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*Dramatic Publishing*

# **YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO REMAIN DEAD**

**An audience-participation comedy mystery**

**by**

**PAT COOK**



**Dramatic Publishing**

**Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand**

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# YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO REMAIN DEAD

an audience-participation comedy mystery  
for 5 men and 5 women

## CHARACTERS

- HARNELL CHESTERTON . . . . . a pompous narrator,  
around 40, a man without an unexpressed thought
- Officer BAINBRIDGE . a long-suffering police detective, 30s
- BLANCHE LaTOURE . . . . . a rather frazzled director, 30s
- ARNOLD TURNBULL . . . . . a large man, 40s  
(also plays FAT DADDY)
- DORIS TURNBULL . . . . . a selfish actress, 40s  
(also plays SWEET MAMA)
- LOIS JACOBSEN . . . . . a coltish woman, late 20s  
(also plays SAVANNAH and MAN 1)
- STEVE RANDALL . . . . . a newcomer to the group, 20s  
(also plays EARL and MAN 2)
- LEIGH DORSETT . . . . . business-like, 20s  
(also plays HYACINTH)
- AJAX CONROY . . . . . not too bright, 20s  
(also plays CLETE and MAN 3)
- TRUDY MARSH . . . . . the ultimate “techie,” a teenager

TIME: The present.

PLACE: A small theater.

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## ACT ONE

SETTING: *A living room in a house somewhere in the deep South. There are three doors utilized in this floor plan. The first, or front, door is located R and leads to the outside. The second door is located on the U wall and the third is on the L wall. The furniture is a bit old, but comfortable. A couch resides just left of C and next to a compatible wing chair. In front of the couch is a coffee table. There is a large desk with matching chair DR. Around the room are various small tables and chairs befitting a once-grand manor house. Large ferns and old photos dot the interior landscape, signaling a remembrance of happier times. There is also a wing-back chair DR, on the stage apron.*

*Before the lights come up, a VOICE booms out in the darkness:*

VOICE. Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please. Good evening. Welcome to our little theater. But, before we begin, just a word of warning. Watch everything! Listen to everything! Don't let anything escape your investigation. Don't assume. Don't take anything for granted. You don't want to miss (*pause*) ... a thing.

*(Suddenly, the lights come up full on the living room. A MAN in a trench coat and felt hat is moving from the front door, which is open, toward two more MEN standing L. A WOMAN is standing U but between the first MAN and the MEN.)*

MAN. You thought it was all over, didn't you, Morgan?

MAN 2. Whatever do you mean?

WOMAN *(looks out)*. Leslie, don't!

MAN 3. I'm not who you think, Francis!

MAN. I'm not talking to you.

WOMAN. What're you going to do?

MAN. Just this! *(He pulls out a long, dark object and points it somewhere between the two MEN and the WOMAN.)* It's over! *(A loud noise is heard and WOMAN falls to the floor.)*

MAN 2. Now you've done it! *(Lights black out.)*

*(A light comes up DR on the wing-back chair. Sitting in the chair is HARNELL CHESTERTON. He leans in and ominously asks a question.)*

HARNELL. What ... happened? *(He smiles and leans back.)*  
Good evening. My name is Harnell Chesterton and I'll be your narrator for our little bit of mayhem, a host to a murder, as it were. You see, tonight you'll be tricked. You'll be looking at one thing while something else entirely is going on, Now you see it, now you don't. And it's all pretty much sleight of hand, gimmicks to lull you into assuming something that is patently false. Even now, as I speak to you, this is ANOTHER trick—put sometime between the event and the questioning. Which

is what I'm doing! *(He laughs to himself.)* Now, before you lean back, trying to settle your roast beef and mashed potatoes, scrunching up into those devilishly uncomfortable seats, let's begin. *(He moves DC.)* First, a show of hands. How many out there have committed a murder? *(He raises his hand and looks out.)* Fine. *(He yells backstage.)* Officer Bainbridge?

BAINBRIDGE *(offstage)*. Ye-e-es?

HARNELL. No one!

BAINBRIDGE. Thank you!

*(If someone does raise his hand in the audience, HARNELL says: "We have someone for you." Then BAINBRIDGE will come onstage, look at the person and say: "Oh, I know all about him. Can't touch 'im. CIA." And exit off again.)*

HARNELL. Now, what did you see in our first little scene here? Anyone? I'd like to find out what you *think* you know. What did you really see? *(He then picks on different people and has them state what they saw, after which he replies "Wrong," or "Could be"—see notes on this section at the end of the play. This section shouldn't last more than two or three minutes.)* Ah, see, that is exactly my point. What you see and what you assume. *(A finger up.)* Lights up, please.

