

A SON AND HIS FATHER

TEN MINUTE PLAY

By E. R. Schultz

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SYNOPSIS: After being called to his father's hospital room, a son in his early 20s is met with an unusual situation. The conversation quickly evolves past the banter of a son and his father to become an examination of the emotional core of their relationship. In the end, both the son and the father gain a newfound appreciation for the role each plays in the other's life.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(TWO MEN)

SON (m)..... A young man in his mid-twenties who has long since moved away from home and become focused almost entirely on his life, ignoring the life he led before leaving for college. *(126 lines)*

DAD (m)..... An old man who lives alone following his son's departure and the death of his wife. *(127 lines)*

SCENE

The stage consists of a hospital bed or gurney. Directly to the side of the hospital bed, there is a small bedside table upon which rests a simple lamp. The entire set should mirror the empty sterile environment of a hospital room.

AT RISE:

The scene consists of a small hospital room. The entire room is seemingly barren: devoid of any flowers, cards, or decoration of any kind. The only evidence that it's occupied is DAD, who is lying asleep underneath the white covers of the hospital bed. The room is completely quiet save for the quiet breathing of its sole occupant until there is a slight knocking on the door. DAD pays no mind and the knocking intensifies. After one more final bout of knocking, the door slowly begins to creak open and SON enters. SON is dressed in a simple plaid button down and jeans.

SON: (Meekly.) Dad? Hello, Dad?

DAD doesn't wake up.

SON: (Walking over to the bed.) Dad? Dad? Hello?

SON arrives at the side of the bed. SON reaches down and pokes DAD.

SON: (Poking DAD.) Dad! Wake up!

DAD wakes and sits up in the bed.

DAD: (Bewildered.) What? What? Who-? (Seeing SON.) Oh, hi, son.
I didn't hear you come in.

SON: Hi, Dad. Sorry, did I wake you?

DAD: I would hope that'd be obvious. When did you get here?

SON: I got into town this morning. I would have been here sooner,
but I stopped by your house to get you some things.

DAD: Oh, really? What'd you get me?

SON: Nothing, I couldn't get in.

DAD: You couldn't get in?

SON: I couldn't get in.

DAD: You couldn't get into your own house? Tell me: that college education I paid for, did it do you any good?

SON: Oh, of course. It allowed me to perfect the skill of writing papers on the resurgence of Depression-era policies in modern-day economics while simultaneously doing Jello-shots off the stomachs of undergrads. It's a very difficult skill to master...requires practice.

DAD: Charming, though I was thinking more along the lines of "the ability to get into your own house."

SON: Well, technically it's your house, not mine. And it's your neighbors, not mine. And those neighbors tend to frown on some random kid poking around your house while you're just a little bit in the hospital.

DAD: First off, I don't think one can be "just a little bit in the hospital." You're either in the hospital or you aren't. Not really a whole lot of gray area to be had.

SON: Well, if my memory serves me right, there was a very specific amount of gray area to be had, and that gray area happened to kick-off on the receding hairline of Old-Man-What's-His-Face as he stood in his tomato garden giving me a look like he thought he was still in 'Nam.

DAD: That's Mr. Haggart. He grows carrots, not tomatoes, and he fought in Korea, not Vietnam.

SON: Korea, Vietnam, it's all the same.

DAD: Not to the Koreans: of which my neighbor, Mr. Haggart, killed eleven.

SON: Eleven?

DAD: That's right.

SON: That old man killed eleven Koreans?

DAD: Well, he wasn't an old man when he did it.

SON: (*Sarcastically.*) Oh, well, in that case, never mind. Killing a dozen Koreans doesn't become impressive until you start collecting Social Security.

DAD: Son—

SON (*Continuing on.*): Hell, I think I may have killed a few on the way over here.

DAD: Son.

SON: Yeah?

DAD: You're rambling again.

SON: Oh, yeah, right...sorry.

DAD: And besides, technically he didn't kill a dozen Koreans

SON: Oh. that's right, he peaked at 11.

DAD: Yeah.

SON: Just missed an even dozen by one, huh?

DAD: Yep, apparently he would have had it if it wasn't for the Red Cross resuscitating the 12th.

SON: Greedy humanitarian bastards, didn't they know that Old-Man-What's-His-Face was on a roll?

DAD: His name is Mr. Haggart. My God. son, he was your next-door neighbor throughout your entire childhood!

Pause. SON reminisces briefly as he tries to recollect the name.

