

# **FIRST, DO NO HARM**

by Tom Smith

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## **CHARACTERS**

Paul	Late 20s/Early 30s, he/him
Penny	Late 20s/Early 30s, she/her
Charlie	Late 20s/Early 30s, he/him
Bunny	Late 20s/Early 30s, she/her
Radio Voice	Recorded

## **TIME/PLACE**

1956

Paul's Living Room

**FIRST, DO NO HARM**

*1956. Paul's charming living room. Everyone has just finished a slice of celebratory cake.*

PENNY

Another slice?

PAUL

Oh, no, I couldn't.

CHARLIE

It's your Longevity Day, Paul, you can do whatever you want!

PAUL

I can't. I just got those last two pounds off last week.

CHARLIE

Two pounds? The vanity!

PAUL

I like to take care of myself is all.

BUNNY

He's a doctor, Charlie; it's in his nature.

CHARLIE

Well, it's my nature to enjoy life, which means another piece of Penny's fantastic cake! Besides, you don't mind a little extra around my middle, do you, Bunny?

BUNNY

It's more to love!

CHARLIE

Ain't she something? See? This is why you need a wife, Paul.

PAUL

I'll get one. In good time.

CHARLIE

In good time!

PAUL

Well, there's no rush now, is there?

CHARLIE

Gee, I don't know: let's ask Penny!

BUNNY  
Charlie!  
*(To Penny.)*  
Ignore him, hon.

PENNY  
Paul's right. There's no rush.  
*(An alarm clock rings.)*

BUNNY  
Eight o'clock already?

PENNY  
*(Turning off the alarm.)*  
I've got glasses already poured in the kitchen.  
*(Rushes into the kitchen.)*

CHARLIE  
How's she doing, by the way?

PAUL  
Penny? As well as can be expected under the circumstances.

BUNNY  
I just don't know what I'd do.

CHARLIE  
Frankly, I was surprised to hear he was even still—

*(Penny rushes out with a tray and four small juice glasses filled with a red liquid. She hands them out and everyone drinks them down quickly.)*

PENNY  
I will never get used to that flavor.

CHARLIE  
It's better than when it first came out. Do you remember, Bun?

BUNNY  
The thick texture and that rancid smell! It was like drinking liquid rubber. We all took a real leap of faith back then.

CHARLIE

Paul, guess who I saw at church yesterday? Morris Peterson. He said he signed off on your shelter.

PAUL

All inspections finally complete.

CHARLIE

He said there's some kind of special locking system. I'd like to see it sometime.

PAUL

Well, there's no time like the present...

CHARLIE

*(Starts to exit, then turns to Bunny.)*

Bunny, don't you wanna come see Paul's new shelter?

BUNNY

Oh, no, you boys go on. I want to spend a little time with Penny.

*(Paul and Charlie exit.)*

PENNY

Can I get you anything, Bunny? A nightcap?

BUNNY

Oh, no, dear, I'm fine. So, Penny...

PENNY

Yes?

BUNNY

How are you? I mean, how are you doing?

PENNY

I'm fine.

BUNNY

Are you? Truly?

*(Penny looks confused.)*

I heard you ran into Martin.

PENNY

Oh. Word travels fast.

BUNNY

Paul's worried about you. We all are.

PENNY

I must admit, it was a total shock, Bunny.

BUNNY

I'll bet.

PENNY

I...I didn't recognize him. I was in the produce aisle when I noticed someone staring at me, just staring.

BUNNY

Martin obviously recognized you.

PENNY

He's...he's not well. He uses a walker. And he had a nurse with him.  
*(Starts to cry.)*

BUNNY

It's not your fault, honey.

PENNY

Isn't it?

BUNNY

No! People have free will. It was his choice. As crazy as it was.

PENNY

I still live with such guilt. Such overwhelming... Why couldn't I convince him? What were the words he needed to hear?

BUNNY

You can't blame yourself. Besides, he wasn't the only one.

PENNY

No, but he was the only one I loved.

