

10-Page Excerpt

I COULD NEVER LIVE HERE

A Full-Length Drama

By C.S. Hanson

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CAST

AUDREY Mid to late 40s

VIN Late 40s, Audrey's husband

KIRSTEN 18, Audrey and Vin's daughter

JOHNNY Mid to late 40s, Audrey's brother, recently
 deceased, a ghost

COOPER Late 40s

WENDY 23, Johnny's daughter, half Native American
 Indian

TIME

Summertime, 1984.

SETTING

An old farmhouse in North Dakota, in the Red River Valley, about five hours from the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. The back door opens into a kitchen and dining room, which extends to a living room. A room on the second floor is visible, and covering its walls are paintings by Johnny. Many of the paintings are large scale, inspired by Fauvist and Abstract Expressionist art.

CREDITS

The play was developed thanks to the following:

- Ensemble Studio Theatre (workshops with Cassandra Medley)
- Abingdon Theatre (Kim T. Sharp, Literary Manager)
- 2010 Sewanee Writers' Conference, where I was a Tennessee Williams Scholar (Beth Henley and Dan O'Brien, mentors)
- Culture Project, 2015 Summer Reading Series

Excerpt from midway through Scene 1 of

I COULD NEVER LIVE HERE

(VIN and AUDREY in the kitchen of the house where she grew up. They have come from her brother's funeral.)

VIN

What's going on? Ever since we got to the church, it's been like a performance with you.

AUDREY

Excuse me?

VIN

Geez, you haven't flirted with me like that since, I don't know, since we hung out in Coffman Union.

AUDREY

I don't know what you're talking about.

VIN

Acting like everything's so great? Squeezing my hand. Doing that thing you used to do at cocktail parties after a couple of vodka tonics?

AUDREY

I wasn't flirting. I . . . I was introducing. Introducing you to people I grew up with. Maybe I put a spin on things, but it's been almost a decade since -- . I was trying to be -- oh, I see, with you, I was being affectionate. And it bothered you?

VIN

I don't know. No, I liked it, but yeah, it bothered me.

AUDREY

What was I supposed to do?

VIN

I don't know. We haven't even told our daughter.

(Audrey heads to the stairs.)

We have to tell her. Soon. . . . why not here?

AUDREY

In this house? No, no. We could never have that kind of conversation here. See this cross stitch? That's a framed work of frustration. I can see my mother working her fingers to the bone. The threads going in and out, and she only did it when something was bothering her. Then one day, it appeared, "The Lord's Prayer." The grandfather clock? Uncle Buzz carved it with his own hands.

VIN

What does that have to do with anything?

AUDREY

In this house, people don't talk, okay? They find rough wood or material and they sand it down or stitch it and make something useful out of it.

VIN

Isn't that convenient? I drop everything to come here, for you. And now it's just another excuse not to talk.

AUDREY

You think I planned this? You think I enjoyed standing up in front of people who I hadn't seen in years and . . . I just know they were thinking "What's she been up to? When was the last time she was in this church?"

VIN

Hold on. You, you were great. Okay?

AUDREY

I was going for sincere.

VIN

It was a eulogy. What do you want me to say?

AUDREY

It was awful. It was a performance. And you know what I really WANTED to say? "He didn't belong here. He got stuck. In a little community where everyone knows everyone else's business. He stayed because he felt he had to. Tradition. Must have killed every creative instinct in his body." Poor Johnny.

VIN

Glad you didn't say that. . . . So, we talk to her tonight?

AUDREY

Why can't you just think of a new idea?

(KIRSTEN, their daughter, enters.)

KIRSTEN

Trunk is open. Can I drive home?

VIN

(to Audrey) Can't seem to do that, can I?

KIRSTEN

Hey, can I --?

VIN

(to Kirsten) No.

KIRSTEN

Why don't I ever get to drive?

VIN

(to Kirsten) We'll see. Keys?

(Kirsten tosses keys to Vin. Kirsten focuses her attention on a piece of toast with a big bite mark in it.)

KIRSTEN

Eeeooh - you can see the bite marks. It looks alive.

AUDREY

It's his smile.

KIRSTEN

Creepy.

VIN

Probably the last thing he ate.

AUDREY

Leave him, I mean, the toast.

KIRSTEN

I'm not touching it.

VIN

No one's making you touch anything around here.

AUDREY

What's that supposed to mean?

VIN

I don't trust the food. I hate the way they make sandwiches in North Dakota. Know what I mean? In the church basement?

AUDREY

You said the same thing twenty years ago at Uncle Buzz's funeral.

VIN

Too thin. Too flat. One slice of turkey, and butter on the bread? At Sarge's --

KIRSTEN

Hey, dufus, you left New York like a million years ago.

VIN

I know, but you go to Sarge's, you ask for a turkey sandwich, they give you at least a half a pound of sliced meat. Plus lettuce, tomato, real condiments, and the bread is thick. The Midwest has a sandwich problem.

AUDREY

Don't eat the sandwiches from now, okay?

KIRSTEN

"Just Say No."

AUDREY

Don't start with the Nancy Reagan jokes. Not today.

KIRSTEN

I won't. I promise. I'll . . . "Just Say No."

VIN

And that tuna salad? Runny. Tuna salad should not make the bread soggy.

