

Our Daily Wheat

By Stephen Cedars

WHY I LIKE IT: Drama Editor JANET COLSON writes...

*Sometimes when I read a play that's so eerily familiar, I think that it's not a play at all, but a biopic, or a diary entry from my own childhood, perhaps, and then I get PTSD and look into therapy, and then – well, you know how it goes. That's exactly how I felt after reading *Our Daily Wheat*, and that's why I recommend it so highly. Stephen Cedars' biting short play (and I mean biting) is a fable that makes me want to use a word like *gestalt* that nobody understands (and if you do, kudos!). *Our Daily Wheat*, however, is about something we all understand. It's about lies. Specifically, the lies we tell our children. Because we love them so much. The child in the play isn't a child *per se* (nor does he have to be played by one as the playwright lets us know), but is symbolic of anyone whom we believe needs to be protected from the truth at all costs. And if you don't recognize yourself in any part of this frightening tale, you're way beyond therapy. I mean, no, you're absolutely fine.*

WIFE

Nothing! Oh, what a bloody sad moment it will be, when he comes down to breakfast any moment, to find his world has changed! If he does not have his cereal, then he will have to ask why...and even if we lie, there will begin his awakening, there will he begin to learn...that we are all of us doomed...that we are poor...that, for people like us, there is no hope...

Pause. HUSBAND

There must be a way. Surely –

(Spacing and font size are playwright's own.) Eds.

“Our Daily Wheat”
by Stephen Cedars

CHARACTERS

HUSBAND, a kind and simple peasant.

WIFE, a kind and simple peasant.

BOY, a naive child. *Does not need to be played by an actual child.*

PLACE

A peasant's hovel.

TIME

Not so long ago as we'd like to believe...

A simple dining room in a modest hut. At center stage a wooden kitchen table.

The WIFE paces the stage. The HUSBAND enters.

HUSBAND

Dear wife, you seem troubled.

WIFE

(stops, wrings her hands)

No shit, husband. For weeks now you have not worked at all - which would be fine, dandy and bearable if we had between us even a farthing in reserve. But us being already so stricken with this putrid lot of poverty, I am indeed quite troubled.

HUSBAND

(angry)

Ah! I can no longer stomach this resentment! Times are hard and there are many of us who want for labor! I'm no lazy man, no matter how you'd have it. The world heaps enough hatred my way, I do not need more of it here at home!

WIFE

Oh, dear husband, please, I would never mean to diminish you, I know that fault is not yours...but our quarrels are of no consequence, as what troubles me concerns our dear, sweet boy...

HUSBAND

(suddenly alarmed)
Our son? Is he harmed?

WIFE

No. Not yet.

(Pause.)
For weeks, we have made due.

HUSBAND

You are well-equipped for that.

WIFE

My life has made me so...for weeks, we have made due...eaten what we could find...stolen wilted lettuce when once we had full salads, drank from wells when we used to tap springs, and where in better days we dined on mutton stew, now it is the red fattened flesh of house rats that fills our stomachs...

HUSBAND

Yes, it's so...but dear, I must insist, we must continue to bear these disappointments lightly...our boy knows us to be happy and bright people, always have we sacrificed our self-pity so he would know us to be glad with life...and he is, you know, a creature so dependent on his usual routine -

WIFE

You think I don't know that?! Dear Christ, husband, it is that which troubles me so...

(Slight pause.)
Through these particularly hard times, we have made due, made compromises on almost all fronts, but we have not yet had to sacrifice his daily breakfast of wheat cereal...how he loves it...his daily wheat cereal...and moreover, how he *knows* it...even at our very worst, when we could not find wheat, we kept him lovingly duped, with flakes of corn or dried fruit...

HUSBAND

And now?

WIFE

Nothing! Oh, what a bloody sad moment it will be, when he comes down to breakfast any moment, to find his world has changed! If he does not have his cereal, then he will have to ask why...and even if we lie, there will begin his awakening, there will he begin to learn...that we are all of us doomed...that we are poor...that, for people like us, there is no hope...

Pause.

HUSBAND

There must be a way. Surely -

WIFE

There is no way. I have thought it through. It is this routine that keeps him blind to life's cruelty...were he used to eating bread in the morning, I could substitute it with mud...were he used to eating oatmeal, I could substitute with pig's crap...but our beloved son knows and loves his wheat cereal, and adequate substitute for that we simply do not have...

HUSBAND

(realizing it)

He is lost.

WIFE

(sobbing)

I know it.

Pause.

HUSBAND

(suddenly)

Unless...I hear him coming...stall him, wife, I will soon return...

WIFE

But...

HUSBAND

He may in his life know momentary displeasure or pain, but the true callousness of our fate, he will *never* see. What kind of father would I be if I led my son to such terror before his time? We will maintain what his innocence, we will make certain all is as he believes it to be, we will give him what he knows.

