

Joe's Wait

A One-Act Play

by Thomas J. Gardiner

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STORY OF THE PLAY

In the waiting room of an airport in the American Midwest, Joe Barnes, a prosperous businessman, is met by his doctor, Ed Tishman. Joe's wife and children were aboard a plane that crashed at the Tel Aviv airport, and he's waiting to hear what happened to them. Dr. Tishman offers pills to calm Joe's nerves, but he refuses them. Joe recounts his toughness in riding out business losses, but confesses his confidence and faith have now been shaken. Ed tries to convince him that good men are not punished by God; knowing better, Joe falls into suicidal despair. Bill Schuman, a television evangelist, overhears their conversation and introduces himself. He proceeds to argue that God rewards just men with material success, and counsels Joe to confess his sins publicly or accept his sad lot as fair. Fr. Elihu, a young priest, has also overheard the conversation and joins them. Politely but firmly, Elihu disagrees with them all, and insists that God is beyond man's comprehension yet never acts unjustly. He invites Bill to say the Lord's Prayer, in the middle of which Joe hears a voice and stands up startled. Thinking he has become schizoid and is hallucinating, Dr. Tishman tries to persuade him to come home with him, but Elihu insists they now give Joe privacy. Alone, Joe talks to God aloud. He is given the grace to believe that there is a reason for everything even if he does not understand it, and the courage to trust in life. Joe then learns from airport officials that his wife and children have survived the crash unscathed. Jubilant, he shares the news with his friends.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

JOE BARNES: A businessman.
ED TISHMAN: A medical doctor.
BILL SCHUMAN: A televangelist.
FATHER ELIHU: A young priest.
THE VOICE
ANNOUNCER (*Female voice.*)

PLACE

An Airport in the American Midwest

TIME

The Present

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(The waiting room of an airport. If staged as a dramatic reading, four lecterns are arrayed across the stage. If fully staged, four lounge chairs are placed in a semi-circle. AT RISE: JOE BARNES is standing alone at stage center. He is a middle-aged man, graying at the temples, and is dressed in a business suit. He begins to walk the room in suppressed agitation. ED TISHMAN walks in. He is about the same age as Joe and is dressed similarly. He carries a leather satchel of the kind used by medical doctors for emergencies. Joe turns to him precipitously as he enters.)

JOE: Well - what happened to them?!

ED: *(Reassuringly.)* Joe, how are you feeling?

JOE: Never mind me - what about Sue and the kids?

ED: Let's sit down, Joe. *(He takes a chair.)*

JOE: Will you stop pussyfooting...!

ED: Now look, Joe, I've been your doctor for how many years now - twenty? Have I ever given you bad advice?

So I'm telling you: sit down and calm yourself. I'm sure you don't want your rash to get any worse.

JOE: *(Slowly taking a chair.)* Is the situation that bad?

ED: Not necessarily. We've gotten further word from the airport in Tel Aviv...

JOE: Yes...?

ED: ...That all injured passengers are being given the best emergency medical treatment, and....

JOE: And...

ED: ...That all serious cases have already been transferred to intensive care units, and....

JOE: But Susan and the children - were they seriously injured?

ED: We just don't know. The list of the injured has not been sent out yet, but it should be coming in any minute now.

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(Glancing at Joe's agitation, Ed takes a small bottle out of his bag, shakes two tablets into his palm, and stretches his hand toward Joe.)

JOE: What's that?

ED: Just a mild sedative. It will make you feel better.

JOE: You know I never take that kind of stuff, Ed. What's the matter with you?

ED: I know, but under the circumstances...

JOE: It's that bad, is it? *(He slowly shakes his head, then speaks in a tone of abject despair.)* This is really the last straw, Ed. I've had it! First the market for grain futures plummets and I'm holding three thousand acres of winter wheat. Then meat on the hoof drops below parity, and I've got five thousand head of sheep in Montana...

ED: I know, I know, but I told you long ago you were overextended.

JOE: So did my wife - but she spent the money I made from it all just the same. Not that I begrudged her, mind you: it was all for the children and the house, she hardly spent a nickel on herself. But there were some things she never seemed to understand. You remember when the skin rash started after the last stock fall?

ED: I treated you for it for months - how could I not remember?

JOE: Well do you know what she said to me when it got so bad I had to change my clothes twice a day to keep from smelling in public?

ED: What did she say?

JOE: You know Susan's always been a religious woman, Ed, but things had come to such a pass she said to me: "You still believe in Christianity after all of this? Why? To hell with it!"

ED: How did you react?

JOE: I said, "You're talking like a damn fool, woman! If we accept what's good from God, shouldn't we accept what's bad?" She didn't know what to say to that so she just got quiet. *(Breaking.)*

JOE: *(Continued.)* But now I think of her thousands of miles away, maybe lying there in the wreckage and the kids with her ... I think maybe she was right. *(He buries his face in his hands.)*

ED: *(Touching his shoulder.)* Joe, you mustn't...

JOE: It's true, damn it, it's true! I wish I was never born! What's the use of all this suffering? You cry coming into the world, and they cry when they carry you out. What difference does it make? I'd be better off dead: at least I'd be at peace. I wouldn't have to care about Sue or the farm or the children. Now everything I care about's in ruins.

ED: If I try to discuss this with you, will you listen? And not get more upset or fly off the handle? Because I can't just sit here and watch you tear up your life.

JOE I'm listening.

ED: Think of how you used to encourage your faint-hearted friends, Joe, how you were always the first one to cheer somebody up. But now, when you're in trouble yourself, you just give up: you let it get to you and wipe you out.

JOE: But what else can I do, Ed?

ED: Isn't your religion of any comfort to you? Doesn't the fact that you're a decent, hard working man pull you through? When did you ever see a good man destroyed?

JOE: If you could weigh my troubles, Ed, you'd see how heavy they are. Are you surprised if my words sound a little crazy? I'm slowly being suffocated: do you really think I have the strength to wait?

ED: But all your friends...

JOE: My friends! They're supposed to help you when you're in trouble. Mine have been as trusty as a river in the Rocky Mountains: it's full of water when you're up skiing in Aspen, but when you're down and out in Nevada, it's bone dry. Did I ever try to borrow money from you when I was in debt, Ed? Did I ever ask for you to bail me out?

ED: No, but...

End of Freeview

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