

A HOUSE BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

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Seven Short Plays About a Family

By

Philip Middleton Williams

A HOUSE BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

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A HOUSE BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

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My heartfelt thanks and love to my father, Philip Williams, whose life, love, and memory inspired every word.

A HOUSE BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

The Plays

A House by the Side of the Road

Blind No. 7

And the Wisdom to Know the Difference

A Moment of Clarity

Favorite Son

I'll Be Here

Good Grief

These plays can be done separately or as one full-length production. If they are presented all at once, they should be done in the order listed above as they are in chronological order. It is feasible that the same actors play the same roles throughout the series.

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CHARACTERS:

ANNOUNCER: Baseball play-by-play on the radio.

CLYDE: Late thirties.

STEVE: His son, fourteen.

DAN: His son, twelve.

PLACE and TIME:

The back yard and back porch of a suburban home in northwest Ohio. A summer evening not too long ago.

PRODUCTION NOTE:

The voice of ANNOUNCER over the radio in this play is based on that of Ernie Harwell, the legendary play-by-play announcer for the Detroit Tigers. There are recordings of Mr. Harwell through sources such as YouTube and they should be used as reference material for the actual voice in the play.

The scene is the back yard and back porch of a house in northwest Ohio. There is a fence along the back wall with shrubs along it and trees off stage indicated by lighting and shadow. Stage Left is the back porch of the house with comfortable patio furniture on it with a table and a radio. At rise, it is evening; twilight is settling in over the yard, but it is not dark. There are sounds of summer insects – crickets, cicadas, katydids – in the background. There are blinks of light from the lightning bugs in the shrubs. The radio is on, and we hear the voice of the play-by-play ANNOUNCER for the Detroit Tigers coming from the radio. CLYDE, a

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man in his late thirties in shorts and a t-shirt, is sitting in one of the chairs, drinking a beer and listening to the game.

ANNOUNCER. Bottom of the eighth, Tigers with a one-run lead, one man on, two out, and the count to Kaline is three and two. The pitcher kicks and deals....

(Sound of a bat hitting a ball and the crowd cheers.)

ANNOUNCER. And that one is loooooong gone! Al Kaline with a two-run homer and the Tigers take the lead three to one!

CLYDE. Yes! Go Tigers! *(STEVE, followed by DAN, enter Stage Right. Steve is fourteen, tall, well-built for his age, wearing a Detroit Tigers cap and t-shirt over shorts and sneakers. He is carrying a baseball bat and much-used baseball mitt with a ball in it. Dan is twelve, thin, not athletic, also wearing a Tigers cap but wearing just a plain t-shirt over jeans and sneakers. He is carrying a baseball mitt that looks comparatively new.)*

CLYDE. So, how'd it go?

STEVE. We won by a run.

CLYDE. That's good. A win's a win. *(The boys come up to the porch. Steve sits in a chair, Dan sits on the porch steps, takes off his cap, slouches.)* How'd you boys do?

STEVE. Three hits. One steal.

CLYDE. That's great. Dan?

DAN. Two walks.

STEVE. And he struck out three times. *(Dan turns and glares at Steve, who smirks back.)*

CLYDE. Well, at least you tried.

STEVE. He didn't even swing half the time. He stood there like a house by the side of the road.

DAN. Well, thank you, Ernie Harwell. *(Beat.)* They looked like balls to me.

STEVE. They were in the zone.

DAN. Oh, now you're the umpire?

STEVE. They were called strikes!

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CLYDE. Boys, simmer down. (*Clyde goes over to Dan, playfully tousles his hair, which Dan barely tolerates.*) At least you still won. And you had fun, right?

DAN. Yeah, I guess.

