

ON THE ROOFTOP WITH BILL SEARS

A one man play

by

Mark Perry

Based on the life and writings of William Sears (1911-1992)

(Under agreement with George Ronald, publisher)

Draft 3.5

March 3, 2005

This script represents the original vision of the play as was first staged in April 2004 with direction by J. Chachula. Since the play has been touring, adjustments have been made that reflect the need for minimal props and set. Along with these changes, a less realistic approach to the premise of the play has been adopted. Whereas this script clearly sets the play in Philadelphia in 1953, the touring production makes it feel like Bill Sears, a spirit living outside of time, stumbles upon this place and this memory, and he decides to spend some time with us and to relive this crucial moment of his life. That being said, the spoken dialogue has changed very little.

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ON THE ROOFTOP WITH BILL SEARS

The set is a 1950s TV studio, which is actually a converted radio studio. This is one of seven such studios at WCAU-TV in downtown Philadelphia. The studio is dimly lit at first with some light on stage right, where we see the set of a park scene. There is a tree and a bench covered by a cloth. On a chalkboard is written the title, "In the Park with Bill Sears." At stage left, apart from the set and still in darkness, there is a make-shift dressing area with a mirror. A kitchen area is offstage left. A sound room is upstage. A Still portraits of WCAU personalities hang on the wall along with other items.

BILL appears at the door. He is a middle-aged man, made up to look like an old man. He speaks to someone offstage.

BILL

Good show today, Paul. No, go ahead, I'll get the lights.

[Bill comes in, full of snap. He wears striped pants, a flat gray coat, a light checkered vest, and a string tie. He stops.]

I love that hush, the quiet of a dark theater... or a TV or radio studio, as the case may be. It's a silence that vibrates with anticipation, every atom poised to bring into being whatever one might fancy. You could say, let's go back to the Renaissance, to Spain, to Seville... or to Rome of the 1st Century, or east to the Orient and points yet unknown. You could call up stories of people long gone. You could bring a man back from the dead. Yes! You can bring a man back from the dead, let him live again, let something of his essence mingle in our midst for a while, so you might enjoy his company, gain from his experience. All you have to do is ask, and this hush – this pure soil for the cultivation of the soul – it responds. And for a span of time, you can forget that it's 1953 and that you're in Philadelphia.

[He turns on the lights.]

You remember that joke. "I entered a contest once. First prize was a week in Philadelphia. Second prize: two weeks in Philadelphia." WCAU, a 7 studio house broadcasting radio and television. I do a daily show, plus my sports gig (*he waves an*

Eagles pennant) and then there's "In the Park." Some Sundays, I like to take a little extra time after the show, to reflect. I don't have much quiet time at home between my two sons' escapades and the menagerie of pets and guests my wife Marguerite keeps. Let's see what we got on.

[He turns on a speaker monitor and we hear music.]

Ah, Guy Lombardo. Must be Stu in the booth – he loves the old sugar-stick.

[He turns down the music, when he discovers a cup of coffee and a donut by his dressing table. There's an envelope next to them.]

Oh, isn't that nice? Coffee with cream and (*sniffs*) two sugars. And a honey-glazed. Heaven. And a letter. (*He picks it up and sniffs it.*) It's a contract. (*He shakes it next to his ear.*) To renew the show for another year. Boss shows me into his office the other day: "Sears, Television is big, very big, and it's getting bigger. The CBS people, they're happy, very happy with your show. Stick with us, Bill, and you'll be a star." And now they're offering me... (*Listens carefully to letter.*) Forty-five? No. (*He weighs it in his hands.*) Fifty! \$50,000. (*He sighs.*) Sounds... delicious. Just one problem.

[The number '16' is written prominently on his dressing mirror. He wipes it away and writes '17' in its place.]

I'm calling it "The Divine Dilemma." And today is Day 17. (*Talking to God.*) Only 2 days left. Beyond that, my conscience is clean. (*To audience.*) How do I put this...? I have a friend – works here at WCAU – who suspects that Jesus Christ has returned, and is wondering what to do about it. The answer is obvious, right? Christ hasn't returned, because when He comes, everyone is going to know it. That's how we know He's come, all the noise, the fire with the angels singing, horns blowing. Right. (*He shakes his head as if he's in complete agreement with that.*) Still... my friend suspects it anyway, and claims to have some proof. Good proof. Great proof... except for the angels, the horns

and the universal cataclysm. What would you do? Really, given that point of view, what would you advise? Should my friend give up a good livelihood and fame to go and share this message? Because no one knows about it. Just like the first time He came – my friend says – when only twelve believed in Him, and He sent them out into the world saying, go out and share the Gospel with all nations.

My friend really loves his job. Don't get me wrong, the industry has its dark side, its temptations. *(He picks up a record.)* This record arrived the other day addressed to me... *(He flips it around – a \$20 bill is taped to the back of the sleeve)* with a 20 spot taped to the sleeve. Might be a good record, it'll certainly get a lot of airplay.

[He pulls off the \$20 bill and hangs it on the clothesline.]

But I say treat people fairly and honestly, and for the most part, they'll do well by you. Take a guy like Ed Sullivan. He's got a reputation to be the "great stone face," but I've found he's one of the genuinely nice people in the business. He's invited us on his show twice now, and because of that, this new rag, TV Guide, did a feature on us. So all in all, things are looking up for the show, for me.

