: Yes, I understand.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: And speaking of offices, Professor, this place of yours here is an ungodly mess. They say a messy room can be a mark of genius. Or a sign of mental disorder. Which would you say applies to you?

ELLERY: Jim, don't you have a plane to catch? I think we've baited each other enough.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Isn't that your M.O. as a teacher—baiting people? Well, that can change too. I've seen it happen in business. Give a man a little stature, make him a chairman, first thing you know, he's cleaned up his act. And his office.

PHYLLIS: Ohmigod.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: First I thought, no way in hell. But then I prayed on it. And God didn't tell me any different. If He's up to the challenge, so am I.

PHYLLIS: You've cleared this with the Provost?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Your husband's been thoroughly vetted. Saw to that myself. *(to ELLERY)* You pay your taxes, your credit rating is AOK, no secret vices as far as I can tell.

PHYLLIS: Ellery's vice is he has no vices.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Solid marriage?

PHYLLIS: Oh yes. Oh this is wonderful news!

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Not so fast. God did lay down one condition.

PHYLLIS: What condition?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: He wants you to come to my church and be washed in the Blood of the Lamb.

(Pause. JIM FAIRCLOTH bursts out laughing.)

JIM FAIRCLOTH: I almost had you, didn't I? Admit it. *(to PHYLLIS)* You. You definitely bought it. But now for the real catch.

PHYLLIS: Ellery, he's speaking to you.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: He insists you teach a course in atheism.

PHYLLIS: Oh, well. I'm sure Ellery won't object to that.

ELLERY: *(to JIM FAIRCLOTH)* Is this what God wants?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Absolutely. You teach all the other religions, why not that one? Maybe if you laid out the fundamentals, people would see atheism for what it is—a fad without a future. Hell, if our faiths can't stand up to scrutiny, they're not worth much, are they? What's the most God-obsessed religion in the world with the most downtrodden followers?

ELLERY: Voodoo.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: I was kinda thinking of the Baptists, but I take your point. Reason I'm one? Believe me, I have no illusions. I was born in a Christian nation, of Baptist parentage, that's why I am what I am. If God wanted me in Baghdad, that's where He woulda put me.

ELLERY: God doesn't play dice with geography.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: There you go. In my opinion you're going to Hell for your religion, but the chair is yours.

PHYLLIS: God bless you, Mr. Faircloth.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: And now I have to make tracks for the airport. May I use your boys' room first? I hate airport bathrooms as much as I hate airport bars.

ELLERY: Second door on your right.

(JIM FAIRCLOTH *hands a business card to* ELLERY.)

JIM FAIRCLOTH: These are my numbers. In case you do hear from my daughter.

(JIM FAIRCLOTH *exits.*)

PHYLLIS: Well. Isn't this something.

REVEREND BOB: (*numbly*) I don't know whether to cheer or cry.

PHYLLIS: Hadn't you better make plans of your own?

REVEREND BOB: Yes, I ought to make some calls. Book a flight. Find a place to live. Get used to the climate out there.

PHYLLIS: The sooner the better, Bob.

REVEREND BOB: But before I go, I want to make a confession.

PHYLLIS: Bob, you've said entirely enough already.

REVEREND BOB: I broke a Commandment.

PHYLLIS: We'd rather not hear about it, Bob.

ELLERY: Which one?

PHYLLIS: (*quickly*) The Tenth.

REVEREND BOB: Which one is the Tenth?

ELLERY: Coveting.

REVEREND BOB: Coveting. Right. I...I coveted your, um, attributes. Your popularity. Your evaluations.

ELLERY: What about my slaves?

REVEREND BOB: Your slaves?

ELLERY: “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s slaves.” OK to own slaves, according to Jehovah. Just don’t covet them. Did you?

REVEREND BOB: If you mean your research assistants....yes, in the case of Ava Faircloth, it’s true, I did. I coveted her.

ELLERY: How about my wife?

PHYLLIS: Ellery, for pity’s sake, please stop.

REVEREND BOB: I was jealous of you, Ellery. Can we let it go at that?

(REVEREND BOB *opens his briefcase. Takes out the JESUS DOLL.*)

REVEREND BOB: (*hands JESUS DOLL to ELLERY*) This is for you. Something to remember me by. I’m passing the torch.

