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Something To Do

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Something to Do
A ten-minute play

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Cast:
HILDA —middle-aged, the eldest sibling
BETTY JEAN—younger sister to HILDA and JOHN, married to ORLAND
ORLAND—married to BETTY JEAN
JOHN—the youngest in the family

Place: a small town in North Carolina
Setting: the porch of a ramshackle house in the country. There are rose bushes downstage left which are waiting to be planted. There are dogs in the yard.
[The dogs in the play may be imagined.]

Time: 1950's

At rise: Two women, two men are on a country porch after their Sunday dinner. ORLAND sits in a rocking chair. BETTY JEAN and HILDA play a game of chess. JOHN sits off to the side, staring out at the road: a strong contrast to the energetic chattiness of the other three characters.

Character note: JOHN is far more morose than sarcastic or cynical. His comments are not so much directed at his family as at the world or life in general. He usually doesn't look at his siblings when he comments.

ORLAND
Chess again. Now why didn't I marry into a family of plain old card players? I ask myself this question each and every Sunday afternoon.

HILDA

Give me chess over cards any day. Watch the board, honey.

ORLAND

Hey, John, what's wrong with this picture? Your sisters are playing chess, as usual, and we men are standing around. Ain't it supposed to be the other way around?

JOHN

Huh. . .? Yeah, well, I guess I'd better go see to them rose bushes. Where you want 'em, Hilda ? [*He listlessly starts digging a hole just in front of the porch.]*

HILDA

You choose a spot for 'em, honey.

JOHN

Ok. [*Start to dig a hole*]

HILDA

No, not there, brother. They flowers, John; put 'em in the sun. Make sure they get plenty of sun. [*To BETTY JEAN.]* Honestly, he don't even use his head for a hat rack.

JOHN

All right. [*Starts to dig in a different spot.]*

ORLAND

I mean, ain't it supposed to be the men playing cards and the women fussing in the kitchen? Or making coffee or knitting or whatever it is you all do?

BETTY JEAN

Check. Ha, ha! Fool's mate, no? Ain't that Fool's mate?

HILDA

Don't go trying fancy stuff, now, and don't rejoice too soon. Check, yourself.

BETTY JEAN

Oooooh. Ha! Hum. . . watch me wiggle out of this one.

ORLAND

If John here would ever join in, we could have us a game of gin rummy. Hey, John? Looks to me like since you living here now and all, least you could do is oblige us with a foursome.

JOHN

Huh.

BETTY JEAN

Let him plant them rose bushes. They've been laying there in the hot sun since before church. It's give him something to do.

HILDA

They are lovely, B.J. I can't thank you all enough. And Orland, I've told you time and time again I'll gladly teach you how to play chess. [*To B.J.*] Get your pawns out, honey.

ORLAND

Who ever heard of women playing chess. It ain't normal.

BETTY JEAN

You knew it when you married me.

HILDA

Beautiful move! You're sharp today, B.J.

BETTY JEAN

I play better after I've eaten. That's a fact, not an excuse.

ORLAND

'Specially when Hilda does all the cooking.

HILDA

[*Looks up.]* John, shoo them dogs away from the rose bushes! You know good and well what they fixing to do.

JOHN

They your dogs.

HILDA

Lucy! Sammie! Come on, get on up here!

ORLAND

Honey, you so dead set against cards. And yet here you sit playing chess. That don't make no sense to me.

BETTY JEAN

There is a world of difference between chess and cards. Chess is a game of skill; cards is hazard. Check. Cards is gambling, Orland. There is a world of difference.

ORLAND

Hazard? Oh, c'mon. I still don't know why we can't just have a good, old-fashioned round of gin rummy. It's the same difference. Hey! What about a game of Meldunek! The three of us could play. We don't need four. How about it?

HILDA, BETTY JEAN

Now, what on earth is Mel. . . .nick?

ORLAND

A Polish game. Game of cards.

HILDA, BETTY JEAN

*Po*lish?

ORLAND

The guys at work. So listen. It takes three players. John ain't interested. We can leave him out.

BETTY JEAN

Honey, I can't even speak the word. How am I gonna play the game?

JOHN

[*Resting against his shovel.]* There goes George Hannah in his new truck. Ain't he something?

ORLAND

You need twenty-one cards, you deal in a hand of seven each, and there's a pot of three cards.

JOHN

Ain't even had my car three days when that so-and-so hit me.

HILDA

B.J., watch your knight there.

JOHN

Women drivers.
[*Overlap the following*]

HILDA

Now, John, don't you start . . .

ORLAND

They'll get you every time, John.

BETTY JEAN

Honey, don't get him going . . .

HILDA

Remember: we got company.

JOHN

Shoot, family don't count as company.

ORLAND

Anyway, girls, will you just listen? It's simple. Then you bid for the pot. Penny a point.

BETTY JEAN

Penny a point? That's gambling!

ORLAND

Nah, that ain't gambling. Hilda tell her . . oh, come on, honey! It's just pennies. Pennies don't amount to a hill of beans.

HILDA

[*Sighs*.] Betty Jean, there probably ain't nothing wrong with it . . . we just family here. . .nobody means nothing the Lord would disapprove of.

JOHN

If the Lord don't mind you playing chess, he sure ain't gonna mind you losing a few pennies.

