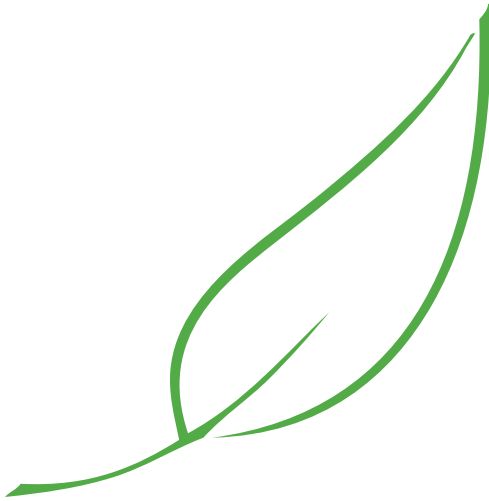


Hush, Little Baby

By Craig Sodaro



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SYNOPSIS: Mona's grown daughter, Alice, has come home for a visit. Only this isn't a particularly joyful reunion, for Alice has just been paroled. Her crime? Felony child abuse. To quiet her newborn, Alice had fallen into the habit of giving the baby whisky. One night the child fell into a coma, and, fearing the infant was dead, Alice wrapped him in newspapers and hid him in the trash. Fortunately a neighbor had been watching and saved the baby's life.

Now Alice must somehow repair her own life. She and Mona have never had a loving relationship, and the incident with the baby has made Mona dislike her own child even more. She tries, without success, to get Alice out of town on the bus. She especially doesn't want her "jailbird daughter" around when she celebrates her fifty-fifth birthday to which she has invited some much-needed friends.

Alice finally begs Mona for help in rebuilding her life. But the nervous, bitter mother shies away in terror. She knows the secrets that underlie this tense relationship--secrets she and Alice are forced to confront before either can take one more step into the future.

CHARACTERS**(2 FEMALES)**

MONA (f).....Fifty-five years old, a waitress who has never experienced any real success in life largely because she always looks back on her defeats. (407 lines)

ALICE (f).....Twenty-two, nervous, volatile, yet seeking control of her own life. She needs to rid herself of the guilt she has been forced to bear before she can walk on her own. (406 lines)

RUNNING TIME: 90 to 105 minutes.

SETTING

Mona's apartment, a three-room space above the Coast to Coast store in a small western town. The entrance is up right. At up center we see the kitchen area separated from the living room by a counter or snack bar which serves as the only dining table. On it sits a telephone. A spare room is off right, while Mona's bedroom is left. The furnishings are without theme, cheap pieces collected from here and there, centered on the American focal point, the television down right. While the room is clean, it lacks any feeling of permanence, comfort, or warmth.

NOTE: If a stove and/or refrigerator are not available, facimilies can be constructed or they can be placed out of view of the audience using only the noise to indicate rummaging through a refrigerator.

PROPERTIES

PRESET:

- ☐ Telephone
- ☐ Bottle of bourbon and glasses
- ☐ Kitchen towel
- ☐ Cardboard boxes containing items below
- ☐ Jar on counter containing money
- ☐ Alice's suitcase

ACT ONE:

- ☐ Doll in blanket (*Alice*)
- ☐ House keys (*Mona*)
- ☐ Can of soda (*Mona*)
- ☐ Bottle of bourbon (*Mona*)
- ☐ Glass
- ☐ Kitchen towel (*Mona*)
- ☐ Cardboard boxes (*Alice*) containing:
- ☐ Halloween witch mask (*Alice*) and
- ☐ Diary (*Alice*)

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ACT ONE**AT RISE:**

A drizzling evening in spring, a point halfway between the violence of winter and the soft warmth of summer. The glow of a flashing red neon sign dances on the walls of the dimly lit apartment. A small rocker, down right, gently sways back and forth, holding ALICE, who clutches a bundle wrapped in a blanket.

ALICE: *(Tenderly)* Oh, poor baby Mona...there, there....have you got to burp? Let Mama help you...up we go. There! *(She hoists the baby up to her shoulder, patting it gently)* Now, I'll pat you ever so gentle. Feel better? Oh, Mona's such a pretty girl. But you don't need to cry, baby. *(Nervously, an edge of anger)* No, now you ought not do that! Stop crying, Mona! Stop it! Stop it! *(She holds the silent child tightly, sings)* Hush, little baby, don't say a word...Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird. *(ALICE takes a deep breath of relief)* There, you see, Mona? You've stopped crying and Mama feels so much better. So much. Dr. Wesley gave me that song. She said it would help your mama. *(There is a sound at the door--keys rattling)* Oh, Mona...hush, little baby...don't say a word.

Silence. The door opens. In the hall lights we see MONA'S silhouette

MONA: *(Suspiciously)* Who's there? Somebody there? *(She tentatively enters)*

ALICE: *(Singing)* Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird.

MONA turns on light.

MONA: *(Disbelief mixed with anger)* My God...

ALICE: *(Coolly)* Hello, Mama.

MONA: They said...

ALICE: What?

MONA: *(Resigned)* Nothing.

ALICE: What did THEY say?

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MONA: You might come back here. That's all. Should have expected you, I guess.

ALICE: I can see this ain't a momentous occasion in your life.