PHYLLIS: Bob, don’t be silly—

REVEREND BOB: Maybe it’ll bring you luck. It did me, at least for a while. Listen, I’m glad I got things off my chest. I feel purged now. I feel clean. (*extends his hand*)

ELLERY: (*shaking his hand*) Every time I wipe my ass, I’ll think of you.

PHYLLIS: Ellery!

REVEREND BOB: I’ll miss that about you, Ellery. Goodbye, Phyllis. Please think kindly of me. Don’t bother, I’ll let myself out.

PHYLLIS: Goodbye, Bob.

(REVEREND BOB *exits.*)

PHYLLIS: Well, goodness, this has been quite a morning. I told you everything would work out, didn’t I?

ELLERY: You advised me to be civil, as I recall.

PHYLLIS: Yes, but I saw where you were headed. So I sent up a few prayers myself.

ELLERY: And they were answered.

PHYLLIS: Isn't it wonderful?

ELLERY: Where did it usually happen?

PHYLLIS: Where did what usually happen.

ELLERY: Here? No.

PHYLLIS: Ellery, I don't know what you're talking about.

ELLERY: Not his house. Crowded street. Too many students going by. His office? Same problem. The rectory?

PHYLLIS: Ellery, please.

ELLERY: Really, where? I'm curious. A hotel? A motel?

PHYLLIS: Do we have to go into this now?

ELLERY: It's now or never, Phyllis.

PHYLLIS: (*pause*) Motel.

ELLERY: Which motel?

PHYLLIS: Not the one in town center.

ELLERY: The one on Route 10. The short-stay motel.

PHYLLIS: Yes. That one.

ELLERY: Who paid?

PHYLLIS: Ellery, please don't rub it in, I'm so ashamed. You and I, we weren't having sex. Then Bob got the nibble from Hollywood. At first he didn't want you to have the chair. Then he asked me to lunch. Then late nights at the church. I've asked God to forgive me and I pray He will.

ELLERY: According to Cutter, he forgives the deed but not the lie. But since I don't believe in divine surveillance, for me it's not a problem.

PHYLLIS: We can start fresh.

ELLERY: I think we should.

PHYLLIS: Yes. Oh yes. Thank God.

ELLERY: You've liked being a faculty wife, who knows? You might enjoy being a Hollywood wife even more.

PHYLLIS: No. You don't mean that.

ELLERY: Any papers you want me to sign, I'll sign. It's the least I owe you.

PHYLLIS: Oh God. Why are you being like this. Ellery, please. Oh dear. Ellery, sweetheart, do you remember those cave people? Those bones they found, a man and a woman, with their arms around each other? When I heard that story I started to cry. I was thinking about us. All we've meant to each other.

ELLERY: Was this on your way to the short-stay motel?

(Pause.)

PHYLLIS: You heartless bastard. So this is my punishment. All those nights I compromised myself. You get the job you've always dreamed of, no more Bob Spalding to report to, finally, finally, a position of power, and I get tossed aside like an old pair of shoes. Well, I hope you can function on your own. No one to keep your appointments, no one to nurse you through your little crises, no faith to fall back on. I shudder to think where you'll end up.

ELLERY: I wouldn't worry too much. You are forgiven.

PHYLLIS: Oh, now you think you're God.

(PHYLLIS exits. The door slams. ELLERY picks up the JESUS DOLL, pulls a string.)

JESUS DOLL: THE TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE.

(The door opens and JIM FAIRCLOTH enters.)

JIM FAIRCLOTH: OK, I'm outa here. Are we all squared away?

ELLERY: It's not a religion, Jim.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: What isn't?

ELLERY: I don't believe in astrology. Does that make me an atheist of the heavens?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Whoa. You're not afraid to teach atheism, are you?

ELLERY: I'd sooner be washed in the Blood of the Lamb.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: You're making fun of me again. Well, God can take a joke too.

ELLERY: Yes. That's why he invented departments of religion.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: I get it. Now you're being Talmudic.

ELLERY: Why do we teach religion at all?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Why? To strengthen people's faith.

ELLERY: I thought that's what the Church is for.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: What's a classroom but another kind of church? Case in point: you took a wild hippie kid, Cutter McCrea, and you taught the boy how to think. That's a sacred endeavor.

ELLERY: And it's total nonsense.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: What do you mean, nonsense.

ELLERY: Nobody teaches anyone to think. All they really ever learn is the professor.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: And what's wrong with that? Wasn't that Christ's mission on earth? To make men over in his image?

