

***The Last Mass at St Casimir's***  
**By Tom Dudzick**  
**Presented at the Public Theater**  
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**A STUDY GUIDE**  
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**THE PLAYWRIGHT:** As the playwright's website makes clear, Tom Dudzick has drawn freely on his own past in creating the characters and situations in *The Last Mass at St. Casimir's*. Here is what he posts about himself online (*from Tom Dudzick's official website, <http://tomdudzick.com/>*):

Often referred to by theatre critics as “the Catholic Neil Simon,” Tom Dudzick has created a series of semi-autobiographical comedies that have played successfully in theatres from New York to Los Angeles and a hundred cities in between. His plays have broken the box office records at Buffalo Studio Arena, Pittsburgh Public Theatre, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis and Chicago's Northlight Theatre.

Tom was born in Buffalo, NY (over a tavern) in 1950 and received his early theatrical training creating musical comedies for that city's massive dinner theatre industry, always casting himself in the lead role, thus garnering critical acclaim as “Western New York's premiere comic actor.”

In the 1980's Tom relocated to New York, left performing behind and focused on writing. Within a few years' time he had landed his first off-Broadway play--“Greetings!”--a Christmas family comedy produced by the legendary Arthur Cantor and starring stage and screen veteran, Darren McGavin. The *Los Angeles Times* described “Greetings!” as “a wonderful, wacky look at how cleverly a mixture of Christmas, Hanukkah, and New Age philosophy can--in the right hands--flick on the electricity.” The play is now a holiday favorite, appearing annually in theatres all over the country.

For his next play, Tom dipped into his own childhood, semi-fictionalized his

family, called them the Pazinski's, called the play "Over the Tavern" and turned it into what Chris Jones of the *Chicago Tribune* calls, "one of the biggest grass-roots successes in American regional theatre of the last few years."

The hilarious and touching play created such interest that Buffalo Studio Arena commissioned him to write a sequel, employing the same characters ten years older, which Tom entitled "King o' the Moon." This comedy has also been performed to great success in major cities such as Pittsburgh, Chicago and Los Angeles.

Tom has finally created an "Over the Tavern Trilogy" by writing yet a third play about the Pazinski's, set in the infamous Blizzard of '77, and entitled "The Last Mass at St. Casimir's."

Tom now has a "day" named after him. By mayoral proclamation, May 5 is declared "Tom Dudzick Day" in Buffalo, NY, in gratitude for "his contribution to his boyhood community and theatre-goers nationwide."

Tom now lives in Nyack, NY with his wife Holly Caster, and their children, Charles and Emma.

Clearly, Dudzick is working in the tradition of many other American dramatists who have mined their autobiographies for theatrical material.

The most notable example of this practice is probably to be found in Eugene O'Neill's family tragedy, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, a play whose characters are strikingly similar to the members of the author's immediate family, whose plot is closely based on events from his youth, and whose setting in a house in New London exactly mirrors his family's summer residence in that Connecticut town. Similarly, in creating *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams tapped into his experiences as an alienated young man in St. Louis and bestowed many of the qualities of his mother and sister on the characters Amanda and Laura. And more recently, Sam Shepard has made repeated use in his dramas of material from his early years in California, peopling plays such as *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Fool for Love* with variants of his father, an ex-military pilot who fell prey to alcoholism in his middle years.

*The Last Mass at St. Casimir's* is in fact the last in a trilogy of plays based on Dudzick's family. In the first, *Over the Tavern*, we meet the Pasinskis—the fictionalized version of the playwright's own family—as they grapple with their domestic problems and crises in 1959, during the last years of the Eisenhower era.

In the second installment, *King o' the Moon*, the playwright leaps ahead a decade, and shows us the various members of the family responding to the disruptive currents abroad in America in 1969.

*In The Last Mass at St. Casimir's*, set in 1977, the family is saying goodbye to their tavern and to the life they have lived in and over it. In this final installment of his family drama, Rudy's mother advises her aspiring-playwright son to, "[W]rite what you know." Obviously this has been a guiding principle for Tom Dudzick in the three plays of his *Over the Tavern* trilogy—as it has also been for generations of dramatists before him.

An earlier version of the play, under the title *Lake Effect*, premiered in Buffalo in 2001. A later version with the current title opened in California in 2007.

**THE SETTING:** As with the characters and plot of his play, so with its physical setting: Tom Dudzick again makes free use of his own family's physical surroundings in creating the environment of *The Last Mass at St. Casimir's*. In the stage directions he writes that,

We are in the bar room of 'Chet's Bar & Grill,' a typical neighborhood watering hole established about 40 years ago by the late Chet Pazinski. . . .

'Chet's' is set in the middle of a once thriving inner-city neighborhood. . . . Now there are boarded up windows and 'forsale' signs.

A website dedicated to "Forgotten Buffalo" celebrates the tavern that served as the real-life model behind that theatrical image (from <http://www.forgottenbuffalo.com/classictavernslastcall/bigjoedudzickstavern.html>):

It may not look like much anymore — just a small parking lot behind a green chain-link fence. But to thousands of theatergoers in Western New York and across the United States, 770 Seneca St. stands for something a lot bigger. To them, the patch of earth on the once-bustling East Side symbolizes Buffalo itself — hardworking, shirtsleeve, blue-collar Buffalo of the 1950s. . . . That's the image of Buffalo that the play 'Over the Tavern' sent out to the world. Now the site of the original 'Over the Tavern' tavern has a brand-new historical marker all its own.

Monday, playwright Tom Dudzick came to Buffalo from his home downstate to get a first look at the city marker, a 2-foot-square slab of bronze that commemorates his achievement — and the lifework of his father, Joe Dudzick. . . .

The lot on Seneca Street was the site of Big Joe's Tavern from 1946 to 1966. . . .

‘I remember sitting at the bottom of the stairs that separated our apartment from the tavern, and the jukebox playing and the men laughing,’ Tom Dudzick recalled. ‘If it wasn’t busy, I would sit with some Squirt and potato chips and watch Jackie Gleason.’

Both Joseph Dudzick and his wife, Alice, worked in the family business, making their home above the bar. They had five children — Carol, Paul, Joan, Michael and Tom. . . . In ‘Over the Tavern, the bar is ‘Chet’s Bar and Grill,’ owned by a family called the Pazinskis. The play is told through the point of view of the family’s 12-year-old son, Rudy, a stand-in for the playwright as a boy.

The historical marker reads: *On This Spot 770 Seneca Street Stood ‘Big Joe’ Dudzick’s Tavern (1946-1966), Boyhood Home Of Playwright Tom Dudzick, Inspiration For “Chet’s Bar and Grill,” Immortalized In His Play “Over the Tavern” First Presented By Studio Arena Theatre in 1994. . . .*

The three-story building that used to be Big Joe’s was torn down during the 1980s. Now a custom-canvas business occupies the site and has turned the lot into a parking area. Tom Dudzick, a graduate of Fredonia State College, moved away from Buffalo in 1979. . . . Gazing around at his old neighborhood Monday, Dudzick predicted a renaissance. . . . ‘I know someday this neighborhood’s going to come back up,’ he said. ‘And people will stop here and look at the marker, and say, ‘Oh, I saw that play! And this is where it all started.’