MONA: I've lived through worse. Let me look at you. (*She turns ALICE around*) Hmmmm...you look real good. Must have fed you well.

ALICE: Just like a Howard Johnson's. You look fine, too, Mama.

MONA: Don't lie. I look like a buzzard. Face cream...lotion...potions and dyes don't do a bit of good any more. I've tried 'em all. Every day I find a new wrinkle. No way to stop it when you have to work hard like I do.

ALICE: That where you were tonight, Mama? Work?

MONA: (*Defensively*) Nope. I had a well-deserved night out bowling.

ALICE: Yeah? How'd you do?

MONA: (*Surprised*) Now that's a change. I don't recall your ever askin' me about my bowling game. Not before.

ALICE: Maybe I've changed.

MONA: (*Hesitating*) I...I bowled 145.

ALICE: My, your game's improved, Mama.

MONA: No more 'n usual. Tell me...how'd you get in here?

ALICE: What, Mama?

MONA: How'd you get into this apartment. I know I locked it. Always do. Even in a small town like this there are plenty of crazies running around.

ALICE: I'm not one of 'em, Mama. And I didn't break in.

MONA: I leave a window open or something?

ALICE: Relax, Mama. I still got my key. Remember? I had a key when I used to live here. I guess I forgot to give it back.

MONA: I see. So...you want a Coke or something?

ALICE: Sure. Whatever diet stuff you got.

MONA: You're skinny enough.

ALICE: I am not! You know the old saying: you're never rich enough or thin enough.

MONA: Let me go see what I got. (*She tosses her coat on chair, then opens refrigerator*) I guess I oughta clean this fridge out. I don't even know what I got in here. Oh, now if this isn't the crawlingest salad I've ever seen. It's breathing! We'll get it cleaned up tomorrow, won't we?

ALICE: (*Sarcastically*) Sure will, Mama. Just like old times.

MONA: Diet grapefruit good enough for you?

ALICE: Sure. Why not?

MONA brings ALICE a can of soda.

MONA: Folks down at work were askin' about you.

ALICE: (*Interested*) Really? Like who?

MONA: Ben for one. About once a week he'd stop me when I'd go in to pick up an order. And he'd put that fat hand of his on my arm and real sincere like, he'd say, "What'daya hear from Alice."

ALICE: Real sincere like.

MONA: Yeah...the sweetest thing. Hard to believe, ain't it?

ALICE: That somebody should ask after me?

MONA: (*Angrily*) Now there you go again, jumpin' to one of your crazy conclusions. I thought they'd fix all that for you. 'Specially after five years.

ALICE: Fix me? Like I'm a broken toy? You hear that, Mona, baby?
(*She cuddles the doll*) They were supposed to fix me.

MONA: (*Taken back*) What'd you call that doll?

ALICE: Mona. You like that, Mama? I named her after you.

MONA: That some kind of honor or something?

ALICE: Dr. Wesley said to name my baby after the one person in the world I look up to. That's you, Mama.

MONA: (*Uncomfortably*) Who's this Dr. Wesley?

ALICE: She was nice. Kind of the prison shrink.

MONA: A shrink? That better not cost me anything. I'm still hip deep in lawyer's bills. Imagine that...you've been in and out, but I'll have the bills to pay for another fifteen years! Hell, I got the longer sentence. You know that? I gotta serve more time than the con!

ALICE: (*Devastated*) Mama! How could you say something like that?

MONA: (*Slightly ashamed, but defensive*) I...I didn't mean nothing.

ALICE: (*Clutching the doll*) Hush, little baby...don't say a word...

MONA: What's wrong with you?

ALICE: Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird. (*After a slight pause*) Dr. Wesley told me to recite that poem when I get mad...and I feel like I can't control myself. She said I've got to do that so I can become more patient.

MONA: (*Pouring herself a bourbon*) Here's hoping it works!

ALICE: (*Sipping the soda*) This sure hits the spot. You want a sip, Mona?

MONA: I got--

ALICE: I mean baby Mona. You know, I'm gonna have to find a nickname for this little sweetheart so I don't go confusing you all the time. How about that nickname Daddy called you? Peaches? I don't think anybody ever called you that but Daddy.

MONA: (*With some bitterness*) And that's the way I want it. That was special between him and me. So you just find something else to call that doll.

ALICE: Well, then...there's got to be lots of other names I can call Mona. I could name her after my first grade teacher, Miss Steele. She was real nice and I think her first name was...Sylvia. Yeah...Sylvia. But she had a mustache. Maybe I ought to call her Rose. I had a friend when I was eight and her name was Rose. Remember her, Mama? She gave me stationery on my birthday, but then she had to move away. I don't want to name Mona after somebody who moved away. I know! I'll call her Holly. Remember that little doll I used to have? She'd lost her hair and one eye fell out, but she was my best friend. Do you like that, Mama? I'll call her Holly.

MONA: (*Taking a drink*) Fine with me.

ALICE: Now, come sit, Mama.

MONA: I was going to take your bags to the spare room.

ALICE: I didn't know you added a spare room, Mama.

MONA: I...I call it that now. Used to be your room.

ALICE: Oh. What'dya do with my things?

