

ONCE UPON A DEAD

by Alan Haehnel

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A One Act Comedy

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SYNOPSIS: The play could not begin more stereo-typically: A narrator enters and speaks the famous words, “Once upon a time,” then brings out three well-known characters: Jack, his mother, and his cow from “Jack and the Beanstalk.” Next, the narrator flips a coin...and kills off Jack and his companions. So goes the play—introduction of age-old characters, coin flip, sudden death of age-old characters. Tracy, however, cannot stand this chain of events and tries to intercede. Logic doesn’t work with the murderous narrator, so Tracy resorts to trickery and eventually ends the carnage.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(7 females, 6 males, 7 either, 10-48 extras)

NARRATOR (f).....	A jaded, murderous story-teller. <i>(120 lines)</i>
TRACY (f).....	A concerned citizen who tries to keep the narrator from her murderous ways. <i>(111 lines)</i>
ANOTHER JACK (m).....	From “Jack and the Beanstalk.” <i>(Non-Speaking)</i>
JACK’S MOTHER (f).....	From “Jack and the Beanstalk.” <i>(Non-Speaking)</i>
JACK’S COW (m/f).....	From “Jack and the Beanstalk.” <i>(Non-Speaking)</i>
SCENERY HOLDERS 1-10 (m/f).....	Scenery holders. <i>(Non-Speaking)</i>
CINDERELLA (f)	From “Cinderella.” <i>(Non-Speaking)</i>
CINDERELLA’S STEPMOTHER (f).....	From “Cinderella.” <i>(Non-Speaking)</i>
CINDERELLA’S STEPSISTERS 1-3 (f).....	From “Cinderella.” <i>(Non-Speaking)</i>
THREE LITTLE PIGS 1-3 (m/f)	From “The Three Little Pigs.” <i>(Non-Speaking)</i>

WOLF (m)	From “The Three Little Pigs.” (<i>Non-Speaking</i>)
LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD (f).....	From “Little Red Riding Hood.” (<i>Non-Speaking</i>)
ANOTHER WOLF (m)	From “Little Red Riding Hood.” (<i>Non-Speaking</i>)
HANSEL (m).....	From “Hansel and Gretel.” (<i>Non-Speaking</i>)
GRETEL (f).....	From “Hansel and Gretel.” (<i>Non-Speaking</i>)
WITCH (f)	From “Hansel and Gretel.” (<i>Non-Speaking</i>)
RAPUNZEL (f).....	From “Rapunzel.” (<i>Non-Speaking</i>)
CHICKEN LITTLE (m/f)	From “Chicken Little.” (<i>Non-Speaking</i>)
VILLAGERS 2-3 (m/f).....	From any number of fairy tales. (<i>Non-Speaking</i>)
POPPA BEAR (m).....	From “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” (8 lines)
MOMMA BEAR (f).....	From “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” (6 lines)
BABY BEAR (m/f).....	From “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” (8 lines)
GOLDILOCKS (f).....	From “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” (7 lines)
JACK (m).....	From “Jack and Jill.” (8 lines)
JILL (f).....	From “Jack and Jill.” (7 lines)
HUMPTY DUMPTY (m/f).....	From “Humpty Dumpty.” (1 line)
MARY (f).....	From “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” (1 line)
LITTLE LAMB (m/f)	From “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” (1 line)
PINOCCHIO (m).....	From “Pinocchio.”(1 line)
GEPETTO (m).....	From “Pinocchio.” (<i>Non-Speaking</i>)

UGLY DUCKLING (m/f)	From “The Ugly Duckling.” (1 line)
OLD LADY (f)	From “The Old Lady Who Lived in a Shoe.” (1 line)
OLD LADY’S CHILDREN 1 (m/f).....	From “The Old Lady Who Lived in a Shoe.” (1 line)
OLD LADY’S CHILDREN 2-8 (m/f) From	“The Old Lady Who Lived in a Shoe.” (Non-Speaking)
EMPEROR (m).....	From “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” (2 lines)
BOY (m)	From “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” (1 line)
SHOEMAKER (m).....	From “The Shoemaker and the Elves.” (Non-Speaking)
SHOEMAKER ELF 1 (m/f).....	From “The Shoemaker and the Elves.” (4 lines)
SHOEMAKER ELF 2 (m/f).....	From “The Shoemaker and the Elves.” (2 lines)
SHOEMAKER ELVES 3-5 (m/f).....	From “The Shoemaker and the Elves.” (Non-Speaking)
GINGERBREAD MAN (m).....	From “The Gingerbread Man.” (1 line)
FOX (m/f)	From “The Gingerbread Man.” (Non-Speaking)

CAST NOTE: With doubling and quick changes, the play could be performed with as few as 30 actors. Flexibility: doubling possible, gender flexible.