ELLERY: If it was, I'm afraid he flubbed it.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: The first time around, OK. That's why He has to come back. That's why I'm giving you a second chance.

ELLERY: A chance at what?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: That's up to you.

ELLERY: What if there's nothing to teach? What if nothing I can possibly say about Jesus...or Buddha...or Mohammed....or atheism....what if nothing makes the slightest difference in the long run? What if we're all barking up a dead tree? The clerics and the academics?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: That's your problem, isn't it.

ELLERY: It's all our problem. We're in the Late Cretaceous, Jim. The dinosaurs are getting bigger, but they're doomed to disappear.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Way things are going, we might just take you with us.

ELLERY: Not if I can help it.

(Pause.)

JIM FAIRCLOTH: You've got balls of steel, my friend. I'm sure God won't consider it a dealbreaker. Do what you've been doing. Forget the atheism course, just teach what you've been teaching. Whatever it is, I'll be watching—

(The door bursts open. RYAN hustles CUTTER and AVA ahead of them into the room. Their clothes are smeared with dust.)

JIM FAIRCLOTH: What the hell—

AVA: Daddy?!

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Oh good Lord.

RYAN: *(to ELLERY)* I found these folks in your crawlspace.

ELLERY: What about it?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: What about it! Ava, where the devil have you been all night?

CUTTER: Sir, she's been with me.

RYAN: *(to ELLERY)* So how do you want to handle this, sir?

CUTTER: *(to RYAN)* Dude, I told you. This man's a friend of ours.

RYAN: I wasn't talking to you.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: *(to RYAN)* Keep your taser in your pants, son.
I'll deal with this situation.

RYAN: I'm sorry, who are you?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: I'm Jim Faircloth, I'm chairman of the board of trustees of this college, and this happens to be my daughter.

RYAN: I see.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: I'm glad you see. Now you can go.

RYAN: *(to ELLERY)* You'll explain to Mrs. Rudge?

ELLERY: Better do what he says, Ryan.

(RYAN turns on his heels and exits.)

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Well. This puts a whole 'nother light on things. Did you two spend the night in this house?

CUTTER: No, sir, we arrived this morning.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: And the Professor let you stay.

CUTTER: There was room in his inn, yes sir.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Tell me, exactly how long have you known my daughter?

CUTTER: Since I was 13, she was eight.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: That sounds downright unsavory to me.

CUTTER: Oh no, sir. It was strictly Plutonic.

AVA: He means Platonic, Daddy.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Cutter's the one left his cigarettes in your room?

CUTTER: Yes, sir, that was me.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: I'm talking to my daughter now.

AVA: Daddy, please don't yell at him.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: (*to AVA*) Why didn't you tell me about you and Cutter?

AVA: Because of the way you're acting now, OK? Like I'm still eight years old.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: You took a pledge at that Purity Ball.

AVA: Yes, and I've kept that pledge.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: You wouldn't lie to me, would you, Ava?

AVA: There's more than one way of showing love.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: I'm aware of the loopholes, I'd prefer not to hear about them, thank you. (*to ELLERY*) And you—you knew they were a couple, and you didn't let on for a minute. I expect more candor from my department heads.

AVA: Cutter, did you hear that?

CUTTER: Wow. That's great news, Professor.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Not so fast. We got plenty to thrash out yet.

ELLERY: There's nothing to thrash out, Jim.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: What do you mean, nothing. A lie of omission is still a lie in my book. In my daughter's case, a clear violation of God's Fifth Commandment. A failure to honor her dad.

ELLERY: Wasn't it God who brought them together?

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Oh here we go. The Talmud again.

AVA: The answer's yes. God did bring us together.

ELLERY: In Bible Class, no less. And what God has joined, let no man put asunder.

CUTTER: Matthew 19:6.

AVA: That's right, and if God's making you break us up, then I'm not sure I want to spend eternity with Him.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: You hear, Professor? She didn't use to blaspheme like that.

CUTTER: Sir, you can't blame Professor Rudge. He thinks blasphemy's a victimless crime.

AVA: He was only trying to help.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Quid for quo, I expect.

CUTTER: Just doing God's work, sir. You want another go-round with the likes of Reverend Bob? Take it from me, that's what's out there. Pharisees from coast to coast. Nothing but hypocrisy and brown-nosing. Save yourself the hassle. What you see in the Professor is what you get. And that's a rare thing in a teacher.

