

James Kemp
“UNTO THE LEAST” – A ONE ACT PLAY

Unto the Least

A One Act Play

By James M. Kemp

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Salem, OR 97302

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Cast of Characters

Ruby Stone – a middle-aged nurse’s aid

Paula Bagnell – a middle-aged nurse’s aid

Misty Woods – a nurse’s aid in her 20s

Marcia Button – a middle-aged nurse

Jimmy Jack – a university student working part time as an orderly

John Tharpe – a Black university student working part time as an orderly

Dr. Joe Standard – an aging medical doctor

Susie Woolford – a middle aged dietician’s assistant

Setting

The play takes place in the early months of 1968 before the assassination of Martin Luther King. The set is brightly lit as if by interior fluorescent lights. The sound of hospital announcements can be heard. The sound of call lights being rung can be heard. Hennepin District Hospital is a=now a public hospital after having been privately owned in the past by a local family of physicians named Standard. Dr. Joe Standard is the aging patriarch of the family. He is a General Practitioner.

The hospital is located in a small city in Western Illinois where a large state university is also located. The name of the town is Prosper. Prosper, Illinois. A mere dot on the map between Chicago, Illinois and St. Louis, Missouri. Prosper is a college town in the middle of a cornfield.

Hennepin District Hospital is a trusted institution with full medical services. The hospital also happens to be a place of interaction between the towns people and the university students and faculty. Being employed at the hospital is desirable even though such employment tends to expose farm people to city people.

On Curtain rise and/ or Lights Up

The stage is bare except for a handrail that runs along the upstage curtain/ wall. As lights come up, Ruby Stone stands alone, center stage leaning into the handrail. She checks her wrist watch and looks away with an expression of boredom. She wears a light green nylon jumper, a modest short sleeved white blouse and a common nurse’s cap of the same color and material as the jumper. Her shoes are white.

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(Paula Bagnell enters from stage right and stands next to Ruby. Paula is dressed in identical costume. Both women peek to their right as if anticipating something.)

PAULA

Late again, huh?

RUBY *(looks at her wristwatch)*

Yeah. It's the weekend. They're probably short of help in the kitchen. Woman, let me tell you about the revival last night.

PAULA *(looking away as if she has no interest)*

You Assembly of God people do have your share of revivals. What did they offer for sale last night?

RUBY

Well, it was a Christian rock group called The Crickets> They had albums for sale. I bought one. But the service was so blessed!

PAULA

You folks ever get that neon sign fixed out front?

RUBY

No. We have a mission that takes priority over neon signs.

PAULA

So it still says "Ass..... of God?"

RUBY

Now Paula, don't be so crude.

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PAULA

Well, it does say that. And you folks still light it up at night. Ass..... of God. Plain as day.

RUBY

At least we have a neon sign. You Presbyterians got a little reader board out front. Don't look very inviting.

(Misty Woods enters from stage right and stands next to the other two nurse aids. Misty wears the same costume but has pinned a fake daisy on her hat.)

MISTY

What don't look inviting?

RUBY

Paula here thinks that cold old Presbyterian building looks inviting.

MISTY

No church looks inviting to me. Give me an open field and a creek. That's where I find God. It don't need no signs.

(Susie Woolford enters from stage right. Susie wears a hair net, a pink version of the same jumper worn by the others. Her shoes are black. Susie pushes a cart which contains a half dozen breakfast trays for hospital patients.)

SUSIE

Sorry ladies. We're running s little late on the weekend. Three people called in sick.

MISTY

My friend Mary has the flu. I know that. So, she must be one of the sick ones.

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SUSIE

I didn't pay no attention to who was scheduled to work. I just started making coffee and toast as quick as I could. Hospital's full too.

MISTY

I think we're short too. I feel a sore throat coming on.

PAULA

Well stand far away from me. I don't have any more sick leave this month.

SUSIE *(removes one of the trays from the cart)*

Trainor. Who has Trainor?

RUBY *(takes the tray from Susie)*

Mine. 234A. Mastectomy. Poor thing. And so young!

(Ruby exits stage left.)

SUSIE

Wagner? Who has Wagner today?

PAULA

Feel sorry for me. I have him. Anyone wanna come with me and tie his wandering hands down?

MISTY

Not me. I had him the other day. He felt me up when I was leaning over to open his milk for him.

(Paula exits carrying the tray to stage left)

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SUSIE

OK, Misty. The next one has to be yours. Fullerton. By the way, how's your little one doing?

MISTY *(taking the tray from Susie)*

He's with his Daddy this weekend.

SUSIE *(to Misty as Misty exits stage left)*

Well, if you need somewhere to go, it's Bingo night at St. Catherine's.