I hope you won't think this immodest. Praise doesn't mean that much to me. My priorities are clear: First, air. Second, water. Third... I dunno, food? Well, praise is after air and water, definitely. Thank you for laughing. So it's not just the money. *(He picks up the envelope.)* Besides, 50,000 isn't what it used to be, say, in 1912, when you could get a beer for a nickel. Still... Wanna see what I do for such a sum?

[He throws a sheet off the park bench to reveal several stuffed animal puppets.]

I talk to the animals! I play dress up and take pleasure in the fact that when I'm finished putting on the makeup and costume, I look like my grandfather! I mean it's all good and fine to play make-believe every once in a while, to have fun, but to be paid a salary that a doctor – someone who saves human lives on a regular basis – doesn't make. Dear God, where will it all end – did you ever catch yourself mid-sentence and wonder who is this speaking with my mouth because it sounds frighteningly like my father?!

My father. Money meant so much to my father. And he wouldn't see this kind of money in 20 years of hard work. Factory work. I look in the mirror some days and I don't see myself. I see him. Looking back at me, with a look of disbelief in his eyes. And we have this ongoing dialogue, he and I – actually the mirror and I – about whether what I do is actually worth anything.

[He hides part of his face with his hands.]

Maybe it's just the mustache.

[He starts taking off his makeup.]

So each Sunday, I'm transformed from my father into my grandfather then back to my father again. And the three of us enjoy a donut and a cup of coffee. So let's see, how do you split coffee and a donut three ways? See, if Christ had returned, He could do this. Or was that Moses? To Grandfather, the coffee. I'll hold the donut. And for Father...

[He goes to the refrigerator and takes out a bottle of beer.]

For father, Milwaukee tap water. He's Irish after all. (*Holding up the bottle as if toasting his father.*) That you may see no one but yourself in the mirror. On a Saturday night Father would stand for hours around the piano at Hennessy's House with the only other two Irishmen in town and they would sing one short song over and over.

“Ooooh... McGinty was dead and McCarthy didn’t know it;
McCarthy was dead and McGinty didn’t know it.
They both lay there dead in the very same bed
And neither didn’t know that the other was dead.”

[The phone rings. He picks it up.]

Bill Sears. Hi Stu. Sorry to hear that. Sure. Of course. Okay. *(He hangs up.)* That was the DJ who’s on now, Stu, and he’s got a stomach flu. *(He hears his rhyme and thinks. He reaches for a pen and paper.)* Just saying he may need me to cover for him. *(The phone rings again.)* Pete’s Porcelain Palace... 30 seconds? No, I got it. Go do your thing.

[He scribbles a few lines, and then goes into the sound room. He comes back out and grabs a horn (sound effect) that is hanging on the wall. Music comes up on P.A. system. When the song fades, the “On the Air” sign comes on. We hear Bill’s voice.]

This is Bill Sears in Studio 7, and here’s a limerick for you: I just got a call from Stu, seems he has a touch of the flu, said he couldn’t sit, and if I could pinch hit, then he could take... *(the honk of a horn)* ...a trip to the loo. If you’re listening, Marguerite, I’ll be coming home soon.

[We hear Benny Goodman’s “Sing, Sing, Sing.” He reenters.]

Benny Goodman’s ‘Sing, Sing, Sing’ is an ol’ stand by for DJ’s. At 8 ½ minutes, it gives us time to grab a snack and visit the little boy’s room. Good thing I was here. Silence can be deadly for a radioman’s career. Now, where was I? I forget. So I’ll do what any old codger would: I’ll start at the beginning.

I was born in Duluth, Minnesota on March 28, 1911. Sometimes I wonder if Father never forgave me for missing Saint Patrick’s Day by less than two weeks. I was born in a caul. Wrapped in a veil, my father said. My Uncle Duffy was more picturesque. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and all the saints in purgatory! The laddie’s come in a cocoon.”

I began to walk when I was ten months old, but I began to speak when I was only six months. It made my father very nervous. Especially since the first word I said was not, "Daddy" but "God". Apparently, I heard it a lot around the house, generally followed by language less religious in character.

By the time I was a year-and-a-half old, my father was quite frightened of me. I knew several words that he didn't. It was at this time that I first had the dream. When I told Mother about my dream she told Father. He wanted to take me to a doctor, but Mother said, "He's just precocious."

"He's weird," Father told her.

All I could recall myself about the dream the first time I had it was that the room had been full of a wonderful bright light, that I was very happy, and that I wanted to remain there. September 20, 1912. Mother said she remembered the day of my dream very clearly. It was the morning that Father came downstairs after being desperately ill. He'd eaten some string beans from a bad jar and had been poisoned. For three days he thought he was going to die. At the height of his fever he confessed to Mother that ten years ago when they had first been married he'd taken Alma Jensen to a barn dance, and he didn't want to die with that on his conscience. Unfortunately for him, he recovered.

By the time I was five I was making my poor father's life a misery. I just had all these questions: Why was the sky blue? Where did a laugh go after you heard it? If the earth was round and people were walking on all sides of it, which side was up? Why was Sammy Agnew black and why was I white – most of the time? Did God have a wife?

Where was His house? Could He speak Chippewa Indians like Uncle Walter? Did He really love everybody? Even old lady Yellow-jacket who chased us kids with her umbrella? Why did He make mosquitoes? And flies that could walk upside down on the ceiling? The big questions really unnerved my father. I seemed to have an inordinate interest in God, and he didn't care to discuss it with me.

One day at the circus, while the bare-back riders were galloping through the big rings of fire, I turned to Father and said suddenly, "Is that what hell is like?"

Father nearly swallowed his cigar. "Don't ask me, I've lived all my life in Minnesota."