*(Crossfade to the shelter. Charlie peering inside the door.)*

CHARLIE

How in the world did you get all that? There must be hundreds of gallons in there.

PAUL

I ordered directly with the distributor a few weeks ago; an old college friend of mine. I bought almost everything they had. It cost my entire life savings.

CHARLIE

I've never seen so much in one place!

PAUL

Enough to live a thousand years, if necessary.

CHARLIE

So, what's your plan then? Sell it at a mark-up?

PAUL

I'm not selling it; this is for me. Well, me and someone else. This shelter can accommodate two people.

CHARLIE

So you are thinking about proposing to Penny!

PAUL

I suppose I am.

CHARLIE

She'll be good for you, Paul. You need someone who believes in you as much as you believe in yourself.

PAUL

Wise guy!

CHARLIE

Enough for a thousand years, hunh? I never took you for a conspiracy theorist, Paul.

PAUL

I believe in being prepared. Besides, you read that report in The Times.

CHARLIE

Everyone knows it was just a ploy to cause panic.

PAUL

And it worked! Store shelves have been empty for two weeks already.

CHARLIE

But it's just temporary. Like when it snows and everyone rushes out to buy toilet paper and booze and cigarettes. Next week everything will be back the way it was. Only you won't have any savings to fall back on.

*(Picks up a magnetic key, similar looking to a modern-day car key).*

What's this?

*(Crossfade to the living room.)*

BUNNY

So, what about Paul?

PENNY

What about him?

BUNNY

It's been three months already. You seem serious.

PENNY

We're still in the "getting to know you" phase.

BUNNY

Nonsense! You have an entire lifetime to know him better. You need to move fast, Penny, before one of those nurses at the hospital beats you to him!

PENNY

Bunny, can I tell you something? Something you won't tell anyone else, not even Charlie?

BUNNY

Of course, hon.

PENNY

There are times when...

BUNNY

When what?

PENNY

When Paul doesn't seem like himself.

BUNNY

What do you mean?



PENNY

It's hard to describe. It's like... It's like he has these flashes of passion sometimes, of rage. Oh, it's never been directed at me. But now and again when something at the hospital goes awry, or when he feels like someone is taking advantage, he gets so... It wasn't like that with—

BUNNY

Martin? Of course not. You were engaged to a very weak man, Penny. A man who didn't trust science, who wouldn't do the one thing he needed to so he could be with you forever. Paul isn't like that. He fights for things he believes in. He doesn't care if he rocks the boat because he has a strong moral compass that always points to what's right. So what if he has moments when he lets his passions get the better of him? It's better to love a man of conviction than a milquetoast.

CHARLIE

*(Rushing in the room with Paul.)*

Bunny, you've got to see Paul's shelter! We need one just like it!

BUNNY

Fix our leaky kitchen faucet and the creaky garage door first, Charlie, and then we can talk about you building a shelter.

CHARLIE

It has a lock with a magnetic key.

BUNNY

A magnetic key!?!

CHARLIE

You press a button on it to activate the magnet. Once that shelter door is closed, it's locked solid until you press the button again to open it again. It's incredible!

PENNY

It's getting late; I should probably head home. I still have some grading to do.

BUNNY

It's not even nine o'clock yet.

PAUL

*(Holding Penny's hand.)*

Stay a while longer, won't you, Penny? For me?

PENNY

Well, all right, Paul. For you.

*(An air siren blares outside. Everyone looks confused. Suddenly, the phone rings. Paul rushes to answer it.)*

CHARLIE

*(Looking out a window.)*  
What's going on?

PENNY

Is it a tornado?

PAUL

Hello?... You've got to slow down, Tom, I can't—  
*(Calling out.)*

The radio, turn on the radio!

*(Charlie turns on a small radio and puts his ear to it. Paul is back on the phone.)*

All right then. I'll come in early tomorrow and we can figure everything out.  
*(Hangs up.)*

PENNY

What is it, Paul?

BUNNY

What's going on?

CHARLIE

Shhhhh! Listen, will you?

