
Burn This

Lanford Wilson

Act 1. Anna's huge loft in a converted cast-iron building in lower Manhattan, New York City. The time is the present. Six o'clock in the evening, mid-October.

Anna (32) is a dancer and choreographer. She is 'very beautiful, tall and strong'. Her roommate and dance partner of twelve years, Robbie, has died in a freak boating accident with his gay lover. She and her new roommate, Larry, have been out to the mid-West to Robbie's funeral. Since Robbie's family did not realize he was gay, Anna plays the role of his girlfriend. The whole experience was a 'total nightmare' for her. The family were not interested in hearing about the real Robbie – the dancer and homosexual – and Anna had to maintain the lie for them. She has had three vodkas and her first cigarette since college days. She is tired and emotionally drained, and is not looking forward to her trip tomorrow to be with her dance company for a première in Texas. For the past two days she has worn the same clothes and has not exercised. At this point all she wants to do is take a hot bath. As she says 'I feel like a piece of shit, I'm not very good company.' Here she recounts to Larry what it was like spending the previous night with Robbie's family.

ANNA. [No,] I should have come with you. God. Just as I think I'm out of there, some relatives drive me back to the house. The place is mobbed. I'm dragged through everybody eating and drinking and talking, to some little back bedroom, with all the aunts and cousins, with the women, right? Squashed into this room. His mother's on the bed with a washcloth on her forehead. I'm trying to tell them how I've got to get a bus back to civilization.

[LARRY. This is very moving, but I'm double-parked.]

ANNA. Exactly.

LARRY. This is a *wake*?

I couldn't tell you *what* it was, Larry, I guess. In about eight seconds I know they have no idea that Robbie's gay.

[LARRY. I could have told you that.]

They've never heard of Dom. God, I'm making up stories, I'm racking my brain for every interesting thing anyone I know has done to tell them Robbie did it. Wonderful workaholic Robbie, and I couldn't tell them a thing about him. It was all just so massively sad.

[LARRY. Oh, Lord.]

It gets worse, it gets much worse. And they *never saw him dance!* I couldn't believe it. All the men are gorgeous, of course. They all look exactly like Robbie except in that kind of blue-collar, working-at-the-steel-mill kind of way, and *drink?* God, could they knock it back. So then it's midnight and the last bus has left at ten, which they knew, I'm sure, damn them, and I hadn't checked, like an idiot. So I have to spend the night in Robbie's little nephew's room in the attic. The little redhead, did you see him?

[LARRY. I didn't see him.]

He's been collecting butterflies all day, and they're pinned around the room to the walls – a pin in each wing, right?

[LARRY. I'm not liking this little redheaded nephew.]

Darling, wait. So. I get to sleep by about two, I've got them to promise to get me up at six-thirty for the seven-something bus. I wake up, it's not quite light, really; you can't see in the room much – but there's something *in* there.

[LARRY. Oh, God.]

There's this intermittent soft flutter sound. I think what the hell is – Larry, the – oh, Lord, the walls are just pulsating. All those butterflies are alive. They're all beating their bodies against the walls – all around me. The kid's put them in alcohol; he thought he'd killed them, they'd only passed out.

[LARRY. Oh, God.]

I started screaming hysterically. I got the bedsheet around me, ran down to the kitchen; I've never felt so naked in my

life. Of course I was naked – a sheet wrapped around me. This glowering older brother had to go get my clothes, unpinned the butterflies, who knows if they lived. I got the whispering sister –

[LARRY. What a family!]

– to drop me off at the bus station; they were glad to get rid of me. I was an hour and a half early, I didn't care. I drank about twenty cups of that vending-machine coffee. Black; the cream and sugar buttons didn't work. The bus-station attendant is ogling me. I'm so wired from the caffeine, if he'd said anything I'd have kneecapped him. There's these two bag ladies yelling at each other, apparently they're rivals. I fit right in.

[LARRY. Oh, God. To wake up to those – I can just see them.]

Oh, Lord, I shrieked like a madwoman. They were glad to get rid of me.

COMMENTARY: You need to consider Anna's state of mind as she delivers this speech. It is late at night; the end of a hard day and a terrifying week. She is tired, deeply upset and overwrought. The story she tells, particularly the incident with the butterflies, is so surreal it borders on hysteria. The whole tale unfolds like a bad dream: mobs of people, the claustrophobia, the lies and hidden secrets, the boy with the red hair, the butterflies, the lonely episode in the bus station. Each event is full of very particular details which give the different phases of the monologue richness and specificity, saving it from becoming too sad and hysterical. Anna has to compel us to listen to all the gothic details. The telling of the story has to bring her to life.