STEVE. Dad, I've been telling you, he can't hit the ball. He just –

CLYDE. So, let's help him. Give him some practice. C'mon, let's go. It's still light out. (*Clyde goes out into the yard. The boys don't move.*)

Aw, c'mon, guys. Steve, toss me the ball. (*Steve tosses the ball to Clyde, then reluctantly gets out of the chair and goes out to the yard. Dan doesn't move.*) Dan....? (*Dan gets up from the porch and joins Clyde and Steve.*) Good. Okay, Dan, take the bat. Let's see your stance. (*Dan assumes a batting stance, somewhat tentatively, but gets it right. Clyde nods his approval.*) Good. Okay, Steve, you be the catcher and I'll be Sandy Koufax.

STEVE. Dad!

CLYDE. Okay, Denny McClain.

STEVE. At least. (*Clyde moves far enough away to be able to throw the ball underhand and give Dan a chance to swing at it. Steve takes up his position as catcher.*)

CLYDE. Good. (*Imitating the play-by-play announcer.*) McClain kicks and deals... (*Clyde pitches underhand; the ball sails past Dan who watches it go by. Steve catches it.*) Okay, good eye, good eye; that one was low and away. Don't swing at every pitch. (*Steve snorts derisively, Dan glares at him. Steve tosses the ball back to Clyde.*)

CLYDE. Okay, let's try it again. Get the bat off your shoulder; lean into the pitch.

STEVE. Yeah, if he hits you at least you get on base for once.

DAN. Shut up.

CLYDE. C'mon, guys. Okay, here we go. (*Announcer voice.*) The count is one and oh. McClain checks the sign... the wind-up... the pitch.... (*Clyde pitches again. This time the ball goes past Dan in the strike zone, but Dan does not move.*)

STEVE. Steee-rike! That one was right in there, Dad. (*Steve tosses the ball back to Clyde.*)

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CLYDE. (*Getting frustrated but trying not to show it.*) All right, Dan, just one more. (*Clyde pitches, and Dan swings at it, but misses. Steve catches it.*)

STEVE. See, I told you, Dad. He's no good at it.

DAN. I can do it!

STEVE. Three strikes 'n' yer out!

DAN. The first one was a ball!

STEVE. (*Mocking.*) The first one was a ball!

DAN. (*Furious.*) Oh, fu... Bite me!

STEVE. You'd like that, wouldn't you? Wuss.

DAN. Hey, at least I'm not sitting on my ass in summer school taking Algebra One for the third time.

STEVE. Oh, yeah?

DAN. Great comeback. What's the square root of fourteen?

STEVE. Who gives a shit?

DAN. Thought so.

CLYDE. Both of you! Knock it off. (*Clyde goes back up to the porch, the boys following, resuming their previous positions. Clyde takes a sip from his beer. He turns up the radio.*)

ANNOUNCER. ... The wind-up... the pitch... (*Sound of bat on ball.*) Killebrew pops it foul into the stands. That one was caught by a man from Walled Lake.

STEVE. How does he know that?

CLYDE. Know what?

STEVE. That it was caught by some guy from Walled Lake.

CLYDE. (*Chuckling.*) He doesn't. He just does that to make it fun.

STEVE. I guess he's gotta do something to make it interesting. I mean, it's radio.

CLYDE. That's right.

STEVE. I mean, you can't see it, so... I'd rather watch it.

CLYDE. But that's what makes it so good. You imagine it. You create it in your head.

STEVE. I'd rather be out there on the field.

DAN. I'd rather listen to it.

STEVE. Yeah, that's because you're a little –

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CLYDE. (*Cutting Steve off.*) Ernie Harwell didn't play. He never set foot on the diamond as a player. But he's the best play-by-play announcer in the business.

DAN. Neither did Vin Scully, the play-by-play guy for the Dodgers.

CLYDE. Or Red Barber.

STEVE. Huh?

CLYDE. Sometimes being there takes away from it. I was about Dan's age when I saw my first major league game. Up 'til then I'd just listen to it on the radio.

DAN. Where'd you go?

