

Characters

Church Grounds

A 12-minute play

- MISS MILDRED** An elderly woman, thin and wiry, with gray hair rather severely piled in a bundle on her head, wearing a print dress, practical shoes, perhaps with spectacles, smugly religious. Born to judge, condemn and complain.
- BEA** A middle-aged woman, dressed in dark slacks and a blouse, typical appearance of a public school teacher, assertive but user-friendly
- DONNIE** Middle-aged big beefy man who owns a local successful car dealership and repair shop, dressed in work uniform – khaki pants and matching shirt with logo on the pocket, perhaps a cap, with a no-nonsense demeanor
- RANDY** An attractive teenaged boy, very quiet, deferential to the adults, with an air of someone who is carrying a hidden weight, tired from running a race that has no rules, with referees everywhere, and no finish line in sight
- MARVIN** An attractive, smiling, personable young man, self-confident, comfortable in his own skin, who wears “rich” very well.

Synopsis: Three adults meet as a church committee to prepare the items that go in a “time capsule,” which is to be buried on the church grounds and not opened again for 100 years. They are impatient because the committee chairman has not shown up yet, and then they must contend with a needy teenaged boy who interrupts their business. The late arrival of the committee chair quickly creates a new perspective on everything and everybody.

The setting: A typical church work room. No scene changes, no special effects.

The time: Now

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Church Grounds

A 12-Minute Play

(Screen dark. **MUSIC** begins. **SLOW FADE-IN** to still photo—**see attached**-- of small typical country church, too distant to make out title or denomination. Title materializes: **Church Grounds** —**see attached**. Music continues but fades a bit for voice-over)

VOICE-OVER:

There are places in the Deep South, where I was born in 1938, where you might think time itself has somehow ground down to a slow crawl and not much ever changes. In fact, on occasion, time seems to have stopped entirely and show signs even of reversing itself. Some folks like it that way: stop time in its tracks and face backward. But the problem with that is: time is on nobody's side. It is going to do for you what it has done for everybody else who has ever lived or ever will live: leave you not just in the dust but part of the dust itself. And the most you can hope for about all those things that got you so fired up during your lifetime, the most that time will do for you is to whisper your epitaph on the winds of change: "here lies a bit of dust that once was fire."

MUSIC UP, TITLE FADES, SLOW FADE TO BLACK

(**SLOW FADE IN:** we are looking at a typical church kitchen. The door opens, and MISS MILDRED and BEA enter and flip on the lights.)

MISS MILDRED

(She takes off scarf and pops it in the air a couple of times to shake it out)

My soul and body! Lordy, that wind! If it keeps this up, it could do some real damage.....
(Pauses, staring at sink) Would you look at that! I want you to look at this, Bea! Can you believe it? That Wednesday night prayer group did not wash a single thing. Just left the dishes piled up in the sink.

BEA

I'm not surprised. They're mostly kids anyway. What more could you expect?

MISS MILDRED

Well, I for one expect more – a lot more. If they were raised like good Christian kids, they wouldn't be doing this kind of thing and getting away with it. Didn't clean up a thing! Beats anything I've ever seen.

BEA

I think I'll go ahead and wash these and get it over with before our committee starts. Won't take long. They've stacked them up fairly neat, actually.

MISS MILDRED

And where's Marvin McKneely? Mr. High-and-Mighty is the one who called this meeting, and now where is he?

BEA

(Busies herself with the dishes)

Well, that's a good question. After all, it's his meeting, not ours.

MISS MILDRED

One thing I know: he'll want coffee when he gets here. And Donnie will, too. I may as well fix a fresh pot.

(Goes to table with coffee pot, goes through motions making coffee)

This poor ole coffee pot has just about had it. We need a new one.

BEA

Well, whatever you do, don't mention it to Marvin McKneely – he'll go buy one before the sun sets. Besides, Miss Mildred, I wouldn't be making coffee for them this late in the day. It'll probably just go to waste.

MISS MILDRED

(With a bit of resentment and a smirk aimed at Bea)

No, it won't. I know both men; and believe me, the minute they get here, it will be the first thing out of their mouth will be: "Any coffee in this miserable place?" That's the way it was with Frank before he died. Always had to have his coffee. Didn't change in almost 50 years. "Any coffee in this miserable place?" Lord, I can still hear him now. It's been almost two years, and I still miss him, Bea. One thing I can say, I know my men when it comes to coffee. I know it's different for you, not ever been married and all....

