

**PERUSAL SCRIPT
ONE-ACT VERSION**

BILLY GOES TO WAR

ARE ALL WARS THIS WEIRD?

by
Harley Marshall



Newport, Maine

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BILLY GOES TO WAR - One Act Version

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

NARRATOR: Billy Bunders
Adolphus Bunderswagen
Louise Bunderswagen
DOC MINER: Gladdy Prin
Ivo Prazzoli
Daisy Prazzoli
Ethelred Strathroy
Alta Mills
(some actors play two or three roles)

SET NOTES

The stage is bare except for a two-step riser, which at different times becomes a trench, an aeroplane, a buckboard and a bed. A tight spot is on the Narrator upstage left who is at a lectern or a music stand. Pools of light are scattered about the stage.

SCENES

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BILLY GOES TO WAR a play by Harley Marshall. 5m 5f. (*ONE ACT VERSION Perfect for Professional, College/University, Community and High School productions*) Billy Bunders is the luckiest or unluckiest boy who ever lived. From his birth, on the 4th of July 1900, in Kansas—the son of a German immigrant—Billy survives catastrophic event after catastrophic event: The War to End All Wars; World War II; even the presence of The Korean Conflict, horrifies him; as did the Spanish-American War that haunted his father and affected Billy second-hand. With pointed pathos and barbed politicism, “*Billy Goes To War*” becomes an intensely involving history lesson as seen through Billy’s eyes and lived through Billy’s actions and with his point of view: “War is ...weird!” Dark humor permeates this unsettling play for these darkening times. A small cast makes this a perfect play for any group. Designed as a minimalist play, little scenery is needed. Simple costumes and props, and the actors’ imaginations fill in the graphic visual fabric of the play.
ORDER #3048

Harley Marshall has a long list of theater credits, stretching from the Midwest to Off-Broadway and Maine. He was nominated for Best Actor by the Kansas City theater critics, and was co-founder of a critically acclaimed avant-garde theater there. He created the Asner Showcase and directed its namesake, Ed Asner, in the first production; spearheaded the renovation of an abandoned stable in Kansas City into a performance center; and wrote and performed three one-man shows. In the past year, Marshall has written two comedies and a drama: *Murray and Juliet or All’s Swell That Ends Swell*, and *Sammy’s The Greatest College Bar in the History of Mankind*. His latest script, *Billy Goes to War* premiered in August of 2017. Marshall is a member of The Daytime Players, a troupe of senior actors, directors and playwrights.

BILLY GOES TO WAR

A REAL PISSER!

DOC MINER: (*brings on a stool and sits*) It was a most unusual Fourth of July. I delivered two babies that day. Our county had far too few fertile women for that to occur.

NARRATOR: Doc Miner had been in Haskell County for some time. As far as anyone could tell, she was the only woman doctor west of the Mississippi River.

DOC MINER: First to arrive that was the Strathroy boy. He was 14 pounds. I had to weigh him on the scale at the feed store.

NARRATOR: His folks named him Ethelred. It seems there was an English king back in the dark ages named Ethelred the Unready. Like his namesake, Ethel, as he was quickly called, was unready for the vicissitudes of life.

ETHEL: (*enters*) I was born with a middle-aged body and was ill-equipped to handle the taunts of my classmates.

CHORUS: (*chanting*) “Ethel is girl’s name, Ethel is a girl’s name. A girlie, girlie, girl’s name.”
(*ETHEL slumps off.*)

DOC MINER: I no sooner got back to my office when I was called on to deliver the Bunderswagen baby, Billy. When I saw Billy Bunderswagen pop out of his mother’s womb without me tugging away, I laughed and said, “This boy is a real pisser!” I was sure he would grab the world by the ass and shake it for all it’s worth. Well, sir, I picked him up to spank his backside and get him breathing real good when he peed on me. His little fountain just kept going and going. I was greatly impressed. I said again with even more emphasis, “Yes sir, this boy’s a real pisser!” Billy wasn’t fully formed. The shutoff valve that would have made him continent wasn’t strong enough.

NARRATOR: It took a few years for Billy to get the hang of continence. Even then, he sometimes failed in tense situations.

DOC MINER: When Billy got to be seven or eight, Adolphus couldn’t take Billy’s bedwetting anymore and banished him to the cow barn for a while. Billy roomed with Elmer the bashful gentle bull. Billy and Elmer got along just fine, but Elmer did give Billy wide berth at night lest Billy soil his side of the stall.

END OF SCENE

THE YEAR IT RAINED

NARRATOR: Billy and Ethel didn’t hang out much as kids. No kids did. The farms were too far apart. But something happened to bring them as close together as twins. That was the year it rained. Even the old timers couldn’t remember such rains. Everything born that spring reached full maturity. A declivity, about a half mile from school, suddenly became a pond. It was wide enough and deep enough for paddling around in. One day ...

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ETHEL: *(enters)* Billy, a bunch of us are going for a swim in the pond to celebrate the last day of school. Think Gladdy'll go? I'd sure like to see her in a bathing suit.

(ETHEL growls.)

BILLY: *(enters)* Come on, Ethel.

ETHEL: *(picks up Billy and carries him to stage center)* Billy, what do you mean come on? I've seen you look at her and how she looks at you. I'd just once like to have a girl look at me like that.

BILLY: I just wish she'd hold up her end of the conversation once in a while. I keep running out of things to say.