CLYDE. (*Reminiscing.*) Your grandpa took me to Tiger Stadium on the corner of Michigan and Trumbull. It was my twelfth birthday. We got seats on the second level behind home plate. They were playing the Yankees. But there was so much going on – vendors selling hot dogs and beer – (*Imitating hawkers.*) Programs! Git yer programs! Cold beer here! – and so many other things like the guys selling pennants, and the crowd noise... and there wasn't any play-by-play; just some voice on the P.A. – “now batting, number six, Al Kaline” – that it was hard to actually watch the game. We were so far away from the field that you could barely see their faces. (*Beat.*) Some of the best games I ever saw were sitting on the back porch. The sun going down, the lightning bugs coming out, the sound of the crickets, the smell of the grass coming up from the lawn... and every now and then there was static on the radio because somewhere between here and Detroit there was a thunderstorm with lightning. (*Silence as they listen to the crowd noise from the radio along with the background of the crickets.*)

CLYDE. You don't have to play the game to be in it. (*Clyde finishes his beer, gets up from his chair.*) Time for another. You boys want a Coke?

DAN. Sure, Dad, thanks.

CLYDE. I'll see if there's any popcorn left. (*Clyde exits Stage Left into the house.*)

STEVE. Three point seven-four.

DAN. Huh?

STEVE. The square root of fourteen is three point seven-four.

DAN. So, you're not just a big ole dumb jock after all.

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STEVE. Well, better than being a little –

CLYDE. *(Off.)* Boys, knock it off. *(Clyde re-enters with Cokes, a beer, and carrying a bowl of popcorn. He hands out the soda to the boys and sits, passing around the popcorn.)* Let's just listen to the game, all right?

STEVE. Okay.

DAN. Yeah, okay.

CLYDE. And remember.

STEVE. Remember what?

CLYDE. Just... listen. *(They listen.)*

ANNOUNCER. You're listening to Tiger baseball on WJR Detroit, seven-sixty on your radio dial. We'll be right back with more baseball after these messages.

END OF PLAY

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BLIND No. 7

CHARACTERS:

CLYDE: A man in his mid-forties.

DAN: His son, aged fifteen.

STEVE: His son, aged seventeen

PLACE and TIME:

A duck blind in Erie Marsh on the western shore of Lake Erie. An early morning in October, not too long ago.

PRODUCTION NOTE:

While the characters are described as carrying and holding shotguns for duck hunting, for the safety of the audience and the actors it is strongly advised that real shotguns not be used. The guns will not be discharged during the action of the play.

The scene is a duck blind in Erie Marsh on the western shore of Lake Erie, a few miles north of the Ohio/Michigan border in Michigan. The blind can be depicted by a simple wooden bench in the center of the stage. The background is the sky.

At rise, it is an early morning in mid-October. It is cool but not freezing. Seated in the blind are CLYDE, DAN, and STEVE. Clyde is a man in his mid-forties, average build. Dan, his son, is fifteen, slight of build, wearing wire-rimmed glasses. Steve, his brother, is seventeen, with an athletic build, wearing sunglasses. They are all wearing hunting gear: tan coats and pants, heavy calf-length boots, and tan hunting caps. Clyde is holding a 12-gauge double-barrel shotgun. Steve is holding a 410 single-shot shotgun. Under the bench is a picnic cooler and Thermos.

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CLYDE. Okay, I got another one. (*The boys groan slightly.*) What do you call an owl that makes fun of a margarita?

DAN. A margarita like the drinks at Loma Linda?

CLYDE. Yeah, like that. What do you call an owl that makes fun of a margarita?

STEVE. (*Barely tolerant.*) I don't know, Dad. What do you call an owl that makes fun of a margarita?

CLYDE. (*Pausing for effect.*) Tequila Mockingbird! (*Clyde chuckles and the boys groan loudly.*) Aw, c'mon, that's funny.

STEVE. (*Grudgingly.*) Yeah, okay.

