

The Solemn Curfew Toll

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A One-Act play

By Kit Thornton

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SCENE 1

BILL is standing on his front porch, waiting for his son, Eric to come home. The boy is late, his father is worried.

JOHN, the Deputy -In-Charge of the local police department approaches him, looking grim.

BILL tries not to let his sudden fear show.

BILL

Evening, John.

JOHN

Evening. I suppose you're not glad to see me.

BILL

Maybe not. Not your fault I suppose.

JOHN

No. I suppose not. It's about Eric. Out past curfew.

BILL shifts uncomfortably, trying to maintain a pose of fatherly stoicism.

BILL

Well, that's why I'm out here, John. Waiting for him. He'll wish he hadn't when I see him.

JOHN

Well, that's it, Bill. I'm, well, I'm sorry to tell you, but one of my deputies shot him. He's dead.

BILL tries not to react to this. He struggles to control his voice

BILL

Why's that? Eric's not the most...easy teenager to deal with, but I don't think he'd threaten...

JOHN

Oh, no, Bill. It's not like that. He was out after curfew.

BILL

You shot him because he was out after curfew.

JOHN

Well, I can't say I agree, or approve, but that's the rule. Counsel passed the resolution two weeks ago. Posted it. You must have heard.

BILL

I heard. I told Eric. But I guess he thought that nobody'd be fool enough to shoot a kid just for being on the street after ten.

JOHN

Now, Bill...I understand that this is hard on you, especially since Kate's gone. But you gotta understand, you'd know better than anyone, what with Kate dying in that bombing last year...

BILL

(bitterly)

I recall.

JOHN

(With Some Sympathy)

Bill, I understand. Really, I do. But you gotta watch your attitude these days. Can't take that tone with a law enforcement officer these days. We've been friends a long time, and I know you, but one of the younger bucks'd write you up - put you on the watch list.

BILL

Well, I supposed I'd better...be more careful.

JOHN

Yeah.

(after a brief silence)

Well, I don't like it so well...you should know that. But the times. All these killings...

BILL

Yeah. Killings. People losing their families.

JOHN

Yeah. You know...maybe it's not the best time, but, I should mention, I mean, someone might wonder...

BILL

Wonder what?

JOHN

He was your son, Bill.. Why didn't you keep him in? That's why he's dead. You should have kept him in.

BILL

Is that what the autopsy report will say, John? Died of his father not keeping him in?

JOHN

(exasperated)

See, now Bill? That's what I'm talking about. That sort of smart-ass remark could get you on the list. The list that goes upstate! Now, don't go blaming us. We follow the law. What they say the law is - what the Council says, we do. And they said that everybody on the streets after ten was to be shot. So that's what we did. And I'm sorry about Eric. Knew him since he was a kid. But you should have kept him in.

BILL struggles to keep his composure. Finally, he manages to resume his pose of stoic calm.

BILL

(long pause)

Should have, I suppose.

JOHN looks at him, then fishes a paper from his pocket and hands it to BILL.

JOHN

Here's your paper. I kept it down as low as I could. You could have been charged with neglect leading to the death of a minor, but I talked Mark down to abating a nuisance after curfew. No jail time. I wouldn't want you to be in that jail, with what's going on in there these days. Not what Kate would have...

BILL reads the paper

BILL

Two hundred dollar fine. A hundred fifty six in...what's this? "County administration fees..."

JOHN

We gotta collect that now. Every time we serve paper. Council rule...

BILL

And this last charge, here at the bottom. Four dollars and thirteen cents.

JOHN

That's for the bullet. We've spent a lot on bullets this year. Costs. The Council...

BILL

You billed me for the bullet you used to shoot my son.

JOHN

Three bullets. And for the gun cleaning. The autopsy bill will come at the end of the month. These aren't my rules, Bill.

BILL looks at the paper, to keep from looking at JOHN. He sees something that causes his eyes to widen. His resolve cracks.

BILL

The time notation. The incident report...

JOHN

What about it?

BILL

This says he was shot at 2155. That's five minutes before curfew. Five minutes.

JOHN

I noticed that. But he was on foot, clear up on Claremont Drive. He'd never have made it home in time.

BILL fixes a deadly stare on JOHN. JOHN'S hand moves reflexively to his gun. Both men are frightened, but BILL is losing the fight against blind fury.

BILL

John.

JOHN

What, Bill?

BILL

You should go now. Right now.

JOHN

Have to get your signature. You gotta sign. Sign your plea.

JOHN hands BILL a pen. His hands shaking, BILL hesitates a moment, then signs. JOHN gives him a copy, and turns to go. Then he stops, and turns to face BILL.

JOHN

I'm sorry about all this...I mean, I'm sorry for your loss. I'm not sorry to do my job, you understand. It's the law, and I'm a lawman. I'm not sorry for that. But I'm sorry for your loss.

BILL

(cooly)

I do understand. You're a lawman. A thing that enforces laws. Any kind of law, fair or not, sensible or not. What would happen if all you lawmen started thinking for yourselves, second guessing? Why, society would fall apart. People wouldn't be safe walking the streets.