NARRATOR: Ethel forgot his books and ran back to fetch them. Some of the school bullies were given a rare exemption from detention and decided to celebrate their good fortune with a dip in the new pond where they encountered Billy. They started razzing him, trying to make him pee his pants. That seemed to be their favorite sport. Billy always obliged them quickly just to get it over with. This time, he was determined to stay dry.

CHORUS: *(offstage chanting)* I see London. I see France. I see Billy pee his pants.

NARRATOR: This time the taunts weren't working. The boys began to get desperate.

CHORUS: *(faster)* I see London. I see France. I see Billy pee his pants.

NARRATOR: Billy was staying dry. Billy saluted them and jumped into the pond. It wasn't deep enough that Billy was in any danger of drowning – that is if he didn't want to.

BILLY: I was worn down by the constant harassments, the embarrassments. To make it quit, all I had to do was take a big swallow of water. So I sat there at the bottom of the pond, weighted down by my clothes, trying to decide – live or die. Then Ethel showed up.

(ETHEL enters jumps down beside Billy.)

He saw me sitting there, jumped in next to me and sat down, too. He knew what I was contemplating. He'd been bullied, too. We sat there looking at each other for the longest while, trying to decide: live or die.

ETHEL: *(pondering)* Live or die.

BILLY: Live.

ETHEL: Live.

(THEY climb out of the pond.)

NARRATOR: Later that summer, Billy and Ethel went back to the pond and stood in the middle of where it had been. By then it had dried up. Billy realized the bullies had done him a big favor.

BILLY: Pissing Billy is dead.

ETHEL: *(runs off and yells as if announcing great news to the world)* Pissing Billy is dead! Pissing Billy is dead!

NARRATOR: In high school, Billy started hanging around the telegraph office. He was fascinated by the idea that it brought people hundreds of miles apart into the same room.

BILLY: *(runs in)* I begged one of the telegraphers to teach me the dots and dashes that made up the Morse Code. When I got real good at it, they let me work weekends when things were slow. My boss would sneak home while I worked. He got paid for doing nothing and I learned a trade. We were both happy. To get to the telegraph office from our farm I hitched rides on the eastbound train. Passengers must have thought I was a big wheel what with the train stopping in the middle of nowhere just for me. I thought so, too. When my shift was over, I rode the westbound home.

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NARRATOR: (*crosses to Billy*) “Morning, Billy,” the conductor would often say as Billy climbed onboard.
“Any important news come over the wire?”

BILLY: No sir, not last night.

NARRATOR: Tell your folks howdy for me, will you?

(*NARRATOR crosses back to lectern.*)

BILLY: I was working when the telegraph started dashing and dotting like mad. The important news coming over the wire was that we had entered the war against the Germans. I ran up and down Main Street yelling.

NARRATOR: (*crossing back to Billy*) Evening, Billy, hop aboard. Any important news today?”

BILLY: We just went to war with the Germans, sir.

NARRATOR: Well, I’ll be! Tell your folks how-do.

BILLY: I will, sir.

NARRATOR: (*back to stand*) And watch out for the critters, Billy. They’re hungry and sickly with famine.

BILLY: I will, sir. I was also working the telegraph when the message came in that Ivo Prazzoli was coming to town. Ivo was the greatest pilot in the world. Some kids worshipped ball players or cowboys or the silent movie stars, but I worshipped Ivo. I was so excited I ran down Main Street yelling again. Truth to be told, there weren’t any other streets to run down.

(*Runs into Doc Miner.*)

DOC MINER: (*enters*) I was taking my morning constitutional when Billy ran into me.

(*BILLY runs all over the stage.*)

He looked like a crazy man. I said, “What in the world is the matter with you, son?”

BILLY: (*running circles around Doc, arms apart like he’s flying an airplane*) Ivo Prazzoli’s coming!

DOC MINER: Who’s he?

BILLY: (*miming Ivo’s stunts: loops, rolls, dives*) He’s the greatest aviator in the world! He has the fastest aeroplane and does the most dangerous stunts! I bet he could do 80 loop-di-loops in row if he wanted! He landed on a train once... then took off before the train got to a tunnel!

DOC MINER: Don’t you do any damn fool thing like get in that thing with him.

BILLY: I’d love that more than anything, ma’am.

DOC MINER: Tell your folks hello, Billy. Yes, sir, that boy’s a real pisser.

BILLY: (*exiting*) I was so excited. I forgot about the train and ran the whole 10 miles home to tell folks Ivo was coming. And he was going to recruit boys like me to join the Army.

END OF SCENE

IVO COMES TO TOWN

(*Ivo, Billy and Ethel enter. Ivo sits on the two-step riser which becomes his aeroplane.*)

BILLY: When Ivo Prazzoli flew into town with his newest bride, Daisy, I noticed the plane was missing a bit, not so anybody but me could tell. I told Ivo, “It’s not running quite right.” All the while Ivo was singing happily.

IVO: (*loudly*) Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do. I’m half crazy all for the love of you.

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BILLY: He laughed at my audacity and said ...

IVO: Have at it, son.

BILLY: I guess he was up for some funning. I got to it and tuned The Mighty Muriel to perfection. Ivo was impressed.

IVO: Son, as a token of my gratitude, I'm going to take you for a ride. See how good your work is.

BILLY: I almost peed my pants.