"Where does *God* live, Father? How big is He? Does He have brown eyes?"

We left the tent immediately. Father stopped at a side-show and bought me a rubber ball.

"Here," he said, "play ball. Be like the other little boys. Bounce the ball on the ground."

I did, obediently. Then I looked up at him proudly. "God made the ground."

About a month later, according to Mother, I had the dream a second time. I didn't say anything about it until my father came home from work.

"The man came again," I said.

"Who came?" Father laughed.

"The man."

"What man?"

"The man in light."

"Where?"

"In my dream again."

"Ethel! He's at it again."

Mother came hurrying in. "What's wrong?"

Father was already putting on his coat. "He's seen that man in a light in his dream again."

Mother picked me up tenderly and kissed me. "Of course, he has." She hugged me to her. "We all have nasty bad dreams."

"It was a good dream," I told her.

"What did the man look like?"

"I don't know."

"What did he say?"

"Don't follow in their footsteps."

The very next morning Father was shaving when I came into the bathroom.

"What's my name?" I asked him.

Father had often played this game with me. "Your name is William."

"Then why did he call me Peter?" "

"Who?"

"The man in my dream last night."

Father cut his chin. "Ethel!"

Mother was very patient about it. "Are you sure he called you Peter, dear?"

I nodded. "He said: 'Fish like Peter.'"

Father went to work that morning with his face half shaved. "It's not normal. He talks like an old man. He'll be dead before he's six." Whenever my father became upset he

talked with a brogue and waxed poetic. "If I'd known what was coming that dark March night, I'd have stuffed him back into the 'caul' and returned him."

They say there's an age when the child looks to its father, looks into his eyes, searching for unconditional acceptance. There's a window of time and if the child doesn't find it, that window closes, and the boy has to go elsewhere for that acceptance.

If we were on Television Playhouse, this is where our troubled protagonist would reach for the bottle of beer, BUT! I'm more interested in this donut here...

[He bites the donut. The phone rings.]

(Answers.) Bill Sears. Stu, you're back! How'd it work out? Oh, good. Did you catch my bit? No? Ask your mother when you get home. Okay, call if you need me. *(Looks around.)* I know where I am, I know where I am. Donut. Beer. Dad. Dream. Ah!

One night I had exactly the same dream again. Only this time I was old enough to remember it clearly. So I wrote it down, all about the beautiful shiny white figure that came to me and brought a peace and rapture such as words can never describe.

I decided that I'd better go and tell my grandfather about my dream. Grandfather didn't always know the answers, but he always let me ask questions. I found Grandfather inside his barn singing at the top of his lungs:

(Sings.) "You will eat, bye and bye,
In that glorious land above the sky;
Work and pray, live on hay,
There'll be pie in the sky when you die!"

I told him about my dream. I asked him if he'd ever seen anything like that. He said no, but he wished he had.

I asked him, "Why is it, Grandfather, that it's so easy to talk to you about God? Here I am a young boy and there you are an old man. We both like it but nobody else seems to want to. "Maybe it's because I am old and you're young. You're close to God on one end, and I'm close to Him on the other. In between, they don't care so much."

I once heard our neighbor Mrs. Casey say Grandfather would never see the inside of the pearly gates. I knew that if you missed church on Sunday it was a mortal sin and you were damned into hell fire forever. I figured it out. Grandfather had missed over three thousand times. I wasn't interested in going to heaven at all if Grandfather wasn't there.

One Sunday I skipped church and took a chance on eternal hellfire. I went with Grandfather in his buggy down by the Mississippi River. There'd been a bad storm, and all the people who lived along the flats had been flooded out. Grandfather was helping to rescue their things. We worked until very late in the afternoon. When we came back Grandfather got a tongue-lashing from Grandma, and I was sent upstairs to bed until Father came home to deal with me.

I knew right away that this wouldn't be a "man-to-man talk, or a light willow switch, this was a razor-strapper. Father swung his razor-strap as though he were chopping wood. What was even worse, was the way he walked up the stairs. His feet could play on stairs with more feeling than Mr. Tilley on the church organ on Sunday.

"Let's get it over with," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"This hurts me a lot worse than it does you."

"But not in the same place."

That got me a few extra strokes.

I went down to join Grandfather at the barn. He was sitting on the oats-box.

"Have a seat, son," he said.

I shook my head. "Not just yet."

Grandfather nodded sympathetically. "You're thinking that if you'd lied about where we'd been this afternoon you'd have a more comfortable seat on your breeches right now, right?"

I nodded.

Grandfather laughed. "Better to be miserable on the bottom end and proud of yourself on the top end," he told me. "That's character. Forget your rump. You did a good thing helping those people at the river."

Grandfather got me a soft cushion out of the buggy. I settled into it very carefully. I liked being with Grandfather. I liked the smell of his clothes, his wrinkled cheeks with those short, sharp whiskers that scratched when he hugged me.

Before I went home that night Grandfather told me, "Never stop asking questions." Then he made me promise, cross my heart and hope to die, that I wouldn't stop. "There must be something better somewhere than what we've got so far. Some day you'll find out what your dream means. I hope I'm around when you do. I've been looking for something myself, for all my years."

Inside the barn was a world that belonged only to me and Grandfather. That world inspired this show. And now in a way we're opening it up to all these other people. We changed it around a bit. Instead of a barn, we have a park. I play the old man. The boy became Albert the chipmunk. We added some other animal puppets like Sir Geoffrey the Giraffe and Magnolia the Ostrich here. And now every Sunday, at 12 noon, the animals and I are transformed into electromagnetic radiation and beamed abroad to CBS television stations all across this nation. I imagine it to be like grandfather's barn stretching out over the whole country, and all are welcome, and no question will go... unspoken.

