

"CRACKED STAINED GLASS"

a play by

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"...God festers in the mist that floats around man's fear and he secretly chews off the fleshy part of their belief...how else can you explain the death of a child?"

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(A waiting room. DR. HEMPEL stares out an imagined window. He is a square-cut man, with dots of mud decorating his white coat. Hempel's hair is a snarled ball of twine.

MILLIE sits on one of those mod-sixties vinyl chairs with chrome legs. She is a farmer's wife of thirty years. Though she's a strong-featured woman, she is ill placed in the hospital room. MILLIE'S arms are freckled and a port wine birthmark stains the left corner of her lips. Wisps of grey that have strayed from her common color frame her green stoplight eyes.)

HEMPEL

Forecast for today wasn't this bleak. We need sun.

MILLIE

Sunshine's nice if you enjoy light. They say in some parts of this earth rain is holy. Today the clouds closed and rain touched my bosom. Little drops soaked through and hardened my nipples.

HEMPEL

What can I do to help, Millie?

MILLIE

Kill my child.

HEMPEL

Nonsense.

MILLIE

I'll kill you, then.

HEMPEL

For the past few days you've used that tone. Why?

MILLIE

Because it is my birthday, Dr. Hempel. I am celebrating my sixty-fourth existence. One day a year I allow myself the pleasure of doing otherwise.

I walk against the flow, speak in a louder voice, sleep past four-thirty, and, one year, I even went to the pharmacy without undergarments.

HEMPEL
Happy birthday, then.

MILLIE
(upcut)
And I have grown to enjoy
it so, that by decree of me
...every day has become my
birth.

HEMPEL
Doesn't sound like the key
to staying young.

MILLIE
You are not one to unlock,
sir. For two weeks you have
captured my little Sissy. She
is gone, but still you hold her.

That has always been a fascination.
Smart men like you, cling to hope
while us desperate ones cling to
each other.

HEMPEL
I've seen hope stitch people back
together.

MILLIE
You damn Catholics see the world
through stained glass windows.

HEMPEL
I can still see through the cracks.
I won't lose sight of blind hope,
either.

MILLIE
I have been on a search for a diety.
Doesn't have to look pretty or smell
nice, only perform miracles. The
rumored one I have discovered, lives
in the rusted out grail of tradition.

I stare into the mirror looking for
an answer, and dust stings my eye.
God festers in the mist that floats
around man's fear and he secretly
chews off the fleshy part of their
belief. How else can you explain
the death of a child?

HEMPEL
Sissy isn't dead, Millie.

MILLIE
You doctors cut off little
pieces until hope is all that's
left.

That must be the worst kind of
dying. My Sissy is in between
and we all tug. You try to win
by amputation and I try to let
her rest with the soil.

HEMPEL
You're playing diety when you tell
me not to save your daughter.
You're killing her from the inside,
Millie...and that is the worst kind
of dying because you can't treat
dread.

MILLIE
But...she has no light in her eyes.
They look about and even the color
is fading. Clouds cover her eyes,
Dr. Hempel. The clouds cover the
disbelief. Is it time?

HEMPEL
No. Sissy has lost hope. Share
some of yours.

MILLIE
I can't start anew. My fertile
years are out to pasture. But,
I will not have a peg-leg sittin'
on the front porch being a living
monument to the "great Dr. Hempel."

I honestly will not allow that.

HEMPEL
You're slipping through the
cracks.

MILLIE
And I don't mind, really. Some
of us forgotten ones reach out
with stubby fingers. When there's
nothing to grab hold of, you turn
it inside.

HEMPEL

Let it out.

MILLIE

I hear Sissy in the night
sometimes. The springs creak
because her hips are a-grindin'
against the feathers.

My child makes love to herself,
Dr. Hempel. She will never
know the feel of an angry man
strokin' with her rhythm and
the hot breath lie of "I love
you, Sissy" as he spills inside.

It don't matter he lied, though.
'Cause for an instant you both
got somethin' to grab hold of.

(HEMPEL takes MILLIE'S hand.)