IVO: We'll fly you right over your farm.

BILLY: How'd you know I live on a farm?

IVO: Son, everybody out here lives on a farm. Climb on up.

(BILLY climbs behind Ivo)

I only have room for one.

(Waves Ethel off)

I'm going to take you to the top of the world. You'll never be the same again after you fly with the greatest aviator *off* the face of the earth.

(THEY take off)

Which way do you live?

BILLY: That way. So we headed for the farm.

(THEY are a-whooping and a-hollering.)

As we closed in on the farm, the animals got wind of us. They couldn't see us, being four-legged creatures with heads that moved only from side to side and not up. But they heard the noise of The Mighty Muriel's powerful engine and scattered every which way. The noise also roused my folks.

(LOUISE and ADOLPHUS enter.)

We buzzed them a couple of times.

(LOUISE and ADOLPHUS duck and look up at the sky.)

Mother was waving, father was as unimpressed as he always was with things he couldn't afford. On one of our passes, my lunch came back up and landed with a big splat at father's feet.

(ADOLPHUS looks down at his feet, turns and exits, LOUISE follows.)

Barfing aside, it was the happiest I'd ever been. Ivo was right, my world was never the same. Then we flew back to town to get Daisy and do the show.

(DAISY enters and takes her place on the wing of the plane. A crowd enters to see the show.)

NARRATOR: Ivo started the show by buzzing the crowd. When he got close, the crowd scattered. Then Ivo did some loops.

(CROWD mimes the loops and oohs and aahs)

He flew upside down.

(CROWD mimes that)

BILLY: All the while Daisy, who was wingwalking, kept screaming ...

DAISY: Get me off this thing! Get me the hell off this damned thing!

BILLY: I laughed. I thought it was part of the show. So I started yelling too. Get me off this thing! Get me off this damned thing!

NARRATOR: Then Ivo finished with the Spiral of Death, corkscrewing the Mighty Muriel straight for hell. Just when Ivo was about to crash, he pulled at the last second and the crowd roared.

(CROWD lets out a big sigh, claps and exits. IVO and BILLY stretch out on the platform and fall

asleep.)

That night, after the show, Daisy ran away.

(DAISY sneaks off.)

She was afraid of heights and wingwalked only because Ivo made her do it. She slipped away in the night as Ivo slept.

(IVO wakes up.)

Ivo was devastated. He quit flying. Billy and his father towed Ivo's plane out to the farm, and Ivo moved into the barn with Elmer the Gentle Bull.

BILLY: To Ivo's credit he didn't take to drink. He just sat there in the cockpit of The Mighty Muriel, day after day, singing the same song, over and over, mournfully.

IVO: Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do. I'm half crazy all for the love of you.

END OF SCENE

CONDITIONS WERE HARSH

NARRATOR: Conditions were always harsh in southwest Kansas. There was never enough rain. Many homesteaders gave up and moved on. After a while, the only reason for the train to stop in Haskell County was to board people leaving, often with not much more than a bag or two of clothes. But the summer of 1916 was particularly bad. There was not enough feed to keep all the cattle alive. The weakest ones suffered horribly from diseases.

BILLY: One day, Elmer, our bashful bull, walked right into the barbed wire fence. He was sickly and blind by then. His head was bleeding pretty good. I tried to make sure he was all right, but he was panicked and knocked me down. He stuck me with his horns. He must have been crazy with pain. He even bit at me. His blood was all over me, mixed with the blood pouring from the wound in my shoulder. Father heard my screams and came running with the shotgun. It took two shots to bring Elmer down. Poor Elmer. Mother sewed me up.

(LOUISE and ADOLPHUS enter and sit on riser. BILLY lies on it as if in the back of the buckboard, looking like he is in a coffin. ADOLPHUS mimes holding the reins.)

DOC MINER: *(enters)* A week later, Billy was hauled into my office in the back of their buckboard wagon. He was violently ill by the time his folks got here, vomited non-stop, coughed blood and had diarrhea and the chills. Fluids were coming from everywhere. By then his lips had turned a deep navy blue, almost black. I was horrified. I had not seen anything like this before and could not find anything about it in my medical journals, which I read religiously. I tended Billy as best I could but believed he would die before the night was over.

(LOUISE and ADOLPHUS rise. BILLY remains lying down.)

DOC MINER: I kept copious notes of his symptoms and my treatments and concluded that Billy had a virus, a new, perhaps deadly, form. It probably came from a sick animal. At the end of the week, he was not better, but more importantly he was not worse.

(GLADDY enters and kneels by Billy and cradles him in her arms. ADOLPHUS and LOUISE exit.)

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My young nurse, Gladdy, Gladly Brin, stayed by the young man's side through it all. She slept by his bed, read him the bible, held him in her arms and rocked him and sang hymns.

GLADDY: (*sings sweetly*) Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound. I once was lost, but now I'm found.

(*GLADDY hums under Doc Miner's lines.*)

DOC MINER: Gladdy, a variation of Gladys, a name she detested, was orphaned when her mother died.

GLADDY: My mother was always sickly, and I had to take care of her. I couldn't go to school except when she wasn't in pain, which was rare. I learned reading and numbers at home but longed to play with other kids. When mother died, father walked out onto the prairie, stripped off all his clothes and solemnly walked away. He had gone to die like an old, useless Indian warrior. I didn't try to get the neighbors to look for him. I thought about joining him.