DURATION: 40 minutes.

PROPS

Numerous two-dimensional cut-outs to provide quick scenery for various fairy tales depicted in the play, a coin, a dollar bill.

PRODUCTION NOTES

The biggest challenge of this play is costuming--so many time-honored characters need to be recognizable at a glance. If you are blessed with a healthy budget and an ambitious costume crew, you're all set. On the other hand, the play's costumes can be accomplished with a strong emphasis on color and shape so that the actors can be dressed in black and simply add an evocative hat, scarf or other identifying feature. If doubling, you don't need to hide the fact the same actor is playing multiple roles--making the doubling obvious, in fact, will add to the comedy.

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AT RISE: *NARRATOR* comes out to the middle of a bare stage. As she speaks, introducing various characters, these characters come out. Someone also comes out carrying some appropriate two-dimensional scenery for the story.

NARRATOR: Once upon a time, there was a boy named Jack who lived with his mother in a poor cottage in the woods. They had a cow. (*The narrator flips a coin, lets it land in her hand, slaps it onto the back of her other hand, looks at it, then proclaims the verdict.*) They died. (*JACK, HIS MOTHER, THE COW, and the scenery all collapsed in a heap.*) Once upon a time, there was a young maiden named Cinderella who lived in a castle with her stepmother and three stepsisters. (*Coin flipping action.*) They all died. (*CINDERELLA and company die.*) Once upon a time there were three little pigs. One built a house of straw, another built a house of sticks, and the third built a house of bricks. They had an enemy called the big, bad wolf who didn't live anywhere in particular but enjoyed destroying other people's real estate. (*Coin flipping action.*) They expired. Once upon a time...

TRACY: (*Enters, quickly.*) Whoa, whoa, hold on. Hold on.

NARRATOR: Once upon a time there was a little girl named Little Red Riding Hood who went for a walk in the woods.

TRACY: Hey, listen...

NARRATOR: She also had an enemy who was a wolf...

TRACY: You've got to stop this.

NARRATOR: But it was a different wolf than the pork persecutor.

TRACY: Are you listening to me? (*NARRATOR flips the coin as before.*) Yeah, yeah, let me guess.

NARRATOR pauses after looking at the coin, then comes out with the decision.

NARRATOR: They keeled over.

TRACY: Hold it right there! You can't keep bringing famous characters from famous stories out here on stage and then keep killing them.

NARRATOR: Once upon a time, there was a girl named Snow White.

TRACY: No, no, no, no! That's enough! Where are you going to put the deceased bodies of not just Snow White but seven dwarves? We're running out of room!

NARRATOR: Once upon a time, there was a giant windstorm.

TRACY: A windst...?

The sound of wind comes loudly into the theater.

NARRATOR: (*Shouting.*) The windstorm was so big and so powerful that it huffed and it puffed and it cleaned all the corpses off the stage!

The bodies roll away, into the wings. The wind stops.

TRACY: That was clever.

NARRATOR: Once upon a time there were two little children named Hansel and Gretel who went to a forest and found a gingerbread house owned by a witch.

TRACY: Do not flip that coin.

NARRATOR stares at TRACY, flips the coin without looking, slaps it onto the back of her hand, then looks at it, then looks back at TRACY and makes the call.

NARRATOR: They died.

HANSEL, GRETEL, WITCH, GINGERBREAD--all collapse.

TRACY: This is ridiculous.

NARRATOR: Once upon a time...

TRACY: You are an irresponsible narrator!

NARRATOR: Any requests?

TRACY: Yes. I request that you cease and desist from what you are doing and either clear the stage to make room for a reputable narrator or change your ways and stop littering the place with the dead bodies of beloved storybook characters.

NARRATOR: What is your name?

TRACY: Why?

NARRATOR: Because you've reached deep into my soul and made a new person of me, and I want to be able to give you credit by calling out your name and then the words, "Hallelujah, thank-you, thank-you."

TRACY: I don't believe you.

NARRATOR: You're too young to be so cynical.