BETTY JEAN

Chess is not gambling! This here's a skill! You gotta have a strategy.

HILDA

Sister, that's my queen you just moved. Pay attention to the game.

BETTY JEAN

Oh, oh, no! Gracious, I am sorry. I'll put it back. Oh, my!

ORLAND

OK, OK, forget about the penny a point! So. The guy after the dealer is automatically a hundred and . . .

HILDA

Look. Betty Jean here ain't interested, Orland, and she's got a point. There's no skill when everything depends on the deal. Now chess, on the other hand, is complex; the possibilities are endless. [*To BETTY JEAN.]* It's your move. Concentrate on the game. Watch your knight there, honey; pay attention to the board.

ORLAND

It depends on what you do with the deal. . . you not really discussing the matter, Hilda; you just making sure you keep your chess partner. Meanwhile, what am I supposed to do? Sit around and watch?

JOHN

Same thing you do every Sunday after church—nothing.

HILDA

Orland, looks like you just gonna have to learn the game. Then we can have risers.

JOHN

Orland ain't about to play you girls. He knows you'll beat the tar outta him.

[*ORLAND sighs and exits into the house.]*

HILDA

Was that necessary, brother?

JOHN

He can't take a joke.

BETTY JEAN

You can tell a lot about a person just by the way they play chess, Orland. It's psychological. Can you say that about gin rummy? Huh? Orland?
[*Looks up.]* Where'd he go?

HILDA

I'm gonna tell you something about your own self here. You about to get over confident and then you going to play too fast.

JOHN

Ain't she got the Lord on her side?

BETTY JEAN

[*Offended.]* John!

HILDA

Brother, honestly! He's just winding you up, honey. Don't you bother with him.

JOHN

You ain't got a chance, Hilda. Not against Betty Jean and The Lord.

BETTY JEAN

I would never call upon the Good Lord for . . . I wouldn't presume to ask . .

HILDA

Betty Jean, pay him no mind and focus on the game, honey. It's your move. Get your pawns out; let them have some air.

[*Pause. JOHN stops digging and takes his shirt off.]*

HILDA

[*Glancing at JOHN*] John, what on earth is that on your arm? Is that a bruise? Oh, my goodness me! Come on over here, John. Let me take a look at that.

JOHN

[*Comes closer, still carrying his shovel*.] Never mind, sister, it ain't nothing.

HILDA

Goodness gracious! How did that happen?

JOHN

Shoot. This ain't nothing.

BETTY JEAN

You're wandering around carrying a bruise big as a watermelon on your arm and saying it ain't nothing.

JOHN

Y'all making a mountain outta a molehill.

HILDA

John, if you don't tell me exactly what happened right this minute, I'll . . .

JOHN

Oh, all right. It happened at work. It's just something we do. [*Pause*.] Ah, may as well tell you. You all don't know nothing about me anyway. What I go through all day long. Well. You know them thick rubber bands that the cards come in? The data processing cards? They come in bundles. Well, we take the rubber bands off the bundles and save 'em. Ha! This is what we do at work, while Orland plays cards with his Polish buddies down in the stock room.

Well, it passes the time. So here we go. We get all the guys in the department to gang up on the guys down the hall and wham! Before you know it, we got ourselves a full-fledged war!

[*He pantomimes the following, enjoying it at first. Puts down shovel. Orland enters from the house with a cup of coffee and a newspaper.]*

When it's real quiet, real dead time, you know, about three o'clock in the afternoon or thereabouts, somebody gets the notion to declare war: "All right, let's go sneak up on 'em!" We get the guys together and we tiptoe down the hall. They can't hear us down where they are, not with all them machines going, so we sneak on down the hall—all five of us—and then I look through the glass part of the door, you know, to see if they're working or if they're just goofing off, wasting time—ain't no good if all they doing is wasting time—but if they're working, then I give the go-ahead and POW! We all charge in and shoot 'em with them giant rubber bands! Right in the arm—POW! On the leg—POW! Old Ed got me good last time, that's all this is. They's been worse.

[*Pause*.]

That job is so almighty boresome, I just can't hardly stand it sometimes. 'Course you gotta watch it. I sure had a close one the other day.
I go down to the juice bar. I think it's just old Ed sitting there at the counter watching the TV waiting for his orange juice. "There's old Ed," I think. "Now I'm gonna get him good!" So I tap him ever so gentle on the shoulder, then I rear back with my fist clenched ready to punch him, you know, when he turns around—and durned if when he turned around, it wasn't him! You wanna know who it was? The Vice-President of the whole dadgum company, that's who it was! You should've seen the look on his face!

[*To himself. Picks up his shovel.]* Lucky I didn't hit him, huh? No, I didn't hit him. Kind of wish I did, though. Yep. I kind of wish I had. You sure gotta watch out sometimes. But I sure wish I'd hit him though. Yep, I sure wish I'd just let him have it. POW! Ha! It would've looked like an accident. Heck, it would've been an accident. POW!

JOHN resumes digging the holes for the rose bushes, aggressively, using the shovel as a weapon.

HILDA

John . . .honey, be careful. With that shovel.
[*Pause*]
Honey, do you hear me?
[*Pause*]
They *rose* bushes, John.
[*Pause*]
They *roses*.

End of play.