DOC MINER: I was alone, so I took Gladdy in. She was exceptionally bright. Over the years, she became more than my nurse, she became my assistant. She mixed medicines and set bones. I hoped she would take over my practice when I stepped down.

BILLY: (*stands*) While I was dying, I dreamt a lot. I dreamt a beautiful woman was whispering in my ear, reassuring me that I was going to make it. I got so I believed her. She sang to me. I fell in love with a dream. I saw myself marrying her. It seemed real. I also had nightmares that water was washing over me and I couldn't stop it. There were people around me who were drowning, too. Even though they were drowning, they were trying to kill each other. The water was blood red. I tried to claw back to the surface, but I was like a lead weight at the end of a fishing line. I started breathing the water, the blood-red water. It was rushing down my throat. The water was hot. Blood always is. I was burning up. The dream went on for days, maybe weeks or years. I thought why struggle? Why not just drift away?

(*BILLY returns to the riser and lies back down.*)

DOC MINER: Having exhausted all options, we piled covers on the boy and wheeled him outside in the sun. We thoroughly baked him.

GLADDY: After a week, Billy came out of it. By then, I was sure I loved him.

(*BILLY and GLADDY start to exit in opposite directions, stop, stare fondly at each other, wave shyly and leave the stage.*)

DOC MINER: I wrote a report and mailed it to every health organization I could find. I wrote to medical journals, medical organizations, to Washington, to President Wilson. I said I had treated the first victim of a terrible virus.

(*Stands to read.*)

"Dear Sir, you are about to face a disease that could kill millions. It could be worse than the Bubonic Plague. Get the soldiers out of the barracks. Clear the hospitals. Get them into the sunshine, for god's sake. Close confinement will only make things worse."

(*Sits*)

I was ignored, maybe because I was a woman doing men's work. In the next two years, people all over the world would be infected by the Spanish flu and up to 50 million would die.

END OF SCENE

OFF TO THE WAR

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(ADOLPHUS, LOUISE and the NARRATOR enter and sit on the riser. BILLY is lying on it.)

BILLY: I was home by then – convalescing – when my mother bundled me up, put me in the buckboard and all of us took off for the train station. Father propped me up so I could to wave goodbye to Ethel and the rest of my friends heading off to war.

(The TOWNESPEOPLE and ETHEL and GLADDY enter quickly. They are waving and crying.)

NARRATOR: When the train started heading off, the young soldiers stuck their heads out the windows and hollered and waved.

CHORUS: Over there. Over there. The Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming. We'll be over. We're coming over. And we won't come back till it's over over there.

(As the TOWNESPEOPLE exit their singing gets quieter and quieter.)

ETHEL: *(Ethel marches by, waving to Billy.)* If the war isn't won by Christmas, Billy, I'll see you over there.

(LOUISE sleeps in the back of the buckboard.)

BILLY: Father, I want to go with Ethel and all the other boys more than anything in the world.

NARRATOR: On the way home as Louise slept, Adolphus told Billy about his war. He'd never talked of it before.

(NARRATOR exits.)

ADOLPHUS: They say my war, the Spanish-American War, was trumped up by a newspaperman who thought he would sell more papers. And he did. But that didn't matter, we were young and full of vinegar. We marched our way up San Juan Hill behind Teddy Roosevelt. The bullets rained down on us from the hilltop. The ones that missed us set the dray, tall grass on fire. The flames started chasing us. The wounded couldn't get out of the way. They burned up. The screams were horrible. I figured if I got shot in battle, well that way my fate. That's what war is. But I couldn't abide with getting burned up. So I ran to the trees over on the side where there wasn't much grass. It also provided me protection from the gunfire. I could have advanced from there all the way to the top. But I didn't. I didn't fire a shot. I just cowered behind the tree. There was a wounded fellow who collapsed no more than 10 feet from me. The flames were licking at him, starting to burn his clothes. He begged me to help him. I was scared. I just watched him slowly burn up. Not even god forgives me.

BILLY: I still want to go more than anything.

(FAMILY exits.)

DOC MINER: *(enters)* There were hundreds of new soldiers crammed into barracks at Camp Funston, about a hundred and fifty miles east of Haskell County. Not long after they got there some of them started falling sick. They were suffering the same symptoms Billy had only worse. Ethel must have got the flu from Billy, a small dose of it, not enough to kill him. Then Ethel passed it along. Each time it got passed around it got stronger. It was in that boot camp that the first deaths from Spanish flu were recorded. Before it was over 50,000 American soldiers would die of it, as many as died in combat.

(DOC MINER exits.)

END OF SCENE

IVO GETS CAUGHT

(NARRATOR, BILLY and IVO enter.)

NARRATOR: When the Army found out, rather belatedly, that Ivo had quit flying and was no longer recruiting, they hotfooted it out to Haskell County. An Army officer told Ivo,

(NARRATOR puts on a cap and becomes the officer.)

Mr. Prazzoli, you have deserted your post. Your choices are to fly again – this time at the front lines of the war – or wallow in the Army prison at Leavenworth.

BILLY: Ivo knew he was had, so he tried to strike the best deal he could.

IVO: I won't fly without Billy. He is my navigator.

BILLY: Which was untrue and the officer knew it. Maybe Ivo just wanted company. Well sir, just like that, Ivo resurrected The Mighty Muriel, I pledged my troth to Gladdy, told her goodbye, and Ivo and I were up in the clouds, heading for the war.