AVA: You won't regret it, Daddy.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: All right, that's enough. Y'all are giving me a pre-flight headache. *(to ELLERY)* It pains me to say this, but I suppose if you're good enough for Ava, you oughta be good enough for me. *(to CUTTER)* What about you, son?

CUTTER: What about me, sir.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: You intend staying in town and seeing my daughter?

CUTTER: Yes, sir, that was the idea.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Well, I trust secrecy wasn't crucial to the romance. I was young once, I know how that works. Let's hope the sunlight doesn't fade the fabric.

CUTTER: No, sir, because I'm devoted to your daughter. It was love at first sight and it grows stronger every day.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Meanwhile you've made something of yourself.

CUTTER: With God's help, yes.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Well...I suspect you have a future at this college. You'll come to the house next week, we'll discuss it. Ava'll cook us all a dinner. Professor, you'll be there too.

ELLERY: Have a good flight, Jim.

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Goodbye, sweetheart.

AVA: Goodbye, Daddy.

(JIM FAIRCLOTH *embraces his daughter, nods to CUTTER.*)

JIM FAIRCLOTH: Goodbye, son.

CUTTER: Goodbye, sir.

(JIM FAIRCLOTH *shoots ELLERY a last look and exits.*
CUTTER *pumps his fist.*)

CUTTER: There is a God! (*to ELLERY*) I said I'd prove it, didn't I? And I did.

AVA: Cutter, shush. (*to ELLERY*) Congratulations.

CUTTER: This girl had her doubts. Me, I knew all along. Well hey, why not. I'm omniscient.

AVA: Cutter, that's enough.

CUTTER: Oh right. That's Dad.

AVA: I said stop it.

CUTTER: I'm kidding. The Father of us all, is who I meant.

ELLERY: Is that what you meant, Cutter?

CUTTER: Actually, He doesn't know everything. God's like anybody else. Learns as He goes along. "The universe adapts to whatever happens within it." Am I quoting you correctly, Professor?

ELLERY: Letter perfect, as always.

CUTTER: You needed a miracle and I farted out a minor one.

AVA: Cutter, please—

CUTTER: Relax, he knows the score. I have no secrets from our favorite professor. *(He takes his pill vial out of his pocket, pops one)* There isn't a human being alive who doesn't believe, now and then, he might actually be God. The meanest monkey is a clone of his Creator. Soon as we draw breath, we think we're omnipotent. We cry, and Mommy feeds us. We wet ourselves, and Mommy changes us. We smile and the world smiles with us. All believers are babies at heart—am I leaving anything out? Isn't that what you tried to teach us?

ELLERY: It's one way to look at it. But what's life without a little magic?

(ELLERY has removed his shoes. CUTTER shoots a wary look at AVA.)

CUTTER: Did you want us to leave, Professor?

ELLERY: No. You can stay.

CUTTER: Don't worry about her dad. Lay low, let me run interference, you'll be able to preach all the psychology you want to. You've got the power now.

ELLERY: Power to do what?

CUTTER: Hire and fire, for one thing.

ELLERY: You're hired.

CUTTER: Seriously?

ELLERY: Seriously.

CUTTER: Wow. That's awesome.

ELLERY: Both of you.

CUTTER: Both of us?

ELLERY: Why, what's the problem?

CUTTER: No problem. No problem at all.

(ELLERY has taken off his socks and shirt.)

ELLERY: *(to AVA)* You might want to put in for this house. There's a waiting list, but with your connections, you'll have a pretty good shot.

CUTTER: You're kidding.

ELLERY: No.

AVA: You're leaving?

ELLERY: Yes.

CUTTER: For a smaller place.

ELLERY: No, a larger one. I've delivered my last public sermon. I have to make the best of what's left of my soul.

CUTTER: Now he is kidding. Aren't you?

ELLERY: Cutter, with all you've been spouting the last 48 hours, you did stumble on a truth now and then. If Jesus ever came back, the last place he'd be seen is a church. He wouldn't waste time preaching to the faithful. Or the godless. And he'd surely never set foot inside a lecture room. Ava, help yourself to the books. The ones that offend you, sell them on eBay. Oh, and here.

(ELLERY picks up the JESUS DOLL.)