So maybe I can show you the kind of thing we do here. You see, the old man, whose name is Bill... Oh, put me in a dress and call me Mabel! I have managed to come to this point without properly introducing myself. *(He offers to shake hands with an audience member.)* Bill Sears. And the program is "In the Park with Bill Sears." Now this old man because of the purity of his heart can talk to the animals in the park where he goes every day. I don't have a particular script memorized. We don't actually memorize in TV. We use prompt cards!

[He pulls out a magazine from his things.]

Okay, I got it. Let me take a moment to get into character.

[He puts on a hat, picks up a cane and assumes the character of the older man.]

Hello, Albert. Hello, Sir Geoffrey. Hello, Magnolia.

(Mimicking Albert's voice:) What are you reading, Bill? (Older man again:) This, my dear friend, is a recent issue of my favorite magazine, which I discovered the other night

by my bedside. Now, Albert, finding it there struck me as very strange as my wife and I had very recently agreed not to subscribe to this magazine. And yet there it was!

(Breaking character.) This bit is more or less true, but we'll come to that soon enough.

[He listens as if the giraffe (Sir Geoffrey) is asking him something.]

Why, Sir Geoffrey, I imagine it was my Marguerite who put it there. All of you remember my wife Marguerite? Eyes the color of robins' eggs? *(Mimicking Magnolia's voice:)* *Ostrich eggs are a much nicer color!* I'm sure that ostrich eggs are a very nice color as well, Magnolia.

[He listens as if the chipmunk (Albert) is asking him something.]

Well, Albert, there's a very interesting thing about this particular magazine. Just listen to these headlines.

“LOST CONTINENT OF ATLANTIS DISCOVERED OFF COAST OF PORTUGAL”

“SHAKESPEARE REALLY BACON”

“MARTIANS LAND IN NEW JERSEY”

[He looks over at Albert the chipmunk.]

Now, you don't need to be so nervous, Albert, these headlines aren't actually true.

[All the animals ask, “they're not?”]

No!

(Mimicking Sir Geoffrey's voice:) *So what kind of magazine prints untrue headlines?*

Believe it or not, this is a good, reputable magazine. They're not saying these headlines are true – quite the opposite in fact. This magazine asked newspaper editors around the nation to submit some *imaginary* headlines that the editor felt would arouse the greatest excitement.

“NO MORE WINTER EVER”

I like the sound of that one too! But there was ONE headline these hard-boiled newspapermen agreed would be the most electrifying of all. Do you want to guess what it was? Magnolia.

(Mimicking Magnolia’s voice:) “Birds proved smarter than people?” Hmm, that would give a whole new ring to being called a “bird brain,” wouldn’t it? Sir Geoffrey, you have one?

(Mimicking Sir Geoffrey’s voice:) “Long neck a sign of superior intelligence.” Well, it certainly signals a nearness to God, doesn’t it? Albert, you have one?

[He leans down as if Albert is whispering to him.]

“Enough nuts harvested to feed entire planet.” Wow, those would all make wonderful headlines, but the number one headline consisted of only two words.

[He gets up, walks to the chalkboard and writes.]

CHRIST RETURNS.

[He takes off his hat and puts off the character of the old man, and gives a significant look to the audience.]

A journalist would give anything to be the one to break that story. My friend – the one who believes Christ has returned – he’s in broadcasting. So what does he do? Does he try to break the story? *(Imitating news telegraph)* Dee-de-dee-dee. News Flash! We interrupt this regularly scheduled program to bring you the following news bulletin: Long awaited Messiah, Jesus Christ, finally returns! Citizens of Philadelphia wonder what took so long... No, of course not! The other day he walks into his boss’ office tells him he’s thinking about resigning. His boss gets agitated. They’re very attached to him, you see.

(Mimicking his boss:) “Now, now, if you leave, and we have to break the contract with the sponsor, 56 people are going to lose their jobs. That’s 56 families with no food on the table.” Just to add another wrinkle to his dilemma.

[A beat.]

So I’m ten, eleven years old, and still I didn’t know what my dream meant. I took Grandfather’s advice and started to read the Bible.

[Bill pulls out a copy of the Bible. He sits and starts to flip through it, quickly displaying a lack of interest.]

I found it very difficult and was just about to give up in favor of “Nick Carter, Master Detective,” when I was told that no one was encouraged to read the Bible for himself. From that moment on, it became a "must".

I kept skipping through the chapters looking for the shiny white man in my dream. Father didn’t want me becoming a religious fanatic, so whenever he saw me reading the Bible he’d take it away from me. He hid our two copies, so I borrowed one from Saphead Phillips.

That was the beginning of the great religious feud between me and Father. I tried reading in bed. “Time to sleep, son” and he’d turn off the light. I would tiptoe out of bed: “Time to read, Father” and click on the light again. One night he saw the light through my keyhole. “William!!” So I began to hang a blanket over the door so that the light wouldn’t shine through the keyhole or cracks. That lasted four nights. I even tried disguising the Bible as my math book. Some days you know you’d just like to go up on the roof where no one pays you any mind. Read what you want to read. Believe what you want to believe.