(BILLY sings:)

I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy, A Yankee Doodle, do or die; A real live nephew of my Uncle Sam.

NARRATOR: As part of their punishment, Ivo and Billy first had to perform in Europe in front of Allied leaders to boost morale.

IVO: We flew over the White House, flew over Buckingham Palace and the palace in Paris, a name I couldn't pronounce. I wanted to buzz Kaiser Wilhelm but figured the only way to do that would be to land on a train heading for Berlin. I deferred to my navigator's caution.

BILLY: Then we headed for the front lines. Our duty was reconnaissance, find out if the Germans were gearing up for attack. It was a piece of cake. We never fired a shot or dropped a hand grenade. But we polished off a lot of champagne. One time, we saw a train carrying German troops. Ivo couldn't resist. We landed on it and we flew off as the train entered a tunnel.

IVO: *(exits)* I kind of wished we had thrown grenades at it. Oh well.

NARRATOR: Billy was a crafty kid. In the evenings, when it was too late to fly, he volunteered to man the telegraph office at the war front. Then he set out to link transmitters from the front lines all the way back to his old telegraph office at home. Soon he could reach Gladdy in no time at all.

(The LADIES enter and stand in a straight line, between Billy and Gladdy.)

BILLY: Hi, Gladdy.

(LADIES mime telegraphing while saying "Hi, Gladdy" along the line until Gladdy hears it.)

GLADDY: Hi, Billy. Oh, Billy, isn't it magical that I can sit here in Kansas and talk to you over this wire.

You were right, it's as if we were in the same room. Ain't life grand? And one other thing, don't let Ivo talk you into wingwalking. You're a lot beefier than Daisy. Ha! Ha!

(GLADDY and TELEGRAPHERS exit. IVO reenters and BILLY and IVO are back miming the plane.)

BILLY: Just about every day we'd see this German soldier standing on their runway watching us. He wasn't brass or anything, just an ordinary soldier. He studied us like he was trying to find a better use of a plane than stunts. He wasn't afraid of us. So we started buzzing him, see how close we could get, make him run away. He never flinched. We admired his foolhardiness. I saw him so many times I knew I would never forget him. After a while, Ivo got tired of reconnaissance.

IVO: So I started doing my show at the end of each mission. We did everything, the whole deal. I made Billy

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wear a dress when he wingwalked.

BILLY: Our boys applauded us enthusiastically.

(ETHEL waves.)

Theirs did, too. Everybody stopped shooting to watch the show. For a lot of the soldiers we were the only spot of happiness they had.

IVO: The only ones who didn't like our show were the German aviators. They must have thought we were making fun of them. Try as they might, their planes could not keep up with the The Mighty Muriel.

BILLY: *(cross to Ivo. They are face to face)* However, Ivo saw the handwriting on the wall.

IVO: I thought the aeroplane would bring peace to the world – that the world would be knit together by it.

No village would be isolated, no town, no country. We would all be one. There would be peace. The aeroplane would end all wars. But I am wrong. The Germans will have guns on their planes and we will, too. The sky's the limit after that, Billy. We are embarking on a new way to kill each other: from the heavens.

(IVO exits. GLADDY enters. TELEGRAPHERS enter and mime Gladdy's speech. They react with smiles and oohs and aahs, maybe even tears of joy.)

GLADDY: Dearest Billy, I have named one of the new kittens Billy because he looks just like you. He sits all day outside the kitchen door hoping to get in and sit on my lap, just like you. In the few times he has skirted around me as I come back from the garden, he doesn't know what to do. He runs around frantically, me right behind trying to catch him. I know Doctor Miner does not like cats in her office. But she never complains. When I sit outside with Billy, Billy, I scratch him all over. I scratch his left cheek, then his right, then under his chin and last the top of his head. He likes it best when I scratch him in the same order. He has a purr motor as loud as The Mighty Muriel and drools uncontrollably. Then he settles down in my lap and snoozes, just like you. Billy is lucky, Billy. One of the little girls down the street wants to take him home.

(GLADDY exits)

BILLY: *(enters)* Dear Father, one day the Germans surprised us in mid-loop. They were waiting for us and had surrounded us. This time they had machine guns strapped to their fuselages. They formed a circular firing squad. Had Ivo been patient, the Germans might have shot each other down. But he dispensed with the rest of his performance and skipped right to the grand finale. He pointed his nose straight down toward the loving arms of Mother Earth, took his hands off the joystick, like he always did, and held his arms out like he was riding a bicycle and hollering, "Look, Ma, no hands." The trick to the nose dive was that Ivo controlled the plane with his knees. He aimed straight at the German who was always there on the runway. Maybe this time Ivo planned to kill the German. Or maybe Ivo was determined, once and for all, to break the German's nerve. I couldn't tell. As we were closing in on him, a cow, feeding on grass at the side of the airfield, must have heard us coming and got spooked. The German landing strip wasn't much more than a path through a farm field. Probably the old farmer forgot it was war day and not farm day and had let his cows out. The cow took off for the runway. Ivo was concentrating on the German so hard he never saw the cow. The Mighty Muriel hit the cow at top speed. BAM! The Germans couldn't catch Ivo, but a cow, traveling at about five miles an hour, did. We flipped upside down and were heading tail first, our momentum carrying us backward while the engine was pulling us the other way, a practical demonstration of the law of equal and opposite reactions. The plane slowed considerably. Ivo had inadvertently created his greatest stunt. We drifted straight for a pond. The only