BEA

(CLOSE UP OF BEA. Her head does not move, but her eyes cut left toward Miss Betty. She grimaces but quickly recovers.)

Oh, it may not be as different as you think, Miss Mildred. Besides, I like my men the way I like my eggs: over easy.

MISS MILDRED

(Hand to mouth in gleeful scolding)

Bea Hudgins! For shame! Saying things like that in this church. Oh, if Reverend Briscoe heard you say that!

BEA

Nothing -- it wouldn't make a bit of difference. He's a man, too. They're all alike. By the way, how's that grandson of yours doing? Randy, is that his name? Is he going to school this fall?

MISS MILDRED

(Suddenly taken aback.)

No! No, he's just visiting for the summer. I don't know what he's going to do after that. It upsets me so!

BEA

I didn't mean to pry or anything.

MISS MILDRED

No, no – it's all right. Seems like the whole town knows about it anyway. I don't care if his dad did kick him out of the house, I just cannot bring myself to think he might be one of them gay people. It's just a phase he's going through. I've got to believe everything will work out and his dad will let him come back home at the end of summer. (Shakes head.) But I know his dad. He's my own son, after all, and I know him too well. Tough as nails when it comes to things that go against Scripture. Lord, bless him! I raised him up that way. (A deep frown) Frank was no help, God knows.

BEA

Maybe it will work out. Sometimes things like that just take time. Maybe by the end of summer your son will let the boy come back home.

MISS MILDRED

I hope to God he does. I don't know what will happen to the poor boy otherwise. God knows I have so little to live on as it is, with the little dab Frank left me. I'll pray about it. All I can do.

(Two loud knocks. CUT TO DOOR. The door opens and DONNIE enters.)

DONNIE

Evening, ladies. Am I late?

(CUT to BEA, busy at sink)

BEA

No, because Marvin is not here yet, and since it's his meeting, nobody's late.

(CUT to MISS MILDRED)

MISS MILDRED

Well, I beg to differ with you, Bea. Marvin is late, Donnie. It's his meeting, and he ought to have been the first one here, to clean up this mess and at least make coffee. But oh, no! He left it for us to do.

DONNIE

Did somebody say "coffee"? Any coffee in this miserable place?

(He takes a seat at the table.)

MISS MILDRED

(CUT TO MISS MILDRED CLOSE-UP. With an obvious smirk aimed at Bea)

There certainly is! It's almost perked, and I'll bring you a cup as soon as it's finished dripping. Goodness gracious, this old pot has just about had it. I tried not to get too many coffee grounds in your cup.

DONNIE

So, ole Marvin's not here, huh? Probably forgot it, or felt he had more important things to do. I been told his dad is turning the whole business over to him and planning to retire. Heard Marvin's even better at it than his old man was, and that's saying a lot.

BEA

Lord, the McKneelys don't need any more money. They float half of this town as it is, and probably more than half of this church. I know they give big-time to the school.

DONNIE

Hey – don't knock the McKneely money! I'd have to close down my shop without that big fleet of all their cars and trucks they bring in for servicing. But give the guy some credit – he's got to be pretty busy these days. Would you believe, I always have to call to remind him to bring his own car in for regular servicing? Always forgets it. Man, what I wouldn't give to have that yellow Mustang he drives.

MISS MILDRED

Well, Mr. Big Shot had better show up this evening; it's HIS meeting, and I've done my part. I hope this is the last time I hear anything about that infernal time capsule.

(She pours a cup of coffee and takes it to Donnie)

Here, this might have a few grounds in the bottom.

DONNIE

No problem -- that'll just add a little body to it -- make it taste better. Thank you, Miss Mildred. I'm easy to please. Right now, I wish I had Marvin's yellow Mustang and he had a feather up his butt so we'd both be tickled.

BEA

Donnie Dallas! (Laughing) That's close to being sacrilegious! For shame! Poor Marvin -- If he only knew he was being talked about like that!

DONNIE

No, not poor.

(A couple of light knocks on the door. **CUT TO DOOR**)
It opens, and RANDY enters, holding a small cardboard box)

MISS MILDRED

Well, bless my soul! Randy, what are you doing here?

RANDY

Hi Granny. Miss Hudgins. Mr. Dallas.