DAN. You make that up yourself?

CLYDE. As a matter of fact, no.

DAN. Would have been better if you had. Then no one else could take credit for it.

STEVE. Or blame.

CLYDE. Thanks a lot. (*They settle back and survey the sky.*)

STEVE. So, where are they?

CLYDE. Well, sometimes they come in waves. On a nice day like this maybe they're sleeping in.

STEVE. Lucky ducks.

CLYDE. I know getting up at four-thirty isn't your thing, Mr. Star Quarterback. But you can sleep in tonight. It's Saturday.

STEVE. I have a date.

DAN. Peggy Tucker?

STEVE. Uh huh.

DAN. (*Teasingly.*) The head cheerleader.

STEVE. That's right.

DAN. Yeah, and we know what kind of head...

STEVE. Shut up!

DAN. She was jumping all over you after the game last night. Thought you were Joe Namath.

STEVE. Yeah, well.

DAN. (*Sing-song.*) Peggy Tucker, Peggy Tucker, tries to get a boy to...

CLYDE. Stop it, both of you. Enough. (*They all settle down again, Steve glaring at Dan. Beat.*)

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STEVE. Place smells like someone cut the world's biggest fart.

DAN. It's a swamp. It's supposed to smell like that. Rotting vegetation.

STEVE. More like your underwear.

DAN. Ha ha.

CLYDE. Steve, knock it off. You're a senior in high school and you sound like a sixth-grader.

STEVE. Well, he... (*Thinks better of it and subsides. Beat.*)

DAN. So, tell me again how killing ducks is somehow good for them.

CLYDE. Well, it's all about wildlife conservation. There are a lot of ducks, but not a lot of places for them to live and raise their young in the wild, so if we cut down on the number of ducks, then there's more room for them to... grow. Too many ducks in too few places like this marsh.

DAN. What's happened to the marshes?

CLYDE. Towns and cities are getting bigger, more spread out, taking over their natural habitat.

DAN. So, maybe they oughta stop the towns and cities from doing that.

CLYDE. Well, it's not that simple.

STEVE. (*With a tinge of sarcasm.*) Maybe they oughta give the ducks birth control pills.

CLYDE. (*Chuckling.*) Yeah.

STEVE. Or make 'em use condoms. Then they could be rubber duckies!
(*They all laugh.*)

CLYDE. That's a good one. Maybe I'll use it.

STEVE. Instead of Tequila Mockingbird?

CLYDE. Sure!

STEVE. Yeah, okay. (*Clyde suddenly stiffens and looks in the sky. He pulls out a duck call.*)

CLYDE. Hold it, boys, looks like we've got some incoming. (*They hunker down. Clyde uses the duck call. After a moment he sits up, disappointed.*) Heading down towards Number 12.

STEVE. (*Loudly.*) Here, ducks! C'mon, ducky-ducky! (*Normal voice.*) Maybe they know that one and aren't falling for it.

CLYDE. Well, maybe we should get out the coffee. Used to be that every time I put down my gun and got out the coffee, they'd flock in.

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Here, hand me the Thermos. (*He pours out a cupful in the Thermos cap, takes a sip and passes it to the boys, who take sips and pass it back.*)

DAN. Did you do this with Granddad?

CLYDE. Yes. This very blind. Number 7. Started when I was ten or so. We'd be out here opening day, coming out in the punt boat, watching the fog rise off the water, listening to the water up against the reeds. Then we'd set out the decoys just like we did this morning and sit and wait. Curly would sit over there, all ready to fetch 'em when we knocked 'em down. He was a good dog.

DAN. Like Tuffy.

CLYDE. Yep, like Tuffy. He was a good dog, too.

DAN. I miss him.

CLYDE. Me too.

STEVE. How come you didn't get another dog?

CLYDE. Oh, I don't know. Don't have the time to train him and...

DAN. I have to pee.