RADIO

"...that have all but decimated the Soma groves. Thousands upon thousands of acres destroyed. Whether it was arson or natural causes has yet to be determined, but without those plants life as we know has been forever changed. We are now awaiting word from the President of the United—"

*(Paul turns off the radio.)*

PENNY

Is it true? It can't be true!

PAUL

Tom said the governor has declared a state of emergency. Stores are being broken into, even though everyone knows there's no more on the shelves.

BUNNY

What do we do, Charlie? We're almost out ourselves. If the plants are gone, if they've been

destroyed— What do we do, Charlie?

CHARLIE

I don't know, Bunny. I guess...we pray.

*(Charlie and Bunny start to kneel.)*

PAUL

Prayers won't help.

PENNY

Paul...?

PAUL

Praying to a God who has eternal life, but who refused to share that gift with us?

CHARLIE

Paul, what are you saying?

PENNY

Please, Paul...

PAUL

We mere mortals had to do it ourselves. Discover those plants. Test them. Crossbreed them. Nurture them. Years upon years of development. Early trials as generations before us died until they finally got the formula right. Science doing something religion never could.

PENNY

Paul, you're scaring me!

PAUL

And now? Now, we're to go back to how it was before? Well, I, for one, won't do it. And I don't have to because I've prepared for this moment. It's come much sooner than expected, but I've prepared for this very moment!

*(He rushes out of the room. Crossfade to the shelter. Paul rushes in, grabs the magnetic key, presses the button on it, runs into the shelter and closes the door behind him. A loud electronic locking sound is heard. The others rush in and see the closed door.)*

CHARLIE

*(Knocking on the shelter door.)*

Paul, you're being hysterical. Come out of there!

PENNY  
Paul?

CHARLIE  
Open this door right now.

PENNY  
Paul, darling, we don't know anything for certain yet.

PAUL (within)  
You heard the broadcast. Those plants have all been burned to ashes.

PENNY  
Surely there are some that have survived.

PAUL (within)  
Enough for the whole world's population?

PENNY  
I...I don't know. I...

BUNNY  
He's right.

CHARLIE  
Bunny?

BUNNY  
Paul's right, there won't be enough. There already isn't enough.

CHARLIE  
Don't say that.

BUNNY  
You and me, Charlie: we only have, what, half a gallon? Enough for maybe two weeks? Three if we stretch it?

CHARLIE  
It's ok, Bunny. There'll be more.

BUNNY  
How, Charlie, if all those plants are gone? How will there be more?

CHARLIE

Penny's right. They'll find some that haven't been destroyed. They can grow new ones from them.

BUNNY

We'll all be dead! You have to drink it every single day. You know that. You know what happens if you don't!

CHARLIE

Paul, open this door!

PENNY

There are other countries that might share their supply. Canada. Or Mexico.

BUNNY

Don't be a fool! No country is going to share anything. Hell, our own neighbors won't. Stores were mobbed when people thought the prices were going up. What do you think they're gonna do now?

CHARLIE

Paul can help us. You'll share your supply, won't you, Paul? You have so much. More than you'll ever, ever need... Paul?

PENNY

Paul? Please answer Charlie.

CHARLIE

You'll share yours, won't you? With me and Bunny? I mean, we're family!

PAUL (within)

No, Grandfather. I won't.

*(Lights dim then slowly rise. Days later. Everyone seems weaker.)*

CHARLIE

Five more days, Paul. Your grandmother and I only have enough for five more days.

PENNY

Paul, please open the door. For me, Paul.

PAUL (within)

I...can't.

CHARLIE

There's room enough for two in there. You built that shelter for two. At least choose one of us. Choose one person to live. Just one person!

BUNNY

Me.

CHARLIE

Bunny?

BUNNY

Choose me, Paul. Charlie's weak. He's got no self-control. He'll go through your supplies without a single thought. But me. You know how strong I am. How resourceful. Choose me.

CHARLIE

How can you say that, Bunny?

BUNNY

You're fat and you're lazy and you'll be no good to him.

PENNY

Don't say things you'll regret, Bunny.