Besides being a re-creation of the playwright’s family home and neighborhood, the setting carries additional emotional significance because it conveys the sense of a vanishing world. As the play begins, the last of the Pazinskis are about to vacate Chet’s, having sold the bar to a Vietnamese family who will open an Asian restaurant. And the title of the play itself—*The Last Mass at St. Casimir’s*—names moment of transition, placing a period at the end of one era, and hanging a question mark over the future. So this drama about a family in the process of change is appropriately set in a place that is itself changing radically.

And the changes in the parish and the bar are symptomatic of the changing identity of Buffalo as a whole. At its height in 1950, the population of New York’s second largest city was about 580 thousand. At the time of *The Last Mass at St. Casimir’s*, that number had shrunk to about 400 thousand, a decrease of more than 30%. The population would continue to plunge, sinking to an estimated 279 thousand in 2008—a drop of almost 50% in 58 years. This change reflected a deterioration in Buffalo’s economic fortunes and the ensuing decline of the Catholic working-class culture of the 1950s that would have formed the social foundation of Chet’s Bar and Grill.

Buffalo's notorious winter weather is another important element of the play's setting. The action takes place during the fabled Blizzard of '77, a storm of historic proportions in the Buffalo area which killed dozens of people and paralyzed the city for several days. Snow began falling on Friday, January 28, 1977, and continued throughout the weekend and into the following week. Wind gusts reached 69 mph and wind-chill readings hit 40 below zero; meanwhile drifting snow piled so high that some snowmobilers found themselves crashing into the chimneys of houses buried under drifts or menaced by overhead powerlines which accumulating snow had placed within arm's reach.

The action of *The Last Mass at St. Casimir's* takes place in the middle of this maelstrom. Because of the weather, the characters of the play find themselves trapped in Chet's Bar and Grill, cut off from outside contact, and forced to confront each other and face up to the conflicts that strain the family. The storm is a kind of dramatic pressure-cooker that accelerates the process of family reckoning. Thus, when an important family member is literally lost in the blizzard, the storm exposes a vulnerability that needs to be recognized.

The storm also counterpoints the centrifugal forces of neighborhood dissolution and consequent family dispersal. While Buffalo's social changes pull the members of the Pazinski family apart from one another, the blizzard compels them to stop, draw together, and look inward at their own problems.

**THE PLOT.** As we have seen, the play begins with a ferocious blizzard paralyzing the city of Buffalo. White-outs and snow-drifts are beginning to make driving impossible and telephones will soon fail as high winds snap communication lines. Out of this winter maelstrom and into the bar room of "Chet's Bar and Grill" stumble Eddie Pazinski and his sister, Annie.

"Chet's" has been their parents' family business for decades, with the Pazinskis and their four children occupying an apartment on the floor above the tavern. But now Eddie, Annie, and their brother, Rudy have moved on in life, leaving only their mother, Ellen, and their retarded brother, Georgie, still living over the bar. What's more, Ellen has sold the business to Vietnamese immigrants, so she will soon be moving out herself to take up residence in a comfortable condo outside the old neighborhood.

In the midst of all this family change, however, Georgie presents a problem that must be solved. Can Ellen, now in her 60s, continue looking after this 31-year-old man with the mind of a child? More pressingly, how will she deal with the deterioration in his condition that seems inevitable given his latest diagnosis: senile dementia? Poor Georgie is prematurely falling victim to a disease of the aged, suffering a deepening loss of memory, growing confusion, and greater likelihood of self-destructive behavior.

It is to settle the question of what to do about Georgie that Eddie and Annie have ventured out on this stormy day, having arranged a family conference on the issue at the

bar. Also invited to this meeting is Rudy, the youngest of the four Pazinski siblings, now living in New York. But Rudy's arrival is doubtful in Eddie's eyes, since the blizzard has rendered the prospect of a safe landing at the Buffalo airport highly unlikely. Annie, on the contrary, is convinced he will overcome all obstacles and make his way to the family conference.

Because they know that their mother will want no part of a plan to place Georgie in an institution, they have disguised their intentions in gathering together at this moment. The reason for the family conclave, they have told their mother, is for them all to attend the last Mass at St. Casimir's, their lifelong parish church—to mark a historic moment together.

Eddie and Annie have been driving through the storm, and at the point of their arrival at "Chet's" each is exasperated with the other. In Annie's view, Eddie's recklessness behind the wheel is life-threatening: "You could've got us killed, running lights, running stop signs—" Eddie, on the other hand, feels nothing but scorn for Annie's timidity: "That's the way you drive in this. If there's an opening you plow through. You stop, you're dead. Drive like you, we'd be in a snowbank somewhere."

Frazzled by Eddie's driving, Annie bolted out of the car before it was properly parked, twisting her ankle and smacking her nose into a lamp-post as a result. Now she arrives at the bar room limping and bleeding, blaming her reckless brother, who in turn taunts her for her feckless moment of panic.

ANNIE. I'm bleeding like a stuck pig. Please get me a chair. . . . Help me. I won't make it. (*Rolling his eyes, [Eddie] lazily moves to her.*) Please, before I fall and break something else.

EDDIE. Fall on your mouth; it's indestructible.

This exchange establishes the pattern of their relationship throughout the play. Brother and sister, Annie and Eddie are the closest of relatives, but in temperament they're miles apart. Their conversational style, based on loving antagonism, flows from this contradiction, and is built around belligerent banter, incessant needling, and affectionate abuse.

But behind their differences lies their common purpose. They must convince their mother to accept the painful truth about Georgie's future: because she can no longer care for him on her own he will have to be placed in a nursing home.

As they wait for Rudy to arrive, Annie muses about how their family situation and the raging blizzard somehow fit together in the grand scheme of things:

**ANNIE.** What does it all mean? . . . God's plan. The years I've spent trying to figure it out. I mean, we make a plan, like tonight's. Then God does something like this because [H]e's got a plan. But it affects our plan. So does that mean [H]e wants us to change our plan because [H]e doesn't approve of it?

**EDDIE.** It snows 'cause we're on a lake.

Again, we see the temperamental differences: Annie's earnest search for the underlying meaning of events bumps up against Eddie's matter-of-fact dismissal of a divine plan as the reason for the snow storm. The same yearning to understand prompts Annie to wonder why "we're the ones God sent Georgie to? . . . Why us?" As with the cause of the blizzard, Eddie's explanation is direct and pragmatic: "Why us? Because of Mom's mixed up chromosomes, that's why us."

And while they are on the subject of celestial planning, Eddie wonders if it is God's intention that his son, Gary, become the class clown of the third grade at St. Gregory's elementary school. It seems that Gary's Uncle Rudy has been sending the boy a stream of gag gifts, like fake vomit and dog droppings, and that the child has also become an outspoken voice of dissent in his religion class, asking if God really bothers keeping track "of every little sin." Annie bursts into laughter at this news, finding it hilarious that Eddie's son is "just like his Uncle Rudy," an instance of genetic mis-coding that Eddie resents: "And that's part of the Big Plan, is it? That my son gets Rudy's traits instead of mine?"