thing I could think to do was duck down under the cockpit. The plane, still upside down, settled softly in the mud. Some German soldiers rushed to the plane and pulled Ivo out. But he was dead. His neck snapped on impact. At least he didn't die horribly like the rest of us are destined to do. The German, we had been buzzing for weeks on end, pulled me out before I could drown. I was not hurt. The Germans carried Ivo on a makeshift gurney, formed a protective phalanx around me and escorted us back to our lines under a white flag to express their condolences. They said they had thoroughly enjoyed Ivo's performances. They wondered that if Ivo could not get out of the war alive how can any of us? The higher ups liked our shows so much they never tried to stop us. But when Ivo took his final dive they had to blame somebody lest they be judged.

LOUISE: (*enters*) Son, Gladly showed me how I can write you over this telegraph. Who says an old dog can't learn new tricks? I'm fine. Your father's cantankerous as ever. Will write more later. Your Mother.

(*LOUISE exits*)

BILLY: I was the only one left to be blamed for Ivo's death. Off to the brig I went while they tried to figure out what to do with me. They decided to drum me out of the Air Corps and send me to the front lines – a sentence of death as sure as a firing squad.

(*BILLY salutes and exits*)

ETHEL: When I found out about Billy, I put in a good word for him and got him assigned to my unit. Truth told, with all the boys getting killed, any soldier – as long as he aimed in the right direction – no matter his record, was welcomed at the front. We were together again, two boys from Haskell County, Kansas, born on the same day.

(*ETHEL exits*)

END OF SCENE

THE ROAD TURNED

GLADDY: (*GLADDY and ETHEL enter*) Ethel, It's a good thing cats can't count because most live only a year or so. They don't know they're getting rooked. They don't even know they have nine lives. Some of the old ones wander off onto the prairie like old Indians do. But I doubt if any would complain. They are well-fed, loved, spoiled even and warm. To my knowledge, none have complained.

(*GLADDY exits.*)

ETHEL: Gladly, thanks for the news from back home. It is well-known that over here, we cease firing on Christmas eve and gather in no man's land for hymns and a toast for peace. But nothing is said about the semi-weekly gatherings in the river to bathe. It is kept quiet for fear it will be disallowed. We, Germans and Allied alike, roughhouse in the water like kids we had been not so long ago. I have become friends with a German soldier: Rolf. He tells me about his wife and child. He is a nice man. If I saw him on the battlefield I don't know if I could kill him.

BILLY: (*enters*) Father, I marched from the brig to the battlefield today to join Ethel. I traveled through country sides and busy little hamlets where people waved and shouted when they saw my uniform. As I got closer to the front the towns became more and more damaged, the fields unattended. What people were there ignored me like they wished everybody would just go away. The road took a hard right and straight ahead was the war. Every blade of grass, every tree, every house, every farm, everything that makes a world was gone.

NARRATOR: As far as Billy could see, there was nothing but mud. The soldiers slept in it. It got in their food. They ate it. They were stuck in it. They could not go forward. They could not retreat. There was no defeat. There was no victory. Just mud.

ETHEL: (*crosses to Billy, puts his arm around him and they wander across stage*) Billy old man, I met a girl over here. She's nice. I plan on asking her to come back with me when the war is over. I'll take care of her. And you can take of Gladdy. I see my fate, and it's a good one. We'll all be happy after it's over over here.

(*ETHEL slaps Billy on the back and exits.*)

NARRATOR: The only instructions given to Billy were to not shoot any of his own and not to stand up in the trenches or you might get your head shot off.

GLADDY: (*enters*) Dearest Billy, In the morning there were 11 cats on the place. We thought we might have to shoot some of them to winnow down the herd, so to speak. By the afternoon, when I returned from shopping, there were only three. Coyotes must have got the rest. One of the three stood by the back door making the most horrible noises. I let her in. Now she won't go back out. She snuggles up in a big bowl on the kitchen table. I call her Wheezy.

BILLY: Father, please pardon the frankness of this letter. I must confide in someone. Yesterday my sergeant assigned me to fetch the bodies out there on our stretch of no-man's land. Housekeeping they call it. There will be hundreds of housekeepers out there on both sides of the line.

(*BILLY and GLADDY exit.*)

NARRATOR: (*enters*) Billy, probably wondered why he was chosen for housekeeping. It's fate, his sergeant told him, pure and simple fate. Soldiers kill or are killed. There was nothing they could do about it except keep their heads down. They were told there may be a German soldier on the other side of that rise, doing housekeeping, too. It is unknown what the proper decorum is if the two should meet – blow each other to kingdom come or quietly turn away. What happens then is their fate.

(*NARRATOR exits*)

ADOLPHUS: (*enters*) Dear Father. When the white flags were raised, I scrambled out to retrieve what was left of the dead. We do it so we can start the next battle with a clean killing field. I had only one hour, then the fighting would begin again. That was not enough time. So I ignored the unidentifiable parts and stuffed the arms and legs and heads into gunny sacks to drag them back to the trenches. There would be no way to match the parts later. Some of them might even be Germans. No man is buried alone. They're all mixed together. There was one guy out there who had been cut in half. He opened his eyes and apologized for being so unpresentable. I didn't know what to do. If I threw him in the body bag he'd smother. I couldn't bring myself to shoot him. So I just walked away as if we had not met. All the while he kept apologizing. Love, Billy.

