

Hell and High Water

DRAMATIC SCRIPT

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CHARACTERS (in order of appearance):

Narrator: Third person observer.

Franklin Wells: Man in late 50s; luthier; politically conservative, white, Catholic.

Leo: Man in his early 40s; wood supplier and piano tuner; environmentally aware.

Mary Wells: Woman in mid 50s; Franklin's wife; working a dead end job.

Radio Announcer 1: Reporter.

Radio Announcer 2: Weather person.

Cecily: Woman in late 30s; famous violinist; hotheaded and impatient.

SCENE: Franklin's home in Texas.

TIME: 2023.

SCENE ONE

NARRATOR:

September twelfth, 2023.

(FRANKLIN rhythmically scrapes at a piece of wood. He sets down the tool and pushes his chair away from the work table. Sawdust sounding beneath his boots, he retrieves a set of clamps from a rack on the other wall and sits back down. The chair groans under his weight. He sets one of the clamps down on the table. He confidently tightens the other.)

NARRATOR:

(following the action)

This is the birth of a violin: methodical scraping at pieces of wood. Franklin's getting clamps to secure it all together.

(Immediately after he grabs the second clamp, the phone rings. He hurriedly puts the clamp down, wipes his hands on his jeans, and clears his throat before picking up, putting the call on speaker.)

FRANKLIN:

Yes?

LEO:

Hey Franklin. I, uh, have some bad news..

(He pauses as if he expects a response. None comes. He proceeds with caution.)

..The Sargent's Spruce is not doing well. The price is gonna go up a little.

FRANKLIN:

How much?

LEO:

I don't know exact numbers yet. I just wanted to call and warn you. I get that money is tight right now.

FRANKLIN:

Okay. Thanks, Leo..How's the tuning?

LEO:

Same shit, different day. How's Mary?

FRANKLIN:

She's well.

LEO:

That's good to hear. Tell her hi for me.

FRANKLIN:

Okay. Will do.

(He hangs up and continues to work. The scraping sounds are initially steady and controlled, but become more erratic as he reflects upon the call. One final scrape sounds particularly aggressive.)

Crap.

(He pauses to take a deep breath and starts again slowly as MARY enters.)

MARY:

It's getting late.. You ought to be hungry. What do you want for dinner?

FRANKLIN:

Anything. I'm starving.

MARY:

Of course you are. You work through lunch again?

(FRANKLIN puts down his tool.)

FRANKLIN:

Yeah.

MARY:

Well then you must be close to finishing Cecily's commission.

FRANKLIN:

Mary..

MARY:

Alright. I'll leave you to it.

(MARY exits. FRANKLIN begins to chisel again.)

FRANKLIN:

(quietly, laughing to himself)

Third violin in five months. Christ, I hope Cecily makes this worth it.

(He pauses for a moment before starting to hum a beautiful, Romantic piece of music (Schumann's Traumerei). As he gets louder, the phone rings, cutting him off. He reluctantly picks up.)

Hello?

LEO:

Hey. It's Leo again.

FRANKLIN:

Yes?

LEO:

Um, I have a favor to ask..

(beat)

..My workshop just flooded, and I need somewhere to keep my tools for a while. Would you mind?

FRANKLIN:

You can bring them by tomorrow morning.

(He hangs up and turns on the radio. The first channel he goes to is just static. He changes the channel. More static. He changes the channel again.)

RADIO ANNOUNCER 1:

-vironmental science. The new satellites provide definitive information on the growing effects of climate ch-

(FRANKLIN scoffs and changes the channel. More static. He changes the channel once more.)

RADIO ANNOUNCER 2:

-mperature. Record breaki-

(FRANKLIN changes the channel again. Slow, dark classical music (Schindler's List) fills the workshop.)

NARRATOR:

(with action)

Franklin is diligently cleaning his tools. After wiping them dry, he puts them away.