As if to underline the waywardness of our genes, Georgie wanders into the bar room at this moment, on the prowl for something to engage his vagrant attentions. He points delightedly to the falling snow, enthuses about "Da-Kween," his version of "Dairy Queen," and heads into the back room in search of potato chips—which seem to be the main component of his diet. As he exits, "Eddie and Annie exchange a look. She shakes her head sadly." They have moved from teasing and baiting one another to a common recognition of Georgie's deteriorating condition.

Just as they are sharing this moment of silent communication, Rudy arrives, having astonishingly overcome the storm's obstacles. The youngest Pazinski—who is shushed the moment he walks through the door—falls right into conversational step with his brother and sister, demonstrating what Annie meant when she declared that her class-clown nephew is just like his Uncle Rudy.

**ANNIE.** (*She wriggles in excitement and holds out her arms for a hug.*) C'mere, c'mere, c'mere—(*To Eddie.*) See, I told you!

(*Deadpan, Eddie twirls his finger, yippee-style.*)

**RUDY.** (*Moving to Annie.*) Why are we whispering? Is this a holdup in progress?

**ANNIE.** I knew you'd make it.

RUDY. You greet me with blood? What happened?  
EDDIE. It was God's plan that I deck her.  
ANNIE. I had an accident.  
EDDIE. A lamppost jumped out in front of her. . . .  
RUDY. (*Re: their bickering.*) I see things haven't changed.

This constant flow of jokes and hugs forms the texture of family life among the Pazinskis—a weave of emotions that “hasn't changed” despite the drastically altered circumstances of the family. Again we see that despite the geographical and psychological differences separating them, these people are deeply attached to each other.

One of the sources of this attachment is the bar and the upstairs apartment: the shared setting of their years together as children and adolescents. Now that the property has been sold, Rudy laments having to say his “very emotional mental goodbye” to the old homestead and all its furnishings. When he learns that a Vietnamese family has bought the bar and is planning on transforming it into a Vietnamese restaurant, he is taken aback. With a sigh, he declares, “I guess I just don't want anybody in here. Up there. Sitting in our kitchen. Waiting for their father to come upstairs in a bad mood.”

This moment of family memory slides into concern for the present, and they begin discussing the Georgie problem. They inform Rudy about the diagnosis of senile dementia—a disability shared by yet another member of the family, their mother's Uncle Belmont, a relative whom Rudy has never heard of before.

Just as Rudy is digesting this information, in walks Georgie from the back room, carrying a bag of potato chips. Delighted to see each other, Georgie and Rudy immediately fall into long shared routines of fun and games. Rudy takes the fact that Georgie remembers these routines as confirmation that his memory is not deteriorating. But Annie corrects this mistaken impression. “Those are the old routines. Don't be fooled. . . . Dr. Filsinger gave us an idea of the kind of behavior we can expect from Georgie in the next couple of months. I doesn't look pretty.”

Just as Annie is sketching out the grim facts about Georgie's future, we hear her mother, Ellen calling from the upstairs apartment. Annie suffers a moment of anxiety: “I'm gonna have a nervous breakdown. . . . She won't listen to anything we say! She goes on like everything's fine! She thinks she's still thirty-five years old with all this energy!”

In order to avoid giving the impression that the siblings have been secretly conspiring about family business in their mother's absence, Rudy decides to pretend he hasn't arrived yet from New York. He puts his coat back on and returns to the storm, preparing to re-enact his entrance of a few moments earlier.

Meanwhile, Ellen descends from the upstairs apartment to find Annie in apparently dire straits, her ankle elevated, and her nose covered by a bloody hankie—a posture she assumes in a blatant bid for her mother’s sympathy. It doesn’t take Ellen long, however, to determine that her daughter’s injuries are not what they seem: she has not been hurt in a car accident and her ankle is not broken. “Well it’s still Eddie’s fault,” Annie insists. But Ellen is not about to be suckered by this show of sibling rivalry: “The way you blow things up,” she dryly observes, dismissing her daughter’s exaggerations. To which Annie responds, “And once again, believe him and not me.” So, we gather, this maneuvering for Ellen’s approval has been going on for a long time.

Rudy’s second arrival breaks the moment of tension. His mother is glad he has shaved his beard, and apologizes that there is no food in the house, and little likelihood of acquiring any, given the blizzard. Georgie also joins the group, and greets Rudy as if he hadn’t seen him just a few minutes earlier. Suddenly, it becomes clearer to Rudy that his brother’s memory *is* declining.

Ellen then presses Rudy for news of his life in New York where, we learn, he is attempting to pursue a career as a playwright while earning a living by working in the Parking Violations Bureau. Disinclined to discuss this unglamorous aspect of his situation, he breaks the news to his family that he is soon to be married, to a Jewish girl who plays the cello, and who hopes to join the New York Philharmonic—a marriage prompted by the fact that his fiancé is pregnant.

Annie suddenly decides that she must get home to prepare for her daughter’s upcoming birthday party. She demands that Eddie drive her; he refuses; they fall into their usual bickering—but their exchange is interrupted when Georgie suddenly, for no apparent reason, flies into a temper tantrum, screaming “NO! NO! NO!,” flinging his bag of potato chips to the floor, and stomping on them. For Rudy, Eddie, and Annie this is yet another demonstration of Georgie’s deteriorating mental and emotional condition.

As Ellen leads Georgie off to regain his composure, the others learn that there is no hope of anyone’s leaving the bar during on this night: the snow has worsened, the phone lines are down, and the mayor has banned driving in Buffalo. Hearing this news, Annie, “turns and yanks open the door as if to escape. But as the snow blows in she realizes the futility of it and slams the door.” As the first scene ends, she asks helplessly, “Why can’t we live in a normal city?”

The second scene finds the Pasinskis still in the bar later that same night, with the snow still relentlessly falling. While playing G.I. Joe with Georgie, Ellen discovers that he has wet his pants—another symptom of deterioration. Meanwhile, Annie and Eddie return from outdoors, where they have been shoveling snow, trying to keep abreast of the ever worsening storm. Rudy, meanwhile, descends from the upstairs apartment, where he has apparently been working on his writing—and not shoveling snow, a fact sardonically

noted by Eddie. Rudy retaliates for this jibe by sidling over to a picture of dogs playing poker on the bar room wall, sliding it off to one side, and revealing a “cartoon of a naked woman” concealed behind the gambling canines. “Debbie Ronski,” Rudy cackles, “*I’m tellin’*.” Evidently, Eddie drew this picture during the heat of an adolescent admiration for Debbie, and has kept it hidden on the family premises ever since. As Rudy studies the drawing, his sarcasm changes to grudging admiration: “Got to admit, you had a talent.”

So both brothers share an artistic bent: Rudy for playwriting, and Eddie for drawing. But it’s clear that neither has found a particularly satisfying or successful way of expressing his talent. In an earlier moment, Rudy is needling Eddie about his career:

**RUDY:** So, how ya’ doin’? How’s the cartooning business?

**EDDIE:** Illustration

**RUDY:** That’s right. I always get them mixed up. Illustration, that’s cartoons without the humor, right?

Rudy evidently looks down on Eddie’s humorless occupation as illustrator, implying that it’s a job that lacks the creative independence of a real artist. But when Ellen later reads out excerpts from the script Rudy is writing, we see that he is far from secure or accomplished in his own *métier*. Hearing his words spoken aloud, Rudy realizes how inauthentic his writing sounds: “I love writing. . . . That I’m hopelessly inept is just a technicality. . . . What good is learning my craft if I have no story to tell? Am I empty? . . . My God . . . [m]y baby will find his voice before I do.