One day, while I was cleaning the attic (this was part of my punishment for the math book scheme), I figured out that I could run a long extension cord with a socket on it right down into my bedroom from the attic. I wasn't taking any chance on this light being discovered, so I ran the cord along the pipes, down the wall, and took it right into bed with me. Mother thought I'd reformed. I heard her tell Father, "Something wonderful has happened. William is making his own bed each day."

At night I would make a nice little tent out of the bed-covers, then take the electric light right under the sheets and blankets. Inside my teepee I could read to my heart's content. One night, I dipped into the New Testament, and the first words that hit my eye were:

"...and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light."

It was my shiny man! I let out a yell, straightened up in bed, and jerked the extension cord so hard it caused a short circuit and burned out every light in the house.

I hid the cord and went out into the hall to help Father, who was trying to find out what on earth could have happened. I could hardly wait until the next night to get back to my reading. I pored over the words. The more I read, the more certain I was that what I'd seen in my dream was the Messiah. It was Christ. He'd returned and was waiting for me somewhere. I was positive when I read the words:

"I go away but return again."

"You shall see the Son of Man coming in the glory of the Father."

"When He, the Spirit of Truth, is come, He will lead you to all Truth."

For a whole week, I kept searching through the Bible for more about the shiny white figure. Then came the night of the big explosion. I had just turned back to David and Goliath. It was a great fight, and I was so worried about David missing Goliath with the sling-shot that I didn't hear Father slip quietly into the room and approach the edge of the bed, wondering what the funny glow was coming from beneath the blankets. He slowly lifted one end of the blanket and peered in at me. David was just getting ready to let fly at the giant Goliath. Naturally, I didn't know it was Father's face. His eyes looked so fierce I thought it was Goliath. I threw the book in the air, screamed at the same time, and like David I fired my sling-shot. I swung the extension cord and hit Father right between the eyes with a sixty-watt bulb. It made a very loud explosion. Father shouted, grabbed for me, held on to the bedclothes, and pulled them on top of himself as he fell to the floor.

My sister Ella was first on the scene. She began dancing round in the doorway hysterically. "He's shot him! He's shot him! Father's shot William dead!" Mother turned the bedroom light on and saw me cringing against the wall on the far side of the bed. Father was still trying to fight his way out of the blankets. When Mother uncovered Father, he began to crawl across the floor towards me, accusing me of deliberately trying to blind him.

"I thought you were Goliath," I said. His eyes looked like the cyclops'. Mother cooled him down, and she and Ella helped him to pick the glass fragments out of his hair and eyebrows.

"I just wanted to learn what was in the Bible."
"Then go and ask Father Hogan," Father shouted. "That's what I pay my pew-rent for. Let him earn the money."

I told him, "Someday I'm going to find out what my dream means, and I'm going to go all over the world and tell people about God."

And you know what? My father never tried to discourage me from that. It made him nervous and he didn't like to talk about it, but he never said I was being foolish. When Father was young he was going to be a great actor. He was going to sacrifice everything for it. Everybody had discouraged him, but he said he felt deep down inside that it was the only thing in the world he really wanted to do. Father never got to be a famous actor. He met mother instead.

Earn the money. Like he said about father Hogan, let him earn the money! It was like Father's soul had been split in two by this obsession with earning money. And yet this (*indicating the studio*) was all he wanted to do. Acting. This is my father's dream. I'm living my father's dream.

[He unconsciously opens the bottle of beer.]

Oh. That was strange.

[He puts the beer down and away from him.]

That isn't even mine. I haven't touched alcohol in years. (*He picks up the bottle, reads its label.*) "The champagne of beers." I'm reminded of a poem.

Gone are the days we all held dear,
The bar, the sawdust, and five-cent beer.
Dimly remembered, how quickly he passes,
That white-aproned bar-keep, his bottles and glasses.

Gone are the doors that swung both ways,
Gone are the memories of free-lunch days.
How different the times of now from then—
A toast to the days when men were men!

I was in grade school when I wrote it. Inspiration descended as I was sitting in a barber's chair listening to some old men reminisce. It was published... (*Nods his head.*) in Captain Billy's *Whiz Bang* magazine, and I received a royalty check for seven dollars and fifty cents. It was great to be a writer. I remember wondering if beer tasted anything like strawberry soda.

[He sniffs the bottle, then puts it down.]

So father moved the family from Minnesota to where he could find work. Guess where. I'll give you a hint. (*He turns beer bottle so a particular part of the label faces the audience.*) Milwaukee! Right, Milwaukee, wow! It had lights downtown that went off and on. Grandfather had warned me about the big city. "It's not like the country. Don't forget the things I've been telling you." And you know, he was right! It was new and exciting and full of so many things that in a year I forgot nearly everything he'd told me.

But I learned some things too. I learned that dreams have a way of not coming true. I learned that, in fact, sometimes you wake up from your dream and realize your house is being robbed. I had just started university when the Great Depression began. So I hurried home to help the family starve. For more than two years I never had more than twenty-five cents in cash in my pocket. I never saw a movie, never rode in a street-car or bus, never ate an ice-cream cone or drank a soda. I began to read the Bible again, but only because we couldn't afford a newspaper.

[A thought strikes him. He starts moving around pieces of furniture and scenery, trying to depict what he is describing.]

There's this image I have stuck in my head. A figure on the rooftop, silhouetted in moonlight, arms outstretched, and waiting... You see, I wasn't the only fool who

dreamed that Christ would return. Oh, no, this was a reverie that many a believer has been caught up in. Remember the Great Disappointment from history class? Long before the Depression. 1844. That was the year He was supposed to come back.

[He gestures towards the “Christ returns” on the chalkboard.]