*(The characters are in their original positions.)*

HARNELL. If you thought the first man entered through the front door, you are mistaken. You didn't *see* him enter the door. Did someone call him Leslie? Wrong again.



This man (*indicates MAN 2*) only said the name. You don't know to whom he was speaking. After all, "Morgan" could be a woman's name as well. As could "Leslie," as could "Francis." And did the man shoot someone with a pistol? No. All you saw was our lovely lady fall to the floor. She might've fainted, after all. What about the pistol? (*To the MAN.*) Show them, won't you? (*The MAN pulls out his "weapon," a silver comb.*) A comb. You saw him pull it out and you heard a noise. You *assumed* he shot someone. The noise? A sound effect of...you guessed it, a car backfiring. Oh, and one other thing. (*He removes the hat from the MAN, revealing him to be a woman with long hair.*) Our man is, in reality, a woman. (*To the others.*) Thank you. (*The others mumble to one another, disgusted with HARNELL, and exit as the lights fade out. HARNELL returns to his chair.*) So you see, all is *not* as it seems. During the show, characters will mysteriously change names, there will be blackouts, people running up and down the aisles...

(*BLANCHE enters from L and crosses to HARNELL, sheepishly glancing out at the audience on the way.*)

HARNELL. ...the victim suddenly vanishing so you're not sure who was really murdered, false clues *loudly* announced as if they were arriving trains.

BLANCHE. Harnell.

HARNELL. Ah, our director. (*To audience.*) Ladies and gentlemen, the director of our little operetta, Miss Blanche LaToure.

BLANCHE (*frozen smile to audience*). Hello. (*Suddenly, to HARNELL.*) What're you doing?

HARNELL. Just brushing up our doubtful detectives out there on some of the devices used in...

BLANCHE. Harnell, you are just the narrator! The narrator! You narrate! That's all, no explanations, no helpful hints, no guided tours...

HARNELL. Of course, but I simply thought...

BLANCHE. No thinking! "Let us take you now to the deep South where all is not what it seems." THAT'S you. THAT'S what you're SUPPOSED to say! And what's with that scene you just did?

HARNELL. Just a brief demonstration I organized with some of the more reliable actors.

BLANCHE. Reliable?

HARNELL. They were sober.

BLANCHE. And you have a police officer backstage?

HARNELL. Officer Bainbridge? What about him?

(*BAINBRIDGE enters R and stands next to HARNELL. The officer is licking his fingers, having just finished a donut.*)

BLANCHE. What's HE doing here?

HARNELL (*an aside to BLANCHE*). Just a little publicity stunt. You know, we have the police standing by. That sort of thing. Builds up interest.

BAINBRIDGE. Then how come I had to pay to get in?

HARNELL. What're you complaining about? The donuts were free.

BAINBRIDGE. Hey! Did you SEE me eat a donut? Or are you ASSUMING I ate a donut?

HARNELL. I'm ASSUMING you ate two DOZEN donuts!

BAINBRIDGE. Hey, I resent that.

HARNELL. Do you deny it?

BAINBRIDGE. No, I...

HARNELL & BAINBRIDGE. Just resent it!

BLANCHE (*looks out and smiles weakly*). We have a wonderful show for you folks tonight. (*To HARNELL.*) Now. Get started! (*She looks out again.*) Thank you. (*She bows and starts to back offstage. As she backs up she grabs BAINBRIDGE's arm.*) You, come with me.

BAINBRIDGE. I'm... (*He is yanked off by BLANCHE*) ...going with her!

HARNELL. Well, where was I? Oh, yes. Before we begin...

BLANCHE (*yelling from offstage*). "Let us take you now to the deep South!"

HARNELL. Let us take you now to the deep South... (*Glares offstage, then looks back at the audience.*) ...where all is not what it seems.

*(Lights fade out on HARNELL and come up in the living room. SAVANNAH is sitting on the couch, fanning herself slowly while SWEET MAMA paces nearby, wringing her hands.)*

SAVANNAH (*after a slight pause*). Sweet Mama, I do wish you would light somewhere. You're stirring up the dust.

MAMA. I jist cain't sit still, Savannah, darling. Don't you concern yourself. Go on and sit and do nothing like you generally do which is why there's so much dust in the

house to begin with. Cain't draw a deep breath around here without whupping up a dust zephyr.