(They exchange nods and hellos)

BEA

You having a good summer, Randy? I saw you on your bicycle the other day and waved but you didn't see me. Still delivering papers?

RANDY

Yes ma'am. It's working out fine.

MISS MILDRED

He lucked out and got the paper route while the regular boy is away at summer camp. Couldn't have come at a better time. It was a God-send if ever there was one.

DONNIE

(**CUT TO CLOSE-UP of Donnie.**)

(Serious tone. His chance to assert his authority as a bully.)

Randy, I want you to start throwing my paper up on the porch from now on. I'm tired of wading out in the dew every morning to pick it up.

RANDY

Yes, sir – I will.

DONNIE

If I have to wade out there in the dew again, I'm gonna cancel my subscription.

RANDY

Yes, sir.

MISS MILDRED

Lord, don't cancel your subscription, Donnie! It's the only money he makes! After he makes weekly payments on his bike and pays me a little dab of rent, there's precious little left, as it is!

BEA

What's that you've got in the box, Randy?

RANDY

It's the ashes from Granddaddy's dog.

MISS MILDRED

What? You mean Rover? I asked you to take him out in the orchard and bury him yesterday.

RANDY

Yes ma'am, but Granddaddy made me promise two years ago before he died to have Rover cremated when the time came and spread his ashes around Granddaddy's grave. He already paid for everything. So that's what I was planning to do.

(He takes out ashes from box)

BEA

My God – in a Ziplock bag?

RANDY

That's what Granddaddy made me promise, Granny.

MISS MILDRED

Him and that dern dog! No, you're not about to do that; I don't care what Frank made you promise. That was two years ago anyway. It's sacrilegious or something.

RANDY

Yes ma'am. But he told me Rover was the only thing he ever loved that loved him back. He said that he wasn't too sure he was going to heaven but he knew for certain that he was leaving hell.

DONNIE

I'm going to be buried in that cemetery, too, one day, and derned if I want dog ashes floating around me every time the wind blows. Somehow don't seem right. I don't like it, not one bit.

MISS MILDRED

It's desecration – that's what it is. Randy, you ought to know better than trying something like this. I'm downright ashamed of you. So disappointed! Sometimes I can understand why your Daddy threw you out of the house, behaving like this. It's... well, it's sinful as far as I'm concerned. You're talking about holy ground. I don't care what your granddaddy told you.

RANDY

Yes ma'am.

(He goes to table, places box at his end of table, sits opposite end from Donnie)

BEA

Well, it looks like Marvin's not going to show up, and I say he's missed his chance to put something in the time capsule. I want to get this meeting over with – it's already taken more time than I have. I'm sorry, but I just don't get it – burying a time capsule for some future church members to dig up a hundred years from now. What's the point in that?

MISS MILDRED

I know exactly what you mean. Let's just get on with this foolishness. Marvin has just missed his turn to take part, as far as I'm concerned. Did y'all bring things to put in? I brought this – my favorite pickle recipe. I got it from my Aunt Flora years ago. I'm gonna put it in for my part.

DONNIE

A pickle recipe? For a time capsule? I don't get that.

MISS MILDRED

(A bit incensed at his remark)

Well, I certainly do! It just so happens that I loved my Aunt Flora, even better than I did Mama! Besides, Marvin said we'll use that pickle jar on the counter as the time capsule, and I happen to think a pickle recipe is the perfect thing to go in a pickle jar.

DONNIE

Oh, I didn't mean anything by it, Miss Mildred. Fine with me!

BEA

What did you bring to put in it, Donnie?

DONNIE

Well, I hope y'all won't think less of me, but I brought the owner's manual from Marvin's yellow Mustang. I found it in the glove compartment the last time I serviced it, and to this day he's never missed it or said a word about it. God, I love that car!

BEA

At least you've brought something, which is more than I've done. I just have not had the time for this project. I've been trying to get a copy of a favorite poem of mine but just couldn't remember the title – I think it's by Robert Frost or Edgar Allen Poe. It's real scary, about this big black bird in a haunted house or something like that. What's that bird? – you know, it's bigger than a regular blackbird. The first line goes something like "Once upon a time when I was weary at midnight" – and something/something about forevermore scratching at my bedroom door....

MISS MILDRED

Oh, I remember that poem! Yes, it's just beautiful, but I don't remember the words. It's a crow! That's the bird I think you mean!