SON: Was he really?

DAD: Yes! Come now, son! You saw him damn near every day!

SON: Well, I also saw "Dragon Tales" damn near every day, and I can't remember if the dragons even had names much less what they were.

Pause.

DAD: So you really didn't get me anything from home, huh?

SON: I couldn't get in! Old man...uhm...

DAD: Haggart, his name is Mr. Haggart.

SON: Yes, him! Korean Killer! Anyway, he weirded me out!

DAD: Of course he did.

SON: I wanted to bring you something. I really did. I would've if not for—

DAD: —if not for Mr. Haggart weirding you out. I understand.

Pause.

SON: I've got gum. Do you want gum?

DAD: No, that's fine. It's not that big of a deal.

SON: Oh, c'mon, don't get all gloomy. Have some gum.

DAD: I don't want any gum.

SON: Are you sure? ...it's minty!

DAD: Keep your gum!

SON: Fine, jeez, don't get all worked up. There was nothing I could do! I tried every realistic possibility short of breaking down the door!

DAD: Son, don't take this the wrong way, but you're 5'10 and 170 pounds. I would hardly call you breaking down the door a realistic possibility.

SON: Hey! It's not like I'm some weakling. I played lacrosse in high school.

DAD: Oh, please, you were a goalie. Your job was to stand there and hope nothing got past you! In the real world, you would've been a traffic cone!

SON: Okay, point taken. But aside from going through the door, the only other option would have been going through a window, and if Mr. Haggart saw me crawling through the window of his hospitalized neighbor's house, do you know what would happen to me?

DAD: I can't possibly imagine.

SON: Let's just say that I would be the 12th Korean!

DAD: Whatever you say, son. To be honest, it isn't all that important. I didn't call you to bring me things from home.

SON: Yes, I've been meaning to ask, why did you call? On the phone, you said it was urgent, but the nurse just told me that you're only here for some routine tests.

DAD: Oh, so you had time to talk to the nurse but not to get your hospitalized father anything but gum?

SON: Dad?

DAD: What?

SON: The tests. Did they show anything...?

DAD: What? Oh God no, the test were clear. I'm healthy as can be.

Pause. SON stares quizzically at DAD.

SON: The tests were clear?

DAD: That's what I said.

SON: You're healthy?

DAD: Again, that's what I just said.

SON: You're healthy as can be?

DAD: If you'd like, I could call someone in here to start taking a transcript of this conversation. That way you could read over what was just said and avoid any confusion.

Pause.

SON: I'm confused.

DAD: You don't say.

SON: You're in a hospital bed.

DAD: Observant.

SON: On the phone you said that it was urgent, that—uh—that you needed me here.

DAD: It is urgent. I do need you here.

SON: What for!?! So I can regale you with tales of your frightening neighbors?

DAD: No, that isn't why I called you here.

SON: Well then, please, why did you call me here? Because, Dad, I'm not going to lie, this situation is rapidly becoming to me what the Rubik's Cube was to the 70s.

DAD: Meaning?

SON: Meaning I can't figure it out! You called me on the phone and made it sound like you were dying of some exotic disease so I fly myself all the way back here, and you're...I don't even know!

DAD: Son.

SON: What!?!

DAD: If you could stop talking for a moment, I'd be happy to tell you why I called you here.

SON: Okay, I'm calm, tell me.

DAD: You might want to sit down for this.

SON: *(Sits down.)* Okay, you're kind of freaking me out. What's going on?

DAD: Son...

SON: Yes?

DAD: Son, I...

SON: What?

Pause.

DAD: I didn't call you here because of the tests.

SON: Well, I know that. Why did you call me here?

DAD: Son, I called you here because...

SON: Yes?

DAD: The reason I called you here is...

SON: Yes?

DAD: Son?

SON: What!?!

DAD: I'm ready.

Pause.

SON: You're "ready"?

DAD: I'm ready.

SON: —to rumble or...?

DAD: Son, are you familiar with the life cycle of the Bolivian Jungle Wasp?

SON: I can't say that I am, no.

DAD: The Bolivian Jungle Wasp has one of the slowest maturation processes from larvae to adulthood of any insect on the planet. Did you know that?

SON: No, I did not.

DAD: Well, it does. Incidentally, it also has one of the most rapid declines from adulthood to death of any insect.

SON: Fascinating. Now, Dad—

DAD: —one second, son, I'm not finished. Now, where was I?

SON: Bolivian Jungle Wasp...fast track to death.

