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Dramatic Publishing

Hope 'n Mercy

by

KENT R. BROWN

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(HOPE 'N MERCY)

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Hope 'n Mercy was given a workshop production by West Coast Ensemble Theatre in Los Angeles in 2000 and by Pulse Ensemble in New York City in 2001. The play was the winner of the George R. Kernodle Playwriting Contest, 2000; co-winner of Boston Theatre Works Unbound, 2001; and co-winner of the Pulse Ensemble Theatre's World Chamber Theatre Festival, New York City, 2001.

HOPE 'N MERCY

A One-act Play

For 1 Man, 2 Women playing multiple roles

CHARACTERS

MARCIA HOPE: Julene's grandmother, late 70s.

JULENE HOPE: A plain woman in her mid- to late 20s.

BRADLEY JENKINS: Julene's lover, could be any age.

SETTING

Multiple playing areas, all sparsely suggested by a table, small bed, single cot, a rocking chair, etc.

TIME

The play takes place in Marcia Hope's memory and imagination.

HOPE 'N MERCY

AT THE CURTAIN: *The stage is dark as we hear JULENE HOPE's pure, sweet voice sing a verse or two of "Amazing Grace." As the singing continues, LIGHTS reveal MARCIA HOPE, in her rocking chair, rocking slowly back and forth. A moment later we see JULENE HOPE, partly in the shadows, sitting on the end of MARCIA's bed. When JULENE finishes singing, MARCIA speaks.*

MARCIA. I been thinkin' 'bout you, child.

JULENE. I know ya have, Grandma. Where am I today?

MARCIA. On the swing, out back.

JULENE. Oh, I like that swing.

MARCIA. It's been rainin' all day. You're barefoot, hair all braided and you're singin' "Amazing Grace."

JULENE. Couldn't never get me to come in when I was singin'.

MARCIA. "Julene, you don't come in right this minute I ain't savin' you a single bite'a supper!"

JULENE. But ya always did, Grandma, 'cause ya always loved me.

MARCIA (*beat*). What do ya want, Julene?

JULENE. You seein' Dr. Stanton, Grandma?

MARCIA. Not on a personal basis, if that's what's on your mind.

JULENE. Now, Grandma, you're stallin' me.

MARCIA. He says I'm gonna live to be a thousand years old 'long as I quite smokin' and drinkin' and runnin' 'round with married men. (*Beat.*) You want somethin', I can hear it in your voice.

JULENE. You strong enough to make a trip, Grandma?

MARCIA. Where to?

JULENE. They're gonna do it, Grandma. I need ya strong for me. I need ya there.

MARCIA (*beat*). Sixty-eight dollars a night, do you believe that? Told the man he was lyin', that when I visited your mother in the hospital with her liver trouble, I could stay all week at the Days Inn for one hundred and seventy-five dollars. A week! "Yes, ma'am," he says, "but times have changed. There's room tax now and city tax, 'n somethin' called a convention tax!" Well, I start to laughin' and I ask him when am I ever gonna find time to attend me a convention, and he says I never can tell and did I want smokin' or non-smokin'.

JULENE. At least you get one of them full continental breakfasts.

MARCIA. Frozen muffins and green bananas so hard you could beat a man to death? That ain't no breakfast.

JULENE (*beat*). When did you get the letter?

MARCIA. Came three days ago. I was hangin' out the laundry. The wind was dry and the sky was settin' down on the hills out back. (*MARCIA picks up the letter from the table.*) When I finished hangin' it all out, I made me a cup and sat right here 'n read it.

(*LIGHTS reveal BRADLEY JENKINS sitting on a jail cell cot. He is writing the letter to which MARCIA is referring.*)

BRADLEY. "Dear Grandma Hope: How are you? I am fine. Well, not too bad, anyway, considerin'. Don't have no more work details. That's a blessin'. Is the weather any good up your way?"

MARCIA. The handwritin' was so bad I had a hard time makin' it all out. Had to read it ten times over.

