

How to Kill a Cactus

by

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Cast (2M, 4W)

PAULA, early 30's, native of Mississippi

CATHY, early 40's, a Northerner

MR. JOE, native of Mississippi

DELILAH BOUDREAU, mid 30's, native of Mississippi

RICHARD DEGRASSI, mid 30's, native of Mississippi

MISS HANNAH, late 50's - early 60's, native of Mississippi

Place

A small town in east central Mississippi, present day.

Setting

Upstage is the living room of an old house. Stage left is a door to the kitchen, up center a door to a hall to the rest of the downstairs. The front door is stage right. There are cardboard boxes piled around the edges of the room, all labeled "Living Room" in black marker. A sofa, two armchairs, and a coffee table are covered with dustsheets.

Downstage right is the back porch of the house. Downstage left is radio announcer's booth.

In the yard is a handsome, stately white oak tree.

About the Character of Delilah

It is important that Delilah not be portrayed as a stereotyped, caricatured Southern woman. She is elegant and well off, and also friendly, gregarious, and helpful; she loves life and the work she does.

Update These Parts of the Text

On page 37, instead of "All for Love," use a similar song from about 16 years before your production dates. It should be a romantic anthem, the kind of song Paula would've liked when she was in high school.

On pages 59 and 59, instead of an MP5, name a device that is a version or two beyond what's currently available.

On page 59, change the number of years Miss Hannah says she's felt her separation from Anthony DeGrassi. It should be (approximately) the current year minus 1875.

Production History

A previous version of the play was produced under the title “Miss Hannah Comes Back,” at Pierce College in Tacoma, Washington, in May 2010.

The current version was workshopped and read at a reading produced by the playwright, in Seattle, November 2011.

(Lights up on MR. JOE in the radio announcer's booth. The Gardeners, a.k.a. Movers, are moving boxes into the house, even a piece of furniture or two. It is a Saturday morning in February, and it has been snowing – a rare event in Mississippi. MISS HANNAH walks through the yard, sprinkling snow.)

MR. JOE

We've got lots of stories of burst pipes this morning, folks. Remember, when it's going to go below freezing, let all your taps run overnight. Even the hot ones. It doesn't matter how hot that water is coming out of your water heater, that freezing cold will suck it all right out.

And don't use a blowtorch to try to unfreeze your pipes, folks. Y'all heard what happened to Harry Johnson?

(MISS HANNAH looks chagrined.)

MR. JOE

Well, stick around Worthy's long enough, you'll hear all about it. Oh, yes, you will. Sorry, Harry, but it's all over town already, and you know that ain't no lie.

(Outside the front door, we hear CATHY on the porch, stamping the snow from her shoes. If we can see the front porch, we can see that she's carrying a wheeled suitcase – so it doesn't get wet from the snow – and a cardboard box. She sets down the suitcase and the box, and even if we can't see that, we can hear her take out a set of keys and try one in the front door. It doesn't work.)

MR. JOE

Alice will be bringing you the farm reports in a few minutes. I've got to go out and do one last little thing to the furnace at the Hampton place before Paula and her friend get there.

Meanwhile, keep your kids bundled up, it's cold out there.

(We hear CATHY trying the key again.)

PAULA

(Off.)

Oh, hey, sweetie, hang on a second.

(CATHY selects another key and tries it. We hear PAULA come up on the porch, and if we can see her, we see that she's carefully carrying a second cardboard box.)

PAULA

(Off.)

Hang on a second.

CATHY

(Off.)

Are these the right keys? They aren't working.

PAULA

(Off.)

No, no, they're the right keys. / We have to do something...

CATHY

(Off.)

Well, they aren't working. Did they change the locks?

PAULA

(Off.)

There's something we have to do first.

CATHY

(Off.)

What? Do you have your keys?

PAULA

(Off.)

No, no, the keys aren't the problem.

CATHY

(Off.)

Maybe the lock's frozen.

(PAULA carefully puts up the box she's carrying.)

PAULA

(Off.)

Come here with me, would you?

(PAULA leads CATHY down into the backyard and up to the Hampton Oak.)

CATHY

Where are we going?

PAULA

This is the Hampton Oak.

CATHY

(PAULA has told her about it.)