DAD: Yes. Well, anyway, once it is fully matured and its eggs are hatched, the Bolivian Jungle Wasp recognizes that it has served its purpose and is no longer needed. And thus, it begins a process known as “degeneracy.” In this process, the Bolivian Jungle Wasp sheds its wings and legs and then curls into the larvae position. It remains in this state, deprived of all resources, and eats itself away until it disintegrates into the Earth. So goes the life of the Bolivian Jungle Wasp.

Pause.

SON: Well, Dad, that is something else. Educational and creepy: how quaint. So, if you don't mind me getting back to the situation at hand, why did you call me here?

DAD: I called you here because I'm ready.

SON: For...?

DAD: For “degeneracy,” son. I'm ready for my “degeneracy.”

SON: Okay, Dad, you've got to give me more than that.

DAD: I'm ready for the decline. I have fully matured, fully lived, seen my children—well, child—grow to adulthood and am now ready to shed my wings, curl into a larval position and leave this world behind. “Degeneracy,” son...it's my time.

Pause.

SON: What are you talking about!?!

DAD: I'm talking about dying. I'm saying that I'm ready to go: that I want to go. Pull the plug, son. Send me home.

SON: I'm sorry. You want me to do what!?!

DAD: I want you to pull the plug.

SON: Are you—!

DAD: *(Interrupting.)* Son, please! Now, I know that this is all unfolding very fast, but I just need this one thing.

SON: And that one thing is?

DAD: I need you to end it. I need you to pull the plug.

SON: You need me to—

DAD: That's right, son. Just pull that plug, and I'll be out of your hair.

Pause.

SON: Just pull that plug, huh?

DAD: Just pull that plug.

SON: Yeah...that plug connects to the lamp. Do you want me to unplug the lamp?

DAD: No, I don't want you to unplug the lamp.

SON: Are you sure? Because I'm beginning to think the brightness is messing with your head and making you crazy!

DAD: Now, calm down. There's no need to get testy.

SON: My "healthy as can be" father just suggested that he kill himself. If there is such a thing as a time to get "testy," now is it!

DAD: Alright, well, first things first, I never suggested that I kill myself. I suggested that you do it for me. I believe the term for it is "assisted suicide."

SON: Well, I have another term for it: "bat-shit crazy."

DAD: It's actually funny that you mention bats.

SON: And it is funny, why?

DAD: Because there's actually a species of bats, generally found up north in Canada, in which it is considered an honor for a child to kill the parent. A litter of bats will fight tooth and nail for the privilege to honorably end their father's life.

SON: Well, I'm not a bat! And neither are you! So can we please stop with the animal analogies and just say what we mean? And by "we," I mean you: can you please stop with the animal analogies and just say what you mean?

DAD: That's what I've been trying to do!

SON: How!?! By talking about the Bolivian Jungle Bee?!?

DAD: Wasp.

SON: Whatever!

DAD: I was trying to get my point across, and I figured that animal analogies would be an effective way to do so.

SON: Your point being that you want me, your one and only son, to kill you?

DAD: Well, what do you know? I guess it was effective after all.

SON: (*Shocked.*) Wha—? I'm—! I'm just—! Are you—? Is this—?
Wha—?

DAD: Just out of curiosity, there are ends to these sentences, right?

SON: I just don't understand. I don't understand this at all.

DAD: Oh come now, you understand everything perfectly fine so just stop being such a drama queen and put me out of my misery.

SON: What misery!?! You're not dying! Hell, you're not even sick!

DAD: I am dying, son...dying from living.

SON: Poetical as that may be, I was talking about actually dying.

DAD: Well, *actually*, the human body only grows and matures up to a certain point, and then, upon reaching that point, begins a downward spiral of physical and subsequent mental decay. After this point, which generally occurs around 45, the muscles became weaker, eyesight becomes fainter, and heartbeats fade. The body begins to slowly and methodically die, so actually, I've been dying for quite some time.

Pause.

SON: You have way too much access to the Discovery Channel.

DAD: I want you to do this, son.

SON: But why? Why do you want this? You're perfectly happy.

DAD: I am not. And how on earth would you know!?!

SON: Well, we talked on the phone a couple of weeks ago, and you said you were perfectly happy.

DAD: It was a couple of months ago, and I was lying.

SON: What?