BRADLEY. "We been havin' us a spell of nasty weather here. Lots'a rain 'n wind. Power went out last week. Guess Mother Nature's gearin' up for my upcoming engagement. Ha, ha. You must be surprised to be hearin' from me."

MARCIA. My fingers felt on fire.

JULENE. I know they did, Grandma, I know.

MARCIA. Every night, child, you come runnin' up to me, arms open real wide 'n a smile on your face. "Do you love me, Grandma?" And I take ya up in my old arms and kiss your forehead 'n place your head on my breast. "I love ya, child, more than life itself." Then ya kiss me sweet dreams on the cheek 'n wave me goodbye as I fall asleep.

JULENE (*beat*). I'm sorry, Grandma.

MARCIA. It's a little late for that now.

BRADLEY. "I want ya to come visit me, Mrs. Hope. I know ya hate my guts, but I'm willin' to overlook that fact. I can invite me five people. So I told 'em I wanted Babe Ruth, Marilyn Monroe, Julius Caesar, Charlie Manson and Madonna. They told me good ol' Charlie's still in jail 'n Madonna don't go slummin' no more. We joke a lot 'round here." (*Beat.*) "You can say no if you want. I'll understand." (*Looking now directly at MARCIA.*) "I want ya to come watch me die. I know ya want to. I can feel it."

(From this moment on, all three characters will interact with one another as if they all share the same time and space.)

JULENE. Forgive him, Grandma. For me. Do it for me.

MARCIA. Forgive! I ain't got no room for forgiveness in my heart, child. I only got room for black bile 'n hate for that man!

BRADLEY. It's kinda like when you was a kid and had a big birthday for bein' eight years old and your ma said you could invite a coupla friends over for special cake and some ice cream. So Ma and me we sat down and we could only come up with three names. So we invited them three. But only two showed up. Billy Murtagh and Wendy Hanson. But that was OK, 'cause we got to have more ice cream.

MARCIA. You gonna have ice cream at this party, Mr. Jenkins?

BRADLEY. There'll be some dancin' I 'spect, Mrs. Hope, but it won't be me doin' the dancin'. Don't know 'bout the ice cream.

MARCIA *(turning suddenly to JULENE)*. Damn you, girl! What the hell you doin' to me? I never brung you up to be like you was!

(LIGHTS begin to change as we hear slow country 'n' western music.)

JULENE. I had to have him, Grandma.

MARCIA. Don't you be trash now!

JULENE. If God didn't want me to have them feelin's then he shouldn'ta put 'em so deep inside me!

MARCIA. Don't you bring God into this!

BRADLEY. Don't ya wanna know how it happened, Mrs. Hope?

MARCIA. You leave me be. I don't wanna know nothin' from you.

BRADLEY. It's a love story. Everybody loves a love story.

JULENE. You shoulda seen him, Grandma, leanin' against that jukebox.

BRADLEY. The Dew Drop Inn, don'tcha just love it! Me 'n a cold Rollin' Rock and some tunes.

JULENE. Ah, Grandma, I loved him, I knew it, then 'n there! Couldn't keep it to myself, just come pourin' outta me. Ain't nobody ever looked at me like that.

MARCIA. That was lust, child. 'Twasn't any kinda love you needed.

JULENE. Hadn't been so hot, Grandma, wouldn't gone swimmin' in the lake.

BRADLEY. But you did, 'n there you was, standin' in the door, the afternoon sun all 'round ya. Barefoot 'n cutoffs and wearin' a shirt with no sleeves. Real sexy.

JULENE. "I got me a dead flat tire out here in the dust. Who's gonna help a girl out?"

BRADLEY. Two fellas raised their hands like they was in kindergarten, but she wanted me, didn't ya, baby?

JULENE. Them green 'n yellow 'n blue jukebox lights all dancin' 'cross his face and a ponytail like a snake curlin' half down his back.

(MARCIA watches as BRADLEY and JULENE begin to recreate their meeting.)

BRADLEY. "What's your name?"