HEMPEL

It's not easy for me, either.
Every day I lose a somebody
because I couldn't stop a bullet
or cure a disease.

So when the Sissy's come along,
I will save them as best I can.

MILLIE

Who's playing diety?

HEMPEL

Give Sissy a second chance.
Don't take that away from her
too. Give her something to
hope for.

MILLIE

You promise me no more pain?
I swear on my dignity if you
force her to live, she will be
loved. You will be responsible
for finding an angry man.
That's my hope.

HEMPEL

A love for a life? I'll try.

(MILLIE stands, and leans against DR. HEMPEL)

MILLIE

Throughout this trial I have remained sturdy. My spine has been tested and now my back hurts. Dr. Hempel, please forgive me for my cowardice...but I am scared.

(HEMPEL hugs MILLIE. She begins to cry. They cling.)

HEMPEL

Grab tight.

MILLIE

God help her.

HEMPEL

Happy birthday, Millie.

(SISSY, 21, enters in an old wicker wheelchair. Her right leg has been amputated and a patchwork quilt covers her from the lap, down. SISSY'S hair is stringy and her pasty-white complexion accentuates her sunken features.)

HEMPEL (CONTINUING)

'Morning Sissy.

SISSY

Mama, I mean it. Don't ask me if I had a good sleep, 'cause I haven't slept in days and you know that. I seem to drift outside and alongside myself without ever coming back.

My leg has this terrible itch and I scratched it bloody last night. When I came to my senses, I was grasping at the air where my leg used to stand.

The joke's on Sissy, again. But you already know that, don't you?

Hello, Dr. Hempel.

MILLIE

Is it another delusionary drug, Dr. Hempel? Is that what has metamorphosized my innocent little girl?

SISSY

Don't you get daring and start up with that lofty prose again, mama. I will turn and wheel myself right out of this room if you do.

HEMPEL

Now, Sissy.

MILLIE

See what you've done? She's a disturbed child, now.

SISSY

No, mama. I am hell-bent. For twenty-one years you've played me as the misfortunate and slighted Muse. I will control my life from now on, thank you.

Dr. Hempel, I would like to go back to the farm. I am ready to go home.

(DR. HEMPEL says nothing. A long silence.)

HEMPEL

Sissy...

(SISSY'S head drops. Any energy she had is now spent.)

SISSY

Tell me slow.

HEMPEL

It seems the disease will cost more than your leg.

MILLIE

Dr. Hempel is saying that the disease has ruined your entire being. You will soon be free to ascend and float amongst the clouds.

SISSY

No. That can't be. Please, no.

MILLIE

Isn't that queer? She doesn't believe either.

SISSY

Oh, I believe. I didn't think it would be this soon.

HEMPEL

There are ways we can prolong your life, Sissy. There is hope.

SISSY

My, my, this is news. You said 'prolong my life.'

You distinctly said 'prolong.' You were certainly careful not to choose the word 'save.' Why?

HEMPEL

Because there is risk.

SISSY

And because I will die anyway.

MILLIE

I have often wondered if it is best to pass away on a day when the sun is brightest and your closest friends surround the bed...or on a day when even the weather is your enemy.

SISSY

It seems as though I am about to find out.

HEMPEL

I'd like to try. Your mother would like to try too.

MILLIE

Yes, of course. It might work, one can never be certain about the unknown. All right, Dr. Hempel, we'll try.

SISSY

No.

HEMPEL

Why?

SISSY

No.

MILLIE

Sissy?

SISSY

No. Not any longer. I
am going home to sleep.

MILLIE

Don't make a stand now,
dear. You might fall over.

SISSY

Please, no more.

MILLIE

If you would please listen...

SISSY

(upcut)

Listen to me! I can't no more!
Why don't you both let me be?

(All are quiet. SISSY is seething, MILLIE is insulted,
HEMPEL is uneasy.)

HEMPEL

I have some tests to check.
I'll let you know about the
blood we took this morning,
Millie.

I'll be a while, so please
try to relax.