On the heels of this moment of authorial despair, Gerogie arrives with a slice of bread looking for the toaster—which is broken. He then wanders off to the back room, where the potato chips are stored. In his absence, Annie begins to broach the subject of Georgie’s deteriorating mental condition—the real subject that has drawn the siblings together in this blizzard. Ellen is determined to keep Georgie living with her when they move to her new home. “You’re blowing things up again the way you always [do] . . .” Ellen tells her daughter, reminding us of her similar response to Annie’s exaggerated version of her driving mishap with Eddie. But Ellen soon learns that Annie has been inquiring about the possibility of having Georgie moved to St. Vincent’s, a nursing facility run by an order of nuns who helped educate him earlier in his life.

At this news, Ellen blows up:

**ELLEN:** I told you how I felt about a nursing home for Georgie. It is out of the question. . . .

**ANNIE:** This has to be a family decision.

**ELLEN:** Family? Where do you see a family? A family doesn’t sneak and plot behind a mother’s back. . . . For the last time. God has a plan. Georgie and I are

a part of that plan. Not separate. Together. That's his plan. I know that as sure as I know I'm alive.

Things seem to be at an emotional impasse with both sides dug into their positions when Georgie returns from the back room bearing toast. Immediately everyone wonders how he managed such a feat, given the absence of a working toaster. Then Rudy sniffs the air and smells something burning. Eddie runs into the backroom and returns immediately with a "blackened burnt dishtowel, still smoldering." Georgie has been playing with fire, an obvious threat to life and property, and seemingly further evidence that he needs professional supervision. But Ellen's response is ambiguous. She takes Georgie's hand and says, "It will never happen again." Does she mean that Georgie won't be so reckless in the future? Or that she will become even more vigilant? Or that she now sees the necessity of life in a nursing home for her unfortunate son? As act one ends, we are left wondering which of these meanings lies behind her words.

As the second act begins we hear a radio broadcast describing the dire situation being created by the blizzard: record-breaking snowfall, whiteouts on the roads, and the summoning of the National Guard. As the grim news drones on in the background, the family plays Scrabble. Predictably Rudy and Eddy get into an argument over the rules. The question at issue: is "Hell" is a permissible word? This dispute mutates into a session of mockery of the speech about the storm just broadcast by the mayor, a politician characterized by Eddy as "a total loser," and by Rudy as someone who belongs on "a comedy album."

Next on the agenda is an inventory of the family larder, a motley collection including raisins, cake frosting, Italian dressing mix, Ritz Crackers, canned goods, one egg, and twenty-two bags of potato chips. Rudy teases Eddie, the Vietnam vet, about his military obsession with shoveling the ever-accumulating snow; Annie frets over her daughter's canceled birthday party; Eddie teases Annie about her multiple childhood phobias, then teases Rudy about his playwriting. In retaliation, Rudy exposes Eddie's naked picture of Debbie Ronski to the rest of the family. Through it all, they continue their desultory game of Scrabble, showing us again the nature of family life: an atmosphere of rivalry and gibes underlain by abiding affection and interdependence, all knit together like a casual board-game.

Rudy notices a pile of boxes and bags on the floor, family odds-and-ends that Ellen won't be taking to her new home. He digs through the contents and pulls out a item that turns out to be his christening gown—a memento that leads to a discussion of his child's religious future. As his family probes him on the subject, Rudy reveals that he has no plans to raise the child as a Catholic or a Jew—indeed, he plans no religious education whatever for his offspring. This leads to much dismay on the part of his mother and sister, and to further sarcasm from his brother. Rudy proclaims himself a "deist," saying, "I believe in God, I don't worship Him. Or Her, or It. . . . I don't think He particularly

wants to be worshipped. Or needs to be. I think He's more well-adjusted than that." Rudy argues that any God Who demanded to be worshiped would be, by that very fact, an egotistical monster, and on that account alone would be unworthy of adoration.

Annie doesn't accept this line of reasoning, insisting that a religious education of some kind is essential: "Rudy, if we were talking about some kid off the street, I'd say fine, to each his own. . . . But this is blood. I care about you child. He's family." Annie's passion about religion is especially notable given her own situation: a cradle Catholic, she has been divorced and left the Church, which, in her view, doesn't change the essential facts: "So, we're Lutheran now and we're fine. . . . You have to give some thought to eternity."

Challenged to defend his regular attendance at Mass, Eddie answers, with characteristic pragmatism, "Better safe than sorry." But Rudy remains un-swayed by his brother and sister, insisting that the compelling principle he intends to observe is the minor proposition of Annie's earlier speech: "to each his own."

Once again, Annie returns to a favorite theme: God's plan. As she observed earlier regarding the snow storm, there must be a purpose or a pattern or a meaning behind life's events, and surely Rudy is flouting that purpose by this decision to deny his child a religious education: "I don't know if you moving all the way to New York was part of God's plan or not. But what you're doing now—taking an even bigger step away from us—it just can't be what God had in His. . ."

She breaks off, because all this religious talk has stirred Georgie into a disturbing imaginary conversation with a nun who was one of his childhood teachers. Georgie began to think about this woman in response to an earlier assertion by Rudy spelling out his position on his child's upbringing:

[G]et upset to the idea that your niece or nephew won't be participating in the same rituals that you grew up with. When you ask him about the Stations of the Cross, be prepared for a glassy stare. There is no deist equivalent of Sister Clarissa.

At the mention of that cherished name, a light goes off in Georgie's head. "Sissa," he exclaims, and, "Quickly fishes for a silver medal he wears around his neck. . . He holds it up." This medallion was a gift from Sister Clarissa, a memento Georgie has been wearing for some twenty years. As he studies the medal, he falls into an imaginary conversation with "Sissa" that grows increasingly animated. He informs his invisible interlocutor about the snow storm and about Rudy's arrival, laughs at an unheard joke, and obeys her instructions to tuck the medal back into his shirt. At the end of this exchange, he bids "Sissa" an affectionate goodbye.

Annie is horror-struck by this exhibition of Georgie's increasingly delusional behavior, and once again urges her mother to place him in a nursing home. But once again Ellen demurs, stroking her son's head and uttering soothing sounds. The first scene of Act Two ends on this tableau, with Annie returning in anguish to her overriding idea: "Listen to me, everybody, please! There is a plan. As sure as shooting, God does have a plan. And as sure as shooting—this is not it."

The second scene takes us still later into the evening, with the storm still raging. Four of the five Pazinskis, Ellen, Rudy, Eddie, and Georgie enter the door of the bar—all, except Georgie—armed with snow shovels. They have been battling the blizzard, and are exhausted and irritable. Rudy and Eddie in particular are getting on each other's nerves, baiting and needling each other over the pet peeves of a lifetime. Rudy decides to try to get Eddie to talk—to reach across the barrier of their differences and communicate something beyond quips and zingers.