MISTY

Thanks. But I have a date. My fella is taking me to a concert at Western Hall tonight. Some band called Procol Harem is playing. British.

(As Misty exits stage left, Jimmy Jack enters from stage right. Jimmy is a part time orderly who also attends the university. Jimmy wears white slacks, shirt and shoes. His belt is black and so are his shoes.)

JIMMY

Good morning, Susie. Would you happen to have a tray for me? I mean for a patient that I can take the tray to?

SUSIE

Mr. Easy Money! What do you have on your agenda today?

JIMMY

Susie, you know I am the hardest working orderly at Hennepin District, right?

SUSIE *(handing a tray to Jimmy)*

Well Mr. Hard-worker, place your grub hooks on this tray for 204B.

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JIMMY

Wait a minute. I just came from 204B. Young guy. My age. Appendectomy. Today. Dr. Joe's patient. Surgery. No breakfast tray. I just prepped him.

SUSIE *(takes the tray from Jimmy)*

Well, word about that did not make it down to the kitchen.

JIMMY

So, you do have an extra breakfast tray for me. A starving college student. Please?

SUSIE *(grabs the tray away from Jimmy)*

You know the rules, Jimmy Jack. No unpaid for food for staff.

JIMMY

OK. But it would be nice to find a piece of toast on the table in the nurse's station.

SUSIE

Not one that falls off my cart. Here, make yourself useful. 204A. Take it.

(Jimmy takes the tray while forcing his face into a mock sad expression and answers as he walks off stage left.)

JIMMY

OK, Susie. I will remember this the next time I fry catfish at my parents' tavern which I know you and your husband visit when you drive your RV down to the river.

SUSIE *(yells after Jimmy as he exits)*

I'll let your parents know if I find spit in my potato salad.

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(Ruby returns to the breakfast cart and holds out her hands to receive the next patient's tray.)

RUBY *(chewing gum loudly)*

Who you got for me now, Suze?

SUSIE *(handing a tray to Ruby)*

Parker 211B. Poached egg. Light toast. Wah, wah, wah.

RUBY

Woops. You kitchen people messed up on this one. Diabetic. You got sugar on here.

SUSIE

Well, give it here. Here, take this artificial sweetener.

(As Ruby walks off stage left with the tray, Paula enters from stage left.)

PAULA

Next?

SUSIE *(handing Paula another tray)*

211A. Salinger.

PAULA *(taking the tray and exiting stage left)*

She back again? How many does that make?

SUSIE

Five by my count.

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PAULA (*chants as she whispers while exiting stage left*)

Five little red necks all in a row. Plant 'em in a flower box and watch them grow. NOT.

(*Paula exits as Misty enters from stage left.*)

MISTY

You got one left there, Susie. Let me have it.

SUSIE (*handing the last tray on the cart to Misty*)

That isn't right. We're one short.

MISTY

Jackson, I bet. Her private duty nurse is out sick today. She usually comes out to get Jackson's tray.

(*Susie exits stage right as Misty exits stage left carrying a tray. As Misty exits, both Ruby and Paula enter stage left.*)

RUBY

Where'd Suze go? What she forget this time? I swear she gets more forgetful every day.

MISTY (*exiting*)

Mrs. Jackson's tray. Her private duty nurse is out sick today.

(*Ruby and Paula walk to center stage and lean against the rear handrail, pantomiming exercise movements.*)

RUBY

So, Jackson's private duty is sick today. Well. Well. You know what that means?

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PAULA

Yes, I know. Another what you call a sit in. Right?

RUBY

Sit in? I thought you Presbyterians was all about sit ins.

PAULA

Meaning?

RUBY

Meanin' that Father George told our congregation you guys was sending money to that Martin Luther Coon guy.

PAULA

We support many causes that promote the power of minority groups.

RUBY

Well, that King guy is no better than them there Black Panthers. You be careful, girl. You might just be payin' for a bullet hole in your head. Somebody oughta shoot him and those jigaboo Black Panthers.

(John Tharpe has been walking onto the set slowly and quietly as if to not be seen or heard. John is a handsome Black orderly who also attends the local university. His uniform matches that of Jimmy Jack but is obviously better pressed and neater.)

JOHN

Ruby, what you talkin' 'bout? Jigaboo? Who's a jigaboo?

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RUBY

John! Don't you look nice today? You always look like you might wrinkle too easy. Jigaboo? Paula and I was just discussing the works that our churches do. Like sending potluck dishes to their weekly dinners. The jigaboos that is. You know. Those Algerian students out at the university?

JOHN

Ruby, I do not know of any Algerian students at the university. There are a number of Nigerian students.

RUBY

Well, are they the ones that play with themselves in public and smell so bad?