SAVANNAH. Don't go poking at it, Sweet Mama, it's too hot to break a sweat over our poor housekeeping.

MAMA. I jist wish they would git here. How long has it been since Earl left to pick up Fat Daddy?

SAVANNAH. They be here soon, don't you fret none. *(She picks up a glass of tea from the tray on the coffee table.)* Why don't you have this nice glass o' tea?

MAMA. Why, thank you, Savannah, darling. *(She reaches for the glass but changes her mind.)* You fixed that tea yourself?

SAVANNAH *(smiles wickedly)*. Jist for you, Sweet Mama.

MAMA. I'll go parched, thank ye.

SAVANNAH. You ain't implying nuthin', are you Sweet Mama? *(Rises and moves to SWEET MAMA.)* You ain't suggestin' that I would be working my evil ways by concoctin' some sort of misfortune for you in the form of an afternoon refreshment, now are you?

MAMA *(stares at her)*. Why don't you go ask Old Blue?

SAVANNAH. Old Blue is daid.

MAMA. Yes, I know that for a fact. I also know you was the last one to feed that poor dog.

SAVANNAH. Now, you KNOW Old Blue was run over by a pickup truck.

MAMA. Which you was also driving.

SAVANNAH. Well, excuse me fer wantin' to git into town once in a while. *(She sits again.)*

MAMA. I KNOW that doctor done found somethin' else wrong with Fat Daddy. I jist FEEL it in my old bones.

SAVANNAH. Oh, settle, won't you. You could give a slug the jitters.

MAMA. I wish I *could* settle, I truly do.

SAVANNAH. Well, try. (*She smiles again.*) Say, how about a nice ride into the country? I'll drive.

(*HYACINTH enters, cleaning a pistol.*)

HYACINTH. Anybody seen the ammo?

MAMA. Hyacinth! Whatever are you doin' with Fat Daddy's pistol?

HYACINTH (*quickly puts the gun behind her back*). Uh... what pistol is that, Sweet Mama?

MAMA. Now you know good and well what pistol, the one you're totin' behind your back there?

HYACINTH (*backs over to SAVANNAH*). My, we ARE suspicious this afternoon! (*An aside to SAVANNAH.*) Has she had her tea?

SAVANNAH. Cain't git her to.

MAMA. You're holding Fat Daddy's prize sidearm. Now let me see!

HYACINTH (*discovers the gun*). Why, bless my soul, you are right. Lookee there. (*Looks lovingly at the gun.*) Ain't it a charmer, though? Who'd believe such a fine piece of metallurgy could be such a dangerous and deadly weapon. Sure would make a hole in *SOMEbody* if somebody *ELSE* weren't payin' strict attention.

SAVANNAH (*absently*). If it was loaded.

HYACINTH. Oh yeah. Has anybody seen the ammo?

MAMA (*suspiciously*). And jist what are you needin' that revolver for, anyways?

HYACINTH (*still looking at the gun*). Fat Daddy.

MAMA. WHUT?!

HYACINTH. Uh... I jist mean that when he gits back home here he's gonna want something to relax him. And you *know* how much he dearly loves to load up in the truck and go shoot small animals.

MAMA. He does for a fact. 'Specially possums.

*(CLETE enters through the L door. He is wearing a T-shirt and jeans and has obviously just been working.)*

CLETE. Well, well, well, and what are all you FINE ladies doing on a hot summah afternoon? Sittin' in heah all pretty and dainty like. And up to no good, I'll wager. *(He stands near the couch, rubbing his thick, bare upper arm. His muscles draw SAVANNAH closer to him.)*

SAVANNAH. Why, Clete, you need to relax, honey. *(She gets on her knees on the couch and feels his upper arm.)* I can just see how tense you are. Muscles ripplin' like some wild stallion strainin' at the bit.

MAMA. Savannah!

CLETE *(backs away)*. Now, you can look but don't touch, Miss Savannah. You belong to another... or have you forgot?

SAVANNAH. I wuz dearly hopin' YOU had.

MAMA & HYACINTH. Savannah!

SAVANNAH *(resumes her previous position)*. I wuz jist playin' with the help, Sweet Mama. *(She looks seductively back at CLETE.)* Teasin' him is all.

CLETE. Oh, listen to her, innocent as a new-laid egg. *(Leans in to SAVANNAH.)* You'd like us ALL fer yourself, wouldn't you, Miss Savannah? Every spare one of us, bayin' at your window like some o' Fat Daddy's dogs. *(Turns to HYACINTH.)* And I has caught you too,

Miss Hyacinth, sneaking a look at me when I'm out workin' in the fields there.

