

Potter County

A ten minute play

Characters

Howard, 50's
Carlene, 40's

Time

An afternoon in August of next year

Place

Carlene's office at Potter County High School

Synopsis:

Howard demands that Carlene carry out an order from the Potter County School Board to remove a frightening idea from a set of textbooks. Carlene refuses and forces Howard to act. Howard's action wounds Carlene superficially, but Carlene's responding action wounds Howard deeply.

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(Darkness. The sound of summer cicadas, then fall crickets. Then a shaft of bright light illuminates the Principal's Office: a desk, a chair and a prominent American flag. There is a large box on the desk and similar boxes are stacked in the office. There is also a box of tissues on the desk. CARLENE, 40's, in smart business-like attire, is seated. HOWARD, 50's, in dress shirt, tie and slacks, is standing. HOWARD opens up a small package he carries which contains two utility knives. He removes one knife and hands it to CARLENE. She refuses to take it.)

HOWARD

If you don't do it I will.

CARLENE

School board pay for those?

HOWARD

Private funds. Hank Cochran took up a collection. Everybody wanted to contribute.

(HOWARD cuts the seal on the first box. He reaches in, and CARLENE stops him.)

Don't take it personally, Carlene.

CARLENE

Why shouldn't I?

HOWARD

They're just doing what they've been elected to do. This is a democracy, after all -

CARLENE

God Bless America.

HOWARD

It's important to our community.

CARLENE

I understand that.

HOWARD

I thought it might come as a relief.

CARLENE

A relief?

HOWARD

No more grief. No more for you to put up with. You got enough on your plate without that -

CARLENE

Oh, come off it, Howard!

HOWARD

Now look, Carlene, I could have just forwarded you their email, made you do it.

CARLENE

You're a real stand up guy.

HOWARD

Look, I know it's not a regular thing -

CARLENE

I'll say!

HOWARD

But, you know, that's the point, it's not a regular thing and I know if the Board were making these kinds of decisions all the time that would be one thing, but they're usually pretty hands-off. Jesus, Carlene, it hasn't let up all summer.

CARLENE

I go to church, too.

HOWARD

Well then you understand it. It...it challenges the core of the community, what holds our community together.

CARLENE

Our community...I have been the principal for twelve years, and every time I see a kid who's graduating and going somewhere, a kid who has some sort of spark, some sort of curiosity, I always say to them, "Don't forget about us here in Potter County. You come back to us and do something great for Potter County." I said it to Kim.

HOWARD

To Kim?

CARLENE

I said it to her in your kitchen the night you had that college send-off for her and where is she now? Pittsburgh! Interning at a pediatric hospital in Pittsburgh. Important work, Howard! Important stuff, and she's doing it in Pittsburgh, not here in Potter County.

HOWARD

She's coming back, Carlene. She's planning to come back.

CARLENE

To County Hospital? It's barely a hospital, Howard. Why would someone who had worked in Pittsburgh -

HOWARD

She promised she'd come back.

CARLENE

Anyone who has a thought in their head leaves.

HOWARD

You're here.

(HOWARD removes a textbook from the first box. He opens the book. CARLENE closes it.)

CARLENE

What do you think, Howard?

HOWARD

What do I think?

CARLENE

What's your opinion about this?

HOWARD

What I think doesn't really matter here.

CARLENE

You're the Superintendent, of course it matters what you think. You're part of the Board, too. Just because they're the ones who renew your contract - *(She stops.)*

HOWARD

Now, Carlene, that's not fair. This has nothing to do with my contract. A democratically elected Board has listened to its constituents.

CARLENE

If this had happened in Kim's day, she might have never gotten into college.

HOWARD

Kim's a smart girl.

CARLENE

They'd have looked differently at a diploma from Potter County High School. And they will, Howard. From now on, they will.

HOWARD

You worried about Emma?

CARLENE

It's not just Emma.

HOWARD

She's a smart girl, too. You've done a great job by her. Talk about a kid whose gonna do something great -

CARLENE

It's all of them. Colleges won't even -

HOWARD

Oh, come on, of course they will. It's only a few pages, for Christ's sake.

(HOWARD opens the book and prepares to draw the blade across its pages. He stops and hands CARLENE the book.)

Here. Give this one to Emma. Maybe she can write her college essay about this.

(HOWARD opens up another book.)

CARLENE

Can you honestly tell me you don't think this is going to matter?

HOWARD

How many of our kids go to college?

CARLENE

Forget that. I want to know what you really think. Do you think it's wrong? Do you think it's dangerous? Do you think it's blasphemous?