BEA

I wish now I had learned it by heart. No, I don't think it's a crow, but that's close. Maybe it'll come to me. (Mumbles to self) Midnight/midnight dreary...something/something... I'm just going to write as many lines as I can remember and put it in the jar – it'll have to do. I just don't have any more time for this.

MISS MILDRED

Randy, son, get that pickle jar and put these things in it.

(RANDY does so.)

BEA

And screw the lid on tight. It's got to last a hundred years.

MISS MILDRED

Lord, we'll all be dead by then....

DONNIE

Yeah, I guess we probably will. It creeps me out.

MISS MILDRED

Why on earth Marvin McKneely came up with this awful project I'll never understand. And then, not to show up like this for his own meeting!

BEA

Well, he just missed his chance, that's all I can say. I'm ready to go home.

MISS MILDRED

Randy, did you dig that hole where I showed you on the map of the church grounds this morning? It's got to be exactly right because they'll use the chart to know where to dig a hundred years from now.

RANDY

Yes ma'am. It's ready.

MISS MILDRED

Lord help us – I still don't get it. But we're leaving. You bury this jar and cover it over real good, like I told you, and come on home. Don't dawdle and don't linger.

RANDY

No ma'am, I won't.

BEA

And take this pile of garbage out to the dumpster when you go.

(Hands Randy a large filled plastic garbage bag)

DONNIE

(He is staring at his coffee cup)

Good God A'mighty! Would y'all come look at this!

MISS MILDRED

(Rushes over, stares in awe)

What is it? Oh, my Lord and Savior! It's a miracle! Bea, come look at this! Saints alive!

BEA

Sweet Jesus! I can't believe it. The coffee grounds have formed into a perfect portrait of Jesus!

MISS MILDRED

It's Him, all right! Glory be to God! It's a sign. He knows the good works we've been about here today, and he's sent a sign to let us know. "Well done, thou good and faithful servant!"

DONNIE

Don't anybody touch this cup. Don't even THINK about moving it! Let the grounds dry just like they are. It's my cup and my coffee. It's mine. People are going to line up to see it. By the hundreds. Thousands, even! I drank from that very cup. It'll be on TV and everything. The pure-tee face of Jesus! This church is going to be world famous. People will flock here to be saved!

BEA

Oh, bless us all! (Checks watch.) Oh my, it's getting late and I gotta go. I hate to face that wind. See you all at Sunday service.

DONNIE

Wait – I need to go with you. I'll be back first thing in the morning with a camera and probably some TV reporters for all I know! Glory be to God and Hallelujah is all I have to say!

(BEA and DONNIE exit)

MISS MILDRED

(Sits at table and gives a heavy sigh)

Randy, son, come over here and hold my hand. I think it's time we offered up a prayer for you.

(RANDY goes over, stands facing audience, holding her right hand in his left. As she closes her eyes, bows her head and begins prayer, he bows his head and, as she gets halfway into the prayer, he slowly raises his right hand towards heaven and unfolds his fist to a prominent "finger" gesture and holds it there until she finishes.)

Blessed assurance, we pray, sweet Jesus, that you take this boy into your heart and teach him thy way to salvation and righteousness. Forgive him his trespasses and show him the divine path to a Christian lifestyle so that he foregoes the wrongful way and follows in thy footsteps to salvation. Teach him to leave his temptations and his bad choices and follow you, through all the years of his life. Thank you for showing him the way, Jesus. It is in your name we pray.

(She gets up and goes to door, turns back)

There – that ought to help. Now remember, don't linger around here, Randy. It'll be dark before long. I've got to go start supper. As soon as you take out the garbage and bury that jar, come straight home.

(MISS MILDRED exits)

RANDY

Yes ma'am, I will.

(He takes pickle jar and garbage bag to table and stands behind table facing camera. He seems to be talking to the bag of ashes and, as he continues, becomes agitated, and it is the first time we see the anger and defiance and passion that have been boiling beneath the surface.)

Rover, ole pal. I wish they'd let me take over the church. You know what I'd do? I would smash down the two big front doors that are always locked and let some fresh air in, along with anybody who needed shelter. I would smash open the fake-colored windows and let some real sunlight in so people could see for the first time, and I would throw ashes all over the floor; and after a hundred years I'd come back and plant a seed in the rotten carpet. That's what I'd do, so maybe there'd be room here for souls like us. Right, boy?