CLYDE. Okay, go way over there by those trees. Is that all you gotta do?

DAN. Yeah, just pee.

CLYDE. I brought a biffy roll just in case. (*Clyde digs in the pocket of his coat and pulls out a plastic bag with a small roll of toilet paper.*)

DAN. Dad...

CLYDE. Just in case. C'mon, take it.

STEVE. What, you're afraid to take dump in the middle of a swamp?

DAN. No. Shut up. (*Dan takes the bag, stuffs it in his coat pocket, gets up and squeezes by Clyde, then steps out into the marsh, the water coming up over his ankles.*)

CLYDE. Be careful; watch out for holes.

DAN. I will.

STEVE. And Gaboon vipers!

DAN. (*Moving off, slogging through the wetlands.*) Ha ha. (*Dan exits.*)

CLYDE. Gaboon vipers?

STEVE. Oh, we saw something on TV a long time ago about wildlife in Africa. They had this thing on Gaboon vipers, "the most hated of all beasts." We thought it was funny, and... (*Shrugs.*) You know.

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CLYDE. (*Chuckling.*) If you say so. So, what's with the Roy Orbison look?

STEVE. Huh?

CLYDE. The shades. It's barely seven o'clock in the morning and you're worried about the sun in your eyes?

STEVE. Nothing. I just –

CLYDE. There's not some reason I shouldn't be looking at your eyes, is there? Like your pupils might be...

STEVE. No, Dad. My pupils are fine.

CLYDE. Then what? (*Steve looks at Clyde for a long beat. Then he takes off the sunglasses. He has a very impressive shiner under his left eye.*) Whoa. Nice shiner. How'd you get that?

STEVE. In the game last night. When I got sacked in the third quarter. An elbow.

CLYDE. Through the face mask?

STEVE. Yeah.

CLYDE. Right. Bet it hurts.

STEVE. It does.

CLYDE. (*Nodding.*) Yeah, okay. (*Beat.*) Except I was there. I saw the whole game. You never got sacked. In fact, in the third quarter the offensive line kept the other team from getting near you. (*Beat.*) What really happened?

STEVE. Nothing.

CLYDE. Steve, it's not nothing. And don't hand me that line about walking into a door. You may be a muscle-bound goof but you're not that clumsy. C'mon. (*Steve looks around to be sure they're still alone.*)

STEVE. It was Dan.

CLYDE. Dan gave you that?

STEVE. No, it was because of Dan.

CLYDE. I'm not following. You got a black eye because of your brother?

STEVE. No, it was Stan Tasker.

CLYDE. Okay, now you've really lost me. What does Stan Tasker have to do with Dan and you getting punched in the face? Stan's not even in Dan's class.

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STEVE. It's because of "Picnic."

CLYDE. What picnic?

STEVE. The play, "Picnic." The school's doing it and Dan is in it.

CLYDE. Oh, right. What does Stan Tasker have to do with it? He's not in it, is he? He can't act; he can barely walk upright. I think he was twelve before he learned to wave bye-bye.

STEVE. (*Chuckling hollowly.*) I know. He's a real asshole.

CLYDE. So...?

STEVE. So, last night after the game we're all in the locker room, horsing around after we won, and taking showers and stuff, and somehow Stan gets talking about all the guys who don't play and how they all like to do pussy stuff like "thee-ate-er" and what a bunch of fruits they are, and then comes right out and says that Dan must be a real faggot if he'd rather be in some stupid play than do manly things like play football. So, I told him to shut the fuck up and he said make me, and so I did. (*Shrugs.*) And he hit me back. (*Beat.*) Look, I know I shouldn't have hit him, but...

CLYDE. No, you shouldn't have, but.... He said that.

STEVE. Yeah, he did.

CLYDE. Thank you for standing up for Dan.

STEVE. Well, yeah. I mean, he may be a dweeb and a dork, but he's still my brother.

CLYDE. I'm proud of you.