All the signs were there; the prophecies seemed to line right up. A guy named... Miller – William Miller – Upstate New York, late 1820s, discovers that the 2300 day prophecy in Daniel 8 is about to run out. Jesus was about to return. [INSERT EXPLANATION] He was convinced. So what do you do? The end of the world is coming and people are going around worrying about – I don’t know – hair pins and wagon wheels. So Miller did what we would probably do – he kept it pretty much to himself. He was no preacher! But his conscience plagued him. Finally he broke down and begged God for help: If you want me to share this teaching, show me a sign. Within half an hour, his nephew shows up and says, Uncle, our church wants you to preach next Sunday on the Second Coming. Understandably he was... Furious! But he preached anyway. Before long, one in seventeen Americans becomes a Millerite.

1844 comes, and they work out a particular month and day. That night arrives. We’re out there on the roof of a house we’ve just signed the deed over to our more skeptical relations who are inside. But no need for such possessions in the land of bliss. Wearing our Sunday best, we climb out the window onto the roof. We stand up there, calling out: “Jesus! Jesus! Take me now, Jesus! I’m ready for you!” and so on through the night on the roof with the waves of faith coming and going.

We feel at one moment that through the concentrated power of our faith that we alone can cause the moon to turn to blood and the stars to fall from heaven. He said with the faith of a mustard seed we could cause the mountain to move but with the flourishing tree of faith firmly rooted in our hearts we feel at that moment that this, the moon is about to break in two and the stars will fall and that our Lord will emerge resplendent, glorious, and dismissive of our skeptical relations inside playing cards. Concentrating. The moon about to break... to break. Break! BREAK!

The silence from heaven was deafening. “Jesus? The world of the faithful awaits you! We stand here trying to keep our balance, to keep from falling. The roof is pitched, Jesus--”

How long can we stay on the rooftop? How long before we have to swallow our certitude and go back inside. Our skeptical relations inside the house smile and try hard not to gloat. A part of them was up on the roof too.

He never came. Almost 2000 years we’ve waited. No Judgment. No fire. No Paradise descending. The world was awaiting its Promised One, to make it whole again. No dice. I think this is the greatest headline because it is our greatest disappointment. Of course, they’ll say, you have to have faith. No man knows the hour. It comes down to trust. Trust in the son, trust in the Father. I don’t know if you’ve noticed. I don’t have a lot of trust in my father.

Oh, Depression. It's not as if my dream were that important in the vast scheme of human disappointment. I'd probably interpreted it wrong, and it had nothing to do with the Second Coming. It was just a comforting presence. A self remedy for poor parenting.

Grandfather wrote to me: "Quit worrying about the Depression. Write about it. It'll make a lot better poem than "the bar, the sawdust, and five cent beer." I took his advice, but instead of a poem, I wrote my first play. It won an award. They sent me a plaque. Father hung it on the wall. "It's a fine thing, son. What a pity you can't eat it."

Playwriting, playwriting. Please tell any poor soul bewitched by the Siren of playwriting to run in the other direction. It took me nine plays – NINE PLAYS – to realize: Theatre is as miserly a master as it is beautiful a mistress. So I became a radio announcer and hopped around the country from job to job. At a certain point, my dream just faded. No one talked about it. Father was no longer nervous when I talked with him, because I never mentioned God any more. To me, it seemed a pity. I had lost an inward glow, a sense of purpose. I was an average, unhappy, unfulfilled human being like everyone else; get up, go to work, go to bed, die.

I mean, sure, it's great to be on the radio, and now TV. People know you, they respect you – eventually they even start to pay you, but what is this? We're selling ourselves, posing for pictures all confidence but really deep down, aren't we just groveling, craving attention, paranoid about money, squirreling away nuts for these piddley little controlled lives? We're really just pleading the Universe, don't hurt me, don't hurt me. Don't break my little fragile bubble of a life. But is this reality? I'm staring Life in the face and it's

looking back at me with hollow eyes. Life should not have hollow eyes. But is that life? Or is it a mirror, and they're my eyes? My eyes should not be hollow. I've known something better. Long ago, maybe, but there was something there. Something basic to our experience – something meaningful, something beautiful. I tell you I never felt so lost in my life. And I was looking for a way out.

And that's when I met Marguerite. I felt as though someone had just turned on all the lights on a Christmas tree. On our first date – in a moment of weakness and blind fascination– I told her about my dream.

What date did you say you first had the dream?

September 20, 1912.

That's just about the time he was in Minneapolis.

Who?

'Abdu'l-Baha.

Who?

The son of Baha'u'llah.

“Oh, that explains it.”

“Sorry,” she said, laughing. “Baha'u'llah was the founder of the Baha'i Faith.”

(Animated.) Needless to say, I was not interested. I was “up to here” with religion. And I certainly had no interest in something so oriental sounding as all that. I had only mentioned the dream because I wanted her to know all about me before I asked her to marry me. But she showed me a book that night. On September 20, 1912, the date of my first dream, this Persian gentleman, 'Abdu'l-Baha, had spoken in Minneapolis,

Minnesota only a short distance away from the little town in which I had lived and dreamed. He warned mankind to investigate the truth for themselves, and not to follow in the footsteps of those who accepted all things blindly. Later that same day, He had spoken in St. Paul, just across the river. He called upon mankind to be like the “fisherman Peter” and to fish energetically for the souls of men. Just as the man said in my dream: Be like Peter!

[He takes out a picture from his things.]