MILLIE

Don't forget the bargain.

HEMPEL

Pardon?

MILLIE

The angry man.

HEMPEL

I'll check into that first.
Good-day, ladies.

(HEMPEL exits.)

SISSY

I'm sorry.

MILLIE

I am too. I'm sorry.

SISSY

What man is he talking about?

MILLIE

You'll find out soon enough,
my daughter. Fulfillment will
follow.

SISSY

Mama, I don't want a life of
medicines.

MILLIE

We will all continue.

SISSY

I can't.

MILLIE

Dr. Hempel says to 'allow our
Savior to choose.'

SISSY

I'll put an end to me myself.
I deserve at least that. Isn't
that so? I know it isn't
easy for you either, so stop
pretending you're handling it.

(MILLIE, for the first time, searches for the right words.
When she starts, the words come out slow, then faster, faster,
faster.)

MILLIE

While it is true we no longer
live lives drawn in parallel
lines, and the disease has
caused your life to go askew
and collide shamelessly into
mine...I will soon find pleasure
at the new painful point where
our lives are now crossed.

SISSY

Mama, I hate you.

MILLIE

Then, I love you.

SISSY

Mama, why do you always use fifty words to say something that could be said with a wink or a frown?

You always go on and on, building metaphoric sandcastles that everyone wants to wash away.

MILLIE

You're ill, Sissy. Shut your mouth when you want to say things, all right?

SISSY

Do you love me?

MILLIE

I love you, yes:

SISSY

Then, let me die.

(MILLIE looks SISSY in the eye for the first time.)

MILLIE

All right. I love you so much that you may decide fate.

If you will excuse me, I'd like to take a brisk walk through the courtyard.

SISSY

Hug me, huh?

(MILLIE bends and hugs SISSY. After a beat, MILLIE abruptly breaks the hug.)

MILLIE

Oh, now Dr. Hempel and I have a surprise for you.

And I do love you.

(MILLIE exits behind SISSY. SISSY doesn't know MILLIE is gone.)

SISSY

What surprise, mama? Mama?

(RONNIE, a 27 year old black man enters. He walks with an angry bounce. He is a hospital janitor. RONNIE'S face is lined and his voice is tinted with anger.)

RONNIE

You Sissy?

(SISSY is startled, and wheels around to face RONNIE.)

SISSY

You scared me.

RONNIE

Hell, there's more scary things than me 'round here.

You Sissy or not?

SISSY

I don't speak to niggers. Clean up and get out, boy.

RONNIE

Hey, I was cruising down the midway checking out the Kewpies and Dr. Hempel tells me to come in here and take care of Sissy.

SISSY

I don't need you to care for me.

RONNIE

Smoke?

SISSY

No thank you.

RONNIE

Have you ever?

SISSY

Sometimes. Not really.

RONNIE

Hell, you not only look like a candy-ass flavored white girl, you are one! All proper and perfumed! Smile for the college paper, honey!

(RONNIE pretends to take her photograph.)

SISSY

You know my name is Sissy.

RONNIE

You need a good, moist beatin' girl. Beat some manners into your lily ass.

You ever been beat, Sissy? Hell, my Daddy made whipped potatoes outta my ass for nuthin'. Most times the moon'd be round and a-glowin'. That old man starin' down at my even tanner ass and smilin' at the cryin' nigger child.

I swear my old man was a werewolf.

SISSY

The only time my mama hit me was when I was ten. Can see that hand slapping my face everyplace. Down there on the floor, in the clouds, in my reflection. Even in your eyes.

RONNIE

What happened?

SISSY

I caught a fish, see. It was summer and this trip to the Ozarks cost her three months pay.

She made a point of telling me that. Three months, ninety days, twelve weeks. I do believe she even had it figured out to the hour.

RONNIE

I know.

SISSY

Anyway, I caught a bullseye or such?

RONNIE

Maybe a walleye?

SISSY

Sure, a walleye. So I was to cut this fish up and eat it for supper.

I threw it to the lake, instead.

RONNIE

And that's when she slapped you?