STEVE. Thanks.

CLYDE. But he called him that. Frankly, I'm not surprised. His dad's just as much of an asshole. Always has been. No wonder his kid turned out like that. (*Steve looks at Clyde for a long moment.*)

STEVE. Dad, Dan's gay. (*Clyde does not move as he absorbs this. Long beat.*)

CLYDE. Dan's gay?

STEVE. Yeah, Dad.

CLYDE. He told you?

STEVE. He didn't come right out and say it, but I figured it out.

CLYDE. How?

STEVE. I've shared a room with him since he was five. I know him. And it's not because he acts like that guy on Hollywood Squares. I can

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just tell. Why do you think he hangs around with Mitch Weaver? Mitch is big and strong and good-looking, and he's...

CLYDE. But you've never asked him.

STEVE. Hell, no. Because if I did, he'd say no and then he'd never trust me again. Besides, he said he would help me on my college application essays.

CLYDE. A little quid pro quo.

STEVE. Huh?

CLYDE. Point taken.

STEVE. Aw, the hell with it, Dad. It's just who he is, that's all. I mean, I don't get it, but maybe he doesn't get me either, and –

CLYDE. No, I get it. I mean, I understand it.

STEVE. You can't tell him I told you. Ever.

CLYDE. No, of course not.

STEVE. And you can't ask him about it, either.

CLYDE. Any more than I can ask you about your plans for Peggy Tucker, right?

STEVE. Look, Dad...

CLYDE. Relax. I was once eighteen and horny. Don't worry. (*Sigh.*) You know, I've tried for so long to try to reach him. To understand him. To just... (*Beat.*) You were easy. You and I... we... Maybe it's because you're my first and I remember thinking how amazed I was that you were here. And we did things like Cub Scouts and Little League and doing stuff like this; going hunting. But Dan; it wasn't the same. He seemed distant. I love him as much as I do you, but I never felt like I could connect with him the same way. I know everyone's different; you're two different people. When you have kids, you'll get it. (*Beat.*) In the long run, it doesn't really matter, does it? I mean, as long as he's happy. It's gonna be rough out there for him, that's all. I remember guys getting beat up just because they liked certain movies or didn't date girls who would put out. Guys who were good in school. Thank you for standing up for him. That's what older brothers are for.

STEVE. Yeah. (*Beat.*) Well, hell, I've been looking for a reason to kick Stan Tasker's ass since fifth grade. So, thanks, Dan.

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DAN. (*Off.*) Shit! (*Steve puts his sunglasses back on, covering the shiner.*)

CLYDE. What?

DAN. (*Entering, limping.*) I got water in my boot.

STEVE. (*Exasperated.*) He told you...

DAN. I know, shut up. (*Dan gets into the blind, sits heavily, and starts to take off his boot.*) Sock's all wet, too.

STEVE. Well, duh. (*Dan gets the boot off.*)

DAN. It's not that much. (*Dan inverts the boot and a small dribble of water comes out.*)

CLYDE. Crisis averted. So, where are the ducks? We've tried the coffee trick, we've tried sending one guy out to take a piss – that always worked with your Granddad – so we might as well go to the last resort: get out the granola bars. I got the good kind this time.

DAN. Not the ones that look like bird seed?

CLYDE. Nope, we're going top of the line here, with raisins and everything. (*Clyde pulls out the cooler.*) Thanks, guys, for coming out here with me. It's nice.

DAN. Yeah, it is.

STEVE. Yeah, okay.

CLYDE. (*Handing out the granola bars.*) So, what do you get when you cross an elephant with a rhinoceros?

DAN and STEVE (*In unison.*) A hell-if-I-know!

CLYDE. Oh, you've heard that one before, have you?

STEVE. Like a hundred times, Dad.

CLYDE. Gaboon viper.

STEVE. Rubber ducky!

DAN. Tequila Mockingbird!

END OF PLAY

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