MONA: (*Tiredly*) There wasn't much a body could keep. You know the kind of junk you had. News clippings about them acid rock singers and all them horrible posters. Why, I certainly couldn't have nobody IN that room with crap like that on the walls. Just after you left I took it all down, then fixed up the place real nice. Jolene, down at the cafe, she gave me some nice curtains that match your old bedspread. And then I took a class---

ALICE: (*Surprised*) You did what, Mama?

MONA: (*Amused, in spite of herself*) I took a class. That surprise you?

ALICE: What'dya take, brain surgery?

MONA: Probably would have done better than that. It was a stitchery class.

ALICE: Like needlepoint?

MONA: Laugh all you like, but we made some nice things like towels and pot holders. I even made a wall hangin'. A little house, you know, with "Home Sweet Home" stitched under it. I put it in a frame and hung it in the spare room. Looks real smart.

ALICE: Do you keep up with your needlework, Mama?

MONA: Keep up? Oh, I tried...but soon as the class ended, I just didn't seem to feel interested no more.

ALICE: You oughta take the class over again.

MONA: I don't want to do that. Not again. Spent twenty-five dollars to make a dishtowel and a picture. I can't afford to live that high off the hog.

ALICE: Cafe hasn't been doin' too good?

MONA: Nothin' in town's doin' good. Didn't you read the papers in there?

ALICE: You know me. I never was one for keepin' up with the news, Mama.

MONA: You ought to. Anymore, what happens millions of miles away eats up your paycheck, though I sure don't know what'd you'd understand about that. I mean until them Arab oil sheiks raise the price of oil, I'm gonna suffer. Business is half what it was last year. Tips are nothin'.

ALICE: Sorry to hear that.

MONA: No sorrier than me. I used to make near twenty bucks a night...even at the cafe. But I've had a good night now when I make twelve-fifty. And you know prices ain't exactly been fallin' like rain.

ALICE: Mama, you got a little rag? Holly just made a mess.

MONA: (*Suspiciously*) That there's a doll, child.

ALICE: Please...just get me a towel before it stains my pants.

MONA: There ain't no mess!

ALICE: (*Anger, well-controlled*) A towel, Mama!

MONA fetches a towel from the counter against her better judgment.

ALICE: Thank you, Mama. And I hate to say it, but people are gettin' a whole lot more selfish these days. I mean with their tips and all.

MONA: Time was they appreciated somebody servin' 'em nice. But no more. Kids come in and just demand. Why, Joe Harrington came in today with his wife--

ALICE: (*Amused*) Joe Harrington got married?

MONA: Didn't you know that?

ALICE: They didn't exactly send me an invitation, Mama.

MONA: Well, I thought...maybe...

ALICE: Don't matter. Who'd he marry?

MONA: Shirley...Shirley...now I can't remember her name.

ALICE: (*Laughing*) Not Shirley Newton!

MONA: That's it.

ALICE: String bean Shirley who never had a date in her life?

MONA: That's one string bean that filled out. Fixed herself up a bit, too. 'Course, Joe Harrington ain't no prize what with that frizzy red hair and chipped front tooth.

ALICE: I know, but Shirley was such a twit in school.

MONA: She graduated top of her class. Your class, wasn't it?

ALICE: (*Bitterly*) She always thought she was smart. Marrying Joe Harrington proves she wasn't all brains.

MONA: They got money now, girl. Ride around in an Expedition. I think he got an interest in the lumber company when his father died a few years back. Anyway, they ain't too free with what money they do got. They brought them damned twins in--

ALICE: Twins?

MONA: Yeah...ugly as ducks in the mud. Red-headed ducks to boot! Anyway, they came in the cafe and mangled a basket of crackers then opened every pack and sprinkled 'em all over the floor. Left me fifty-two cents.

ALICE: (*Proudly*) Told you she was a twit!

MONA: Raised wrong, that's all. Nobody ever bothered to tell 'em I make \$2 an hour plus tips. Let them try to drive that Expedition on \$2 an hour!

ALICE: I don't know how you do it, Mama.

MONA: Sometimes I wonder. But then I ain't as bad off as Mr. Bowman. Coast to Coast is closing up at the end of the month. He's got a big "Going Out of Business Sale" on right now. Bought a fan for next summer for seventy-five percent off.

ALICE: I saw the sign in the window. What happened?

MONA: No oil, no people. No people, no business.

ALICE: What'll you do? I mean if Coast to Coast is closing--

MONA: Mr. Bowman's not about to throw me out. He owns the building, so he'll be glad to have my rent coming in at least.

ALICE has been looking round the room, cradling HOLLY in her arms. She has noticed boxes along one wall.

ALICE: These my things, Mama?

ALICE kneels by the boxes and sets HOLLY on the floor. She opens the boxes one after another

MONA: Yeah...I...I boxed 'em up right after you...went away.

ALICE: I didn't "Go away," Mama. That makes it sound like I had a choice in the matter and we both know I didn't get no choice.

MONA: It's better than sayin' what really happened.

ALICE: I suppose you're right.

MONA: You'd understand if you had to live here all your life. Everybody knows who I am...and who you are.

ALICE: *(To herself, bitterly)* And what I did.