(He picks up a handful of tools and brings them to the sink. He lets the water run while rinsing them off. He places them on a towel and sprays them with a healthy amount of WD-40. After wiping them dry, he puts them away in cabinets and on wall hooks. He turns off the light and exits, shutting the door behind him. End of scene.)

SCENE TWO

NARRATOR:

September seventeenth.

(action following)

Franklin enters his workshop carrying a stand and sheet music. He prepares to play.

(Once he puts down the stand, he lifts the top. He places the sheet music. Taking a deep breath, he picks up a violin and plays a sweet, lighthearted piece (Beethoven's 8th Symphony in F Major). A couple seconds in, it starts to go out of tune. The notes gradually get flatter and flatter until the tune is no longer recognizable.)

NARRATOR:

Inexplicably, his violin goes flat.

(FRANKLIN makes a sound of disgust and quickly tunes each string. He tries to play the piece again, but the result is the same.)

NARRATOR:

Again, it goes out of tune.

(FRANKLIN tunes the strings again, but this time he is meticulous, centering each pitch to perfection. He plays the piece slower with the same result.)

NARRATOR:

Though it is no fault of his own, Franklin finds himself with little success.

(FRANKLIN scoffs and sets down the violin. End of scene.)

SCENE THREE

NARRATOR:

September nineteenth. Franklin opens a jar of varnish, pouring it into a cup. The substance is viscous, somewhere between maple syrup and molasses. He closes the jar and places it on the table. After grabbing a brush, he begins to stain the sides of the violin with long, controlled strokes.

(FRANKLIN follows the actions detailed in narration. The phone rings in another room, but he continues to work. Just seconds after it goes to voicemail, the phone rings again. He exasperatedly puts the brush and violin down before shoving his chair back. The sawdust sounds angrily under his heavy steps. He picks up. The voices begin faintly, growing as he walks back toward the workshop.)

CECILY:

Where is my violin?

FRANKLIN:

Hello to you too.

CECILY:

Hi Franklin. Where is my violin?

FRANKLIN:

On my table. Almost done.

CECILY:

And when are you planning on shipping it?

FRANKLIN:

Soon. A week, give or take.

CECILY:

Step on it. I don't pay you to waste my time.

FRANKLIN:

Of course not.

(The phone beeps loudly after CECILY hangs up. FRANKLIN sets down the phone and continues to stain. A moment later, MARY comes home, loudly closing the front door behind her and putting down her keys. She enters the workshop.)

MARY:

How's it goin, hun?

FRANKLIN:

(irritated)

Just got off the phone.

MARY:

Who was it?

FRANKLIN:

Who do you think.

MARY:

Oh. Cecily's still breathing down your neck?

FRANKLIN:

Yeah. She's getting worse.

MARY:

You've done so much work already. Just keep your nose to the grindstone. You're so close.

FRANKLIN:

Thank God.

(MARY exits. End of scene.)

SCENE FOUR

NARRATOR:

September twenty-fourth.

(FRANKLIN sits in his workshop listening to the weather report.)

RADIO ANNOUNCER 2:

Today is gonna be a hot one. The high is 127. Try to stay out of the sun and drink a lot of water. Now, a message fr-

(FRANKLIN turns off the radio. Subsequent action follows the narration.)

NARRATOR:

Franklin opens a small, waxy envelope containing brand new strings. One at a time, he takes each string out and places them on the table.

(FRANKLIN puts down the envelope.)

He grabs the first one and strings it on the violin. At the end of each string, there's a little metal ball. That satisfying click is it sliding into place.

(while the peg creaks)

He threads the other end into the scroll, using the peg tighten it. He picks up the recently finished violin and starts to pluck the string.

(while FRANKLIN bows the A string)

As he gets closer to the desired pitch, he slows down and begins to bow across the string before finally centering the note.

(while FRANKLIN repeats with the E string)

He follows the same pattern of threading, plucking, and bowing with the next string. This time, he's more hesitant. Nearing the pitch, he holds his breath, almost in anticipation of something going awry.