Oh.

PAULA

We have to ask permission before we can enter in the house.

CATHY

We have to what?

PAULA

I know it sounds right strange, but we do. Everybody who ever lives here has to get the Hampton Oak's blessing.

CATHY

We have to ask permission of the tree or it won't let us in the house?

PAULA

That's right.

CATHY

You Southerners have the weirdest rituals.

PAULA

Well, this is particular to here, the whole South isn't like this.

(Pointing to the tree.)

See how it has leaves?

CATHY

Most trees do, Paulie.

PAULA

I know, what I'm saying is, see how none of the other trees have any leaves yet?

CATHY

Okay.

PAULA

It's always been that way. The Hampton Oak is always the first to show its leaves, last to keep the beauty of its leaves when they're in their autumn color. Remember I told you about that one terrible ice storm when my granny was a girl? The other trees suffered terribly, but not the Hampton Oak. It stayed as whole and sound as ever. Not even one little ol' branch broke off.

CATHY

I still think that's one of those legends people pass down but isn't true.

PAULA

It's true all right, my granny had photographs.

See, back a long time ago, in the 1870s, Miss Eudalia Hampton – she was the last Hampton – she got a telegram at Oberlin, where she was going to college, to come home quick because all her family was ill with typhus. / But, when she got here...

CATHY

What's this got to do with getting in the house?

PAULA

I'm getting to it. So, but when she got here, the tree had grown around the house, and she couldn't get in. Her father, stepmother, and two little brothers died. She got her sweetheart, Anthony Degrassi, and as many men in town as she could muster, and they went at the tree with axes and buck saws. But taking the tree away from around the house, that let loose the typhus, and a great many people here died. A great blight arose, everyone's crops rotted and died in the fields. Her sweetheart felt so remorseful, he went away out West and was never heard from again.

CATHY

Okay, so...

PAULA

Miss Eudalia came out here, and sat on the stump of the tree, and mourned, and after a while, no one saw her anymore. But the tree grew back. And everything was all right again. But my granny always said...see those two branches there, curving up and out? Those are Miss Eudalia's arms, asking God's forgiveness for cutting down the tree. Asking God to send her sweetheart back to her, and to forgive her for the harm she caused.

CATHY

That's a nice story, but a tree couldn't grow around a house like that. Now, can we get in the house now?

PAULA

The records office at the town hall has records of all those deaths from typhus.

So what we have to do is, we have to tell the tree that we're entering the house for a good reason, that we won't let anyone come to harm in it.

CATHY

Oh, wait. This is like when we first moved in together, you had me say hello to all your plants.

PAULA

Come on, it won't take but a minute.

(PAULA steps closer to the Hampton Oak.)

PAULA

Hey, there, Miss Oak. How are you doing? I'm Paula Hammontree, remember me? My granny was Julia Maxwell, and my granddaddy was Robbie Hammontree. I moved away after high school, and I'm moving back. And this is Cathy McGarity, she's from Montana. Up North.

CATHY

West. Not north, west.

PAULA

Up West. Anyhow, we want to come live in this house and keep it safe and make sure no one ever comes to harm in it. May we have permission?

(To CATHY.)

Now you. Ask her permission.

CATHY

Okay.

(To the tree.)

May we have permission?

(MISS HANNAH causes the tree to make a sign of assent. She gestures towards the front door.)

PAULA

(To the Hampton Oak.)

Thank you so much.

(PAULA goes back up to the house, CATHY following.)

PAULA

It'll be all right now.

CATHY

How do you know?

PAULA

Try the key.

(CATHY tries the key. It works.)

PAULA

See?

CATHY

I think the lock must have been frozen.

(Carrying the boxes and the suitcase, they come in the house.)

PAULA

Well, here we are.

CATHY

Here we are.

PAULA

Here we are. Home at last.

CATHY

Where you've always wanted to be.

PAULA

In my dream house.

CATHY

In your dream house. Except your dream house probably had heat.

PAULA

In my dreams it did.

CATHY

I'll keep you warm.

PAULA

I know you will, sweetie.

(They kiss, then hug.)

CATHY

Welcome home.

PAULA

You, too.

(Another kiss.)

CATHY

If I go back out to the car to get some more boxes, will the tree let me back in?