HYACINTH. No such thing! You just don't go flatterin' yourself! I got better things to do than waste my time watchin' you. Think you is God's gift to women. I know your type. No good and nevah will be.

CLETE (*moves to her*). And that is jist what is so excitin', ain't it? Forbidden fruit? Late at night you lie awake, cain't sleep on account o' the heat. And your thoughts drift over to wonderin' wheah I am, don't they?

HYACINTH (*in one quick move, brings up the gun and aims it at CLETE*). You come one step closer and we'll ALL know where you are. You'll have a tombstone on top o' you.

CLETE (*backs up a bit*). Well, well, well, Fat Daddy's favorite pistol. And jist what were you plannin' on doin' with that, Miss Hyacinth?

HYACINTH. Maybe I was plannin' on puttin' a hole in the workforce around here.

SAVANNAH. Pay no attention to her, it ain't loaded.

CLETE. No, but SHE is.

MAMA. Hesh up! All of you! (*She cups her ear.*) I hear Earl's truck comin'. (*Sound of a truck pulling up outside.*) Fat Daddy's home. Now, behave, all of you! You hear me?

HYACINTH. Yes, Sweet Mama.

CLETE. You want I should help get Fat Daddy in the main house heah?

MAMA. No! You jist be handy in case he needs anything. And you girls, don't say nuthin' to upset him, you hear me?

HYACINTH. And jist how are we to do that?

SAVANNAH. Ever' time we say ANYthing it upsets Fat Daddy.

MAMA. Then don't say nothin'! (*She crosses to the front door.*) Fat Daddy? Is that you?

*(Before SWEET MAMA can reach the door, it is kicked open. FAT DADDY is wheeled in in his wheelchair, pushed by EARL. FAT DADDY holds up a hand and EARL stops pushing and shuts the door quietly.)*

DADDY (*after looking around*). I have arrived...in all my splendor. Well, I see you ain't killed each other off... yet. (*Taking the cane off his lap, he struggles to his feet.*)

MAMA. Now, Fat Daddy, you just relax now that you're home with your lovin' family. Here, let me... (*She tries to help him but he holds out his free hand.*)

DADDY. Right there is fine, Sweet Mama. I want to always see daylight between the two of us.

MAMA. Why, Fat Daddy, you make it sound like I was up to some sort of mischief, like I wanted to do you bodily harm, like...

DADDY. Like you was the first one I saw at the top of the stairs after I got shoved down to the bottom of the stairs. And that's why I has to carry this! (*He waves his cane.*) Oowweeee! (*He replaces the cane and leans on it. He turns to EARL.*) Don't let me do that agin.

EARL. Sorry, Fat Daddy, I don't know where my mind was. I purely should've seen that comin'. You jist never mind, and remember that as your only real son and rightful heir, I shall always stand vigil over you and make sure...



DADDY (*jumping in*). Stop snivelling! Look at you! You ought to be in an aquarium. Stand up straight! (*EARL stiffens.*) Oh, you cain't, can you. I forgot, you ain't got no backbone. (*He ambles around the room, leaning heavily on his cane.*) And the rest of you. Sweet Mama, always whinin' and fussin' over me, why don't you give it a rest?

MAMA. That's 'cause I think only of yo' welfare. (*She pulls out a greeting card from her pocket and holds it up to FAT DADDY.*) Look at this lovely card I done bought you, to cheer you up some.

DADDY (*looking at the card*). What is that? It's nuthin' but a bunch of pigs wearing lipstick.

MAMA (*opens the card*). Read what it says inside.

DADDY (*reads*). "Hogs and kisses." (*He looks hard at her.*) Oh, I am much cheered now.

MAMA. Jist wanted to show you how much I and all of us love you, Fat Daddy.

DADDY. A man could go to his grave on such love... and in a hurry. And Savannah, Earl's wanton wife, what all have *you* ordered outta the catalog today? Somethin' frilly to parade in front of all the bachelors in the county? Or do you even CARE if they is bachelors? And my loving daughtah, Hyacinth. (*HYACINTH holds up a hand to wave, forgetting she is holding the pistol in that hand. She sees the gun and puts it behind her.*) I see YOU remembered I was comin' home. I do hope I was gone long enough for you to go through all my private papers.

HYACINTH. I could've used another hour or so.

DADDY. And Clete...