

THE HANDS OF OUR BROTHERS

A One-Act Play
by Paul Lewis

TIME and PLACE

Present day. A park bench adjacent to a jogging trail, Green Lake Park, Seattle.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

NORMAN, an attorney in his early 50s, Jewish. He's never been west of Minnesota before.

JILL, a Seattle mom in her mid 40s. Lutheran, with two teenaged kids.

An autumn day in Seattle's Green Lake Park.
NORMAN sits on a park bench, waiting for
someone to arrive. JILL enters, having just
concluded a jog. Their eyes meet.

NORMAN

Jill Barclay?

JILL

Yes. You're Mr. Landau?

NORMAN

Norman Landau. How do you do?

JILL

I see you found the spot alright.

NORMAN

First park bench north of the rowing center. Not a problem. Thank you for meeting with me.

JILL

You said you had something to tell me about my brother.

NORMAN

Yes. Your brother William. Or... maybe you called him Bill—?

JILL

—I'm sorry, but I don't know you, and I have to pick my kids up from soccer practice soon, so I wish you'd tell me what this is about.

NORMAN

Yeah, of course. As I told you on the phone, I'm an attorney, and I work for the State Patrol in Madison, Wisconsin.

JILL

Right.

NORMAN

About six months ago I happened to read in the paper that some climbers had found the wreckage of a single-engine plane in a rugged stretch of mountains not far from here. And that it was later identified as a plane which was reported missing in December of 1975.

JILL

Yes, that's right.

NORMAN

I...started following the story. Correct me if I'm wrong, but from what I understand, it was your uncle who was the pilot. It was him and your aunt and your cousin on that plane. And your brother William, who was, what, eight at the time?

JILL

Eight, yes. They were returning from a ski trip to Idaho—

NORMAN

—And they ran into some trouble over the North Cascades. To be honest with you, I didn't even know there was such a mountain range. I had to look it up—

JILL

—Mr. Landau, would you mind telling me why the Wisconsin State Patrol is interested in a private plane that crashed in Washington state thirty-nine years ago?

NORMAN

Well, I'm not here on police business, actually. It's business of a more personal nature.

JILL

I see. Well, I'm not interested in suing the maker of the plane, if that's what—

NORMAN

—No, that's not it, either. Hear me out for a second. In December of 1975, my brother and I were spending the winter holidays with our Uncle Skip and Aunt Sylvia in Long Island, while our parents were vacationing in Bermuda.

JILL

Long Island. Can we just cut to the chase here? How can I help you, Mr. Landau—?

NORMAN

—We heard the people who were on that plane. On a shortwave radio. Our Uncle Skip's shortwave radio.

JILL

(a beat)

Is this some kind of joke?

NORMAN

Why would I joke about something like that?

JILL

I have no idea. Maybe you're the type of person who gets off on playing pranks on people.

NORMAN

You're entitled to assume that. But I'd like to assure you that I'm not that kind of person.

JILL

This was when? That you heard them on a radio. While they were in the air?

NORMAN

No. It was probably pretty soon after their plane went down.

JILL

From three thousand miles away. How is that even possible? From what I've been told, an aviation radio wouldn't have been any use in the mountains. VHF doesn't—

NORMAN

—Yes, I know. VHF transmissions need a clear line of sight. I'm guessing that there was a CB radio on board as well, with a single sideband. We're talking about radio waves that bounce between the earth and the upper atmosphere. One or two hops and they can travel thousands of miles without any signal degradation — What is it?

JILL

Nothing.

(a beat)

How can you be sure it was my family? Did they mention their names?

NORMAN

Not that I recall, no. But when I saw the story I did the math. December 1975 is when we would have heard the radio transmission. So unless another plane went down around the same time—

JILL

—Who's 'we'?

NORMAN

It was just me... me and my little brother, Esau. But, you know what? Let's leave him out of this.

JILL

What were they saying? Over the radio?

NORMAN

They were... calling for assistance. Your uncle — I assume it was your uncle— was requesting assistance. The other voices: they were muffled. I couldn't identify them.

JILL

So, you might have heard my brother?

NORMAN

I can't be sure. The other voices were in the background. Very soft. There was static.

JILL

Okay.

NORMAN

Nobody was crying, okay? I want to assure you of that.

JILL

Okay.