PAULA

Of course. You don't mean it any harm, do you.

CATHY

All right, but if you hear me banging on the door...

(CATHY goes to the door.)

PAULA

Don't be silly.

(CATHY laughs, and exits. PAULA looks around, delighted. She opens the box she carried in and carefully takes out a beautiful philodendron with long fronds. She arranges it ceremoniously on the mantel.)

PAULA

There. You'll be happy here, I know it. And look, you've got lots of room to grow.

(Out of the same box, PAULA gets a framed photo. She unwraps it and places it on the mantel, arranging the philodendron around it.)

It's a photo of Montana, looking south from Billings. Then she opens the box CATHY brought in, and takes out a spider plant, which she sets on an end table. She sees a broken frond on the spider plant.)

PAULA

Oh, no. Now, how did that get broken? Well, we'll just have to stick you in some water.

(She pulls dust covers off the furniture, carefully folding them up.)

PAULA

Have mercy, this thing needs fixing.

Oh, my Lord. Granny and me used to sit there. When we'd come to visit. I thought that ol' caretaker made off with it.

(CATHY enters, carrying something wrapped in a blanket.)

CATHY

Some strange woman on a horse just gave me this.

PAULA

Who was it?

CATHY

Shannon someone. Maxwell, I think.

PAULA

You didn't invite her in?

CATHY

We just got here.

PAULA

You should have asked her to come in and say hey.

(PAULA unwraps the blanket and finds – you guessed it – a casserole dish. She lifts the lid and smells it.)

PAULA

Lord, she still makes the same thing.

CATHY

It smells strange.

PAULA

It's fine. Just set it in the kitchen.

CATHY

What's in it?

PAULA

Chicken. Probably.

CATHY

Probably?

PAULA

Might could be rabbit.

CATHY

Rabbit?

PAULA

It's good, really. You'll like it.

CATHY

No, I like rabbit, I just haven't had it in a long time.

PAULA

Put it up in the stove so it'll stay warm.

Oh, wait. Look. See what I hung up here?

(PAULA points at the photo. CATHY, astonished, goes to look at it.)

CATHY

How did you find that so quickly?

PAULA

It wasn't packed. I hid it in the box with one of my plants. I wanted you to feel at home, have something familiar around you right away.

CATHY

Thank you, Paulie, that's really sweet of you.

PAULA

It's just something to remind you of your roots.

CATHY

(Remembering the day the photo was taken.)

That was a nice day.

PAULA

It was. I had a good time.

CATHY

So did I.

(Pointing to the photo.)

We went hiking up in there.

PAULA

You made sure I didn't get dehydrated. I couldn't believe it, hiking all that way and not feeling sweaty.

CATHY

Oh, and, you were astonished at how little all the flowers were.

PAULA

And how nothing was green. Well, next to nothing.

CATHY

It was brown and sage and gold, just like things should be.

Well, I better put this "might could be rabbit" in the kitchen.

(CATHY exits to the kitchen with the casserole.)

PAULA

(Calling.)

Hey, sweetie?

CATHY

(Off.)

Yes?

PAULA

You want the red rug in the living room, right?

CATHY

(Off.)

Yeah. If it'll fit.

(PAULA finds a rolled-up rug and cuts the tape on it. CATHY enters as PAULA is starting to unroll the rug. CATHY playfully smacks PAULA on the butt.)

CATHY

Move over, cabbage.

(PAULA swipes back.)

PAULA

Move over, yourself.

(This is clearly a favorite ritual of theirs, though we may never know where it comes from. They unroll the rug. It's a pretty Oriental rug.)

CATHY

You hated this when I brought it home.

PAULA

Well, now, then why is it the first thing I unpacked? You just tell me that, Miss Thing.

CATHY

You unpacked your plants first.

PAULA

A rug isn't going to freeze to death in the car, now, is it?

CATHY

Well, I guess you're right.

PAULA

I am right, and don't you forget it.

(They laugh.)

PAULA

I'm going to get the last boxes from the car.

(PAULA exits to the car. CATHY is straightening the rug. From the kitchen, we hear a knock at the back door. By the time CATHY triangulates the sound, the kitchen door opens.)