MONA: *(Taking a drink)* A body couldn't have missed it.

ALICE: No...

MONA: Why it was in every paper from San Francisco to Omaha. Even that USA Today carried it.

ALICE: Don't read 'em, remember? *(She hugs HOLLY, then begins looking through a box)* Doesn't matter anyhow. It's all in the past. Like this stuff. Look here, Holly...my horse model. I got it when I was six. The Black Stallion. Ain't he beautiful? I always wanted a horse of my own. Mama said someday. Someday.

MONA: *(Bitterly)* You still might. Someday.

ALICE: (*Pulling witch mask from box*) I gave up holdin' my breath. Look at this! I haven't seen it in a thousand years! My Halloween mask. Ain't that just something. I remember my teacher...that was Miss Steele...she said, "My, Alice, that's a pretty awful lookin' witch!" And I told her I made it just like the witch I really saw.

MONA: (*Dryly*) And just what witch did you really see?

ALICE: (*Brightly*) Why, don't you remember that night when you came into my room, Mama? And it was dark and the light was behind you in the hall...and, my, the nightlight or something must have caught your eyes and made them glow. You scared me no end! So I made the mask. See that, Holly? BOO!

MONA: (*Uncomfortably*) You goin' through every bit of that trash?

ALICE: (*Ignoring her, pulling diary from box*) And this! This is my diary, Holly. I kept it real faithful for a long time. (*She opens to a page, reads*) Today I won a race. I was the fastest girl and beat most of the boys, too. I hung my ribbon on the refrigerator. Oooops! I spelled that word wrong! But Mama took it down. She said it would ruin the finish.

MONA: You always were good at runnin'. 'Specially away from things.

ALICE: Gosh, I can't imagine if you wouldn't let me hang a little ribbon on the refrigerator that you'd live with these boxes clutterin' up the living room.

MONA: I just brought 'em out the other day. They wrote and said your parole might come through. I figured you'd want 'em.

ALICE: I sure do.

MONA: (*Sweetly, taking a drink*) I...I didn't imagine you'd be staying around. That's why I brought 'em in here. Things you don't want, we'll toss in the dumpster.

ALICE: I do appreciate your keepin' all this for me. It would have been a lot easier throwin' it all away.

MONA: (*Proudly*) I know what's right.

ALICE: (*To HOLLY*) Grandma knows what's right, Holly. Isn't that nice?

MONA: Don't do that.

ALICE: Do what?

MONA: That...that thing is a doll.

ALICE: (*Hurt*) No! She's not just a doll! She's Holly...your granddaughter.

MONA: Look--

ALICE: Dr. Wesley SAID she is!

MONA: (*Rising, moving about nervously*) I don't care what that shrink says! That's nothing but a cheap doll!

ALICE: (*Venomously*) Hush, Little Baby...don't say a word!

MONA: (*Angrily*) Stop it!

ALICE: You see how it works, Baby Holly? Just like a charm. Oh, don't cry. Grandma didn't mean to upset you. She loves you. Just like she loves Alice.

MONA: I don't love that thing! For God's sake, girl...you HAD your own child. A living, breathing child!

ALICE: Have!

MONA: HAD as in the past tense!

ALICE: This is my child. Holly is my baby...until...(*She smiles at MONA who is horrified*)

MONA: Until WHAT? You don't really think...in your worst nightmares...they're ever going to give Andy back to you!

ALICE: (*Nervously, afraid MONA'S right*) When...when I can handle Holly...when I can stand her crying...then I can visit Dr. Wesley...and she'll contact the Department of Public Assistance. They'll give me Andy back to me then...when she says. Dr. Wesley promised.

MONA: She ought to be sued for telling you lies like that --boldfaced, no good lies!

ALICE: (*Defensively*) That's not a lie, Mama! It's true! That's why she gave me Holly. To get me ready for Andy.

MONA: No...she just had to do something. Your time was up! The only way you'll ever go back there and see Dr. Wesley again is to get thrown into the slammer again. And you damned well better not, you hear me?!

ALICE: Please don't yell, Mama. You're scarin' Holly.

MONA: My God....I...I remember when this all happened. Jolene told me it wasn't my fault. Some kids are just born bad, and no matter what a body does, that's how they turn out. I never wanted to think you were one of them--

ALICE: (*Overlapping, singing*) Hush, little baby--

MONA: But I don't know what else to think--

ALICE: *(Singing)* Don't say a word. Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird--

MONA: Not sayin' you're bad like some are...but somewhere along the line something snapped.

ALICE: *(Singing)* If that mockingbird don't sing---*(After a slight pause)* I'm crazy, Mama?

MONA: I didn't raise you to be crazy.

ALICE: What did you raise me to be?

MONA: I...I don't know.

ALICE: And if you don't know, then which of us oughta?

MONA: My life's been hard.

ALICE: Not nearly as hard as mine.

MONA: You make your bed you lie in it.

ALICE: Oh, I remember that one! Words to live by. Ever since I could remember I heard that one. You make your bed you lie in it. That hold true for you, too, Mama?

MONA: My mama told me that. I was raised on it. And it's as sound advice as I've ever heard.