DAD: When we talked on the phone: it wasn't a couple of weeks ago. It was a couple of months ago, three and a half months ago, to be exact. And the last time we talked before that was eight months ago. But I suppose I should feel encouraged, because the last time we talked before that was over a year and a half ago when you graduated from college, so at least the separating increments of time seem to be growing smaller.

SON: Is that honestly why you're mad?

DAD: I'm not mad.

SON: But—

DAD: (*Cutting SON off.*) I'm not mad. And I'm not crazy. And I'm not depressed. I'm just...

SON: You're just in a hospital bed begging for death.

DAD: Does it look like I'm begging?

SON: Kind of.

DAD: No, begging would be lying on the ground, grasping at your feet, and most likely crying. I'm doing nothing of the sort.

SON: Fine, you're in a hospital bed politely asking for death.

DAD: Not the ideal way to put it, but at least with that phrasing it's clear I have manners. The concept of me begging at your feet for death might give the impression that I've lost my mind.

SON: I think you're running that risk either way.

DAD: I'm not crazy.

SON: Yes, yes, you are. That's the only explanation. You are: white pants after Labor Day, chugging cough syrup by the bottle, killing raccoons just for the heckuva it, out of your mind, bat-shit crazy.

DAD: I'm not crazy.

SON: Well, if you were crazy, you wouldn't know it, now would you?

DAD: Maybe. But even the craziest people at least seem to enjoy being crazy. Whatever I am, I don't get a whole lot of joy from it. Hence the...all this.

SON: Well, what is it that you are?

DAD: Exasperated.

SON: What's that supposed to mean?

DAD: It means that—I'm sorry, I'll try not to be cryptic.

SON: Well, that would be an excellent change of pace for this conversation.

DAD: I just feel...I'm sorry, I shouldn't have called you here. I shouldn't be bothered. It's probably nothing. You can leave, I'm fine.

SON: Well, I can't leave now: now that you've established yourself as obviously "not fine."

DAD: Look, it's nothing.

SON: What is it?

DAD: It's just... Do you ever get that feeling where you just are empty? So empty you don't even care. You just wallow in the emptiness, day after day. Night after night. Until it just becomes...everything. You ever get that feeling?

SON: I suppose so. I don't really like to think about it.

DAD: Neither do I...but I do. I think about it all the time. And I just want out, and there's nothing else to do.

SON: I suppose you haven't considered developing a hobby?

DAD: You're right, I'm sure this whole thing could be fixed if I just took up knitting, because after all, I am an 89 year old woman.

SON: I'm not saying you should take up knitting.

DAD: Well, then what?

SON: I don't know. Anything: cooking, power-walking, online poker...

DAD: Online poker?

SON: Sure! You always hear stories about creepy old men trolling the internet...that could be you.

DAD: This is exactly my point.

SON: What is?

DAD: When did I stop being a regular person and become a creepy old man?

SON: I'm sorry, Dad. I was making a joke.

DAD: Do you think that this is the time to joke?

SON: I hope so, because if this is a time for seriousness, then I'm scared.

DAD: This is a time for seriousness.

SON: Then I'm scared.

DAD: I am, too.

Pause.

SON: Is it...?

DAD: What?

SON: Have you been taking all your meds?

DAD: Oh good Lord.

SON: Seriously, have been taking your calcium meds?

DAD: Yes.

SON: What about your heart medicine?

DAD: Yes. I've also been eating all my vegetables and drinking a big sippy-cup of milk every day.

SON: Dad, seriously—

DAD: (*Interrupting.*) Seriously, I've been taking my heart medicine and my calcium medicine and the medicine from the chiropractor. I've been taking everything I'm supposed to take. I've done everything I'm supposed to do. I've always done everything that I'm supposed to do.

SON: Well, clearly something is happening that isn't supposed to happen.

DAD: That's one helluva understatement.

SON: Look, this is my fault, and I'm sorry. I should have called. Hell, I should have visited. We could have avoided this mess altogether.

DAD: No, this isn't your fault.

SON: But it is, it is.

DAD: No, it isn't. I don't blame you for a second. You're not the one to blame here.

SON: Well, then who is to blame?

DAD: There isn't— It's a not a "who."

SON: Well then, what? What's to blame for how you feel?

DAD: I don't blame— It should be nothing. It's the— It's the damn Deal. I blame the Deal.

SON: What deal?

DAD: The silent Deal: the Deal no one has to say. Everyone just knows. The one we all make with...God, I guess.

SON: You're an atheist.