TRACY: My name is Tracy.

NARRATOR: Once upon a time, there was a girl named Tracy...

TRACY: I knew I couldn't believe you.

NARRATOR: Who bothered a very busy narrator. She would just not leave this narrator alone.

TRACY: Oh, let me take a wild guess. You're going to flip a coin now.

NARRATOR flips the coin, as before, without looking. She holds it, covered, on the back of her hand.

NARRATOR: Any predictions?

TRACY: You know something? Just because you look at that coin and it comes up heads or tails and then you say, "And then she died..."

NARRATOR: Kicked the bucket.

TRACY: Whatever.

NARRATOR: Bit the dust.

TRACY: Whatever.

NARRATOR: Croaked. Pushed up daisies. Turned herself into a main dish at the Dirt Cafe for Maggots.

TRACY: Are you done?

NARRATOR: No. *(Looks at the coin.)* But you are. Tracy died.

TRACY: I'm still here.

NARRATOR: You're dead to us.

TRACY: I am not one of your characters. I am here. Breathing. Talking.

NARRATOR: Annoying. Once upon a time, there was a girl named Rapunzel.

TRACY: I am not going to let you do this.

NARRATOR: Once upon a time, there was a chicken named Chicken Little.

TRACY: Stop bringing these characters out here!

NARRATOR: Once upon a time, there was a village full of poor people.

TRACY: Oh, no, you don't! *(She runs to the side of the stage, stops a couple entering VILLAGERS, and calls into the wings.)* No, no, villagers, you cannot come out here right now. This is...this whole area is radioactive! Very dangerous! Do not come out here!

NARRATOR: I'm flipping my coin!

NARRATOR flips the coin, catches it, slaps it onto the back of her hand.

TRACY: Seriously, you will be in grave danger if you come out on this...watch out with your pitchfork. You almost poked him in the eye.

NARRATOR: They all died!

RAPUNZEL, CHICKEN LITTLE, THE TWO VISIBLE VILLAGERS all collapse onstage and, judging from TRACY'S reaction, so do the crowd of VILLAGERS in the wings.

TRACY: Oh, now, that...that is a fire hazard, all those dead bodies blocking the exit like that. *(To NARRATOR.)* What is your problem?

NARRATOR: Uh, let me think.

NARRATOR pauses for a moment, then points at TRACY.

TRACY: That is very cute. You're funny as well as homicidal. Perfect.

NARRATOR: Once upon a time...

TRACY: Oh, yeah? Oh, yeah? How about this? Once upon a time, there was a funny, homicidal narrator who liked to be funny and homicidal and guess what? I am going to flip a coin. *(Searching in her pockets.)* I don't have a coin. I have a dollar. A crumpled up dollar. I am going to flip this crumpled up dollar. *(She throws it in the air, drops it, picks it up, slaps it on the back of her hand, looks at it.)* There! It's not heads, it's not tails, but it's still crumpled. And the narrator dies!

NARRATOR nonchalantly checks her pulse, then shakes her head.

NARRATOR: No dice. You ain't got the power. Once upon a time...

TRACY lets out a short scream of frustration and heads offstage. After a second, she comes back on, heading in the opposite direction.

TRACY: Can't go that way because of the pile of dead villagers blocking the exit.

TRACY turns to NARRATOR and lets out another short scream of frustration before exiting.

NARRATOR: Ah. Freedom. Room to breathe, no distractions, wide open... *(Looks around at the bodies on the stage.)* Once upon a time, a virus inhabited the dead brains of Hansel, Gretel, the witch, the gingerbread house carrier, Rapunzel, Chicken Little, and assorted villagers. *(The dead bodies on stage rise up and become zombies.)* The virus re-animated the bodies of these individuals, making them alive enough to move but not smart enough to avoid being easily fooled. Oh, look over there! A casting call for *The Walking Dead!* *(The ZOMBIES all exit in the direction the NARRATOR has indicated.)* That's it. Move along, move along. I'm sure you'll be perfect for the role. Keep walking, right out the side door and into the busy street. Perfect. *(The stage is empty again.)* Ah. As I was saying--room to breathe, no distractions, wide open spaces. Time to kill, space to kill, characters to kill. *(Flips the coin.)* Heads, they don't live; tails they die. Win-win. Once upon a time, there were three bears who lived in a quaint little cottage in the woods. *(The BEARS come out along with someone carrying the cut-out of the three bears' cottage.)* In the very same story was a nosey little critter of a girl named Goldilocks. *(GOLDILOCKS enters and waves.)* Goldilocks and the three bears. You know what? I'm not even going to bother with the coin toss. It's just a prop. Let's just cut to the chase, shall we? They died!