NORMAN

Let me try to explain something. I was thirteen at the time. My brother was nine. Uncle Skip and Aunt Sylvia had left us on our own that night. They were going out to play cards or something. The plan was that we were going to read comic books, watch TV and raid the refrigerator. Anyway, Uncle Skip had a shortwave radio in his den— with a top panel which opened up into a map of the world. It was his most-prized possession. He picked up Radio Moscow, Tangiers, you name it. We were not allowed in the den by ourselves. And we weren't allowed to touch that radio under any circumstances.

JILL

So I take it that you went into the den—

NORMAN

—Like I said, I was thirteen. Essie, he just tagged along. He really had nothing to do with this. I was a miserable failure of an older brother that day. I would have made a lousy shepherd.

JILL

You turned on the radio—

NORMAN

—I turned on the shortwave, and started turning the dial. All we heard was static, 'til out of the blue there was a voice, a man's voice. 'Mayday,' he said. 'Mayday. Our plane went down. It's cold. Please send help.' Or words to that effect.

(a beat)

Just tell me: did they have an amateur radio with them?

JILL

Yes.

NORMAN

Okay. I know what you're thinking now. And yes, we thought about it. At least I know my brother did. I...I don't think I seriously considered it— telling my Uncle Skip what we had just heard. You gotta understand. My Uncle Skip: he hunted elk—

JILL

—No, I don't understand.

NORMAN

He fished for eel in the canal out in back of his house in Massapequa, and Aunt Syl pickled it and laid it up in jars in the basement—

JILL

—I still don't understand.

NORMAN

My brother and I grew up Jewish, you see? My Uncle Skip: he might have been adopted for all I know. Who ever heard of a Jew hunting large animals and laying up jars of pickled eel? He was different, is what I'm saying. Unpredictable. You had to watch your step around him. If we had told him, I... I'm not excusing my decision. But I was scared to death, to tell you the truth. Anyway, Essie was pretty upset. I tried to calm him down, told him it was probably a hoax. Which is actually what I figured it was. Besides which, I said to him, a thousand other people would have heard that Mayday, and somebody would have notified the authorities. Which would make sense, wouldn't it?

JILL

From what I understand, no one reported a thing that night.

NORMAN

Yeah, well, when I saw the article in the paper, a light went on. The wreckage of a plane in a remote mountain range. The remains of four people in a makeshift shelter nearby. I put two and two together and realized that it had to be the people we heard. And that maybe we were the only ones to pick up the transmission. 'Cause no one came to their rescue.

(a beat)

Was a crime committed? Probably. Failure to render assistance. Yet the offenders were juveniles, and the statute of limitation has elapsed. But here...

(indicating his heart)

There is no such statute. This is why I came forward. To find one of the loved ones of the deceased and say that I was deeply ashamed and sorry. Which I am.

JILL

I imagine this is where I'm supposed to thank you for doing the right thing, for coming forward.

NORMAN

Listen, you don't have to do anything of the kind. Like I said, I just wanted you to know. And to apologize.

JILL

Alright. Now I know.

NORMAN

I'm sorry.

JILL

Right. I get it.

(she prepares to leave)

Have a nice trip back.

(she pauses, then)

The North Cascade range covers thousands of square miles, you know.

NORMAN

Yeah, that's what I understand.

JILL

So it wouldn't have made any difference if you had told your uncle what you heard. My mother reported the plane missing that night, and rescue parties began searching for it as soon as the weather cleared.

NORMAN

Yeah. Okay, I guess that's a good point.

JILL

Okay, then.

(after a beat)

There's something else, isn't there? Something you haven't told me.

NORMAN

Listen. You've been through enough. You don't want to hear about any more of this—

JILL

—You flew all the way out here to tell me something, and I think you better tell me what it is.

NORMAN

This is very difficult. Extremely difficult. Your uncle... said one other thing that night. He read out the coordinates of where they had gone down.

JILL

I... don't understand.

NORMAN

The numbers. The geographic coordinates. My brother Esau— he wrote them all down on his hand, with a pen.

JILL

What?

NORMAN

On the palm of his hand. With a pen. A fountain pen.

JILL

A fountain pen.

NORMAN

With blue ink.

(a beat)

Listen. Ms. Barclay... Jill. May I call you Jill?

JILL

No. You're saying he wrote them down? And—

NORMAN

—And I made him wash his hands, okay? I took him to the bathroom sink and stood there while he washed his hands, while all those numbers ran down the drain.