**RUDY:** When we were growing up, you and I weren't reall buddy-buddy. . . .  
And that was okay. But over the last few years it's gotten kind of, uy'know, worse. So I just want to know if you in any way resent me. Because I lucked out of the draft with my lottery number, and you had to go over there and face hell, and I got to stay here and write jokes.

**EDDIE:** Yeah, I do. A lot.

**RUDY:** I didn't want it to happen like that. . . . Anything I can do?

**EDDIE:** You can drop the army jokes.

**RUDY:** Okay, you got it. No more jokes. That's a promise. . . . No more jokes, what kinda crap is that?! I'm sorry, I don't accept that. Joking is like breathing to me. Would you ask me to stop breathing? Don't answer that. . . .

So we see another layer in this relationship: in addition to the family ties and continual teasing there is an undercurrent of anger on Eddie's part at Rudy's exemption from the painful experience of Vietnam. An on Rudy's part, there is a refusal to accept the self-censorship that Eddie demands as the price of brotherly harmony.

Just as they are thrashing their way through this emotional thicket, Annie, forgotten by the others, comes bursting into the bar from the storm. "You left me alone out there!" she exclaims. She, Eddie, and Rudy desert the barroom and head upstairs, leaving Georgie alone downstairs. He looks out the door, is mesmerized by the snow, grabs a shovel, and heads out into the blizzard in search of his beloved Da-Kween.

Annie returns to the bar to pour herself a quick drink. She is joined by Ellen, who reports alarming news: a dead body has been found under a nearby train trestle. As they chat, Annie expresses her worry that tomorrow's Mass at St. Casimir's will be canceled. This event was the ostensible reason for the family gathering, the cover story camouflaging the

real purpose of settling Georgie's future. But the last Mass is nonetheless an important milestone that the family eagerly wants to attend.

St. Casimir's is the parish church of the neighborhood where they have lived for decades. It is a spiritual landmark for each of them: the place where they took the important steps of life, from baptism, to marriage, to the funeral of Ellen's first husband and father of the four siblings. Like many inner-city Catholic churches during the 1970s, St. Casimir's (named for a 16<sup>th</sup> century prince who became the patron saint of Poland and Lithuania) has fallen on hard times. The Polish-American Catholics who were its mainstay are leaving, and being replaced by newcomers—like the Vietnamese about to take over Chet's—who don't share the old faith. So saying goodbye to St. Casimir's is a sad objective that unites the often fractious Pasinskis.

Annie is the first to express worry that that last Mass will be canceled. Ellen repeats the thought a moment later, apparently without having heard her daughter's previous comment. This touches a raw nerve for Annie, who blurts out one of her chief resentments against her mother: "You never hear me," she charges. "You manage to hear everyone else, but when it comes to me, I don't know what happens, something happens, your ears stop working." In fact, she confesses, she "used to be jealous of Georgie[.] Jealous of a retarded kid. . . . Because when he talked, everybody listened. . . . And I'd say to myself, 'How do I learn that?'"

But Ellen is having none of this complaint: "I listened to all of you kids. Equally." A claim that doesn't convince her daughter, who waves it away with a dismissive, "Ha."

This mother-daughter face-off is interrupted by a far more alarming crisis: people are beginning to realize that Georgie has disappeared. When Rudy sees the discarded potato chip bag on the floor near the door, they realize that their brother has wandered off into the storm. Seized with panic, they organize a rescue party and as they head into the night in search of Georgie the second scene ends.

Scene three takes up the action a half-hour later. Ellen and Annie enter from the storm without Georgie. Shortly thereafter, Eddie appears, with Rudy in tow, the latter having knocked himself out by running into a lamp post. But still no Georgie. However, when Rudy recovers, he looks out the door, and there stands the missing brother. It turns out he had trudged to St. Casimir's where he has in fact been sheltered from the storm.

Following all the excitement, Ellen declares the day at an end. She shrugs off Annie's attempts to reopen the nursing home conversation, and takes Georgie up to bed. Eddie and Rudy are left alone in the bar, and Rudy suggests that Eddie do something about removing the naked picture of Debbie Ronski before the Vietnamese move in. Eddie agrees, and as Rudy heads for bed, Eddie hauls out a box of paint jars and brushes. "He slowly steps back and studies the wall. His wheels are turning. Now he returns to the

box of paints and carefully selects a narrow brush. He has a plan.” As he eyes the wall, brush in hand, the third scene comes to an end.

The play’s final scene begins with a radio broadcast of a man-in-the-street interview with a typical, beleaguered citizen of snowed-in Buffalo. The storm is at an end, and the long-suffering population is taking stock of the situation. The interviewee’s observations boil down to a sturdy stoicism: “Eh, whattaya gonna do?”

As the lights come up in the bar room, we see an extraordinary scene. Overnight, Eddie has covered the wall formerly bearing the naked portrait of Debby Ronski with a “magnificent handpainted mural. . . It is a portrait of the Pazinskis, sitting around their kitchen table. Young Pazinskis.” Eddie, asleep in the bar room, awakes, admires his handiwork, sees that the snow has stopped falling, and exults. He calls his family on a telephone now restored to service and talks to his son, who tells him a joke he learned from wisecracking Uncle Rudy. When he gets his wife on the line, he informs her that the mission of the family gathering is “not accomplished, mission disaster. Next time I say my mother is a level-headed woman, hit me with a shovel.” So, in Eddie’s eyes, Ellen is still committed to keeping her son at home with her.

Next to appear is Rudy, who “sees the mural and stares, awestruck.” Then Annie appears, complaining about her wretched night’s sleep. “She sees the mural and stops dead in her tracks. . . . She is agog.” Then Georgie comes bounding down the stairs headed for the door. But before he gets there he sees the painting and is stopped in his tracks. “Wo-o-ow!” he cries out, appreciatively. Finally Ellen enters, and she too is dazzled. “Glory be,” she says, joining the other members of her family who “stare in wonder” as this portrait of themselves. But what will happen to it when the new Vietnamese owners move in? Will they paint over it? Or, as Rudy suggests, will they keep it as a “conversation piece. . . . Like cave paintings. People will come from the four corners of the earth to gaze at the enigmatic Polish family.”

The spell is broken, however, when they realize they are about to be late for the last Mass at St. Casimir’s. But having joked about the mural, Rudy resumes his study of the picture, “slowly moving toward it. It’s as if a flood of ideas are overwhelming him.” In a rush of inspiration, he declares that the picture of his family has helped him to find that missing writer’s “voice” that has been so conspicuously absent in his playwriting. “Write what you know,” he declares, echoing his mother’s earlier advice. To which Annie delightedly responds, “You mean you’re going to write about us? Oh, that’s so neat!”

Meanwhile, Ellen tells Georgie that they are going to pay a visit to St. Vincent’s after mass: “That’s where Georgie’s going to live.” Georgie is at first panicked and distressed at this idea, dashing “around the room like a squirrel caught in a cage,” and crying out, “No! No!” But eventually his mother soothes and pacifies him by assuring him that he

will be very close to her new house, that Sister Clarissa will be at St. Vincent's to take care of him, and, best of all, that his beloved Dairy Queen will be right next door.