MR. JOE

(Off.)

Hello? Paula? Y'all here?

CATHY

Um... in here.

(MR. JOE enters.)

MR. JOE

Oh, good, y'all got in. You must be Cathy McGarity.

CATHY

Yes.

MR. JOE

I'm Joe, Joe Nelson. How are you doing?

CATHY

Okay.

MR. JOE

(Waits for her to say "I'm fine, how are you doing?" When she doesn't:)

I've come to fix your heat.

CATHY

Oh. Right. Of course.

MR. JOE

I forgot one little ol' part yesterday. Won't take me but a minute.

(MR. JOE hands CATHY a casserole dish.)

MR. JOE

And this is a little something for y'all.

CATHY

Oh. Thanks.

MR. JOE

Y'all have a nice drive?

CATHY

Yes, we did.

MR. JOE

I hope you don't mind the snow. I'm sure it's a present for you, to make you feel welcome. Now, where's Paula?

CATHY

Getting some things from the car.

MR. JOE

I sure am sorry about your heat. I can fix it right quick.

(Sees Paula's philodendron.)

Lord! How'd them plants get in here? Let me get rid – I mean, let me take care of them right away, now, I am so sorry, I know what, you know, it must've been / Miss Nina's ("NY nah") little granddaughter –

CATHY

Those are Paula's plants.

MR. JOE

They are?

CATHY

Yes.

MR. JOE

Those are Paula's plants?

CATHY

Yes. She brought them from Chicago.

MR. JOE

Good Lord. Well. Of course they are. I remember she was always a green thumb... don't know what I was thinking... I'll just take care of your heat...

(PAULA enters, with another box and a ficus tree.)

MR. JOE

There she is!

PAULA

Mr. Joe! How you doing?

MR. JOE

I'm doing all right. How you doing?

PAULA

Better now that I'm seeing you.

(MR. JOE envelops PAULA in a big hug.)

MR. JOE

My Lord, look at you. You are still the prettiest girl around.

PAULA

Oh, now, Mr. Joe.

MR. JOE

Well now, you are, and you always was. Alice hadn't stolen my heart, I'd have married you.

(To CATHY.)

No offense.

CATHY

None taken.

PAULA

(Making introductions.)

This is Mr. Joe Nelson. And this is Cathy McGarity.

MR. JOE

We introduced ourselves earlier. I'm so pleased to meet you.

CATHY

Um, thanks. How are you?

MR. JOE

I'm doing well, thank you so much.

(PAULA and MR. JOE settle in to talk. CATHY joins them.)

MR. JOE

So, now, I understand that you're from Montana. From the city of Billings.

CATHY

That's right.

MR. JOE

Billings! Now, that's a nice town. I enjoyed it when I was there.

CATHY

You've been to Billings?

MR. JOE

Oh, yes. Long time ago now, but I and a buddy of mine bummed around the country after graduating high school.

(To PAULA.)

That was Leo DeGrassi, Richard DeGrassi's daddy.

PAULA

Oh.

MR. JOE

Sure was beautiful there, but Lord, it was so big beautiful it was overwhelming.

CATHY

It is big.

MR. JOE

And what does your daddy do?

CATHY

My parents are dead.

MR. JOE

Well, I'm right sorry to hear that.

PAULA

(To CATHY, indicating the casserole.)

Sweetie, why don't you go on and put that up.

CATHY

No, this is another one.

MR. JOE

Now, that's got no meat in it, Alice thought y'all might be vegetarians, but it's real tasty anyhow.

PAULA

Well, wasn't that nice of her. Please tell her thank you.

MR. JOE

I tell you what, folks are pleased that someone's going to be living in this house again.

PAULA

It has been a while, hasn't it?

MR. JOE

Yes, it's been a good long while. I hope that Trust lawyer didn't give you no problems.

PAULA

Oh, he tried to, but Cathy's friend didn't let him get away with a thing.

CATHY

We have a 99-year lease.

MR. JOE

That's good. I don't care what the Hampton family wanted, someone should be living in this house. It's a good place to raise a family.

PAULA

Oh.

MR. JOE

Folks living here could consider it. There's lots of kids in this world need good homes.

PAULA

Yes, I believe that's true.