(a beat)

Tears, too. You see, Esau was crying. I'm sorry. I wish you could believe how sorry I am. Later that night, Essie woke me up, all upset. He was convinced that it wasn't too late to tell our aunt and uncle. That, if we told them, they could call the FBI, and the FBI would be able to analyze the water that went down the drain, and reconstruct the numbers. He read somewhere that the FBI could reconstruct a letter that's been set on fire, with nothing more to go on than the ashes. 'It doesn't work that way, Essie,' I told him. 'This is water, not fire. They can't ever retrieve those numbers. Go to sleep.' And we both went back to sleep. Essie died a few years ago, but before he died, he brought up that night in Long Island. We hadn't talked about it since we were kids. 'Do you think those people ever got rescued?' he asked me. 'Sure they did, Essie,' I said. 'Either that or they got arrested for pulling a dumb prank like that.' But in my heart I was never so sure, and I doubt if he believed a word I said. For we both knew that I had implicated him in something which was very wrong. And that no matter what he did with his life — he became a rabbi, by the way— his hands were forever marked by that.

(a beat)

NORMAN (CONT'D)

I know that there's nothing that I can say that can bring any of them back. But I thought you ought to know the whole truth of what happened that night.

(a beat)

Listen: I have a check here. For ten thousand dollars.

JILL

What?

NORMAN

Financial reparations, for whatever you wish to use it for—

JILL

— You know, I think you should go back to Madison, Wisconsin. In fact, you should quit...following this *story*, and not contact me ever again, is what I think—

NORMAN

—Please, just take the check.

JILL

No, I'm not going to take your goddamn money.

NORMAN

Just take the damn money. Please. In the Jewish tradition, repentance is accompanied by restitution. The boy, that thirteen-year-old, who did this to your family, to your brother. He should have known better, but he didn't.

JILL

(standing up)

Yes, he should have known better. And how could you possibly think that coming out here almost forty years later to get this off your chest would make *anything* better? It doesn't.

NORMAN

The last thing I wanted was to cause any more hurt to the family of those people that died in the mountains. But I believe this is something my brother would have wanted me to do. Something he would have done himself if he were still alive. To seek out the aggrieved party, confess wrongdoing, and express shame and remorse for what took place.

JILL

Just fucking leave it alone, do you understand?

She begins to walk away. Norman stands up.

NORMAN

The rotten kid who did this. I want you to know: I'm not that rotten kid anymore. There are good people in the world still. That terrible, rotten person —whoever he was, Jill, I forsake him—

Jill suddenly stops, and turns around.

JILL

Don't—

NORMAN

(misunderstanding her intent)

—I know, don't call you 'Jill'. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—

JILL

(approaching Norman)

—Don't you do that. Don't you ever say that.

NORMAN

(a beat. Now he understands what she meant.)

Four people might have been saved. If only that kid had done the right thing. But he didn't.

JILL

No, he didn't. He was mixed-up. He got it wrong.

NORMAN

He got it wrong.

JILL

My oldest son: he's twelve. As parents, you always try to teach your kids right and wrong. But you never know what they're going to do once they're on their own— or if you let them out of your sight for even a little while. You might leave them alone for a couple of hours, and for the next thirty-nine years they're carrying around a terrible secret. It's too painful to think about.

(touching his shoulder or cheek)

Thirty-nine years of doubt, Norman. Of uncertainty. Isn't that repentance enough? Forgive him, Norman. Just forgive him. Let him be.

NORMAN

I keep picturing that brother of yours up there in the mountains.

JILL

William the Conqueror.

NORMAN

What's that?

JILL

It's what my parents used to call him —'cause he was so... headstrong is the word they used. To me he was just Billy, of course. You always worship your big brothers, no matter how many stupid things they do as they try to find their way in the world. If he had asked me to fly off a rooftop with him, I would have grabbed hold of his hand and done so without the slightest hesitation.

NORMAN

Brothers and sisters. They can have their own language sometimes. Write their own laws.

JILL

Yeah, it's true. So this is how *I'll* always picture Billy: blond hair, eyes lit up, standing on a mound of cushions pulled from the living room sofa. Gripping a sword in one hand and a shield in the other. Surveying his domain. Enemy forces laid to waste among the furniture. Summoning his trusty girl-lieutenant and leading the way forward— to the dining room and kitchen and beyond— to each and every glorious conquest that lay ahead.

BLACKOUT.