SISSY

Mama started screaming and stomping her fists in the air.

RONNIE

Slap!

SISSY

Not yet. I was bawling like a lost calf, and I cast my hook into Mama's forearm.

RONNIE

Hell, no!

SISSY

And I reeled that bitch in, tugging on her flesh for all of forty-five seconds.

RONNIE

Man, oh, man.

SISSY

After the hook tore out, blood was squirting and she knocked me out. She bashed my head with the tackle box.

RONNIE

Too bad.

SISSY

We haven't fished since.

RONNIE

My Daddy hit me to make somethin' of me. Least that's what he told everybody. 'Let the boy feel the world.' He'd say. Damn, the world packs a shitkickin' roundhouse.

SISSY

Why'd you come here?

RONNIE

So that Ronald T. Wood could be a somebody. So I can hit the world back. Hell, I ain't nobody. I done punched myself out, I did.

SISSY

But why did Dr. Hempel send you here?

RONNIE

I was sweepin' like I do, and he come up and tells me about this crippled girl, see? And he tells me to go and screw her silly, bein' us black boys are well hung. Then he walk away laughin'.

SISSY

Mama. It must've been her idea.

RONNIE

No, Dr. Hempel say somethin' about Millie and love and holdin' on.

SISSY

I will kill her. Really, I will.

RONNIE

What for, Sissy?

SISSY

Because I do not fuck strangers. Especially when they are of a deeper hue.

RONNIE

Well...you ever been fucked, Sissy?

SISSY

I don't have to answer that.

RONNIE

No, you sure don't. Okay.
How 'bout loved? You ever
felt love before?

SISSY

Of course. Everybody is
loved. I love everybody
because it says to in the
Bible.

RONNIE

Nope. You never been loved.
Your heart has never felt fire.
I can tell your insides have
never been pulled and tugged
by a man. I can tell.

SISSY

Well, I'll tell you something,
Ronald T. Wood. My whole life
has been like that edgy feeling
of having to go to the bathroom.

You know sometimes how you're all
upset and jumpy for no good reason?
Then you realize it's your body tell-
ing you to get rid of some crap.

So you do and you feel relieved.
I don't have time to screw around
with love, because everyone is
trying to stick me in the ass.

I haven't gone to the bathroom in
days. All I want is to crap by
myself. No tests and nobody else
cleaning up my mess. Okay, Ronnie?

RONNIE

Sissy, I want to make love with
you.

SISSY

No. Thank you.

RONNIE

Hey, babe, there comes a time when
even the frozen ones are left out
to thaw. Situations get all heated
up and the ice melts.

(MORE)

RONNIE (CON'T)

So here we all is, all frightened and room temperatured. No more hiding in the freezer. It's time to lay in the sun, or rot on the counter.

SISSY

I'm not a piece of meat.

RONNIE

You is a woman all alone and sad is what you are. I worked in this hospital for eleven years and I know who's dyin'. You are dyin', so don't fool me, okay?

SISSY

Okay. But...Ronnie, this place is scary. I'm scared too.

RONNIE

We all is, baby. That's why we need each other.

(RONNIE goes to his knees and after a tentative moment, he kisses SISSY on the mouth. She melts a little.)

SISSY

Let's pretend that I might allow you to perform your duty. What then?

RONNIE

Up to you, Sissy. It's your life, so don't forget that.

SISSY

When we finish, I want you to help me. If you truly want to satisfy me, you will oblige me.

RONNIE

What do I have to do?

SISSY

After we finish loving, you will fetch me a length of rope. You will slice it in two. With separate pieces, you will bind my hands and tie a noose.

(MORE)

SISSY (CON'T)

Then you will lift me up,
tighten the ropes and let
me swing until the breath
leaves entirely.

Do you understand?

RONNIE

Only if I get to love you
first.

SISSY

You musn't forget.

RONNIE

No, 'mam.

SISSY

Then, my love, wheel me to
my room and let the games
begin!

(RONNIE wheels SISSY off the stage.)

A long moment, with the empty stage.