(He reaches into pickle jar and takes out each item, holds it up, and reads aloud before dropping it into garbage bag)

"Flora Forsythe's Pickle Relish. Serves twelve." Garbage in, garbage out.

"A Poem by Robert Frost: "The Crow Calls at Midnight." Garbage in, garbage out.

"1963 Mustang Owner's Manual." Garbage in, garbage out.

(He takes Ziplock bag of ashes from box, places it into pickle jar and screws down lid.)

Rover, ole pal, now I know how you felt about Granddad and how he felt about you. Love lasts longer than a hundred years.

(He grabs pickle jar, slings the garbage bag over his shoulder, starts toward door. A couple of quick knocks on the door and MARVIN McKNEELY sticks head in door.)

MARVIN

Hey, Randy! Sorry I'm late. Uh-oh! Everybody else gone? (Looks around)

RANDY

(Walks to him, smiling, and the two do a quick informal bear hug and break away.)

Marv! Yep, all gone. And oh yes, I got saved in the process -- and you could have been, too. Missed your chance, man. Now you gonna die and go to hell for missing the meeting.

MARVIN

Thanks, but I'll try to make it. Maybe I should have come in singing "Amazing Grace" to shame them, make them be nice for a change. You leaving already?

RANDY

Yep -- Granny's curfew, as usual. I gotta go. (Stops, looks back at Marvin.) God, Marv, I don't think I can hold out for two more days. Eighteen and legal at last! I'll be what they call "of legal age." An adult! Can you believe it? They don't have a clue. I'll be my own man!

MARVIN

No, our own man! You're moving in with my folks and me and that's final. We've talked about it, and Mom and Dad are thrilled! They thought the world of your Granddad, Randy, and they feel the same about you. Mom has already fixed up your room, and your job is ready when you are. So you can't escape. (Looks about.) Hey, since I'm here, I may as well help clean up this place. My penance for being late. Anything else to go in the garbage before you leave?

RANDY

Nope, one lifetime of garbage is enough. You might clean the coffee pot, and there are a couple of cups -- if you want something to do.

MARVIN

Consider it done. Can't wait to show you the new sports car I bought. The dealer didn't want to offer me much for that Mustang I had -- that's what took me so long because it was a lemon and they had every repair record on file, but I got a beauty and a great deal. You'll have to drive it!

RANDY

Can't wait. No, I take that back. I can wait -- just two more days. It'll be worth it. See you then! Take care, Marv. I'll be thinking about you.

(He takes pickle jar and garbage bag and exits.)

MARVIN

You, too. Can't wait!

(He looks around, rubbing hands together)

Let's see now: Two cups and a coffee pot. Piece of cake.

(Picks up cup, stares at contents, does a double-take.)

Good grief – look at the grounds piled up.... Who could drink this nasty stuff? We need some real coffee in this miserable place and I'll see that we start fresh first thing tomorrow....

(He sets about washing cups and taking lid off coffee pot, etc., while humming melody from "Amazing Grace." **SLOW FADE to black, FADE IN of church image same as title page, MUSIC BUILDS, credits start**)

(ROLL CREDITS, see following page)

(CREDITS ROLL)

Church Grounds

Written and Produced by
Tom Parks

Director and Cinematographer
James Fite
Checkbrain Productions

The Cast:
In order of appearance

Miss Mildred:
Beverly Wise

Bea Hudgins:
Lisa Jebsen

Donnie Dallas:
Tim Jebsen

Randy:
Zach Jebsen

Marvin McKneely:
Alex Fields

Special Thanks

Larry Haggard

The Rev. Emily Wright-Magoon

Deborah Brown

Shanda Unger

Filmed at the
Unitarian Universalist Church
Midland, Texas

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Music

Church Grounds (Open on blank screen)

Piano recording on "Amazing Grace" available.

<u>Measure</u>	<u>Screen Image</u>
01	Music up, screen blank
20	Slow FADE-In of Southern country church (see sample)
30	Title appears (see sample)
42	Voice-Over narration begins
150	Voice-over narration ends, music up
150	FADE-IN on kitchen door from inside, music ends

Closing of Film

252	MUSIC UP, credits roll until end
335	As credits end, music up till film ends