(A long, suspenseful moment in which the only sound is the note slowly creeping higher. The string snaps.)

FRANKLIN:

Son of a bitch!

(MARY enters, clearly startled by FRANKLIN's sudden outburst.)

MARY:

What happened?

FRANKLIN:

(setting the bow down)

The E snapped.

MARY:

You didn't scratch the wood, did you?

FRANKLIN:

No.

MARY:

Then what's all the fuss about?

FRANKLIN:

(beat)

It was never actually in tune.

MARY:

What do you mean? You put the right string on, right?

FRANKLIN:

Yes. It just.. wasn't.. I don't know..

MARY:

Franklin, you're talking nonsense.

FRANKLIN:

I don't know..

(He sets down the violin. Fanning himself with the collar of his shirt.)

It's hot.

MARY:

And a little stuffy.

FRANKLIN:

Feels like I'm suffocating.

(after breathing slowly and loudly for a moment)

The string was too low. It didn't get to E.

(beat)

I understand why it snapped. I tightened it too much.

But it was the right string. It shouldn't have been an issue.

(FRANKLIN and MARY are silent for a moment, racking their brains for any possible explanation. FRANKLIN begins to anxiously drum on the table with his fingers.)

MARY:

I need to go get ready. I'm sure it'll be fine.

(MARY exits.)

FRANKLIN:

It'll be fine.

NARRATOR:

(action following)

Franklin stands up to grab a broom and dustpan. He begins to sweep the sawdust from the table and floor.

(While sweeping, FRANKLIN hums the same slow, dark classical piece that was on the radio before (Schindler's List). He is in no hurry. After dumping the sawdust into the garbage, he puts the dustpan and broom back.)

NARRATOR:

(action following)

He's getting another string.

(He opens a cabinet, grabs another E string envelope, and sits back at his table. He takes out the string and puts down the envelope. He picks up the violin. Again, the string's ball clicks into place. End of scene.)

SCENE FIVE

NARRATOR:

September twenty-sixth.

(action following)

As if performing a ceremony or sacred ritual, Franklin begins to pack the violin while reciting a prayer, an act of contrition. He places a heavy case down on the table and puts the violin inside.

FRANKLIN:

My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart.

NARRATOR:

(action following)

After rooting through a few cabinets, he returns with scissors, wax paper, foam cubes, bubble wrap, and masking tape. He puts them on the table.

FRANKLIN:

In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good,

NARRATOR:

(action following)

He cuts two small squares from the wax paper, places a cube of foam on top of each one, and slides them above and below the bridge of the violin.

FRANKLIN:

I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things.

NARRATOR:

(action following)

He cuts a large piece of bubble wrap, rolling it tightly, and positioning it at the base of the violin.

(beat)

Finally, he must close the case.

FRANKLIN:

I firmly intend, with your help,
(He secures each locking mechanism with the following phrases.)
to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin.

NARRATOR:

(action following)
He grabs a bag of packing material, rips it open, and pours the contents into a large cardboard box.

FRANKLIN:

Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us.

NARRATOR:

(action following)
He carefully lays the violin case inside, insuring that it will not shift during its trip.

FRANKLIN:

(while applying a piece or two of packing tape)
In His name. My God have mercy. Amen.
(He lifts the box and exits. End of scene.)

SCENE SIX

NARRATOR:

September thirtieth.
(The phone rings. FRANKLIN picks up almost immediately.)

CECILY:

What the hell, Franklin?

FRANKLIN:

What.

CECILY:

You know what.

FRANKLIN:

Do I?

CECILY:

Don't play dumb.

FRANKLIN:

(beat)
That violin was perfect.

CECILY:

Bull.

FRANKLIN:

The wood isn't warped. The cuts are clean. The neck is straight.

CECILY:

None of that matters if the violin doesn't work.

FRANKLIN:

You don't know what you're talking about.