KIRSTEN

(cracking up) Hey, how about that spreadable cheese? "Just Say --" Oh. Sorry. We're laughing, on the day of a funeral.

*(Johnny comes down the stairs.
Only Audrey can see him.)*

VIN

(to Kirsten) It's okay. (to Audrey) Right?

JOHNNY

No one around here makes good tuna salad.

KIRSTEN

Earth to mom.

AUDREY

(to Johnny) I don't believe this.

JOHNNY

Shoulda brought my own recipe to the funeral. It's a touch of mustard that gives it tang. Forget celery. I hate celery.

AUDREY

(to Johnny) No. No. Shut up.

JOHNNY

American cheese with brown bread is the most popular. That's what people will stand in line for.

VIN

(to Audrey) It was her first funeral. You think that was easy for her?

KIRSTEN

(to Audrey) Everything I do you just hate.

AUDREY

(to Kirsten) I'm sorry. (to Vin) I'm sorry I dragged you here today. I'm sorry the sandwiches were soggy.

KIRSTEN

(to Vin) We shouldn't have been joking around.

AUDREY

(to Johnny) Johnny and I always joked around.

JOHNNY

I would jump out of the broom closet -

AUDREY

(to Johnny) And my heart would almost stop. Scared and laughing at the same time.

JOHNNY

So this is your family.

AUDREY

(to Vin and Kirsten) I need some air.

(Audrey goes outside. Johnny exits up the stairs.)

KIRSTEN

Mom hates Nancy Reagan jokes.

VIN

It's okay, kiddo. Let's pack up.

(Audrey enters. She takes the toast and throws it in the wastebasket. She exits up the stairs. Vin and Kirsten will go in and out carrying things to the car during the following scene that focuses on Audrey and Johnny in his studio.)

JOHNNY

Hello, Audrey.

AUDREY

Jesus Christ.

JOHNNY

Haven't seen him yet.

AUDREY

Oh god, I'm seeing things.

JOHNNY

I'm your brother. I am here for you and you alone.

AUDREY

But, you're -

JOHNNY

Yeah, they put me in the grave less than two hours ago.

AUDREY

Look, I'm, I'm so sorry. I didn't visit you enough. But then, you didn't visit me. We both know the highway runs both ways. Oh this is killing me, the stupid things people say on the day of a funeral. Like, "this is killing me." You're dead and I just said -

JOHNNY

Take a deep breath.

AUDREY

You weren't supposed to die, not like this. I have to get you out of my head. But I can't, can I?

JOHNNY

I don't think so. It's all coming from you.

AUDREY

What is this? A game? No games.

JOHNNY

Growing up, if we didn't have games - it's true, isn't it?

AUDREY

Yes, yes, if we didn't have games, we wouldn't have made it out of here alive.

JOHNNY

I didn't. I died in the middle of nowhere.

AUDREY

It's all I can think about. It wasn't supposed to be this way. And it makes me ache, Johnny. Ever since I got the call.

JOHNNY

The call. What was that like, sister, the call?

AUDREY

"Johnny passed away." No. Please no. Because I'm making eggs. And I drop the spatula and egg bits go scattering, splattering, all over, all over. Eggs all over the floor. Sink down, start picking those little egg pieces off the tile. Creamy yellow on midnight blue. . . . He'll never forgive me now. It's too late. I'll never be able to make things right. I want to make things right. I want everything to be okay between us. Is it really you? Johnny? Johnny.

JOHNNY

(mocking tone) Oh sister, aren't you a piece of loveliness?

AUDREY

Don't make fun. I once saw a beautiful Bengal tiger in a zoo, locked in a cage and I started to cry because it reminded me of you.

JOHNNY

Put an artist in a cage and there's only one thing to do.

AUDREY

(suddenly, taking in the paintings on the walls) Oh, Johnny, are all these yours? . . . Yes, I see. You never stopped.

JOHNNY

What else was I gonna do? Long winters. Not a single distraction except the sounds in my head. Sometimes louder than a prairie wind.

AUDREY

Living here, running a farm, you painted like this? How did you do it? How did you find the time?

(Audrey moves to hold a painting.)

JOHNNY

Don't touch.

AUDREY

Why not?

JOHNNY

I'm expecting a visitor.

AUDREY

A visitor? Is that supposed to be clever? You were expecting me. Of course. I see why. Look at this room -- these belong in a gallery. That was your dream.

JOHNNY

It was your dream, too, sister. I got stuck in the middle of nowhere. And you flew away like a blue jay. How's your art?

AUDREY

My --? This is your day, Johnny. What can I do? What can I do to make up for the way things turned out?

JOHNNY

Stay. Stay the night.

AUDREY

Here? In this house?

JOHNNY

I stayed, watched over the farm, took care of dad. Didn't break a single piece of mom's depression glass. Now you stay.

AUDREY

But my family - we need to be home tonight.

JOHNNY

You were conceived in the room across the hall. And I died at the kitchen table eating a piece of rye toast with rhubarb jam.

(Audrey starts to leave, looks back.)

AUDREY

I'll come back another time. I'll look at every painting. And I'll see you.

JOHNNY

So, once again, it's all about you, your convenience, your schedule. Maybe God will forgive that. (*chuckling*) I'll haunt your days for the rest of your life. Stay.

TO BE CONTINUED