He rushes off.

WIFE

There's no way!

BOY

(enters, wiping his eyes from sleep)

No way for what, mama?

WIFE

Oh, my darling!

She smiles through her tears, a strange contradiction.

BOY

Are you sad, mama?

WIFE

No, my darling! Only so happy with the sunrise! What a wonderful day!

BOY

Ay, as always! Though last night was a tough one -

WIFE

(concerned)

Tough?

BOY

Yes. This new mutton of late has me every night plagued with the thin dirties, and I am forced to spend half the night on the crapper.

WIFE

(brightening)

Oh! That means it's good protein, dear!

BOY

Oh.

HUSBAND

(entering with a bowl)

Who is hungry for cereal?

BOY

I am!

HUSBAND

Come and get it!

He puts the bowl on the table and the boy rushes and sits. He is about to start eating.

HUSBAND

First, the milk!

WIFE

Wait!

HUSBAND

Huh?

BOY
What?

WIFE
I'll get it.
(Whispers to husband.)
We have no milk...I have been using water...

HUSBAND
(impressed)
You marvelous woman!

She gets a decanter of water, brings it over, pours it.

BOY
This milk is quite thin, yes?

WIFE
All the better to battle those late night craps!

BOY
Yay!

She looks in the bowl. She gasps. When she finishes, she rushes and embraces the husband.

WIFE
You marvelous man!

HUSBAND
(a whisper)
God might deprive us of fertile soil, but even the beggars have stony ground.

WIFE
And our boy has his cereal...we have saved him yet another day from the ugly truth of life.

He takes a bite. A HEAVY CRUNCH, as he bites down onto stones.

BOY
(his mouth filled with stones)

Ow!

WIFE

It's good for you, sweetheart! A new strain of wheat! It is good protein! The best protein!

BOY

(after swallowing)

Will this too keep me on the crapper in the daytime?

HUSBAND

If that is God's will.

BOY

OK.

He takes another bite. Another loud CRUNCH.

BOY

(his mouth filled with stones)

Ow!

WIFE

Oh, we have done our duty...

BOY

(after swallowing)

It hurts to eat, mommy.

HUSBAND

The good things are hard, son. This, you will learn, but for now, you must enjoy your cereal.

BOY

(after a third bite)

Ahh! I think I broke a tooth!

WIFE

(concerned)

Oh no, that's...

HUSBAND

Don't sweat it...

WIFE

(a sudden inspiration)

Why, that only means they're your baby teeth!

HUSBAND

Yes! Of course! That's why it hurts to eat this morning! Because you're growing up!

BOY

I am? Wow! I've been so patient, but now I can open my eyes as an adult and I'll know what the world is truly like...

WIFE

Yes, yes, but do eat. You'll be late for school.

BOY

Late? Oh no!

He starts eating fast. As he chomps on the stones, the crunching gets louder, more violent. BLOOD trickles from his mouth, being torn up as he chews. His parents stand upstage, watching, relieved.

BOY

(as he eats, through stones in his mouth)

Ow...ow! Oh, I'm bleeding...how wonderful, Mama! I bleed the blood of being an adult! Bye, bye baby teeth! Ow!

WIFE

(whispering to husband)

We have saved him for yet another day, husband...for today, at least, he will remain happy...

HUSBAND

He has had his cereal, as every morning...he has had his daily wheat...but tomorrow...

WIFE

...is another day. We'll face it if it comes. But for now, let us enjoy that one truly happy thing we know.

They watch him bleeding as he eats, a big smile on his face.

END OF PLAY.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

OUR DAILY WHEAT is about illusion and poverty and parenthood and that quality of human resilience that seems to me worth both mocking and celebrating. In its social intent and anachronism, it reminds me of Brecht's lehrstücke and in its brutal climax calls to mind the grotesquerie of the grand guignol. But as most of the good ones do, it came quick and pretty much complete, so I'm happy to acknowledge those potential influences

*while feeling fairly certain that it's my own piece of wild fun.
The play has been produced twice, by Over Our Head Players in Racine,
WI, and by the Renaissance Guild in San Antonio, TX.*

PLAYWRIGHT BIO:

Stephen Cedars is a writer, director and teacher originally from south Louisiana. His plays have been produced or developed both in New York City and throughout the U.S. and Canada, and published by Original Works and Words of Choice. As a producer and director in NYC, he has created work for stages in three boroughs, including several years of community programming. Amongst his awards are the Theater Masters Visionary Playwright Award, the Gloria Ann Barnell Peter Award, a Fellowship with the Target Margin Institute, a Residency with America-in-Play, and the John Golden Playwriting Prize. He earned his MFA in Dramatic Writing from NYU, which he attended as a Rita and Burton Goldberg Fellow, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Theatre and Performance Studies with the CUNY Graduate Center.