Then, HEMPEL enters. He looks around, then plops down in
the vinyl chair.)

HEMPEL

(to himself)

Lord, it's been hours. I
hope nothing's happened.

(MILLIE slowly and casually walks on stage. She peers out
the window.)

MILLIE

Good afternoon, Dr. Hempel.

HEMPEL

Where have you been?

MILLIE

Strolling and contemplating
the weather. I'm beginning
to like the clouds.

Did you find a gentleman for
my Sissy?

HEMPEL

I talked to some. We'll see what comes of the offer.

MILLIE

Good. Thank you.

(HEMPEL stands, offers his chair to MILLIE.)

HEMPEL

Rest your bones. I need the exercise.

(MILLIE sits, and almost looks comfortable.)

MILLIE

I've been thinking. Life wouldn't be so bad without Sissy.

HEMPEL

Don't say things like that.

MILLIE

She never was happy, really. I tried to teach her to fish, sew, and I even tried to find a lover for her.

I did my motherly duty.

HEMPEL

She needs to find those things out on her own.

MILLIE

Sissy's dead, you know.

HEMPEL

Only in spirit.

MILLIE

No. She's gone. She took her own life, I know it.

HEMPEL

How do you know it?

MILLIE

Feelings. I saw her in the corridor with rope.

HEMPEL

God, why didn't you stop her?

MILLIE

It's her life. It really is not my choice anymore.

HEMPEL

I guess I need to make some phone calls.

MILLIE

Let my baby alone. You'll probably find her hanging from a water pipe in her room.

Or maybe she hanged herself from the dining room chandelier. Sissy always did like to think she had class.

Allow her the honor of swaying in the breeze for a while, Dr. Hempel.

HEMPEL

I don't know what to think.

MILLIE

Small town folk die dramatically and quietly. I pray that your little boy grows up strong and happy.

It was always a struggle with Sissy. Now it appears time for another try. It is time to burn the diseased fields.

HEMPEL

Millie?

MILLIE

Oh, don't look so condemned, Dr. Hempel.

HEMPEL

Millie, there is something very terrible and very true that I have to tell you. Please be strong. Just be strong for one moment more.

MILLIE
Dr. Hempel, I don't like that
pleading sound of your voice.

HEMPEL
Millie, I'm sorry.

MILLIE
There's more? No, please.

HEMPEL
You have the disease, too.

(MILLIE'S eyes close and she grips the chair.)

MILLIE
No.

HEMPEL
I took your blood this morning,
and the results came back with
the news. I'm sorry, Millie.

MILLIE
God help me. I'm no better than
Sissy. No, Dr. Hempel. I'm afraid
this cannot be the honest truth.

HEMPEL
It is.

MILLIE
Well, then.

HEMPEL
Let me help you.

MILLIE
There is something very important
that I must know before we go on.

Tell me the location of my new
infection. Please tell me so I
can have reason to cry out loud.

Is it in my breasts, Dr. Hempel?
Please tell me my breasts are
still pure.

Tell me in a loud voice so there
won't be any question. Yell it
so everybody can hear.

HEMPEL

The disease is inside your bones. Your marrow isn't working well enough to fight a cold.

MILLIE

I have never been bed-ridden.

HEMPEL

You soon will be.

MILLIE

Then, I am going home.

HEMPEL

You need care. Don't leave me here.

MILLIE

My head is in a tizzy.

(MILLIE massages her head with her finger-tips.)

HEMPEL

Millie, there was a time in my life when all I wanted to do was sit and stare. There came a time when all there was to do was look at the flowers.

I don't mind flowers, but I got itchy. I suppose not so much itchy, as interested in the every day goings on of trees.

Then, my interest grew to the town across the ridge, then the county, then the whole damn country! And all those exotic places had flowers and trees, too.

I've seen the world and the only thing I learned about was flowers and trees and believing. All those people, including ones with stubby fingers, were believing that what they were doing is right, and has some justification someplace.

I'm not saying that what I'm doing is right...but I believed in staring at flowers...and I believe that I can help you, Millie.