LOUISE: (*enters*) Adolphus, I got a letter from Billy. Dear Mother, I look across the battlefield and see in my imagination the meadow out our back door. It is Christmas morning, the only Christmas morning we ever had snow. You gave me a sled. Father is pulling me on it. You are riding with me, laughing like a little girl. Father is grinning, something he never did. I fall off, and you pick me up and put me back on. I remember how strong you are. We glide across the frozen creek. Later you are singing to yourself, in the kitchen, the same hymn over and over.

(*Becomes emotional.*)

You are baking bread. You take it from the oven, slice off the heel and smother it with apricot jam. I

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wish I could remember the name of the hymn you always sang. It would comfort me now. Love, Billy.

(ADOLPHUS and LOUISE exit.)

NARRATOR: What Billy didn't know was that seven times zones away, his father, Adolphus, died fighting a wildfire that was sweeping across Haskell County, bone-dry Haskell County. It threatened his farm. The fire picked up and chased the men back. But not Adolphus Bunderswagen. He stood his ground.

ETHEL: *(enters and crouches behind the trench)* Every morning, fog comes. It makes everything peaceful. But it's not peaceful. It's not. But we never know if Germans are hiding in the fog, eager to start the day off with a fight. Maybe one of them will crawl all the way over here and pop up in your face. It happened yesterday, one of our boys was so startled he froze. There was a knife in his eye before he could even gasp. I was right next to him. I wonder if he had time to be amazed that he had been killed not by bullet with his name on it but by a knife not much different from the ones you eat with or the one my dad whittled with while we waited for the campfire to catch hold. So we stare into the fog until our eyes sting. One morning as the fog was clearing, there was your dad. Out in no-man's land. He looked like a ghost, but I'm sure it was him. I'm sure of it. I must be going crazy.

GLADDY: *(enters)* Billy dear Billy, I write this letter because I dare not send it over the telegraph. I could no longer act as though the war doesn't exist and send you funny stories about the kittens. So I became a nurse at a hospital here. This is one of the places the horribly wounded soldiers are shipped to. I thought I could help. Most of the wounded are so bad off that no one can help them. A week ago, I held a young boy's hand as he died. He cried out that he didn't want to be thrown to the bottom of the pile of naked corpses. In his delusion, he thought he had seen bodies stacked outside the window. He was afraid god wouldn't find him at the bottom of the pile and he would end up in hell. He begged me to make sure he got put on top.

BILLY: *(enters)* Father, please do not let Mother get ahold of this letter. I remember your telling me that there are good wars and bad ones. The trick, you said, is to know which is which. I think I know now which one this is. The dying have told me. Many of them were killed in horrible ways. Not a one of them said they were glad they were dying for their country. They called out for their sweethearts, their mothers, their homes. I heard that a limey down the line from us refused to fight. It was said that in the last attack he had stumbled into a foxhole and his arm went right through the chest of a dead man who had been missing for weeks.

(BILLY exits)

ETHEL: *(enters)* Dad, no one knows how to fight this war. A regiment of Highland Scots strutted across the battlefield behind kilted bagpipers. They marched directly into machine guns. The Scots never fired a shot. Maybe they thought they could kill the Germans with mournful music. They say a brigade of English cavalry soldiers, swords raised, attacked the Germans on horseback. They were mowed down. Not one English cavalryman survived. Not one horse. Not one German was killed. The battlefield was littered with sabres, beautiful, shiny sabres – collectors items. The German soldiers ran out of their trenches and hauled the swords away. Some got killed. My sergeant says a bullet with my name on it has been issued to a German soldier. It is loaded in his rifle. A bullet with his name on it has been issued to me. It is in my rifle. One of us will die. One will live on for a while. The trick, my sergeant says, is who has your bullet? It's driving me crazy, Dad.

(ETHEL exits)

GLADDY: Oh, Billy, I have tended to so many young men who bled from every hole in their bodies. I have

written mothers and lied about how their sons died. I told them they died courageously without pain. The parade of men who are horribly wounded does not stop. If anything it gets longer. I couldn't take it. I believed I was committing horrible sins by prolonging their agonies. Back home we put animals out of their misery. So I began injecting the worst with syringes of air, syringes of sweet pure air. I was found out. My superior was kind. All he did was make me leave. But where do you go when your soul is damned?

(GLADDY exits)

END OF SCENE

THE BATTLE TO END ALL BATTLES

(BILLY, ETHEL and the NARRATOR enter.)

NARRATOR: After years of unimaginable slaughter, the Germans launched an all-out attack. They poured everything they had into it. The Allies launched a desperate counter attack. Thousands of soldiers would die. One soldier sat down in the muddy trench and refused to fight: Ethelred Strathroy. He said he couldn't fight because he had killed Billy's father.

BILLY: I sat next to him in the mud just like when we were sitting at the bottom of the pond back home while we tried to figure out whether we wanted to die.

NARRATOR: *(crosses to Ethel)* "Come on, Strathroy," the sergeant said gently. By rights, he could have shot Ethel. "Son, it's fate. If you don't shoot your enemy, he will shoot one of us."

CHORUS: *(chanting offstage)* Ethel is a sissy! Ethel is a sissy!