MR. JOE

As long as someone's living here, that's all right. Now, I want to hear all of y'all's news, cause Alice will ask me, but I better get the heat fixed first.

PAULA

Thank you so much. You know where it is.

(MR. JOE exits towards the hall.)

CATHY

Well! That was blatant.

PAULA

What was?

CATHY

How he referred to kids.

PAULA

Blatant for a Southerner, sure, but it's his way of saying he knows, and accepts us.

CATHY

That's personal.

PAULA

It's just a way of being friendly.

(Indicating the casserole.)

Go on, put that up before it gets cold.

CATHY

How many casseroles are we going to get?

PAULA

Oh, probably 10 or so.

CATHY

Ten?

PAULA

And a ham – oh, yes, at least 10 – and some biscuits and some pies. And a Red Velvet cake. Or two. And more tomorrow.

CATHY

Oh my God.

PAULA

That's how people are down here.

(CATHY takes the casserole into the kitchen. PAULA steps into the hall.)

PAULA

(Calling.)

Hey, Mr. Joe? You want some coffee?

MR. JOE

(From somewhere back in the house.)

MR. JOE (con't)

I had mine already, but thank you so much. I got some at Worthy's. They serve right good coffee these days.

PAULA

All right, well, you just holler if you change your mind.

(Calling to the kitchen.)

Sweetie? Could you put on some coffee?

CATHY

(Off.)

Okay.

(PAULA picks up the ficus tree, considers where it should go. She ceremoniously places it next to the fireplace. Considers. Moves it next to a window.)

CATHY

(Off.)

Wait. We don't have any milk or anything.

PAULA

Check inside the fridge.

(Silence. Then CATHY enters, carrying a carton of half and half.)

CATHY

You didn't say they'd bring half and half.

And you know what else? Someone unpacked all of our kitchen stuff.

PAULA

That was probably Miss Nina.

CATHY

Isn't she the one who's 90 years old or something?

PAULA

It wasn't her herself, but probably one of her granddaughters came over with Mr. Joe yesterday. Now, wasn't that nice of her.

CATHY

We're going to have to re-arrange everything in the kitchen.

(CATHY exits to the kitchen. PAULA moves the ficus next to the sofa. Considers.)

PAULA

Well, you'll just have to stay there until the sun shines and I can tell where to put you, all right?

(CATHY enters.)

CATHY

I put the coffee on.

PAULA

Thank you, sweetie.

CATHY

I think I'll go out to the highway and help get people's cars out of ditches. This place doesn't seem to know how to deal with snow.

PAULA

That's right neighborly of you. Everyone will bless you for it.

CATHY

You'll bless me for it.

PAULA

Well, now, it would take me three times as long to unpack if you "helped."

CATHY

Last time we moved, you said I made it only two times as long!

PAULA

You've gotten older and crankier since then.

CATHY

Damn right. You sure?

PAULA

That you've gotten older and crankier?

CATHY

Very funny.

PAULA

I'll be fine. Really.

CATHY

Okay.

(They exchange a short kiss. PAULA zips CATHY'S jacket all the way up. CATHY zips it back down. They smile – another long-standing ritual.)

CATHY

Call me if you need anything.

PAULA

I will. You have fun now.

(CATHY exits. PAULA takes the two suitcases, exits up center. CATHY comes out into the backyard. She looks at the Hampton Oak.)

CATHY

Paula will want to do a lot of work in this yard. Dig up stuff. Plant new things. She'll change it a lot. Come spring.

That better be okay with you.

(MISS HANNAH causes a leaf to fall from the tree. CATHY looks at it. Picks it up.)

CATHY

What am I doing??

(She sets the leaf back on the ground. She zips her jacket up, and exits. MR. JOE enters the radio announcer's booth. As he speaks, the Gardeners change the scene from snow to spring time, early April. They unpack some of the boxes and carry the rest off. They bring out plants – all under MISS HANNAH'S direction.)

MR. JOE

And the pollen count is going to be up there today, so keep your allergy medications handy. Ain't this just like April?? I tell you what, I mentioned that Alice bought me one of them neti pots? It was a little strange at first, and I still ain't used to that salt water dribbling around – I'll spare y'all the details – but she was right, I sure feel a lot better.