ALICE: You hear that, Holly? You make your bed, you're gonna lie in it. That comes from your great-grandma, and probably she got it from HER great-grandma! You know what it means? You plant yourself a bad seed, you gotta live with the harvest. That about right, Mama?

MONA: *(Quietly)* You're not a bad seed.

ALICE: You just said I WAS a minute ago. I must have been granted a pardon.

MONA: I said you were different. I always said you were different. Not bad. Not sayin' you haven't done some bad things. There's no sense tryin' to deny that, is there?

ALICE: Not if you read the papers, there ain't.

MONA: That's right. Bad enough to be in the papers. Oh, God...every time I think of that poor little Andy...

ALICE: *(Brightly)* Andy's your brother, Holly. He's your big brother. A real sweet boy. And you know something? He's got your nose.

MONA: *(Dreamily)* Eyes...biggest brown eyes you ever saw. Bright, happy child. How could you have done that? How could you have?

ALICE: (*Angrily*) Hush, little baby...don't say a word...Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird. If that mockingbird don't sing...Mama's gonna buy you a diamond ring.

MONA: (*Cutting her off*) You got plans or are you just gonna practice your Joan Baez impression?

ALICE: Yeah...I got plans. I've had so much time I got myself planned right up through the year 2065.

MONA: (*Nervously*) So? You go to school while you were in there?

ALICE: Now, I'm real glad you asked that. I got my G.E.D., Mama. Ain't you proud of me? I graduated from high school.

MONA: I'm glad to hear that.

ALICE: I studied real hard and I got as good a grade as Shirley the Twit. Didn't you get my graduation announcement?

MONA: Don't make fun of me! (*She pours herself another bourbon*)

ALICE: I wrote you! I told you!

MONA: (*Thinking*) I...I'm sorry. I forgot. It's easy to forget when you're workin' hard as I am. I can't remember everything that comes through the mail.

ALICE: Funny. You remember all about Shari.

An icy silence falls briefly.

MONA: Don't bring up Shari. (*Angrily*) Don't!

ALICE: Don't shout, Mama! Holly was just drifting off to sleep. You remember what it was like having a baby around the house. You almost got to walk on eggshells so's you don't disturb 'em.

MONA: How long are you gonna be here?

ALICE: Long as you'll have me.

MONA: (*Not what she wanted to hear*) Hell! You said you have plans!

ALICE: I do. I want to get Andy back.

MONA: I mean REAL plans.

ALICE: (*Intensely*) Those ARE real plans, Mama. That's all that matters to me. I want Andy back!

MONA: Well, there sure as hell isn't a thing I can do for you in THAT department. So, maybe spend the night...then tomorrow...

ALICE: What about tomorrow?

MONA: (*Hedging*) Didn't they get you a job or something?

ALICE: (*Brightly*) Sure! In a day care center.

MONA: I told you before not to make fun of me! Putting you in a day care would be like turning a fox loose in a henhouse!

ALICE: I've changed, Mama!

MONA: Tell that to Andy!

ALICE: I would love to tell it to Andy! Oh, God, how I'd love to even see that child.

MONA: And what would you say to him?

ALICE: I'm sorry! That's what I'd say because that's what I feel. So sorry. Dr. Wesley told me to say what I feel. But just to see Andy at first would be enough. I asked her if she could just let me know where he is because I thought I might go over near the house and watch him from across the street or something. But she said she couldn't find out. Nobody would say where he is.

MONA: You think they'd let YOU near him?

ALICE: I'm his mother!

MONA: No...no, child. That don't make a bit of difference. Mother or not, you gave up your rights when you... (*She can't go on*) Just don't get your hopes too high. Nobody's gonna let you see him again, let alone talk to him.

ALICE: I am his mother!

MONA: No mother would have treated her child that way!

ALICE: (*Bitterly*) That so, Mama? I learned a few things while I was...away, Mama. And one of 'em is that I am not alone. There are lots of Alices running around out there. Lots of 'em!

MONA: (*Sarcastically*) Sure. So why don't you start a club? (*MONA takes a long drink*)

ALICE: That's funny, Mama. You get real dry when you're wet.

MONA: (*Slamming her glass down*) I don't have to listen to this! You're gone from my life.

ALICE: Am I? I think I'm right here in your living room. In living Technicolor!

MONA: When you did that to Andy, that was the end of you 'far as I was concerned. You understand that? I shut the book on you. And sure, any jackass can see you sittin' there. But it don't matter any more. When you were livin' here, it mattered.

ALICE: (*Incredulously*) What, Mama?

MONA: I said it mattered.

ALICE: Did it?

MONA: It matters to any decent parent. Now...you still ain't told me how long you're stayin'.

ALICE: But I did! I said 'long as you'll have me.

MONA: (*Nervously*) But...you can't just stay here indefinitely. I mean...I got a life to lead. You know...it ain't been easy since you went away.

ALICE: (*Angrily*) Don't say that! Say the truth! I went to prison!

MONA: All right! It ain't been easy since you went to prison. Since they locked you up! I still had to face everybody in this town. I still had to wait on their tables, bring 'em their water, take 'em their orders, clean up their filthy messes! I still had to go to the grocery store and the post office and out to the discount center to pick up garbage bags. And no matter where I go I feel 'em lookin' at me. Even today. Sayin' silent-like, "She's the one whose kid got in so much trouble." Or, "You ain't heard nothin' 'til you hear about Mona DeLane. You don't know what it's like. But I'm too old and tired to think about leavin' here and startin' over. Just too old.

