

Other versions of this play have other titles:
OLD WIVES TALE and KITCHEN GOTHIC.

T E N D E R H O O K S

by Julie Jensen

SCENE ONE

(A piano version of "Sweet Mystery of Life" plays as the lights come up on LA PRIEL'S kitchen. It is not elegant, but it is immaculately clean.)

(MARGERY sits slumped in one of the kitchen chairs. She is in her mid-sixties, short, heavy, slow and authoritative. She has a keen instinct for tormenting her younger sister.)

(LA PRIEL is near the back screen door, looking out, preoccupied, worried. She is a couple of years younger than MARGERY, possessed of a much more flighty tempo and rhythm, seems always threatened. It is late afternoon in early Autumn.)

MARGERY

The rez-avoy is way low, they say. Ben Mackerel and them was out there the other night. Last night, I guess it was. Yes, cuz he was jist tellin me about it today. And he says it's below the weir. And it ain't been like that since he can remember.

(Pause. A tea kettle on the stove begins to whistle.)

Me and Wesley was out there, oh a week ago or so, see if we could catch us some fish fer dinner. That musta

been Wednesday. Yeah, it was Wednesday because Rena and Dutch come on Thursday. And that was the day before. Probably the same day as yer folks next door moved in.

(Pause. MARGERY notes the tea kettle whistling then talks over it.)

And I says to Wesley then I didn't ever remember the rez-avoy so low. You could walk out passed them reeds. Well, Wesley could. I don't like to walk through them kinda things. They remind me of snakes. And I says to Wesley, I don't want to think about snakes any more than's necessary, and least of all, I don't want to think about snakes standin up!

(Pause. Noting LA PRIEL'S preoccupation)

That's what them reeds put in my mind. (Pause.) La Priel. La Priel. La Priel, that water's boilin.

LA PRIEL

(As if bumped awake.) Laws!nn (Embarrassed smile.) Well, then. Postum time, ain't it?

MARGERY

I'd think so....

LA PRIEL

(Getting cups and saucers and putting them on the table.)

Now what is it you take?

MARGERY

A teaspoon of Postum.

LA PRIEL

Oh my land. Yes.

(She gets the bottle from the cupboard.)

Only five more of these left from that case I bought.
What else you take?

MARGERY

Hot water.

LA PRIEL

Oh gracious! Well. You see how rattled I am. Some days
is better than others. But this bunch next door.

(Gets tea kettle from the stove.)

Can ya hear em from there yet?

MARGERY

Can't hear a thing.

LA PRIEL

Well, ya will. Them kids will be out soon.

(Returns to the table, pouring hot water
in both cups.)

First they git in that tire swing. All of em. I don't
know how many it is....

MARGERY

Don't see nobody yet.

LA PRIEL

Then they rough-house around, yelling and screamin, ya
know. Then they all scatter. Quiet as nothing. Ya find
em under the porch, in the lilac bushes, rattling
around in the forsythia, I don't know what all....

MARGERY

Ya got any sugar?

LA PRIEL

Why? Ya think that would discourage them?

MARGERY

I like sugar in my Postum, La Priel.

LA PRIEL

Oh sure. My goodness.

(She gets the sugar bowl. Sits. Pause.
They both drink. They alternately look out
the window and blow on their Postum.)

MARGERY

Sure is dry. When it's like this, you jist can't keep a lawn up. I says to Wesley the other day, you'd have to keep the hose goin all the time if ya wanted to keep a lawn green in this kinda weather. Even then you couldn't do it.

(Pause. Sips loudly.)

We haven't had the water turn in three weeks. Wes went up again this morning, jist to see. But he turned right around and come back, cuz there wasn't enough water to wet the ditch.

(Loving to forecast disaster. Pause.)

It's gonna be a tough time, we don't get some storm.

LA PRIEL

(She runs to the window.)

Lookit, here they come. Can ya see em out there now? Look at em all. How many'd you figger that is?

MARGERY

(Moving heavily to the window.)

They all belong to her?

LA PRIEL

So far as I know....

MARGERY

Well, they sure do make up a collection, don't they?