DAD: Fine! Well then, if not with God, then with the Universe or whatever higher power controls everyone's lives. The Deal that says that if you work hard in school, you'll get a good job that pays good money. The Deal that says if you're nice and open and caring, then you'll find someone to spend your life with. The Deal that says if you put everything you have into raising a child, then that child will go off into the world to a successful life of their own. The Deal that says if you do all these things, then you'll be able to live out the remainder of your days resting in true serenity with the person you love, and you'll reap the rewards of all that hard

work and sacrifice. Well, I worked hard, and I made the sacrifices, and look at me now.

SON: *(Softly.)* Dad—

DAD: *(Interrupting.)* Look at me now. I live in a silent house once vibrant with my family's laughter. The days once spent at my work are now spent wasting away. The woman I loved more than anything and everything in the world is alive only in faded photographs and memories. I lived up to my end of the Deal, I'm just waiting to reap the rewards that will never come. Look at me now, son, and do you know what you'll see? You'll see a broken man too worn to put himself back together. So please...just end it, son. Look at me, look at my face, and see that I can't go on.

Pause.

SON: I'm not going to kill you.

DAD: Son, look at me! I'm a sick old man.

SON: I am looking. And yes, I do see a sick old man feeling the pain of all the hardship you've been subjected to. But I'm not going to kill you because I see past that. And underneath that sick old man is my father. I see the man who taught me to play football, and upon seeing I sucked, refused to give up hope and bought me a lacrosse stick. I see the man who would get home late from work every night and no matter how exhausted he was would walk into my bedroom and give me a kiss on the forehead. I see the man my mother loved and still loves from a better place. I see my dad. I see the one person in this world who I can't live without. So apparently you're prepared to die today, Dad. Well, unfortunately, I'm not prepared to let you. And if I need to move back home and spend every waking hour with you to ensure that you stay with me then I will. I love you Dad, and I'm not letting you go.

Pause.

DAD: You realize that I'm going to have to die someday.

SON: But not today?

DAD: Not today.

SON: Oh, thank God.

DAD: And don't worry, I'm not going to make you move back home.

SON: Oh, thank God! But don't you worry, Dad. I'm going to call you every day to see how it's going. And if you every start feeling lonely, you can call me or hey, you could talk to Mr. Haggart.

DAD: Oh to hell with Mr. Haggart. You were right to be weirded out. That old man could scare the crap out of an outhouse.

SON and DAD laugh. SON rises from his chair.

SON: I'm gonna run down to the cafeteria real quick and get us some food. Are you sure you'll be alright? I mean, this is a hospital: lot of sharp objects afoot.

DAD: I'll be fine. Besides, now that I'm thinking of it, if I made my way to the Pearly Gates before meeting my grandchildren, your mother would send me right back down to Earth.

SON: (*Chuckling.*) I bet she would. She knows I won't be able to raise children of my own without some form of guidance.

DAD: I don't know. I found a way to do it, and it worked out better than I could possibly have imagined.

SON: Well, you had Mom to do the really hard stuff. You landed the fun jobs like playing in the park and reading the occasional bedtime story.

DAD: Ah yes, my infamous bedtime stories. Whenever I got the opportunity, I really I set the bar high. You're going to have big shoes to fill when you tell stories to your kids.

SON: I think I'm up to the task.

DAD: Me too.

SON: Besides, I think the story of "How I Almost Murdered Grandpa" will be a hit at bedtime. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to scrounge us up some grub.

DAD: Maybe this time you'll bring me something better than minty bubblegum.

SON turns to leave, then stops.

SON: You know, there's just one thing... Why did you call me?

DAD: What?

SON: Well, it occurred to me that, when someone wants to kill themselves, they chug a bottle of pills, they shoot themselves in the head, they light themselves on fire and jump off the Brooklyn Bridge. They don't call their sons to come down and do it for them.

DAD: Well, maybe I'm a wuss...or maybe I just needed someone I love to pull me from the ledge.

SON: Well, either way, I'm glad you called me. Okay, I'm going to go get some food. Now, I will be coming right back, so try not to go all Bolivian Jungle Wasp on me.

SON turns to leave.

DAD: Son!

SON stops.

SON: Yes?

DAD: Thank you.

SON: Honestly, Dad, I was just trying to help like you've helped me countless times in the past. That's what sons do for their fathers and fathers do for their sons. I love you, Dad. I really do. And I'll always be there to pull you from the ledge time and time again.

SON exits. Pause.

DAD: I love you too, son, more than you'll ever know.

THE END