ETHEL: *(sets down his helmet, climbs out of the trench and stands bravely)* I will not fight.

NARRATOR: For the first time in his life, Ethel was not afraid.

BILLY: Let's go home, Ethel. Let's go home.

(THEY salute.)

NARRATOR: Then, Billy saw yellow gas coming toward them – mustard gas. Billy grabbed Ethel and they headed to the river that separated them from the Germans.

BILLY: Let's go, Ethel.

NARRATOR: He pulled Ethel under and tried to swim downstream to escape the gas.

(In slow motion, BILLY and ETHEL crouch and struggle to make headway underwater.)

When Billy's comrades saw the mustard gas coming, they threw down their rifles and ran toward the water. Then the wind shifted and the gas turned back on the Germans, who threw off their weapons and ran to the river. Everybody began fighting hand-to-hand, knife-to-knife under water.

BILLY: The water was blood red, just like in my nightmare when I almost died in Gladdy's arms.

NARRATOR: *(crossing to Billy's right)* At one point, Billy noticed the German he and Ivo had dive-bombed all the time. The German was drowning. Billy grabbed the German and staggered ashore, the German in one hand and Ethel in the other. The mustard gas hadn't reached that far downstream. It was quiet. They were safe.

(NARRATOR crosses behind Billy and Ethel.)

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The German drew his revolver and shot Ethel in the back of the head where his helmet should have been.

(The NARRATOR shoots Ethel.)

Bam! Ethel was dead.

(ETHEL bows head, exits)

Then the German shot Billy. Bam!

(The NARRATOR shoots Billy.)

The last thought Billy had was ...

BILLY: Are all wars this weird?

(BILLY bows head, exits.)

END OF SCENE

WAKING UP

(NARRATOR, GLADDY and BILLY enter. BILLY lays down with head in Gladdy's lap.)

NARRATOR: When Billy's letters to Gaddy quit coming, she tracked him down, found him in a coma in a hospital in France and brought him back to his home. Billy's mother, Louise, lived long enough to see her son come back to the farm.

GLADDY: One morning, some twenty-five years later, Billy woke up. The bullet in his brain was laying on the pillow. It had worked its way out. Billy got out of bed and went down on one knee.

(Facing each other and holding hands.)

BILLY: Let's get married.

GLADDY: Considering we hadn't held a conversation for 25 years, I figured Billy was making up for lost time. We got married, that afternoon.

NARRATOR: Do you, Gladdy Prin, take this ...

GLADDY: *(eagerly)* I do.

NARRATOR: Do you, Billy Bunders ...

BILLY: *Even more eagerly* I do, too.

(Arm-in-arm THEY turn to the audience as if presented in church to the wedding guests. Then THEY take two steps forward.)

NARRATOR: Billy came back to life right in the middle of World War II. It was all over the news.

OFF-STAGE VOICES: Sieg heil! Sieg Heil!

BILLY: *(to Gladdy)* From the pictures in the paper, I recognized the soldier we dive bombed every day, the guy I had saved from drowning, the man who shot me. He was Adolph Hitler. Then it hit me. I could have prevented World War II. I could have prevented the deaths of millions of people – soldiers, Jews, children. All I had to do was let Hitler drown. There were times I wanted to cram the bullet back into my brain and sleep through the rest of my life.

GLADDY: I got my medical license and took up Doctor Miner's practice. Billy heard The Mighty Muriel was in some farmer's barn close by the battle field in France. He bought it sight unseen, repaired it and got it back in the air again. On weekends, we performed Ivo's air show in little towns and county fairs. It

kept his mind off his troubles.

BILLY: Gladdy wingwalked, and I did Ivo's death-defying loops and rolls and the "look-ma-no-hands" nosedive finales. Gladdy, unlike Daisy, loved it. She laughed and screamed out,

GLADDY: "Get me out of here! Get me out of here!"

NARRATOR: They had to quit flying when Gladdy hit her head during one of the shows. Gladdy's passing about crushed Billy.

(GLADDY bows her head and exits. BILLY exits slowly in the opposite direction.)

He started wetting himself again. His only connection to the world beyond the family farm was a little TV hooked up to a great big satellite dish. He saw the Korean War, puzzled by America's plan to play for a tie. He'd never heard of a war that wasn't fought to win. He saw the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam and remembered the whores deliberately shot by the soldiers in his war. He wasn't surprised his war didn't end all wars. It didn't end any wars. It seemed to him, we were in endless wars.

The train didn't stop in town anymore. You had to board it miles away in Dodge City or Garden City. The hardware store, where Ethel was weighed when he was born, had long since been boarded up. So too was the general store. In its place, on the edge of town, was a Kwiki Mart for travelers to gas up on their way to anyplace else. That's where Billy got groceries. All he needed was a few cans of Spaghetti-Os, some potato chips and pop.

Billy found Gladdy's journal and learned he was the cause of the Spanish flu. He got it from Elmer, the gentle bull, passed it to Ethel, who passed it to the recruits at boot camp, who carried it overseas where it spread all over the world. He was also haunted by the thought that he was destined to kill Hitler and save the world but had defied his fate. When Billy died, no one bought the farm. It's still there, composting.

All of Billy's possessions were hauled to the county dump. No one would know the adventures of Billy Bunders. The Mighty Muriel fetched a couple of hundred dollars at auction.

THE END