And this is a picture of Abdu'l-Baha that Marguerite shared with me. This is the shiny man from my dream. Apparently, I had seen him at the train station that very day when we went to pick up my aunt. He made quite an impression on me. Evidently, he wasn't the Messiah, but he had come to the West to spread a message: not that Christ was coming, but that He had come... and gone!

[He folds his arms and leans back or calls attention to an audience member who does.]

That's exactly how I felt. No way. I've studied the Bible and I know what's supposed to happen. What – did the whole thing just come like a thief... in the night the way it says it will in Second Peter. Or, or, or in Revelations: Be watchful, or I will come as a thief. But then those are only a couple of references. There are hundreds of others. One Christian gentleman counted and between Old and New Testaments, he found 1843 references to the Second Coming. So what about the other 1841?

[He picks up the magazine.]

The woman is clever. Remember this: the magazine Marguerite left for me with the greatest headlines. She pinned a note inside: Don't read too late. By the way, did you

know the Baha'i Faith began in 1844? (*Beat.*) So next to the magazine she had placed this book: "The Baha'i Proofs."

[He opens the cover of the book and reads aloud.]

"Let him who hath an eye to see, see; and him who hath an ear to hear, hear."

[He closes the book quickly.]

You see? The woman has pulled out all the stops. She's put the bounce on me, got me in this massive headlock, face to the canvas. Spiritually speaking, of course. The whole thing is very cordial and she's very sweet about it, but she knows that truth and time are on her side, and I'm left with something else: I dunno, denial and this sort of flailing about in this materialistic quagmire.

God called out to Abraham: Abraham! Abraham! And Abraham replied, "Here am I, my Lord." God called out to Jacob: Jacob! Jacob! And Jacob replied, "Here am I, my Lord." God called out to Bill Sears: Bill Sears! Bill Sears! And Bill Sears went *pkoooo* (*makes cartoonish exit sound. With the "God" voice.*) Bill Sears? What are you doing behind that door? Do you think I can't see you? And Bill Sears replied: I'm comfortable!! Life's just started looking up for me. Finally, finally, I can pay my bills, I can support my family, and you want me to give all that up. I thought this success was the sign of your good-pleasure, your recognition of my work, the value of what I do. Why didn't you come when I wanted you? When I was calling out to you... from my rooftop? I don't want you now. My life's too complicated. (*A beat.*) As usual, silence.

My thoughts were another thing. I was finding it impossible to sleep. So I opened the book and read. And I read more. And I started to do some research. I keep it all here,

away from Marguerite. (*He takes out a box full of folders full of unorganized papers.*)
Don't tell her. She already suspects that I've swallowed hook, line and sinker. But this is only a little research. I think it would make a good book though... a mystery. I'll call it "The Case of the Missing Millennium."

Here, let me show you. (*He pulls out some papers from the box.*) These are some diagrams I made related to the prophecies, all pointing right smack to 1844. They say that this return is not of Christ's physical body descending from the sky, but that it's the same heavenly Spirit in a new body, just as human, and His new name is Baha'u'llah.

Likewise, the sun and moon weren't literally going to lose their light. It was the light of Christ's spirit and teachings that was like a light to the world of the soul that would become darkened by superstition so that the truth couldn't be found. Corrupt religious leaders like fallen stars were no longer guiding lights to spiritual seekers. And so on.

As for Baha'u'llah, His life was an ocean of suffering, exile and imprisonment, but His words echo across these waters calling mankind together.

"Lo, the Father is come, and that which ye were promised in the Kingdom is fulfilled."

"The tabernacle of unity is raised. Regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch."

When I hear His words, it's like I'm hearing the echo of the Prophets of old in their reply, "Here am I," but it's different, as if some great Reversal had taken place, where "Here am I, my Lord" has become "Here am I, *your* Lord."

So all of this, all of this, but what to do with it? I mean, if I believe this – This is big! -- I should do something about it. I almost wish I could go back a hundred years and comfort

those folks out on their rooftops. You're right! Today is the Day! It's just He's not coming the way you thought He would.

I've heard some talk that there's a call coming. A campaign to take this Message to all the countries and peoples of the world. To share the message with those who will hear it. And a little bubble rose up in both Marguerite and me, from the ocean floor in both of us rising higher and higher til it reached the top and gave up the ghost in a whisper that we both heard as "Africa."

But you know what? I'm sharing the message here. I'm in a unique position actually. People know me on the street. I come into hundreds of thousands of people's homes every week, and for a half an hour I can teach good moral and even spiritual lessons. And that guy in there, who writes the checks – he wants to pay me \$50,000.00 a year to do it! Sounds perfect. I mean, come on! If there was ever a medium to spread a message, or a headline, or the greatest, most electrifying headline known to mankind, Television is the one. Right?

[He has an idea that begins to animate his movement.]

Okay, let's imagine what that might look like. It's next Sunday at 12 noon. We're ready to go. All quiet on the set! Going in 5, 4, 3 – – CBS Television presents "In the Park with Bill Sears" brought to you by Stewart Warner Televisions. Stewart Warner – your theatre of the world.

[He pushes a couple of things aside, and makes a motion like the camera sweeping along the studio floor.]

