

from A WAKE

a play in two acts

by Brent Englar

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### CHARACTERS

JAMES COLE, 56, a high school English teacher

DANA MURPHY, 16; a student in James's American Literature class

MILO NASH, 16; the same

### TIME

The present

### PLACE

James's classroom in a typical suburban high school in Maryland

*Synopsis: A Wake tells the story of James Cole, a high school English teacher who has begun to despair of inspiring in his students the same love of language and literature, reading and writing, that first motivated him to teach. When he assigns Eugene O'Neill's Long Day's Journey into Night, one of his students, an aspiring actress, unexpectedly connects to the play, reawakening in James the enthusiasm he feared he had lost, not just for teaching, but for living life to its fullest potential. It is a reawakening that prompts him at last to seek the truth about his own family history, and the ways in which he has allowed the ghosts of his past to shape his present and future.*

*In this scene, which happens early in Act I, James introduces his class to O'Neill's masterpiece.*

(The bell rings. JAMES enters. DANA and MILO are giggling)

JAMES

Please take your seats. Today we begin our study of American drama. Unlike poetry, unlike the novel or the personal essay, American drama—the art of American drama, the stuff that has lasted, the stuff that still holds the stage with anything those Brits and Germans and Frenchmen have to offer—impassioned, rough-hewn, full-blooded—was born barely a century ago, willed into existence by men and women living in a world not extraordinarily different from our own. And above all by one particularly impassioned New Englander named Eugene O’Neill—he whose picture adorns the text before you.

(He grabs a copy of said text from off the desk and holds it in the air; as he continues in his lecture, his tone becomes for the first time truly enthusiastic, though he is careful never to allow that enthusiasm too free a rein)

This text is O’Neill’s masterpiece. It is the greatest play written by an American, which is reason enough to read it, though it is also devastatingly moving and at times even funny, if alcohol-fueled gallows humor happens to be your bag, lest you get the idea I only assign books for their nutritional content. The title of this play is Long Day’s Journey into Night, and there’s good news for the test anxious—the title tells you everything you need to know. So that is what I would like you to consider in the time we have remaining, and write your response on a sheet of paper, and please be so kind as to scribble your name or some such signifier up top—if you were going to write an autobiographical play called Long Day’s Journey into Night, what event from your own life could you write about? What event most suggests to you a long journey from dawn to black midnight?

(A moment passes. The bell rings and he calls after his departing students)

Please set your papers on my desk and be sure to bring your copy of the play to class for the remainder of the unit. And have a good afternoon.

(As he begins to sort the papers on the desk into tidy piles, DANA and MILO stand up. Both are sixteen and dressed in the style of typical, middle-class, suburban teenagers. MILO is conventionally handsome, with an athletic build and a friendly, complacent face. DANA is markedly shorter. Her figure is slight yet feminine, and she carries herself with the conscious poise of a trained dancer; her manner, however, tends toward the histrionic)

MILO

Mr. Cole?

JAMES

(still sorting his papers)

Mr. Nash?

MILO

Can I have my phone back now?

JAMES

I still need to call your parents.

MILO

They're not home.

JAMES

Then the answer is no.

MILO

Mr. Cole—

JAMES

—Mr. Nash.

(looking up)

May I recommend paying attention in my class? Or if you find that difficult, at least do me the courtesy of keeping your cellular phone turned off and stowed safely in your backpack.

MILO

I know, and I'm sorry, really. Don't I get an excuse?

JAMES

An excuse?

MILO

Yeah. It's a good one.

JAMES

Well then, let's hear it.

MILO

It was Dana's fault.

DANA

(swatting him on the arm)

Liar.

JAMES

Milo, are you lying to me?

MILO

Mr. Cole, Dana and I are supposed to go out tonight—it's been set for a week, only

now she's being all coy about if her parents are going to let her use the car—you know how important stuff like that is.

JAMES

Oh yes.

MILO

So when class started and you were talking, there was no way I could stay focused on Irwin O'Neill—

DANA

—Eugene.

MILO

Huh?

DANA

Nothing.

MILO

Right. So I looked over at Dana, and she gave me this ... I don't know, this—

DANA

—Coy?

MILO

Evil grin, right? Well, I couldn't wait all period to find out what that meant, so I got out my cell—totally not cool, I know, Mr. Cole—and I was just going to text her, just a question mark, that's all, only that's when you caught me, and I totally understand you taking it from me, only I really do need it this weekend, so if you just give me the phone now and call my parents later on—and I'm going to tell them the whole story anyway, as soon as they get home—well, doesn't it all work out the same in the end?

JAMES

(to DANA)

What do you think?

DANA

You're asking me?

JAMES

It was your fault, no?

DANA

No. But if you want to know my opinion ...

JAMES

Please.

DANA

I think you should give him the phone.

JAMES

Why?

DANA

Because he's a good person, Mr. Cole.

(JAMES thinks for a moment, then slowly opens a drawer in his desk and takes out the phone. MILO holds out his hand. JAMES pauses)

JAMES

I don't ever want to see this again. Or the newer model your parents get you next month.