ELLERY: This belongs to you now. *(tosses him the JESUS DOLL)* The torch is passed. The lemonade stand is yours.

CUTTER: Sir, in all respect: This is full-on crazy.

ELLERY: Ecclesiastes 5:15.

CUTTER: *(thinks)* "As he came from his mother's womb, naked shall he return..."

ELLERY: "...and take nothing of his labor."

(ELLERY starts for the door. AVA steps in front of him.)

AVA: No! Please. You can't just go like this—

ELLERY: Don't worry about me, Ava. *(re CUTTER)* He's the one needs looking after.

AVA: But where will you go? What will you do?

ELLERY: God only knows.

(Seized by an impulse, AVA kisses ELLERY.)

AVA: Goodbye, Professor.

ELLERY: Goodbye, Ava. Work things out for yourself—it's the only road to salvation. So long, Cutter.

CUTTER: Godspeed, Professor.

(ELLERY heads for the door. AVA starts after him.)

AVA: Professor?!—

CUTTER: *(restraining her)* Let him go.

AVA: Ohmigosh. I feel so awful suddenly.

CUTTER: Shh, it's OK. I'm here.

(CUTTER and AVA have their backs to the door. In the doorway, ELLERY continues to disrobe, carefully hanging his clothes on the hatrack, during:)

CUTTER: We did all we could. We bought him his ticket. It's not our fault he didn't get on the bus.

AVA: No. He was walking the edge and I pushed him.

CUTTER: What do you mean, "I pushed him"? His trolley left the tracks a long time ago. Don't you remember in class? He'd be trashing some ritual or other, suddenly freeze up like God was about to hit him with a lightning bolt?

AVA: Yes. I remember.

CUTTER: I used to time those trances with a stopwatch.

AVA: It wasn't God's power he was afraid of.

CUTTER: What then?

AVA: His own.

CUTTER: Right, I see what you're saying. That's why he gave it up. (*holds up JESUS DOLL*) Passed it along to someone who could use it.

(*ELLERY has stripped to his shorts. A spotlight begins to fade up on him. CUTTER idly pulls the string on the JESUS DOLL.*)

JESUS DOLL: *NO ATHEIST EVER LAID CLAIM TO JERUSALEM.*

CUTTER: I think I impressed your dad, don't you?

AVA: (*distantly*) Yes, you probably did.

CUTTER: Hey, the only thing Jesus lacked was ambition. And a wife.

(*CUTTER reaches for AVA. Again AVA draws away. By now the spotlight on ELLERY is so intense he seems to be glowing.*)

CUTTER: We're gonna take this campus by storm. There won't be a Bible college in the country hold a candle to us. God's work, 24/7. (*to JESUS DOLL*) Right, pal?

(*CUTTER pulls the string again.*)

JESUS DOLL: *ONCE YOU SAY YOU'RE DOING GOD'S WORK, YOU CAN GET AWAY WITH ANYTHING.*

CUTTER: (*realizing*) Whoa.

AVA: What? What is it?

(*CUTTER pulls the string.*)

JESUS DOLL: *IF GOD HAS SPOKEN, WHY IS THE WORLD NOT CONVINCED?*

CUTTER: Oh man.

AVA: What's wrong? Cutter?

CUTTER: He's messing with us.

AVA: Who is?

(*CUTTER pulls the string again.*)

JESUS DOLL: *GOD IS THE NAME WE GIVE TO OUR FEARS.*

CUTTER: Jesus H. Christ....

AVA: Cutter, what are you talking about?

CUTTER: Take it. Take it away.

AVA: Cutter, calm down!

(AVA takes the JESUS DOLL from CUTTER. Stares at it. Pulls the string.)

JESUS DOLL: *MAN NEVER WORSHIPPED ANYTHING BUT HIMSELF.*

AVA: Oh my God.

(AVA pulls the string again.)

JESUS DOLL: *THOSE WHO BELIEVE ABSURDITIES WILL
COMMIT ATROCITIES.*

(AVA pulls the string.)

JESUS DOLL: *THE LOVE OF RELIGION IS THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL.*

(AVA sets the JESUS DOLL aside. A light fades up on it.)

JESUS DOLL: *GOD IS DEAD—JESUS LIVES!*

(AVA whirls toward the doorway. Blackout. Only ELLERY's face is visible—glowing. With a last look at AVA, he vanishes into the darkness. END OF PLAY.)