Hello, Albert! (*Albert's voice:*) Why do you look so happy, Bill? Well, it's because the Lord of the Age has come. A deep silence fills the studio, and all eyes are on me. That's

right, boys and girls, Moms and Dads, Grams and Gramps all across America: Jesus has returned! Isn't that great news? By now, the director has swallowed his wristwatch. Paul, the puppeteer, has to make something up. Who is Jesus? Good question – you remember how a few years ago corporations like our sponsors changed the name of the holiday on December 25th, which is of course the most important consumer event of the year, to X-mas. Jesus is the one they X'd out. So the phone rings. It's some ad executive howling so loud I can hear him as I draw these diagrams about all the amazing prophecies, and then... (*Makes the sound of a sustained TV tone*) "Technical difficulties..." And I'm whisked away like Blanche Dubois in "Streetcar Named Desire": "I've always depended on the kindness of...sponsors!"

Here I am – got this message – the world is right there – no conceivable way to communicate it. What am I supposed to do? I feel like William Miller. Just give me a sign! (*Pause.*) Silence. As usual. You wouldn't make much of a radio man!

[*He picks up the "contract" letter.*]

The other day, after my *friend* talked to his boss... okay, I guess the jig is up. It's me. It was a flimsy device to begin with. So after the Boss basically said, no, you can't go and what about the 56 families and our contract with Stewart Warner Televisions? Marguerite has this idea that what we need is a prayer vigil. So for 19 days, we and our boys were supposed to pray hard. And if by the end of nineteen days, nothing happened, we'd resign ourselves to staying. So the clock is ticking. Today is Day 17. And still no sign on the horizon.

But you know what? One thing I've been learning in this "research" – is that we're really not meant to dwell so much on signs or miracles. We're not here to accumulate miracles but virtues... like wisdom. That means learning by doing. Cause and effect. WE make choices and we learn. Maybe it's as simple as this: This is not my dream. This is an inheritance that I have fulfilled and now... This isn't my dream at all. This isn't my dream at all.

Thank You for Your silence. If You spoke any louder, we'd all be struck dumb.

[He picks up the beer bottle and moves to the sink.]

Bless you, my dear old man.

[He kisses the bottle, then pours down the drain. After a moment, he opens the letter.]

What do you think? 45 or 50,000?

[He reads.]

Hm. "Dear Bill, Due to the fallout from their ongoing strike, Stewart Warner is canceling their sponsorship of *In the Park*." (*Trying to comprehend.*) Hooooohhh. Canceling? Canceling? How dare they cancel! Our ratings are great! Boy, I'm going to give them an earful.

[He goes for the phone.]

Ed Sullivan loved our show! You don't cancel a show that Ed Sullivan loves! (*Changing his demeanor.*) Hello, Mildred. Can you get me Stewart Warner? No, it's not a person, it's a company. I have no clue what their number is. City? No, sorry. How hard can they be to find? They sponsor my show. Who am I? Ed Sullivan! And your name was

Winifred? Mildred, of course... Look, this is not Ed Sullivan. Just say I'm Marco Polo and have a nice day.

[He picks up the letter to re-read it.]

“Bill, you had come to me asking about resigning. What I said still stands: It would be a tragedy to see you leave. But if you were looking for a green light to go, this would seem to be it.”

[He thinks.]

On the rooftop, we scream ‘break.’ And when it breaks, when it really breaks, we cry and run inside. *(Throwing up his arms)* Aaaaah!

[He runs offstage, and we hear him tearing around looking for something. He reenters with a slip of paper and goes to the phone. He picks it up and dials.]

Hello, Mildred? This is Bill Sears at WCAU. Yes, in fact, there was a mad man up here.

A lunatic howling from the rafters. Mildred, can you get me Long Distance, Minnesota, 3-5087? Thank you. *(Pause.)* Hello? Hello, Grandfather! This is Bill. *(To audience.)*

He's still alive, in his nineties. *(To phone.)* Grandfather, I'm calling from the studio. I want to ask you if you would be a guest on my show this week. No, we could have a phone interview. All my listeners feel like they know you already. I've been telling them stories about you for years. *(He laughs.)* No, nothing good. How's Wednesday seven o'clock your time? I'll call you, okay? Because I want them to hear your voice before ... Before I say goodbye. I'm saying goodbye to WCAU. I just decided. Marguerite and I have this wild idea of picking up and heading off. Africa, I think. Yes! *(He laughs excitedly.)* Why? Because... Because, well, in a nut shell: Christ has returned. His new name is Baha'u'llah. I am a Bahá'í, and I'm giving up everything to tell the world about His message. *(He listens.)* Grandfather? Grandfather? Oh. Did you fall? Oh. Good. *(To*

audience.) Too much chin music on my pitch. I nearly knocked him over. (*Into phone.*)
Nevermind, Grandfather. I'm going to send you something. A book. And we'll talk after
you've read it. The thing is: I've finally found the answer to my dream... to our dream.
I'll talk to you Wednesday. Okay? Bye bye.

I remember my father's face peering at me under the bedclothes on that night when he
caught me reading the Bible under the covers. "Some day," I told him, "I'm going to find
out all about God—something nobody knows. Then I'm going all over the world and tell
people about my discovery."

[He has packed up his things and goes to leave.]

Here we go.

[He turns off the light and exits.]

END OF PLAY

[Alternate ending, to replace "Here we go" if performer is so inclined:]

Thank you. You may think you haven't done much, but just your listening has been
encouraging. And in your laughter, I hear the echo of divine happiness and I'm certain
that God loves laughter. And we laugh until we cry – "three laughs and a tear" that's my
motto – our heart overflowing with gratitude and we climb to the highest spot we can find
and we throw wide our arms and we embrace the divine mystery and when we hear His
call, we say finally, and with no hesitation, "Here am I, my Lord! Here am I!"

[He laughs, turns off the light and exits. End]