MILO

I swear. Thank you, Mr. Cole.

JAMES

And I'm still calling your parents.

(He gives the phone to MILO, who immediately turns it on and checks his voicemail. JAMES looks at DANA)

JAMES (Cont'd)

Help you with something?

DANA

Um ...

JAMES

Just hanging out?

DANA

Sure.

(She stares at him. He smiles awkwardly)

JAMES

How are you?

DANA

I'm fine. Are you doing anything fun this weekend, Mr. Cole?

JAMES

Is tomorrow the weekend?

DANA

Yes.

MILO

(pocketing his phone, to DANA)

Nothing important. You ready?

DANA

I'll catch up.

MILO

What do you mean?

DANA

I mean I'll catch up.

(She smiles and takes his hand; he grins, simultaneously embarrassed and delighted, and leans forward to kiss her. JAMES blinks, unsure if this is appropriate school behavior. At last she pulls back, still smiling. It takes MILO a moment to realize they are no longer kissing)

MILO

Okay. Meet you out front?

(She nods)

MILO (Cont'd)

Okay.

(He stumbles offstage. JAMES crosses his arms and waits for DANA to speak, though she suddenly seems reluctant to do so)

JAMES

(at last)

Dana?

DANA

(spurred on by the sound of her name)

Mr. Cole, do you really like this play as much as you say, or was that just standard English teacher BS?

JAMES

Did it sound like BS?

DANA

No. Well, it's hard to tell with you.

JAMES

Is it?

DANA

Sometimes. I didn't mean—

JAMES

—As a matter of fact, I really like it as much as I say.

DANA

You act like you like everything we've read this year.

JAMES

Why else would I teach it?

DANA

But you really like Long Day's Journey into Night?

JAMES

Better than the rest, you mean? I suppose I do.

DANA

Why?

JAMES

Read it and find out.

DANA

Why do you like it?

(He thinks for a moment; she studies his face, intrigued. At last he crosses around the desk and sits on the edge facing her, as though to acknowledge the tearing down of a longstanding wall)

JAMES

Dana, is there something you love, more than anything else? I don't mean a single thing, like a book, but a whole collection of things, like literature or the theater. Have you ever noticed that whatever it was that first introduced you to that thing—whatever first got your blood pumping for it—you'll always love that one best? Even if you secretly acknowledge, in more rational moments, it maybe isn't quite as perfect as the memory.

(He looks at her for the first time since he started speaking; she stares back, lost. He sighs and starts over)

JAMES (Cont'd)

When I was a kid I didn't have many friends. Don't look so surprised, it's true. I read a lot of books, not so much because I loved to read but because it beat sitting around wondering why I didn't have many friends. One summer a local theater troupe put on a series of plays to mark the fortieth anniversary of the death of Eugene O'Neill. This was in Provincetown, where I grew up, and where O'Neill first achieved recognition as ... well ... as the first American playwright worth recognizing. So you can imagine, the citizens of Provincetown feel a certain kinship with O'Neill—the ones with any sense of history, at least. My great-grandfather, another James Cole, the first of that name—he knew him, a bit, drank with him even, so they say.

DANA

So who say?

JAMES

I heard it from someone. At the time I possessed very little sense of history. I only stumbled upon the performances as I rambled through on my way to nowhere in particular—they were free and they were outdoors, and there was a full moon and Massachusetts Bay for the backdrop ... and the plays themselves set aboard ships, so we weren't just members of an audience, we were a crew, we were fellow seekers of the horizon ... and after that night, I read more books than ever, because after that night I loved to read.

DANA

But a play isn't a book. Right? Why not more plays than ever?

JAMES

I see as many plays as I can. But there is an advantage to reading a play over seeing one, you know?

DANA

No.



JAMES

When you read a play, everything about it can be perfect. Unfortunately, one finds perfection only rarely in performance.

DANA

Are you an actor?

JAMES

There was a time when I entertained such a notion.

DANA

You wanted to be an actor?

JAMES

A very brief time.

DANA

I want to be an actor. I am an actor.

JAMES

I know. I've seen you.

DANA

Where?

JAMES

Here at school. You're very talented.

DANA

Oh. Thank you.

JAMES

You're welcome. Then you plan to pursue it?

DANA

I plan to make it.

JAMES

Good for you.

DANA

So I know from experience, that's why I asked. I don't want to read a character. I want to be the character. That's why we go see plays performed.

JAMES

That's why we continue to hope.

DANA

Mr. Cole, do you think I could come by one day and act for you?

JAMES

Why for me?

DANA

So you can give me feedback.

JAMES

Be careful what you wish for. I'm told I'm a grumpy critic.

DANA

That means you're honest.

JAMES

That means I'm grumpy. But you've been fairly warned, and if you'd still like to drop by, I would be honored to offer you an opinion.

DANA

Maybe next week?

JAMES

Any day.

DANA

Thank you.

(She lingers for a moment, then turns and exits. The lights slowly fade to black as JAMES contemplates what has happened.)