JOHN

That's right, Bill. That's right. Goodnight.

BILL

Goodnight

JOHN exits

BILL looks at the paper for a long moment.

END SCENE

## SCENE 2

BILL stands by a closed casket. He has been waiting to receive the few visitors who come to offer their condolences. JOHN approaches, in civilian dress.

Bill. JOHN

John. BILL

I'm sorry for your loss. JOHN

Thank you John. Good of you to come. BILL

They stand awkwardly for a few moments.

JOHN  
We just never know what God has in store for us, do we? I mean, it's all God's will.

BILL  
God didn't shoot my son.

JOHN  
If it hadn't been God's will. It couldn't happen. You know that. You should accept God's will. It'll give you peace, Bill.

BILL  
And what's it give you?

JOHN  
Peace. It gives me peace.

BILL  
I'd think that'd be hard to come by for you, John. (he nods toward the casket) How many?

JOHN

I didn't come to talk business. Just wanted you to know...well, anyway, your boy. He's with his mother now.

BILL does not respond to this. JOHN leaves.  
As he leaves FRANK approaches.

FRANK

Hello, Bill. I'm sorry.

BILL

Thank you, Frank.

FRANK looks at the coffin for a few long moments.

FRANK

Closed casket.

BILL

That's what they do when you get shot in the face.

FRANK

They shot him in the face? Jesus!

BILL

The doctor said he was already on the ground. Already dead, probably. I identified him, though. I could tell by his eyes. I had to look at his eyes.

FRANK

They can't get away with that, Bill. You can't let them get away with that.

BILL

Not much I can do, Frank. The law says they can...

FRANK

No law that says that is a good one. No Council that says that...

BILL

You gotta watch talk like that these days.

FRANK

Yeah. Well. Not every where.

BILL

I don't think I want to hear this.

FRANK

You just going to take this, Bill? Just let them do this? You don't have to...

BILL

I said I don't want...

FRANK

Look, there's some of us, we meet at the old lumber yard. Monday nights, after the ball game. Just think about it.

BILL

I'll think about it. But I'm not very ...

FRANK

Just think about it.

FRANK leaves.

END SCENE

SCENE 3

BILL is strapped to a board, his head lower than his feet. He is blindfolded, and obviously very frightened. JOHN enters, carrying a bucket of water and a cloth.

JOHN

Hello, Bill. I'm sorry about this. I don't like this. But I've got my orders. Now, I need to ask you some questions. It'll be easier if you answer them right away.

BILL

John? Is that you? What are you doing?

JOHN

I've got to ask you some questions. You went to the lumber yard Monday night. Why did you go there?

BILL

What? For pity's sake, John. I don't...

JOHN puts the cloth over BILL's face and pours water over it. BILL chokes and screams.

JOHN

Bill, don't make this harder. Who were you supposed to meet? What were you going to do?

BILL

I don't know. I don't know! Why...

JOHN pours more of the water. Longer this time. BILL can do nothing but choke, sputter, and twist desperately in the restraints.

JOHN

C'mon, Bill. Nobody's enjoying this. It doesn't have to...

BILL

(screaming)

Frank! It was Frank asked me!

JOHN removes the cloth.

JOHN

Frank works for us, Bill. He works for the Council. Who else did you talk to?

BILL

Nobody. I didn't talk to anybody. Nobody was there. Just the police. Just...

JOHN

Listen. There never was anybody else. Never was. But you went. That's an act. What we call an act in furtherance of a terrorist conspiracy. You've committed a crime. A very serious crime.

BILL sobs, broken.

BILL

There never was anybody else?

JOHN

Nobody. Listen, I know you don't...but I'm still trying. Christ, Bill, with Kate and then Eric, listen. I'm bringing a doc in here. Tell him you were out of your head. He'll give you some meds. You're going to take a plea, just to agitation. You'll be inside for a couple of months, then out on probation. Maybe help us now and then. Help us a few times and it'll be over. You can go home.

BILL

I can go home?

JOHN

Sure, Bill. It's what Kate would have wanted. I mean, what if she saw you here, like this, crying. In jail. That's not what she would have wanted.

BILL

It's not. Not what she would have wanted.

JOHN

That's good. That's smart. It's the right thing.

JOHN washed BILL's face, almost gently.

God knows, you've suffered enough.

END SCENE

SCENE 4

BILL appears on a video monitor. He looks pale and uncomfortable.

BILL

(on video)

I have just been released from the Grace Hollow Internment Camp. I have been inside for three years, after having pled guilty to agitation. During those three years I have been... it doesn't matter. My wife was killed in the Christmas bombing four years ago. My son was shot by the police. I'm recording this so someone will know why I'm doing this. What I have to do.

BILL puts on a vest filled with explosives and wires.

I don't think this will help anything. Others have done this, and it just leads to more people getting hurt, more soldiers in the streets, more homes destroyed. But I have to do something. I have to.

My friend John is being named to the Council today. He is just doing what he had to do. I will be there to see them applaud him, and thank him for his service. And then I will do what I have to do. If that's what God wants.

END