TRACY steps from behind the cottage.

TRACY: Oh, no, they did not! Remain standing, people! Er, bears...and person. You do not have to die! Not on my watch!

NARRATOR: What are you doing?

TRACY: Subverting your plan, you death-dealing evil narrator person.

NARRATOR: You can't subvert my plan. I'm in charge.

TRACY: Really? Plan looks fairly subverted to me. Poppa Bear, how are you feeling?

POPPA BEAR: Quite well, thank-you. Just planning on taking a little walk to let Momma Bear's porridge cool down. She makes some very hot porridge.

MOMMA BEAR: Oh, Poppa Bear.

POPPA BEAR: Very hot.

BABY BEAR: This amorous banter is not appropriate in my presence.

GOLDILOCKS: I like the looks of this house. I don't see an alarm system anywhere.

NARRATOR: And they died! They died! Die, already!

Pause.

POPPA BEAR: I'd rather take that walk. *(The BEARS begin to walk around the stage.)* A little aerobic activity is good for the ticker. Have to have a good ticker to keep up with Momma Bear.

MOMMA BEAR: Oh, Poppa Bear.

BABY BEAR: I'm still here, still impressionable.

NARRATOR: *(To TRACY,)* What have you done?

TRACY: I have joined the character camp in hopes that my presence, as an individual aware of your invidiousness, would take away your maniacal tyranny and let these characters have a life. And guess what? Score! It worked. Look at them. Alive and strolling.

GOLDILOCKS: I believe, since the door is open, I will just take a look inside this adorable abode.

GOLDILOCKS ducks behind the cardboard cutout of the bears' house.

TRACY: Alive and breaking and entering.

NARRATOR: Look, I'm the narrator on this gig, and I have the authority to do with these characters as I please.

TRACY: You may have the authority, Pal, but you don't the right. Because you're wrong.

The BEARS face front, moving their feet and looking around as if walking through the woods, but they stay in place.

POPPA BEAR: *(Sing-song.)* Strolling, strolling, strolling through woods.

MOMMA BEAR: You have a wonderful voice, Poppa Bear.

POPPA BEAR: Why, thank-you.

BABY BEAR: Don't quit your day job.

GOLDILOCKS: *(From behind the cottage.)* Ew, porridge!

NARRATOR: Okay, fine--I'll give you the bears in the woods. I'll give you Goldilocks vandalizing their house. I'm moving on.

GOLDILOCKS: Ow! I burned my tongue. I hate that!

TRACY: It just so happens that I'm moving on, too.

TRACY exits as NARRATOR continues.

NARRATOR: Glad to hear it.

POPPA BEAR: Isn't it a lovely day? Almost as lovely as my Momma Bear.

NARRATOR: Hey.

MOMMA BEAR: Oh, Poppa Bear, stop it.

NARRATOR: Hey.

BABY BEAR: I just threw up in my mouth a little bit. Knock it off, you two.

GOLDILOCKS: This porridge is the bomb diggity!

NARRATOR: Hey, Bears! Hey, Goldilocks! If you're not going to have the decency to die, at least shut up, okay?

POPPA BEAR: I love leaves. I am a leaf lover... *(To MOMMA BEAR.)* Lover.

NARRATOR: Shoot me now. Just...do your thing over there, I'll do mine over here. Once upon a time, there was a boy named Jack and a girl named Jill.

JACK and JILL enter along with someone carrying a two-dimensional depiction of a hill with a well on the top.

NARRATOR: *(Looking at the hill.)* What is this?

JACK AND JILL: It's our hill.

NARRATOR: Let me guess.

NARRATOR pulls the hill aside to reveal TRACY behind it.

TRACY: Pay no attention to the girl behind the hill.

NARRATOR: Jack and Jill died.

TRACY: Nope.

NARRATOR: I want Jack and Jill to die.

TRACY: Don't think it's going to happen. *(To JACK and JILL.)* How are you two doing?

JACK: I'm fine, thanks. Jill?

JILL: Doing very well. I'm a bit thirsty.

JACK: Me, too, come to think of it.