LA PRIEL

What did I tell ya? And every one of them has got something missing. Jist keep a watch-out. You'll see what I mean.

MARGERY

Like what missing?

LA PRIEL

Pert near anything. Some of em ain't got all their fingers. Others missing toes. At least one of em's got only one ear. Strangest collection of kids you ever seen.

MARGERY

They look normal enough from here.

LA PRIEL

Well, it's the light how it is now. These long shadows, ya can't see the smaller features. You jist wait, though. They'll finish with that tire swing, then they'll spread out more, you can get a look.

MARGERY

They do look a little scrawny.

LA PRIEL

Geneveve Shotwell thinks they're Jehovah Witness or Seven Day Advents.

MARGERY

Well then, ya got yer hands full if it's that. One of them kind don't believe in windows. I don't know which

one. And the others don't believe in doctors or operations. And a course, their kids don't do good in school. They just don't mix. They come from where, did ya say?

LA PRIEL

I dunno. That ole truck they come in's got a California license. But they coulda stole that.

MARGERY

Listen, if they was gonna steal something, they coulda done better an that!

LA PRIEL

But they don't look like a Californian. Not the ones I seen.

MARGERY

Probably from Nevada. One of them little places. Like Pioche or Tonopah. One of them dinky little desert towns. Ain't got a tree, little lean-to shacks for houses....

LA PRIEL

And there's no curtains over the windows....

MARGERY

Well, there wouldn't be.

LA PRIEL

...Old blankets and dirty sheets.

MARGERY

Curtains one of the last things come to mind with them kind.

LA PRIEL

And their name's Hicks.

MARGERY

Well, that sure fits, don't it?

LA PRIEL

And the man with them ain't the father. That girl that come over. Member I told you one of them come over? One that's got only the three fingers? She called him Uncle.

MARGERY

If he's their uncle, let's see, that would make him and her brother and sister. Them two look anything alike?

LA PRIEL

They don't. But then I ain't got a very good look at him. He sits in the cab of that truck most of the day....

MARGERY

With the way them kids have turned out, it might be the cause of it right there.

LA PRIEL

What would be the cause?

MARGERY

(Both obvious and ominous.)

In-breeding.

LA PRIEL

In-breeding?

MARGERY

In-breeding.

LA PRIEL

In...breeding.

MARGERY

And you know what that means.

LA PRIEL

What?

MARGERY

Their moren likely pligs.

LA PRIEL

Oh no, not pligs.

MARGERY

You think they got all their sense?

LA PRIEL

Well, not by the look of em, they ain't.

MARGERY

That's yer answer then, ain't it?

LA PRIEL

In-breeding?

MARGERY

In-breeding! Like the people in Parowan, fer example, them in Sigurd. You know why so many of them run around half there? It's in-breeding. Jist not enough people move in. They marry each other. And that's what happens.

LA PRIEL

(Trying to put a good face on it.)

Course. They're pleasant enough. Wouldn't harm ya er nothing. Them people in Parowan er Sigurd.

MARGERY

Sure they're pleasant. They got nothing to worry about. Their church takes care of em.

LA PRIEL

But I mean they smile at ya. They're happy people.

MARGERY

Like I says, it's their church....

LA PRIEL

I mean, they speak. They behave quite nicely. Not like this bunch....

(Pause as an old torment returns.)

I always wondered if they knew it. Them that ain't all there.

MARGERY

Course not.

LA PRIEL

Then how would ya know if you, yourself, was one?

MARGERY

Ya wouldn't.

LA PRIEL

Well then, how do we know we ain't one?

MARGERY

Look at yerself, La Priel. Do ya look like them?

LA PRIEL

But if ya didn't know....

MARGERY

(Having to explain another obvious truth.)

If you was one, you wouldn't know it. But if ya ain't one, ya know.

LA PRIEL

Oh.

(Back out in the yard with her attention.)

Jist look at em now, crawling up that rope. Listen, one of them is gonna fall out of that tree and right into that water ditch. Serve em right.

MARGERY

You can't hurt them kind. Them kind got their own special angel. That's what Mother always used to say.