ALICE: (*Clapping her hands*) Why, that was very clever, Mama!

MONA: You stop that! There was nothin' clever about it!

ALICE: Sure there was! You wanted to remind me that tomorrow's your birthday.

MONA: What? Why that is the LAST thing--

ALICE: Isn't grandma silly, Holly? Thinkin' we'd forget? I always thought of you on your birthday, Mama. Each year that I was in prison, I thought about you on the twenty-eighth of March. And I thought real hard about what I'd give you for your birthday when I got out.

MONA: (*Nervously*) You don't have to give me a thing. Not a thing. I'm not lookin' for a handout. In fact, you don't have to think twice about stayin' for my birthday. It's no big deal at my age.

ALICE: I wouldn't want you to be alone.

MONA: That's okay.

ALICE: It's not right to be alone on a special day like that.

MONA: I won't be alone, child.

ALICE: But if we're not here...

MONA: After work my bowlin' team's coming over for cake.

ALICE: I see.

MONA: They're real nice gals, but they ain't exactly your friends.

ALICE: (*Bitterly*) No...don't suppose they are. You mean they ain't jailbirds, so we won't have nothin' in common. That it, Mama?

MONA: You stop that!

ALICE: Stop what?

MONA: Puttin' words in my mouth! I never said nothin' about jailbirds. These are just down-to-earth gals who like to get out once a week and have a nice time bowlin' and drinkin' a couple of beers. They all got grown kids. We got things in common. You're just a bit young for us all. You'd make us all jealous.

ALICE: That is the dumbest thing I've ever heard come out of the mouth of a grown woman! I'd make 'em jealous. I couldn't make the wicked witch in Snow White jealous!

MONA: Look, I'm tryin' to be nice!

ALICE: You just gotta say what you mean, then. You're really tellin' me you don't want me at your party, right, Mama?

MONA: What would you want with a bunch of over the hill hippos who sit around and count calories though it don't make a difference on their rear ends anyway?

ALICE: That hurts, Mama.

MONA: Well, hell!

ALICE: It does! I was SO glad when I found out I was gettin' out just before your birthday. So glad. You hear that, Holly? Grandma doesn't want us to stay for her party. No cake for us. No peanuts. Poor Holly. She was SO lookin' forward to it.

MONA: You got your whole life ahead of you! What would be the fun of stayin' here wastin' time with old fuddy-duds? The only one you might remember is Jolene.

ALICE: Jolene?

MONA: Tall blond? She's from Montana. Billings, I guess. Real nice gal. Been here for...gosh..eight years now.

ALICE: She's the one who's so free with advice, right?

MONA: She has always been there when I needed a shoulder to cry on.

ALICE: I seem to recall her tellin' you just what I ought to do with my life some years back.

MONA: Somebody had to.

ALICE: Makes me real glad that you had somebody to turn to in those times of crisis.

MONA: And I sure want to keep it that way!

ALICE: What's that supposed to mean?

MONA: (*Brushing it off*) Just forget it. How about some brownies. Jolene sent some over last night.

ALICE: (*Seething*) What WAS that remark supposed to mean, Mama?

MONA nervously fills a plate with brownies.

MONA: Trouble with you, child, is you try to read too much into everything. You gotta learn just when to let things slide.

ALICE: Funny...YOU don't let things slide too often, do you, Mama?

MONA: Serious things you can't let slide. But a careless remark...I mean...what harm can it do? Now, here. These are double chocolate with nuts. Try one.

ALICE: (*Furiously*) No! I'm not GOOD enough for Jolene's brownies! I'm not GOOD enough for anything!

ALICE slaps the plate from MONA'S hand. Brownies fly about the room.

MONA: What the hell did you do that for?

ALICE: (*Prowling about like a panther*) You're afraid to have me around when your beer-guzzling gals come over, aren't you?

MONA: (*Picking up brownies*) All right! You want it straight? I'll give it to you straight. These gals are the only friends I got. And the first ones in so long a time. All because of YOU! Everybody I ever talked to before wouldn't look at me after they caught you. Everybody except Jolene, of course...she stood by me! But now, finally...finally! ...I got some gals who care about me! They actually care. And I'm not about to risk that, child. Not on your life.

ALICE: I...I guess I'm just a rotten apple, ha? Get rid of me before I spoil the barrel. But, Mama...I got a fine birthday surprise for you. I've been savin' it since I got locked up.

ALICE has moved closer to MONA, who is tossing the remaining brownie pieces away.

MONA: *(Nervously)* Now...you stay over there.

ALICE: What?

MONA: You heard me.

ALICE: Are you...are you afraid of me, Mama?

MONA: I didn't say that.

ALICE: You think...I might hurt you? It's me, Mama! Alice! Your little girl! Where'd you ever get the idea I might hurt you?

MONA: I...I didn't get that idea. I mean...they just said to be careful.

ALICE: Who said that?