Deeply happy at this turn of events, Annie returns to her favorite theme, albeit with a significant variation: "Dairy Queen. Georgie, know what? I think you planned this whole thing." So there is a plan, one executed by Georgie, though perhaps with some oversight from God.

As they head for church, Annie "mouths a silent 'thank you'" to her mother for finally listening to her. But one last worry strikes her as she passes through the door: "Rudy? What kind of things are you going to write? I mean, you wouldn't embarrass us. Right? I mean you wouldn't tell about private things. . . . Rudy, would you? Rudy?" With that anxious question the play ends as a spotlight lingers on the family mural.

### **THE CHARACTERS.**

**Eddie:** At 33, Eddie is the oldest of the three Pazinski sons, and the young man whose life most closely resembles that of his parents. He is married, has a son of his own, works at a decent but unglamorous job to support his family, and goes to church on Sunday. Unlike his younger brother, Rudy, Eddie has not left Buffalo, either physically or spiritually. He is the dutiful son, not the prodigal, always on hand when the family calls. Throughout the play he's the guy who trudges out into the blizzard, snow shovel over his shoulder, determined not to let the weather bury them all in its undisciplined fury; he is the family member people turn to when something needs doing. As he says to his sister, who's headed upstairs for a snack, "I'll be too busy for dessert. I'll be fixing that storm window in the front room that's coming off. Since I'm the only male in the house who knows which end of a screwdriver to hold."

But there's more to Eddie than meets the eye. For one thing, he has a sharp and caustic sense of humor. One of his first actions in the play—after he pries open the balky bar-room door and helps his sister hobble into shelter from the storm—is to crack a joke. Annie pleads, "Help me. . . . Please, before I fall and break something else." Eddie responds, "Fall on your mouth; it's indestructible."

Here we see the two sides of his complicated character: on the one hand, he's the man who's dependably *there*, offering a supporting shoulder to a family member in need; on the other, he's a master of the deflating wise-crack, seasoning his generosity with the salt of his wit.

Especially complicated are his feelings about his younger brother, Rudy, who was the target of the screwdriver zinger above. Their relationship is plagued by ambivalent emotions centering on their experiences of the war in Vietnam. Rudy avoided

conscription by drawing a high number in the draft lottery. Eddie was not so fortunate, and he wound up serving in combat.

When Rudy asks his brother whether he resents what happened, Eddie's answer is characteristically direct and laconic: "Yeah, I do. A lot." In response, Rudy protests that he, too, suffered from the war, "Reading the news every day, looking for your unit's number? Watching . . . those body bags coming home? Wanna hear about guilt? . . . Don't tell me I didn't suffer."

As with Annie's extravagant complaints about her slightly-injured foot, Eddie deals with Rudy's self-pity with a trade-mark deflationary one-liner:

EDDIE: You suffered?

RUDY: Yes!

EDDIE (*A little smile.*) . . . Cool.

Actually, the core of his response isn't even a one-liner; it's a one-worder which pricks the hot-air balloon of Rudy's bid for sympathy.

Eddie is the kind of character that people describe as having "hidden depths," the sort of person who has a stream of unconventional ideas and emotions flowing beneath the orthodox surface of his appearance and social behavior. Emblematic of this hidden self is his drawing of Debbie Ronski in the nude, sketched on the wall of the bar-room when he was fifteen, and lurking behind a picture of poker-playing dogs ever since—hidden for almost twenty years. As Rudy comments when he considers the sketch, "Got to admit, you had talent!" The playwright puts that picture there to tell us something about Eddie. He wants us to know that the talented—and audacious—adolescent who drew it still lives somewhere inside the dutiful family man.

And we see the emergence of this hidden self when, in the last scene of the play, we encounter Eddie's "magnificent" mural depicting the Pazinski family as it was in the days of their dead father:

Chet . . . is engrossed in his newspaper. . . . Across from him sits Ellen in housedress and apron. . . . [S]he gazes at her dreamboat across the table. . . . Rudy, about 12, mischievously makes devil's horns with his fingers behind Annie's head. Annie . . . glumly holds the weight of the world on her shoulders. . . . Eddie, 15, in high school jacket, rests his face in his hands . . . wishing he were somewhere else. Georgie happily squirms on his mother's lap. . . .

Eddie has transported himself back to the moment when, at age fifteen, he drew the naked Debbie. In doing so, he has released some enormous well of energy and genius in

his adult self, a geyser of artistic talent that has been simmering below the surface for years. As the stage directions tell us, the picture is “a masterful work.”

As the most spectacular thing Eddie does in the play, his painting of the mural surely expresses his overarching objective as a character: He needs to find some way back to the gifted and daring young man he once was while still remaining faithful to the family obligations that now absorb his energy and attention. And there, dominating everything on stage, is the mural that realizes this goal.

As the lights rise on the final scene, Eddie awakens after his heroic night’s labors, immediately rushes to the telephone, “makes the sign of the cross for luck,” and calls home to assure himself that the rest of his family has survived the blizzard. First he jokes with his son, then, as he reviews the events of the last several hours with his wife, the church bells of St. Casimir’s ring in the distance: “Oh, shoot, I gotta get to mass. Yeah, listen, I’ll be home as soon as I get mom some groceries.” This moment gives us the “full Eddie”: loving father and husband, dutiful son and church-goer, he is also an artist who stands before the masterful painting of the family that shaped him.

**ANNIE** makes her first entrance the play limping and complaining, loudly proclaiming her pain to attract sympathy and help from her brother and her mother. Having ventured out in the blizzard to tackle the crisis created by Georgie’s mental health, she has fallen afoul of the weather and injured her ankle and nose. Now she wants to make it clear that she is suffering on behalf of her family. As a result, she strives to be noticed, to be appreciated, to be taken seriously.

Eddie catches something of her essential spirit in his mural, which depicts an Annie who, “glumly holds the weight of the world on her shoulders.” Even as a teenager, Annie was radiating a sense of being uniquely burdened, of carrying more than her share of the family load. And in fact, she is the character who steps up and demands that her mother and brothers confront the problems presented by a mentally deteriorating Georgie. She is the character who initiates the action from which the rest of the play develops: getting everyone together to make a difficult choice.

But Annie feels under-appreciated, especially by her mother as we see in this exchange with Ellen:

ANNIE: You don’t hear me. You manage to hear everyone else, but when it comes to me, I don’t know what happens, something happens, your ears stop working .

ELLEN: Of all the ridiculous things.

ANNIE: Fine. Good. It’s ridiculous. . . . And once again I’m not heard from. . . . Y’know, when [my daughter] talks I listen so hard. Even when it’s some nonsense. . . . I listen. And then I think, “What am I working so hard for? No

one ever listened to me like this.” . . . Do you know I used to be jealous of Georgie? Jealous of a retarded kid, can you believe it? Because when he talked, everybody listened. . . . And I’d say to myself, “how do I learn that?”

