

# **The Devil's Right Hand**

by  
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**The Devil's Right Hand.** (*1f, 1m; int.; 10 minute*) Despite his mother's wishes, a young cowboy believes he is old enough to take his gun to town, culminating in a lesson learned the hard way.

### **CHARACTERS**

BILLY JOE:	A young cowboy. Any gender. Any race/ethnicity. A teenager.
MOTHER:	Billy Joe's mother. Any gender. Any race/ethnicity. An adult.
NICK:	A bartender. Any gender. Any race/ethnicity. Might be double cast with MOTHER. An adult.

### **PLACE & TIME**

America. Dusk.

### **PRODUCTION NOTES**

The play is inspired by the song, "Don't Take Your Guns to Town" by Johnny Cash.

The song "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie" is a traditional ballad in the public domain.

## The Devil's Right Hand

*A room. BILLY JOE shines his boots. There is a wide-brimmed hat on a table. MOTHER enters.*

MOTHER

Billy Joe.

*BILLY does not look up.*

Where are you going?

BILLY  
(shining)

General store.

MOTHER

Mighty cleaned up for a trip to the store.

BILLY

Never know who you'll run into.

MOTHER

I know you know Lucy lives on that side of town.

BILLY

Ma...

MOTHER

All I'm saying is that you oughta spend more time working this cow-lick than those boots.

*She spits in a rag and approaches. Despite BILLY's best efforts, she gets the back of his head.*

There. Spit shine.

BILLY

Can I finish? (*beat*) May I finish?

*MOTHER begins to leave.*

MOTHER

I'll expect you home by supper?

*She notices the hat on the table.*

Your father's hat -

*She moves toward it. BILLY intercepts.*

BILLY

What's cookin' tonight?

MOTHER

Have you grown into it after all these years?

*She picks up the hat, revealing a gun underneath. MOTHER stops cold. BILLY doesn't move.*

BILLY

Father left it to me.

*Painful silence.*

I can handle it.

MOTHER

Where are you going?

BILLY

Into town...

MOTHER

Don't lie to me, Billy Joe.

BILLY

Nick Murphy's place.

*MOTHER sits down.*

I know how you feel about him and what that place means -

MOTHER

How do you feel about him?

BILLY

He told me to stop by when I was old enough...

MOTHER

The man is no good.

BILLY

He wants to share with me the whole story about what happened that night with Pa.

MOTHER

Nothing more than what I've done told you.

BILLY

I gotta go, if only to put my mind at rest.

MOTHER

My dear boy.

BILLY

Ma...

MOTHER

Must you take that ugly thing with you?

BILLY

I can shoot as quick and straight as anybody can.

MOTHER

You sound like your father.

BILLY

I wouldn't gun nobody down. I wouldn't shoot without cause.

MOTHER

What cause on earth is worth the life of a man?

BILLY

Ma -

MOTHER

Answer me, Billy Joe.

*BILLY has no answer.*

The least you can be is honest, 'stead of slinking around with the devil's right hand.

*BILLY puts on a jacket.*

Don't take the gun to town, son. Leave the gun at home, Bill. Don't take the gun to town.

*BILLY dons the hat and goes to MOTHER.*

BILLY

Your Billy Joe's a man.

*He takes the gun, holstering it. Exits. MOTHER cries.*

*Shift. Actor playing MOTHER dons a hat, removing any "motherly" costume. Actor becomes NICK MURPHY, turning the bedroom into a bar.*

*BILLY sings offstage through the transition.*

BILLY (o.s.)  
(singing)

O, bury me not on the lone prairie  
These words came low and mournfully  
From the pallid lips of a youth who lay  
On the bloody ground at the close of day.

*Transition ends. NICK tends bar, picking up the song.*

NICK  
(singing)

O bury me not, but his voice failed there  
But we paid no heed to his dying prayer  
In a narrow grave, just six by three

NICK (cont'd)

We buried him there on the lone prairie.

*BILLY enters.*

NICK

Well, if it ain't the ghost of Bill senior.

BILLY

Mr. Murphy?

NICK

I knew you'd recognize me.

BILLY

I was hoping you'd recognize me.

NICK

Have a seat young Bill.

*BILLY sits at the bar, unsure of himself, fiddling for money. NICK cleans glasses, sizing him up. BILLY places money on the counter, nervous.*

What's that for?

BILLY

Whiskey, or a beer.

NICK

You don't know which?

BILLY

How about whatever that is?

*He points to a bottle. NICK continues cleaning.*

NICK

Never thought I'd live to see the day.

BILLY  
You told me to come by.

NICK  
I remember.

BILLY  
When I'd become a man.

NICK  
Only thing is -

BILLY  
What's that?

NICK  
Your face looks as soft as a baby's.

BILLY  
I'm old enough to sit here.

NICK  
I'm only ribbin' ya.

BILLY  
(unamused)  
I'm here now, Mr. Murphy.

NICK  
Seven years later.

BILLY  
Ready to hear what you got to say.

NICK  
I see you're wearing his hat.

BILLY  
I've grown into it.



NICK  
His gun.

BILLY  
Shoots as fast as lightnin'.

NICK  
Loads a might slow.

BILLY  
I can handle it.

NICK  
It'll get you into trouble, but it can't get you out.

*Beat.*

BILLY  
You were there that day, with my father.

NICK  
Tending bar same as this day.

BILLY  
You saw him shoot.

NICK  
Saw him shoot the dog down.

*He nods to a table in the back. BILLY turns.*

Your father got into a card game with some roughnecks from up the mountain. Caught one of the dogs hidin' an ace up his sleeve.

*NICK makes his way to the corner table. He carries a gun on his hip.*

Table's done up just the way it was that day and you can see my walls are still full of lead.

BILLY  
What happened to him?

NICK  
Can't trust the law in this town, kid...

BILLY  
What happened to my pa?

NICK  
I was forced to take matters into my own hands.

BILLY  
You...?

NICK  
I had to protect my property, kid.

BILLY  
Nothin' in here worth the life of a man.

NICK  
Right or wrong, that's the truth. I figured it was time you grew up and faced it.

BILLY  
I don't need any lessons from you.

*BILLY puts his hand on his gun.*

You got a quick finger, don't ya?

BILLY  
I can handle myself.

NICK  
Bet your ma don't see it that way.

BILLY  
You don't know jack.

*NICK laughs at him. BILLY pulls his gun but drops it; NICK pulls his own gun now and points it at BILLY.*

*Beat. BILLY backs down and turns to the bar.*

NICK

“Don’t take the gun to town, son...”

BILLY

Lay off, Mr. Murphy.

NICK

“Leave the gun at home, Bill...”

*NICK picks up the gun and places it next to BILLY.*

BILLY

How ‘bout that drink?

NICK

“Don’t take the gun to town...”

BILLY

Just pour me a drink and let’s forget the whole thing!

NICK

Get it yourself, you’re a grown man!

*NICK hands him his gun. BILLY shakes. BILLY grabs the liquor, pours a glass. He’s never done this before. He takes a gulp. Gags, spits.*

*BILLY puts his head down, full of rage.*

“Don’t take the gun to town, son...”

BILLY

I’m sorry, Ma.

*BILLY grabs the gun, and turns to shoot; but NICK is faster and shoots BILLY dead.*

“Leave the gun at home, Bill...”

*BILLY falls to the floor.*

“Don’t take the gun to town...”

**The End.**