MILLIE

My, Dr. Hempel, you have even a smoother version of the English language than I do. Only I can say it simpler. 'Terminate.' A vivid verb describing the stoppage of something alive.

With your medicine, you've pulled all the flowers and trees up by their roots.

Poison is everywhere, Dr. Hempel and you can't slow it down. Earlier you told me "dread" was untreatable. Well, so is "valiancy."

In medical school, don't they teach you about hopeless cases?

HEMPEL

Yes, they do.

MILLIE

Then don't feel sorrow. Your belief is strong enough to cover your failures.

HEMPEL

Did you find your diet?

MILLIE

It doesn't matter now, ummm? The roses will bloom and the leaves will fall without me and my Sissy.

Someday the clouds will stray and the sun will shed some life.

HEMPEL

Millie, please let me take care of you. Stay here with me.

MILLIE

You're not all that bad, Dr. Hempel. In fact, you're dangerous. You won't let go of hope when all is lost. That, Dr. Hempel, is a fool.

HEMPEL

Then I'm honored to be a fool.

MILLIE

Someday, my fine fool, you will find a Sissy and a Millie that believe in miracles.

(MILLIE stands and smooths her flowered dress.)

HEMPEL

Take care of yourself, Millie. I'll expect you to keep in touch.

MILLIE

It'll be good to go home. I think I'll cut myself a piece of birthday cake, cry for the loss of my child, and for dessert...I will mourn for myself.

(MILLIE strolls past the window.)

HEMPEL

I'll be here waiting for you.

MILLIE

I do believe the sun is beginning to break and glow. It's time to go home and feed the animals.

Thank you, Dr. Hempel. I mean it.

(DR. HEMPEL begins to go to her. MILLIE waves him back.)

HEMPEL

I need a hug.

MILLIE

No. I can't. I would start to cry uncontrollably. I don't like to be wet, and I especially don't want to look a fool for breaking down in a public place.

HEMPEL

I'll see you soon, then.

(MILLIE nods, and waves him good-bye. She then begins to sing "Happy Birthday" to herself as she exits the stage. Her voice slowly dies in the echo of the off stage corridor.)

(HEMPEL is alone. He paces to the window and looks out at the new sunshine.)

From the opposite side of the stage MILLIE exited, SISSY enters in her wheelchair. SISSY'S outlook is brighter.)

SISSY

Dr. Hempel, is that you?

HEMPEL

Sissy? Lord, Millie said you were dead!

SISSY

I couldn't do it. Where's mama?

HEMPEL

She went home for a rest. She'll be back, I hope.

SISSY

I wanted to tell both of you that I would like to try. I want to live.

HEMPEL

Thank God, finally. What changed your mind?

SISSY

Ronnie made love to me in the light from a candle.

HEMPEL

Ronnie?

SISSY

He's the janitor. And he is a fine man, Dr. Hempel. He deserves better than cleaning up people's messes.

HEMPEL

What happened?

SISSY

I shouldn't say. It's a very personal matter.

HEMPEL

I'd like to hear it.

SISSY

Well...after me and Ronnie
made love, I took an excursion.

I went to the chapel and just
sat and listened to the breath
leaving my body. I imagined
my death and it wasn't so bad.

Then, I imagined my life and
knew pain.

Those vigil lights flickered
and called me over. The flames
danced and made love to the wind.

For the first time since the
disease, I felt warm, Dr. Hempel.
Ronnie's arms held me and the
candle made me hot.

I had Ronnie wheel me back here
so you can help me imagine my
life in a less painful light.

HEMPEL

I know we can make it, if only
for another day, another hour.

SISSY

All I want, Dr. Hempel, is to
stay a hot flame and flicker in
the darkness.

I am now ready to keep a vigil,
Dr. Hempel.

(DR. HEMPEL gets behind the wheelchair and pushes SISSY
off stage. Before they are gone from sight, HEMPEL speaks...)

HEMPEL

Let's get started on a miracle.

(They are gone.)

END OF PLAY