This feeling of being ignored might stem from the facts of Pazinski family life, though Ellen stoutly denies having favored or slighted any of her children. Or it might be the result of Annie’s break with some of the orthodoxies of her parents’ generation of Polish-American Catholics. For one thing, she has divorced and remarried, thereby violating a fundamental Catholic prohibition. For another, she has left the Church and become a Lutheran instead—a second betrayal of her roots. It makes psychological sense that Annie, having committed such a double violation of parental core values, would feel cut off from, or even rejected by, the mother whose taboos she has broken. It’s also easy to imagine that Ellen, without fully realizing it, has in fact withdrawn somewhat from the daughter who broke the rules.

In any case, there is an element of tension and conflict in Annie’s relationships with her mother and with the brother who never strayed from the fold: Eddie. With the former, Annie nurses a sense of aggrieved neglect; with the latter, she is in a state of constant bickering and badgering.

One of her chief obsessions, perhaps growing out of her sense of bearing family burdens and suffering family censure, is her conviction that the world must be governed by a divine plan. Because Annie is a worrier, she deeply wants things to work out and make sense in the end; she wants her fretful planning and anxious concern to be validated by some celestial blueprint in which all the parts of this seemingly centrifugal family will fall into place creating an ultimate and reassuring order.

But no sooner is the Georgie-problem solved than Annie begins working on the next thing to worry about: her brother’s new, family-focused playwriting plans, which have her exiting the stage and ending the play with a battery of nervous questions:

Rudy? What kind of things are you going to write? I mean, you wouldn’t embarrass us. Right? I mean, you wouldn’t tell about private things, like, how I was hooked on Twinkies or something! . . . Rudy, would you? Rudy . . . ?

Unlike Annie, **ELLEN** spends most of the play refusing to worry about Georgie’s future. In fact the drama is structured around such moments of refusal. At or very near the end of the first three scenes, Georgie acts with alarming strangeness and Ellen reacts by taking his bizarre behavior pointedly in stride.

In the first scene of Act One, Georgie falls into a sudden rage, screaming, “NO!” over and over for no apparent reason while stomping on a bag of potato chips. Just as suddenly, he calms down, and greets his brother, Rudy, whom he had been playing with moments

earlier, as if he hadn't seen him in ages. While Eddie, Annie, and Rudy are "stunned," and look on with "dread fascination," Ellen reacts with studied calm, saying only, "Come on, Georgie-Man, time to calm you down."

At the end of the second scene of the act, Georgie sets fire to a dish-towel in order to toast a piece of bread, and comes close to burning the house down. His brothers and sister gasp, and watch Georgie in "horrifying silence." But Ellen simply takes his hand and declares, "It will never happen again."

And at the end of the first scene of the second act, Georgie conducts a conversation with an imaginary partner, providing further evidence of his mental deterioration. The siblings stare in "horror," and Annie stammeringly tries to tell her mother that her brother "needs to be. . . ." By which she means that he needs to be institutionalized. But Ellen will not hear of it. Instead she "soothingly" shushes her daughter, and strokes Georgie's troubled head.

By treating each of these instances of bizarre behavior as events that she can assimilate to the normal routines of life, Ellen shows that she is committed to keeping Georgie by her side, caring for him as his mother "twenty-four hours a day." "His memory is slipping. I'm here to help him remember. End of discussion." She wants no part of Annie's attempt to have Georgie enrolled at St. Vincent's, and she vehemently denies that he could ever behave as other people in his condition do: "wandering away, forgetting where they are." The play shows the recurrent testing of that resolution and the repetition of that denial at the climax of each of its first several scenes, thus underlining their dramatic importance. She will persist, she tells her daughter, because, "This is my life." And until the very end, Ellen maintains her position unbudgingly.

Ellen's statement reveals a great deal about her character. As a twice-widowed wife, as the mother of four children, and as the nurturer of a handicapped son for more than thirty years, Ellen is totally shaped by the demands of family life—by the rewards it bestows, the sorrows it imposes, and the sheer duration and intensity of the bonds it creates. This is what she means when she says of her relationship with Georgie, "This is my life." And if family "is" her life, what would she be without a child to care for? Not wanting to confront that question, she clings to Georgie as a way of clinging to herself.

But in the end, after Georgie does in fact wander out into the snow, risking death in the savage blizzard, she does change her mind. Ultimately, as a truly loving mother, and not as a narcissist who uses her children to gratify her own ego, Ellen chooses what is best for Georgie even though it pains her deeply.

**RUDY** is the Pazinski offspring who has strayed furthest from his roots both geographically and spiritually. A would-playwright in pursuit of an artistic career, he has deserted dowdy Buffalo for glamorous New York City. Moreover, he has andoned

Christianity, he is about to marry a Jewish wife in a secular ceremony at City Hall, and he plans to raise the child she is already carrying without any religious identity whatsoever.

And yet, despite these multiple rejections of his family's fundamental values, his loyalty to the Pazinski clan is so great that he returns home in the midst of the century's worst blizzard to help plan for the future of his retarded brother. Rudy, in other words, is a man of contradictions.

Rudy expresses these contradictions with particular clarity in two moments on stage where he discloses the fundamental thrust of his character.

In Act II, when he attempts to reach out to his brother Eddie to overcome the emotional chill that has long settled between them, he asks what he can do to warm up their friendship. "You can drop the army jokes," Eddie replies, showing his resentment at Rudy's continuous mockery of his military habits of mind. Rudy replies—"Awakwardly," according to the script—"Okay, you got it. No more jokes. That's a promise."

So we seem to have reached a small watershed in the brothers' relationship, a resolution that might lead to further developments. But as Rudy stands before the door preparing to leave the room after this turning-point, he hesitates, then "suddenly slams" that door shut. "No more jokes, what kinda crap is that?!", he demands. "I'm sorry, I don't accept that. Joking is like breathing to me. Would you ask me to stop breathing?"

Rudy tells us a great deal about himself when he compares joking to breathing—a necessary, life-sustaining process. To get at some of the implications, we first need to consider the nature of a joke.

One dictionary definition of a joke is, "Something said or done to evoke laughter or amusement, especially an amusing story with a punch line." Which raises yet another question: what is a "punch line?"

To begin with, it's a metaphor: the words hit you like a fist, striking an unexpected blow that startles you into laughter. Punch lines surprise you because they come at you seemingly out of the blue. Given the context of the set-up, you never expected that particular climax.

An example: Joe is boasting to Bob about his new hearing-aid. "Best on the market. I paid top-dollar, but it's worth every penny. Can't be beat." Bob says, "What kind is it?" Joe looks at his watch and says, "About four-thirty." Joe's answer is completely unexpected—we anticipate more information about the hearing-aid, not about the time of day—and as a result the words hit us like a little punch. A punch-line is a bit of shocking incongruity; a follow-up that seems to contradict all the premises of the preparation.

Rudy's need for jokes—his dependence on the punch-line as life-support—tells us that he's the kind of guy who loves the head-fake, the jolt of the unexpected, the rhythm of set-up and contradiction. And this is exactly the rhythm of his habitual behavior—which is another term for character. For him, human relationships should be continuously surprising, a succession of jack-in-the box moments which shock and please everyone involved.