MONA: The warden. She called when your parole came through. *(After no response from ALICE)* You can't blame 'em, can you? I mean...these days she's liable like everybody else. She said you'd been through counseling. She said you'd changed. But seein' as how you might come here, there could be cause for concern. That's how she put it. Cause for concern. Is she right?

ALICE: *(To HOLLY, quietly)* They still don't think I've paid, do they, Holly? How long's it gonna take. *(Viciously, to MONA)* You know how long I was in prison, Mama?

MONA: I...I wasn't counting.

ALICE: I was! Over five years! Two thousand, ninety-nine days to be exact. I drew an "X" over each day on my calendar. Calendars, really. *(She fishes calendar from her backpack)* See here? There's my first year! *(She tosses calendar at MONA, then picks out another)* And my second! *(She tosses it, then pulls more)* Third! Fourth! You want to count 'em all? See that, Mama? Time I spent payin' for what I did! And you think I'm gonna risk goin' back by hurtin' you? You think I got cause to do that.

MONA: *(Unconvinced)* 'Course not.

ALICE: Then don't go thinkin' such horrible things! They say if a person thinks something hard enough...it'll come true.

MONA: *(Weakly, depressed)* I wish...

ALICE: *(Brightly)* What do you wish, Mama?

MONA: I wish...you'd leave me in peace.

MONA sits tiredly on couch. ALICE moves about like a panther

ALICE: I wish I could, too, Mama. But I can't! I can't move ahead in my life until I got things straightened out behind me. Dr. Wesley told me that. Why, she said, picture a train all derailed but the engine. And that poor thing is trying to pull all those derailed cars back onto the track at the same time it's trying to move ahead. No engine can do that, can it? I'm just like that engine. I can't either. I gotta get my cars back on the track so I can get on down the line. And you know? I've been puttin' those cars on the track one by one during the last five years. The box cars, the coal cars, the tank cars...they've all fallen into place. But that there caboose is still lyin' way off someplace on its side. You know what that caboose is, Mama? It's you. The last car of my past.

MONA: That's real fine. You just go ahead and get yourself straightened out. But I got my own life to live and I can't afford to have it messed up by you again. I'm too old for that. Way too old.

ALICE: You already said that three times. And you ain't even old. Tomorrow you'll be...what? Fifty-nine? Sixty?

MONA: Oh, thanks.

ALICE: What's the matter?

MONA: I'll be fifty-five.

ALICE: Heck, fifty-five is young! You're in the prime of your life.

MONA: My life never had no prime. It's hard work that ages quicker than anything. You know that? I don't think I've had two days since...well...when I have felt like I'm really secure. It's always been from hand to mouth. That naggin' worry...will the tips cover the bills? That's a hell of a way to live. So if you can, kid...don't wait tables. It'll wrinkle your prime.

ALICE: From the looks of this place, you've done pretty good.

MONA: You been starin' at cement blocks too long, girl. Anything nice in this place came from your Aunt Betty.

ALICE: I thought about Aunt Betty sometimes.

MONA: That so?

ALICE: She wrote to me for a long time. Only person who did, regular.

MONA: You know she died, don't you?

ALICE: (*Angrily*) Died? Now how the hell would I know that?

MONA: Didn't I write to let you know?

ALICE: You never wrote so much as a postcard after the first year.

MONA: Well, I'm sorry. It was sad. She got cancer about three and a half years ago. Finally died last July.

ALICE: Cancer? Mama, why didn't you let me know? I would have written to her...called her...something! Something to let her know.

MONA: (*Tiredly*) Let her know what?

ALICE: She was always so...kind. I remember how she'd bring me a doll each year for Christmas. A big, beautiful doll. The kind all the kids would be talking about on the first day after vacation. She always smelled good. Like lilacs. Everytime I get near a lilac bush in the spring, I think of her. (*Sighing, hardening, looking around the room*) So, this is Aunt Betty's stuff. I knew it had class.

MONA: She did far better'n me, that's for sure.

ALICE: Life's funny, ain't it?

MONA: Never amused me much.

ALICE: No, I mean Aunt Betty never got married or had any kids. And she ought to have. She'd have made such a fine mother. You'd have liked your Aunt Betty, Holly. She was so sweet.

MONA: (*Defensively*) If she'd have had kids, she'd never have lived so high off the hog. She'd have spent her money on things like milk and shoes, just like I did instead of buyin' lace curtains to go with her new designer couch.

ALICE: Aunt Betty would have found a way to do both.

MONA: Well, sure! I know she'd have done the job better 'n me! ANYBODY would have! You've always been so damned honest about it. But then we all know that story in the Bible that applies to you, child.

ALICE: And what story is that?

MONA: The one where that woman...that cheap one...is hauled off to get stoned. And everybody's ready to toss their rocks when the Lord stops 'em and says, "Sure...go on...stone her. And whoever's never done nothin' wrong, you can throw the first stone."

ALICE: You got such a cute way of tellin' Bible stories, Mama.

MONA: Maybe I ought to have done more of it.

ALICE: Maybe you should have. 'Course anybody can use the Bible to twist their own ideas straight.

MONA: That story is the truth for you, child. I think the Chinese had it, too. People in glass houses--

ALICE: Stop it, Mama!