CECILY:

You're telling me that I don't know what I'm talking about? Which of us tried to sell a broken instrument?
(beat)
You're not getting the money.

FRANKLIN:

Wh-

CECILY:

I refuse to pay for a violin I can't play.

FRANKLIN:

I labored over that for weeks. I busted my ass so you'd have it early.

CECILY:

It doesn't matter.

FRANKLIN:

I-

(CECILY hangs up. FRANKLIN turns on the radio, an aggressive orchestral piece (Schubert's String Quartet No. 14 in D minor (Death and the Maiden) - IV. Presto) blares. Boxes of screws and cans of paint hit the ground. MARY enters. They stand staring at each other for an uncomfortable amount of time. When she begins to speak, her words are barely audible above the music.)

MARY:

Shit.. Franklin, what did you do?

(FRANKLIN shoves his chair back and walks out. The front door slams in the distance. End of scene.)

SCENE SEVEN

NARRATOR:

October sixth. Cecily isn't only one to contend with.
(MARY and FRANKLIN sit looking at the work table. FRANKLIN types briefly.)

MARY:

Are you sure? You don't have to look.

FRANKLIN:

I need to know.

(FRANKLIN clicks something. The two begin to read comments left on his website aloud, scrolling slowly.)

FRANKLIN:

“Franklin Wells is a fraud. His violins are no better than the rest, but he charges ten times as much. The past week, all of my instruments have stopped staying in tune, including his. So much for quality workmanship.”

MARY:

“He’s supposed to be the best in the business. It’s all outright lies.”

FRANKLIN:

“I was supposed to perform at my sister’s wedding and my twenty thousand dollar violin broke the day before. Do you know how mortifying that was? I want my money back.”

MARY:

(beat)

This one is Cecily.. “Mr. Wells sold me a broken violin. Right out of the box. He should be ashamed of himself.” ..Franklin..I’ll try to pick up extra shifts, but you know I can’t support us both forever.

FRANKLIN:

I know. It’ll be fine.

MARY:

How? Should we reach out to Sarah?

FRANKLIN:

No. I’ll figure this out. Don’t worry.

(End of scene.)

SCENE EIGHT

NARRATOR:

October seventh.

(FRANKLIN dials a number. LEO picks up.)

LEO:

Hello?

FRANKLIN:

Leo..

LEO:

Franklin? It’s been weeks! Are you o–

FRANKLIN:

Is there anything unusual happening with your strings?

LEO:

What?

(beat)

Actually, yeah. On hot days, they’re really flat.. Weird shit has been happening with most my instruments when the weather changes.

FRANKLIN:

My violins have the same problem. But it’s every day.

LEO:

Well, yeah. You live in Texas.

FRANKLIN:

(after contemplating for a moment)

What do I do? I can’t keep working like this.

LEO:

You could go up north?

FRANKLIN:

I can’t. My entire life is here.. I’m too old to move. I can’t begin to imagine starting over somewhere else.. And even if I did move, I can’t change what people have already said about me. It’s all over the Internet. It’s too late.

LEO:

I don’t know what to tell you. It’s not your fault those violins just can’t function like they used to.. You either need a new type of violin or a new type of climate. And I doubt the world is gonna stop getting warmer any time soon..

FRANKLIN:

..I have an idea.. Thank you.

(FRANKLIN hangs up. End of scene.)

SCENE NINE

NARRATOR:

(action following)

October twelfth. Franklin sits at his work table, sketching furiously. Over time he develops an off-kilter rhythm: pencil marking, contemplative pause, frustrated erasing, repeat. Occasionally, he goes for a ruler. When Franklin is finally satisfied, *(FRANKLIN dials a number and pauses before clicking to make the call. The phone rings.)*

AUTOMATED VOICE:

Thank you for calling the United States Patent and Trademark Office. For trademark information, say one. For patent information, say two.

FRANKLIN:

Two.

(End of play.) ■