CHARLIE

Just listen to yourself! Look what you're becoming.

BUNNY

I don't care. I don't care what you or anyone else thinks of me anymore. In five days I'll be dead so what does it matter how I behave?

CHARLIE

It matters to me.

BUNNY

I don't want to die, Charlie! I don't want to die in that horrible, horrible way. If I never would have taken that first dose sixty years ago then maybe I could have died peacefully in my sleep.

*(To Penny.)*

Maybe what's happened to your Martin isn't so bad after all.

PENNY

Please, Bunny...stop!

BUNNY

I don't know why you are accepting this. You know how we'll die! First, we'll bloat from the

acid that forms inside us.

PENNY

*(Covering her ears, terrified.)*

Make her stop, Charlie. Please!

BUNNY

Then one by one our internal organs melt and dissolve. But not our brains, not our precious, precious brains: those go last. They say there's consciousness up to that final moment, so we'll know, we'll actually feel ourselves burning us away into nothingness!

PENNY

Shut up, Bunny, shut up!

BUNNY

But I refuse to die that way!

*(With her remaining strength, she rushes to the door, banging it with her fists.)*

You've got to let me in, Paul!

CHARLIE

*(Pulling her from the door.)*

For God's sake, Bunny, stop it! Stop it right now!

BUNNY

Don't touch me! Don't grab at me with those meaty paws.

PENNY

Paul, please, there's enough for all four of us to live for a few hundred years. There'll be more plants by then. You'll see!

PAUL (within)

And if there isn't? I'm sorry, I really am. But you're all wasting your time. You should be using whatever days you have left to figure out what you want to do in your last moments.

CHARLIE

You sonuva—

*(Now he rushes to the door, banging it with his fists.)*

Let us in! Let us in.

*(No reply.)*

For God's sake, Paul, you're a doctor: you can't let us die! You not supposed to do harm. Your oath, your Hippocratic oath: first, do no harm!

*(He bangs the door until he no longer can. Bunny, resigned to her fate, slowly turns and exits. Charlie looks at Penny, not knowing what to do.)*

*(Lights dim then rise. Charlie is now gone as well. Silence. Then, from the inside of the shelter...)*

PAUL (within)

Penny?

PENNY

I'm still here, Paul.

PAUL (within)

Where are my grandparents?

PENNY

Gone. Looking for any small chance of salvation.

PAUL (within)

And you? Why are you still here?

PENNY

I don't want you to be alone.

PAUL

*(Electronic lock sound. The door opens. Paul exits into the room.)*

I choose you.

*(Holding out a juice glass of liquid.)*

Now, quickly, come inside and drink this before anyone—

PENNY

What? What do you mean you choose me?

PAUL

I choose you. To save.

PENNY

But why?

PAUL

My grandparents. The neighbors who tried to break in these last few weeks. None of them thought about my welfare, only their own. And sometimes a doctor...sometimes a doctor needs someone to take care of them.

*(Penny hesitates. He places the juice glass into her hands.)*

Look, Penny, I know I put you through a terrible fright. But I wanted to be sure. I had to know what your intentions were and that you truly cared about my well-being.



PENNY

I always have.

PAUL

I know that now.

PENNY

I've always wanted what's best for you, Paul. In good times and bad.

PAUL

Yes.

*(Slowly guides the juice glass to her lips.)*

PENNY

In sickness and in health.

PAUL

That's right.

PENNY

'Til death do we part.

*(She throws the glass away without drinking from it. Instinctually, Paul reaches to grab it. As he does, Penny snatches the magnetic key from Paul's hand, presses the button on it and throws the key into the shelter. She slams shut the door, locking the key inside. Paul rushes over but cannot pry the door open.)*

PAUL

What have you done, Penny? You've locked us both out. There's no way in now! What in God's name have you done!?!

PENNY

I've saved you.

*(She walks away a few steps. Paul continues to batter against the door as Penny falls to the floor, her body struggling to stay upright. Paul doesn't notice.)*

END OF PLAY