MONA: Shouldn't throw stones.

ALICE: (*To HOLLY, squeezing the doll*) Hush, little baby...don't say a word...Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird.

MONA: That's what they say, ain't it? And if the Lord and the Chinese say it, it's got to be true! Who are YOU to judge ME? You prance in here after servin' five years for felony child abuse, and you act like you're all of a sudden Mother of the Year! Well, I am sorry, but I don't see no ribbon across your chest! You ain't wearin' a crown, neither! (*MONA takes a drink*)

ALICE: That's right, Mama...drink up. Get your courage back.

MONA: It don't take any special courage to tell you the truth. Never did. It's just that you never wanted to hear it.

ALICE: (*To HOLLY*) Isn't Grandma nasty when she gets mad, Holly? You wouldn't want to be around her very much with a temper like that, would you?

MONA: (*Sarcastically to HOLLY*) Yeah? Well, I was a hell of a lot sweeter to your...brother...Andy, doll face. Your mama ever tell you what happened to him?

ALICE: (*Nervously*) Holly wants to go to sleep now, so why don't you just keep your voice down.

MONA: But it's only right a child ought to have a bedtime story when she's sleepy, right?

MONA grabs HOLLY from ALICE, who moves away downstage. MONA holds HOLLY like a doll, not a child. ALICE doesn't want to notice this.

ALICE: You give her back to me!

MONA: But this is such a good story. She'll want to hear it, won't you, Holly? See? She wants Grandma to tell it to her!

ALICE: She's too young to understand!

MONA: Oh, little ears pick up more than we give them credit for!

ALICE: Funny you should say that, Mama. But there's no need to go raking up the past.

MONA: There is when you stand there plain as day tellin' me I wasn't a good enough mother for you.

ALICE: We all got our failings.

MONA: (*In a storytelling mode*) Once upon a time a beautiful little baby boy was born. His mama named him Andy. Now Andy didn't have no papa, which is how things sometimes go in this world of ours. His mama was a shy, nervous thing. She probably ought never to have been a mama, but done was done. And despite how he got into the world, he was a beautiful addition. He had big, brown eyes.

ALICE: (*Remembering*) Green when he was born.

MONA: No baby's eyes are green.

ALICE: (*Bitterly*) They were the color of mold!

MONA: His mama loved him dearly. She thought.

ALICE: Don't, Mama!

MONA: Andy's grandma asked his mama to come live with her, figuring his mama wouldn't have enough money for formula let alone rent and food. But do you know what Andy's mama said? "No! I don't want you livin' at Granny's house. She might spoil you with kisses and candy."

ALICE: You would have raised him on gin and hate!

MONA: Well, Andy's mama moved into a room above a garage. There were spiders crawling around, windows with cracks in 'em, and old paint rags here and there lent a touch of color. His mama soon got a job at the five and dime sellin' yard goods. Only she couldn't afford no babysitter, and she was way too proud to ask for help. So do you know what she did, Holly? She left Baby Andy alone in his crib. All morning.

ALICE: What else could she do?!

MONA: If that weren't bad enough, when she'd get home from work, that love-starved little boy would cry and cry and cry for her attention.

ALICE: I was tired!

MONA: Too tired to hold him?

ALICE: I fed him! I gave him toys! Nothing worked. Just that horrible screaming. Screaming!

MONA: So Andy's mama put a gag around his tiny mouth. Just like he was a little bandit or what have you. But that didn't work, of course, because he'd just squirm around until it fell off, and then he'd cry all the louder. One day, Andy's mama was so fit to be tied she poured herself a big glass of demon rum! And then it hit her! If it made HER feel better, maybe it would make Andy happy, too! So she gave him a nip. Pretty soon he fell asleep. And then she gave him another nip! And another! The cryin' stopped. 'Course the neighbors became suspicious.

ALICE: *(Pleading)* Please, mama!

MONA: We gotta finish the story, don't we? I mean it don't do any good to tell half the story and not get to the excitin' part. So you see, Holly...Baby Andy spent a lot of his time sleepin'. One day his mama gave him just one shot too many of that demon rum. And that poor little tyke...why he just closed his big, brown eyes...and lapsed into what they call a coma. A coma's when you sleep so sound nobody can wake you up...not doctors...nurses...all the king's horses or all the king's men. Anyway, Andy's mama thought he up and died on her. And instead of callin' an ambulance, why, do you know what she did?

ALICE: I was scared! You have to believe that, Holly...I was scared!

MONA: She put her baby in the trash. Wrapped him in a newspaper and dropped him in a dumpster just a ways down the street...like he was a hunk of rotten fish.

ALICE: I was scared!

MONA: I guess his mama thought, why, who'd ever guess that little boy-child was mine? But those suspicious neighbors were watchin', thank the Lord, and one of 'em noticed how careful like the mama carried that garbage.

ALICE: *(She can no longer bear it)* I loved him!

She slumps to the floor. MONA moves triumphantly down above her daughter and drops HOLLY beside ALICE)

MONA: Not for a minute!

ALICE: *(Cradling the doll)* I did! I did! I just didn't know what to do!

MONA: *(Back to storytelling mode)* The police did! They took Andy's mama away. Far away.



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