HOWARD

I don't think it's worth getting yourself as upset as you're getting.

CARLENE

Then what do you think?!

HOWARD

You want to know what I think? Off the record here? Whether it's in the book, whether it isn't in the book, I think it doesn't much matter what we do because half the kids aren't even gonna look at the book in the first place.

I'm sorry. That's not a dig against you. I think you do a great job, I hope you know that.

CARLENE

I don't do a great job.

HOWARD

You do.

CARLENE

When I came here I was determined to...ignite a passion for learning. God, it sounds so ridiculous, so pretentious -

HOWARD

It's not pretentious. Hell, it's our motto.

CARLENE

Then make sure your blade's sharp enough for the banner over the front door.

HOWARD

It's just one chapter in one book, one idea. One little idea.

CARLENE

It's obviously not a little idea.

HOWARD

I just meant there's plenty more to focus on.

(HOWARD readies the blade for the book.)

CARLENE

You never answered me. Do you believe it or not?

HOWARD

I don't really -

CARLENE

If you were forced at knifepoint to say either, "Yes, I believe what's written here," or, "No, I don't believe what's written here." What would you say?

HOWARD

To tell you the truth...I don't know enough about it to say.

CARLENE

Have you even read it?

HOWARD

Of course I read it!

CARLENE

Then what do you think? You're not stupid! You can comprehend the concept! Can't you? Oh God, Howard, please tell me you can at least comprehend the concept??

(HOWARD puts down the blade.)

HOWARD

I get it, Carlene. Everybody gets it.

That's the point.

CARLENE

Then why...?

HOWARD

(after a pause) You ever go out to Cherry Springs? At night? Did you know that Cherry Springs is the only place in this state certified to have zero percent light pollution? The last place in the state to be free of any artificial light. Right here, in Potter County. Now you go out there on a summer night, no moon, and there's maybe five, six hundred people there, come from all over. Cell phones don't work there. They don't even let you have a flashlight. No artificial light. You can see more stars there than you can ever imagine. That's what people come for - the best view of the stars there is. It's the way the universe was meant to be seen.

And every year I give a little money to what they call the Cherry Springs Dark Sky Fund. Now this money, they tell me, goes to making sure the skies around Potter County stay dark enough so that people will be able to see all those stars forever and keep on seeing the universe in the same, pure way. Now I don't know what exactly they do with the money. And I don't ask. I just give it to them on faith.

CARLENE

I see.

HOWARD

You think I'm stupid then?

CARLENE

No.

HOWARD

You think I'm a fool because I write a check and don't really have any idea where the money goes?

CARLENE

No, I don't.

HOWARD

I do it because it just makes me feel good.

(He handles the blade once more, then stops.)

Do you really believe it, personally?

CARLENE

It doesn't matter.

HOWARD

You just told me it mattered if I did.

CARLENE

I do believe it, yes.

HOWARD

Why?

CARLENE

I believe in people. In ideas. In the brain's ability to reason out answers to difficult questions -

I guess I just have faith, Howard.

(They look at each other for a long time. HOWARD cuts the pages out of one book. He hands her a book and a razor.)

HOWARD

It's Chapter 18, pages 334 to 362.

(He picks up another book and opens it up. As he goes to make the cut, she gently tries to stop him. He gently moves her hand away and cuts

the book. He opens another book, and this time she tries to stop him a little more forcefully. He pushes her hand away and makes the cut. He opens another book. As he prepares to cut she places her hand in the way of the blade, and her hand is cut.)

Jesus, Carlene, what are you doing?

(She is speechless.)

What the hell did you do that for?

Goddamit, Carlene!!

(He looks around for a towel, something to stop the bleeding. He pulls out a bunch of tissues from the box and tries to take her hand to stop the bleeding.)

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Look, you're not gonna - ?

(He examines the wound on her hand.)

I don't know if you need stitches.

(HOWARD presses the tissues around CARLENE's hand to try to stop the bleeding.)

CARLENE

Kim would know.

It's a shame she's in Pittsburgh, Howard.

(HOWARD looks at CARLENE's hand and sees the bleeding has stopped. He returns to the book and finishes cutting. He opens another book and cuts furiously.)

She's not coming back, you know.

*(HOWARD continues to cut with
fury.)*

HOWARD

I know.

*(The stage lights fade to
black, but hundreds of stars
are seen. HOWARD continues to
cut. CARLENE holds the
tissues on her hand and sits
quietly.)*

(Blackout)

End of Play