JACK AND JILL: We could fetch a pail of water.

JACK and JILL go skipping away.

TRACY: What a fetching pair. See what I did there?

NARRATOR: I see what you did there. I see what you're doing here. I do not like what I see.

TRACY: What? Seriously, you'd rather have a pile of dead bodies on the stage than all this action going on?

POPPA BEAR: Say, Momma Bear, do you suppose that porridge is ready? We don't want things to cool down too much now, do we?

MOMMA BEAR: Oh, Poppa Bear.

BABY BEAR: I think I was adopted. I hope I was adopted.

GOLDILOCKS: Wow, this chair is hard!

JACK AND JILL: *(Skipping.)* Fetch, fetch, fetch, fetch, fetch a pail of water!

TRACY: Isn't this great?

NARRATOR: No, it is not great! It is... *(Crossing to the BEARS.)* Listen, you're going to find a little girl named Goldilocks who has spit in your porridge, broken your chairs and mussed up your sheets. She'll be asleep in the little guy's bed; you'll scare her; she'll run away. End of story.

BABY BEAR: There's a girl in my bed? Growl.

NARRATOR: Hey, Goldilocks, get out here!

GOLDBLOCKS comes from behind the house.

GOLDBLOCKS: You know, everything in that house is just too much.

BABY BEAR: She's the one? Double growl.

NARRATOR: Listen, Goldy, after you're done ransacking the place, you're going to fall asleep until these fuzz-balls wake you up. Then you're going to run away screaming, having learned your lesson, to spend the rest of your life having nightmares featuring big teeth and bear drool. End of story. You, Jack and Jill!

JACK AND JILL: Hi!

NARRATOR: Hi, yourself. The sole purpose of your existence is to go up that hill to fetch some water, upon which Jack will fall, break his crown...

JACK: Seriously?

NARRATOR: And you, Jill, will come tumbling after. Duel concussions. Happy day. End of story.

TRACY: Now, why did you go and do that?

MOMMA BEAR: Hey, Buddy, you ever heard of a spoiler alert?

JILL: Are you laying out an option for what will happen, or...

NARRATOR: No! It's not an option! It's not a prediction! It's a surety. That is what will happen. I am the narrator; I've been around. I know.

Pause.

BABY BEAR: Well, I'm going to go see what's on Netflix.

BEARS exit with JACK and JILL close behind.

JILL: Why do you have to be so klutzy?

JACK: It's not my fault. That hill looks slippery.

They are gone, leaving TRACY and the NARRATOR.

NARRATOR: You happy? I didn't kill them.

TRACY: Yeah, but you killed off their stories.

NARRATOR: Tremendous loss.

TRACY: What is your problem, anyway? And no, don't point your finger at me again. That would only make a dumb joke dumber.

NARRATOR: For your information, Tracy, I don't have a problem.

TRACY: Oh, you don't.

NARRATOR: No. I was doing just fine out here with my particular dramatic plan, when...

TRACY: Dramatic plan?

NARRATOR: Yes.

TRACY: And just what was the narrative arc of your particular dramatic plan?

NARRATOR: Jack arrived alive. Jack died. Jack's corpse was blown away by a windstorm. Jack's mother arrived alive. Jack's mother died. Jack's mother's corpse...

TRACY: All right, let's work from an assumption, all right? Can we do that? I mean, granted, it's kind of far-fetched and all, but how about we assume that if a narrator--some hypothetical narrator, not you--were to come on stage and bring out a bunch of characters to join her only to kill them off before even giving them a chance to speak, act or interact...let's assume that narrator has a problem of some sort.

NARRATOR: I reject that assumption.

TRACY: Yes, but can you imagine *not* rejecting that assumption? Can you imagine what you *might* say that narrator's problem is?

NARRATOR: Maybe, just maybe...

TRACY: Yes?

NARRATOR: Maybe that narrator is tired.

TRACY: Of what?

NARRATOR: Of...them.

TRACY: Who?

NARRATOR: Them! The characters! The Jacks and the Jills and the bears and the ducklings and the pigs and the Cinderellas and the Rumpelstiltskins and the wicked stepmothers and...all of them! Maybe this narrator of yours has a problem with all of them, all of these stereotypical, hackneyed, over-done, trite, we've-heard-about-them-a-million-times characters and their stereotypical, hackneyed, over-done, we've-heard-about-them-a-million-times stories.

TRACY: You left out trite.

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