

# Near Tragedy

## Synopsis

Two lonely people, unknown to each other except for an anonymous chain letter, discover whether the grass is really greener on the other side as they imagine what it might be like to be with these interesting strangers.

## Characters

### Jack Wright

Translator in his thirties. Skeptical because of his life, but developing a streak of hopefulness because of the chain letter he received from his cousin. Looking hard for happiness.

### Jill Thompson Will

Teacher/homemaker in her thirties. Upset with herself for her discontent with what is seemingly an ideal life. Torn between her longing for newness and fulfillment of her dreams and her desire for security and love for her family.

## Place

The set should be divided into two playing areas. Stage left is a kitchen, with an opposing counter, covered with implements and ingredients for making bread from scratch. This is Jill's area. Stage right is an office, complete with a cluttered desk, covered with books, papers, and a computer terminal, and a chair. This is Jack's area. Whenever the two of them move downstage, they have ventured into a world of spoken thought and emotion, not realistic at all, where these two can communicate.

## Time

The play takes place over an afternoon in 1996, 3 months after the letter is sent, with flashbacks to the time of the letter, and to 1982.

In darkness, two voices, JACK and JILL's, are heard.

JACK  
Near-Tragedy, scene one.

JILL  
 The Letter.

Scene 1: The Letter

Lights up on a split stage. JACK is typing and consulting a book, while JILL is preparing the counter for the bread making. Whenever THEY are not speaking or involved in a scene, JACK and JILL will return to these tasks, with JILL's progressing in all its steps. JACK is the first to stop. HE then addresses the audience.

JACK  
 If I could tell you why ... The moment that I knew ...  
 Maybe, maybe I should ...  
 (HE takes a deep breath and exhales.)  
 You'll have to excuse me. I'm not very good with words. At speaking I mean. Words,  
 (Making a sweeping motion of HIS desk.)  
 I don't really have a problem with. My own words, maybe a little. Saying them out loud, most definitely. They just get jumbled up in your mouth when you move to sentences and paragraphs and, and themes. It'd be nice if we could just stay with individual words and letters. Letters I understand.

(HE goes back to typing as JILL pauses  
 in HER work and speaks to the audience.)

JILL  
 They're such a rarity these days. Letters. We don't receive letters, we don't send letters. We get mail. I open up the mailbox and pull out, not lovely notes from people I'd love to hear from, but  
 (Pulling the mail out of HER apron  
 and dropping it on the counter.)  
 instead I get advertising circulars, bills, and coupons, and

more bills. Maybe a card once in a while if there's a special occasion. Not that I'm blaming. I don't want to give that sense. I don't write letters to everyone I know and am bitter about being ignored. I write personal letters as often as everyone else. Or as ... as, what's the word? Not often? There has to be a word for that. I ... anyways I write them as ? Unoften as anyone else. It's what everyone does I guess. We call, maybe send cards, we *don't* send letters. All the postman's good for is mail.

(SHE goes back to HER work as JACK stops typing and speaks to the audience. This will constantly occur except when noted.)

## JACK

The ending is considered masculine, because it is a strong one, and the term harkens back to when males were strength and women were ... not. It's archaic, I agree, but everything must be given a name these days, so we keep the old ones. It's what I do, in a sense. I translate texts, mostly ancient ones, into contemporary language. I know, it's one of those jobs where you know they have to exist somewhere but few people know someone who does it. Like you see that your underwear is inspected by number sixteen or whatever, but nobody really knows an underwear inspector. Maybe that's not a fair example. I mean most products, it seems like, are manufactured in other countries, so it's not like we'd have a chance to know them anyways. It is a bad example, come to think of it. Maybe a, a .... regardless, my job, it's a rarity.

## JILL

That's it! I write letters as *rarely* as everyone else. Rarely. That'll do.

(SHE smiles to herself. SHE holds up an envelope with a handwritten front.)

So when the letter came in the mail, this strange letter from someone I didn't know, naturally I was doubly surprised. You question these things in the short walk from the mailbox to the house. I mean, what is your life, really? Yes, I guess it's a tapestry, as my mother used to say, of all the things you've done, the people you've met. But, um, I never really bought into that. To me, it's more like some patchwork quilt type project. We live, I think, from moment to moment, remembering random things of great or little or no importance. It's a crap shoot. So when you realize this, once I realized this, anyway, I look for those little moments that may make the most difference. That may cause the greatest number of memorable, important things to happen.

(Pause)

The walk to the door isn't that long, I just think fast. I looked at the envelope.

JACK

3

(Holding up an envelope)

The return address on it was from my cousin Jane. I thought I was gonna get a nice "John is fine, the kids are fine, here are some new pictures, how are you" type letter. It wasn't. It was a chain letter. Not one of those pyramid scams, but just a plain old "find love if you send it, get despair if you don't" one. It didn't surprise me that Jane sent it. She's really superstitious, into all that stuff. It told me I had three days to further the chain. I shelved it. I'm surprised I didn't throw it in the trash.

JILL

James and I have been having so much trouble with that now. We'll forget to buy the tags, or forget to attach them to the bags. I rhymed, didn't I?

(SHE smiles.)

James has talked about getting a compost container. He said they sell them with starting material now, and it's all self-contained. In a trash can looking thing. It made me remember the ugly pile we had in the back of camp when I was in grade school.

JACK

And so Jane calls me when I'm out in my tent, reading. The ... place I'm living in right now, it's nice enough, but it seems really empty sometimes, so I set up this tent in the backyard where, on nice nights, I can go and read and do work by candlelight. Always take the cordless though, can't be too out of touch with the world. But Jane calls about the letter, of all things.

JILL

For a little while, I didn't open it. Wouldn't open it. It seemed like this immense source of power, of possibility radiating from inside it. There was this song I heard a few years ago, something about, just before the band starts to play they'll always play your favorite tune. Talking about that anticipation of greatness. I tried to explain what it meant to James once, but he didn't get it. He wanted to though.

JACK

She says, "Did you get the letter?" I tell her, yeah. "Have you sent it?" No. "Why not?" It's a chain letter, I hadn't really considered it. "It's important to me that you do this." But why? It's just a letter. "But what if it's not?" This is ridiculous. We went on like that for a while, and then she told me to look in the envelope.

JILL

So, I did it. After trying to procrastinate by cleaning, which, confidentially, is really a hideous way to waste time, after doing that, I got out the letter opener and cut open

JILL (CONT'D)

4

the mail. Filing the bills, clipping the coupons I'd use, moving the mystery letter off to the side like it was dangerous. I was ... it sounds stupid, but I was really afraid of what I might find inside.

JACK

I checked again, and there was another envelope, stamped with my return address on it, next to the chain letter. I kind of chuckled, I guess, and Jane got really serious on me. Telling me that wheels were turning and that my sending of this letter was of some monumental cosmic importance. I asked her how she knew all this, and she said she didn't. But then she said, "If I'm wrong, no big deal. But what if I'm right?" And she was. Not that this was definitely so monumental, but that it wouldn't hurt, me sending it out.

JILL

I tore it open, the way you tear off a band-aid, thinking if it's quick, it'll defuse some of the, the shock or whatever it might produce. It was just a chain letter. Some stupid little thing telling stories about people who found love who sent it, and people who got crushed by falling trees who didn't. I don't know why I didn't just throw it out, but I didn't. I shelved it.

JACK

The only trick now was finding a person to send it to.

JILL

Guess it wasn't as important as I thought it'd be.

(Blackout.)