This love of the punch-line appears again near the end of the play when Annie asks Rudy whether the expectant father is hoping for a boy or a girl. Rudy's answer is revealing: "A Pazinski," is his reply. What makes this answer so striking is the fact that he went to such great lengths earlier in the play to set his mother and siblings straight on his intention of raising the child with complete disregard for the family's traditions. The whole concept of being a "Pazinski," with all that implies beyond genetic inheritance, including ethnic loyalties, moral sentiments, and shared attitudes, seemed absolutely anathema to him at that point—a burden which he wanted to spare his child, boy or girl. Now, the play having reached its end, he seems to be contradicting himself, no longer planning for an offspring who is some sort of rootless, sui-generis, autonomous individual, but hoping for a child who will continue the family identity. In other words, he's delivering another punch-line in his ongoing performance of life as a joke.

And he carries this performance yet another step further in the same scene. Just as he is about to launch into a witty disquisition on boys versus girls in response to Annie's question, his eye is caught by his brother's family mural: "[H]e stares at it, entranced . . . . He is lost in the painting, slowly moving toward it. It's as if a flood of ideas are overwhelming him." And what washes into his brain is a major self-discovery:

ELLEN: Hey, lose something?

RUDY (Quietly): I think I found something.

ELLEN: Huh?

RUDY: My voice. . . . (Rudy excitedly goes to the bar and grabs his notebook.)

What did the brilliant mother say? Write what you know? ([S]its at table and writes quickly.) Isn't that what she said?

Having left Buffalo to become a playwright, he now realizes that he must come back home to discover what he has to say as an artist—to find "his voice." And what he will write about is his family and his home town. Just as he wants a Pazinski for a child, he wants a stage full of Pazinskis as his dramatic offspring. Since Rudy is a stand-in for Tom Dudzick, and since Dudzick became a successful dramatist by writing plays about his family, what we are seeing enacted when Rudy finds his voice is a discovery that will alter the course of his life. The prodigal son will become famous by celebrating his family: a final joke that surprises even the joker.

At the end of the play, Annie declares that **GEORGIE**, “planned this whole thing.” The line is meant as a joke, because, given Georgie’s limited and ever-decreasing mental capacities, the likelihood of his planning anything of consequence—let alone the complicated outcome of the plot—seems impossible. And yet, paradoxically, Georgie’s intentions and consequent actions—the primary materials of dramatic character—do in fact shape the action of the drama at its most crucial moments.

It is Georgie who finds and sets fire to a dishtowel to make himself a piece of toast, thereby bringing about the climax of Act I. It is Georgie who reaches out to the invisible Sister Clarissa, engaging in a deeply satisfying conversation that makes him laugh—and makes the others on stage cringe with dread. And it is Georgie who, quite methodically, “flips up his parka hood, grabs a snow shovel” and heads out into the storm on a journey that takes him all the way to St. Casimir’s—and sends his family into a panic. So, limited though his mental powers may be, it is Georgie who is always planning obscure projects, finding ways to pursue them, and enjoying their success— thereby driving the play forward.

Unlike the others on stage, however, Georgie is not always seeking to explain himself, mostly because he can’t. And as a result he remains a constant source of mystery and astonishment to everyone else. In modern psychological drama—the works of O’Neill, Miller, and Williams—characters are always revealing themselves to one another and the audience. The high point of the play comes when we finally understand why James Tyrone is such a skinflint; why Willy Loman longs to be well-liked; why Blanche Dubois can’t get enough of beautiful young men. Package unwrapped, mystery unraveled, our longing for the bottom-line low-down is ultimately sated.

Georgie thwarts all those expectations. His behavior doesn’t mean anything that we can grasp and pocket; he just is. His actions are his own, their meanings a secret; and as a result he is the character around whom all the rest cluster, the problem everyone wants to solve.

**THEMES.** “The trouble with family is, it’s worth the trouble,” reads the epigraph to the text of this play. In effect, this captures the fundamental theme of the drama. In spite of the century’s most savage blizzard, and regardless of the social and personal forces that are pulling them apart, the three functioning Pazinski children make their way to the family home to join forces in solving a family problem.

The troubles are there for all to see: the weather, the frustrating resistance of Ellen to Annie’s common-sense plans for Georgie, the various vexations that brothers and sister cause one another. But on the other side of all those obstacles lies fulfillment and self-discovery, achieved precisely by soldiering doggedly through the family challenges.

As a result of that slog, Eddie recaptures the talent as a visual artist that he first secretly expressed in the naked picture of Debbi Ronski, drawn when he was 15 years old. He has diverted that talent to what seems to be a routine job as an illustrator, which Rudy dismisses as, “cartoons without the humor.” But after his hectic hours with his snow-bound family, Eddie has a vision which he lays out in the wonderful mural he paints on the barroom wall. The play doesn’t tell us whether Eddie will follow through on this amazing burst of creative energy, but it makes it clear that its source lies in the bosom of the Pazinskis.

Like Eddie, Rudy also finds his artistic inspiration—his voice—after listening to the many voices of the family that he hears during the storm. Having run away to find himself, he discovers what he was looking for only when he comes back to what he left. The philosopher Santanaya says somewhere that “piety is loyalty to the sources of our being.” The seemingly impious Rudy finds the source in his family.

Annie finally achieves the satisfaction of being heard—of being listened to—by her mother when Ellen declares, on the morning after her son’s terrifying plunge into the blizzard, that Georgie will be moving to St. Vincent’s. “Sometimes Annie gets good ideas,” Ellen says, mostly for her daughter’s benefit, and we realize that Annie has the satisfaction of having her “plan”—possibly the very same as God’s—work out for the best.

For Ellen the tribulations of the storm have brought her to a new state of self-knowledge. “Mommy can’t do it alone anymore,” she admits as she calms Georgie’s initial fear of being separated from her. Ellen has been forced to confront the inevitable fact that both she and Georgie are changing, and that life can’t go on as it had been for thirty years. The storm has taught her a lesson about her own limitations, but it has also made her realize the wisdom of her daughter.

Georgie, who has never known a life except with his mother in the bar and the apartment above it, faces the biggest change as the play ends. It’s no wonder that he panics momentarily when he learns he is to move to St. Vincent’s. But he calms down when he is reassured that there will always be familiar faces and landmarks in his limited world: his mother will be nearby, Sister Clarissa will be there to care for him, and Dairy Queen will be right next door. Family and familiar are sibling words, both derived from a common root. For Georgie, the familiar faces and landmarks of St. Vincent’s will be a continuation of the family that has been the source of his being.

#### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.**

1. Why did the playwright choose to set the action of the play during a blizzard?

2. Why do you think Rudy has left Buffalo to live in New York City? Do you see similar things happening in Maine?
3. Why does Ellen persistently minimize the seriousness of Georgie's recent changes in behavior?
4. Why does Annie make such a fuss about her minor injuries at the beginning of the play?
5. What do you think it would be like to live and work in the same place as the Pazinskis do?
6. What does the picture of Debbie Ronski tell us about young Eddie—apart from his interest in girls?
7. What does Rudy mean when he says he has found his “voice?” What does that term mean when applied to a writer?
8. What is the importance of Eddie's mural? What kinds of ideas and emotions does it capture?
9. Why does Ellen finally agree to send Georgie to live at St. Vincent's?
10. What is happening to Georgie's mind? What does it imply about his future?