LA PRIEL

See that one sittin in the swing now? That's the one that come over. Letha. Ain't that jist a awful name fer somebody like that?

MARGERY

Names usually fit their people, er else the people grow to fit their names.

LA PRIEL

Well now, there she comes. That's her all right. She's mostly normal from what I've seen. That's her. Their mother.

MARGERY

She's jist put their cats out.

LA PRIEL

Oh my goodness, that's all that outfit needs is cats. Can't take care of theirselves.

MARGERY

Ain't no hair on the tails of them cats. You see that?

LA PRIEL

Neither one of them? What do you suppose is the matter with them?

MARGERY

(Launching into a lecture as she returns to table.)

Well, there's many things about cats that aren't quite understood. There was that cat that took the breath of Tiny Clapper's baby. You remember when that baby of hers died crib death?

LA PRIEL

Oh Margery, that was quick pneumonia.

MARGERY

...There's also the example of the one twenty years ago or so. Now whose baby was that? Selfie Warby's baby, I think. They used to live out in Manderfield, remember? Then they moved into the Holdaway place up by the fish hatchery. Well, their baby died of the same thing. And when they looked into it, they was a cat involved there, too.

LA PRIEL

Margery, them's jist old wise tales.

MARGERY

I always thought that cat of yours had something to do with the baby you lost.

LA PRIEL

Now listen here, I lost that baby because it was not whole. That's what they all told me. Doctor McWarren, Lyma Hamilton, all of em. There's ways nature has of takin care of some.

MARGERY

And who knows what happened to that one was born a twin to you.

LA PRIEL

Margery, that boy wasn't meant to live. He didn't have the will to live. That's what Mother said.

(MARGERY looks at her knowingly.)

And it was a blessing. That's also what she said. And it had nothing to do with cats.

MARGERY

(The real truth about it all.)

You see, cats are furry. People will trust anything that's furry. But the fur of a cat is only their camouflage. If you ever seen a cat wet, you'd think different about them.

LA PRIEL

I got to git me some more water.

(Rises and goes to stove.)

MARGERY

...Course a cat don't like water. It's their instinct to stay dry....

LA PRIEL

You need any more water?

MARGERY

....Because if people seen em wet, cats would not be invited into people's houses the way they are. And they would not be given to children as pets....

LA PRIEL

Can't I jist warm this up a bit?

MARGERY

...It's really their mouth that gits the breath. Especially the breath of a little baby. You see, people got jist a plain mouth, whereas cats got the triangle mouth. A little pointed here....

(Imitating a cat face.)

LA PRIEL

(Trying to peel her away from this subject.)

They're spreadin out now, Margery. You better pay attention. If you really want to see them....

MARGERY

...How they steal the breath is related to two things: their feet and their mouths. The feet are so they can walk very quiet on your chest until you breathe into a rhythm. And their mouths are so they can put em up close to your face. And then they can take the breath direct from you into them. It's the strangest thing you'll ever experience. Course, most of them, especially babies, don't survive it....

LA PRIEL

There's the one without a ear. Can ya see him? Right there.

MARGERY

....They're dead before they have a chance. And the cat that caused it is far away by the time it's discovered....

LA PRIEL

He's just standin there breathin, Margery.

MARGERY

....Because a cat is such a quiet walker, and also because the taking of the baby's breath is such a quiet thing. There's a little humming sound when it happens, they say. And that's all.

(Transfixed by the magic of it.)

LA PRIEL

(Frozen with fear. Pause. Very quietly.)

Now see? You don't hear nothing. That's what they always do. They're hiding. They'll be up under the porch, all around in the bushes. They're hiding.

MARGERY

Well, probably that's it then.

LA PRIEL

What?

MARGERY

It's the cats that have give them kids all them deform-in-ations.

LA PRIEL

Is that what you call it?

MARGERY

Well, it's what I call it. When you see a bunch of children without all their parts, you might jist as well check out their cats.

(She moves as if to leave.)

LA PRIEL

Margery. I wouldn't go yet, if I was you.

MARGERY

Why not? I seen em.

LA PRIEL

When it's quiet like this, they're jist hiding!

(They freeze, then blackout.)

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