JOHN

Ruby, I do not know of any such students of any kind that behave in that way at the university.

RUBY

Whatever. But they are the ones.

JOHN

The ones what?

RUBY

The jigaboos! That's the way jigaboos act.

PAULA

John. You will need to forgive Ruby. Her church had a revival meeting last night and she's still under the influence of that neon sign they have out front.

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JOHN (chuckles)

Ruby, you mean you go to the Ass of God church? I don't suppose any jigaboos go there, do they?

RUBY

No, John. No jigaboo would go to my church. We'd stop 'em at the front door and send their asses back to Algeria. Nigeria. Bullshiteria.

(Susie returns carrying another tray meant for Mrs. Jackson. She holds the tray out to the group.)

SUSIE

Whata ya gonna give for it? Do I hear ten? Ten, ten, ten. What no tens? Come on, people! This here is a tray for the lady in 222A. Her private duty nurse is sick. That means anyone who delivers this tray could be violating union regulations. Anyone? Anyone?

(Nurse Marcia Button enters from stage right. Marcia is the classic registered nurse from the recent past. Marcia's nurse costume is the classic white dress with the button-down bodice. She wears the classic nurse cap with stripes and pin from the school of nursing she attended. She takes the tray away from Susie.)

MARCIA

Ladies, John. I am holding the breakfast tray for Mrs. Jackson. Her private duty nurse is sick today. I need one brave soul to volunteer to take this tray to Mrs. Jackson, to set it up for her and the take care of her morning needs.

RUBY

Marcia, you know if any of us take that tray into her, we will be out of compliance with our union rules.

MARCIA

How about the rest of you? Is any one of you willing to accept this responsibility or do I need to do it myself, in spite of the fact that our nurse staff is also short today? Misty?

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MISTY

Sorry Ma'am. Rules is rules. Since I got on full time and got to be a union member, I gotta do what the union says.

MARCIA

Paula? You're a Christian. We both go to the same church. Are you willing to do the Christian thing?

PAULA

Sorry Marcia. I can't afford to get fined.

MARCIA

John. How about it?

JOHN

I don't get it. What's the big, damn deal? I've gone in to visit Mother Jackson before. She and I go to the same church. Give me the damned tray.

MARCIA *(handing the tray to John)*

Thank you, John. Ladies, John is part time. He is not a union member. So let's get back to work. You all have your bath assignments. Let's do them.

(Nurse Marcia exits stage right. As John exits stage left with the tray, Paula exits stage left. Ruby and Misty exit stage right, discussing things as they exit.)

RUBY *(to Misty)*

He may not be a union member, but he better watch out for being a scab.

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MISTY

Are we on strike?

RUBY

Not yet, but if this crap continues, we just might be.

(Jimmy Jack enters from stage left and passes RUBY and Marcia as they exit.)

MISTY (to Jimmy)

Jimmy, you just missed a big run in.

JIMMY

What happened?

RUBY

We'll tell you later.

(Jimmy Jack goes to center stage and leans against the handrail. John Tharpe enters from stage left and stands next to Jimmy.)

JOHN

Your old man still pissed at you for bringing me to his tavern last week?

JIMMY

I haven't talked to the SOB since he threw his shit fit.

JOHN

Well, after all, I suspect I may have been the first person of color he ever had to serve.

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JIMMY

As a matter of fact, if you hadn't been with me, he would have asked you to leave.

JOHN

Well, it was after dark and I suppose he could have called Johnny Law to pull my black ass into jail on the Sundown Laws. I know you are out to your parents, but what if Dad knew we are lovers?

JIMMY

Neither of us would have left town that night with our nuts still intact.

JOHN

Ouch! You know, Babe, there's always Boys Town in Chitown. Halstead Street. We could go for walks, hold hands and all of that.

JIMMY

Yeah, but it would be a pain in the ass for both of us to transfer to Chicago Circle Campus.

JOHN

I don't know. Both are state universities. No Sundown Laws in Chitown. They'd have to shut down the whole fuckin' town!

(An announcement is heard over the loud speaker.)

ANNOUNCEMENT

Staff needs to report to Central Supply for a brief meeting with Dr. Standard.

JIMMY

O-o. Big trouble. I just prepped one of his for an appy this morning. Nobody ever told me the protocol. I just assumed I was to shave the pubic hair on the appy site.

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JOHN

O-o is right. Babe, you need to shave all of the pubes off.

JIMMY

Babe, he was our age. It was all I could do to keep from springing a boner.

(All cast members enter from the same places from which they had exited earlier and stand in a line in front of the handrail. After they are in place, Dr. Joe Standard enters from stage right. Dr. Joe is still dressed in a green surgical costume with his surgical mask hanging loose.)

DR. JOE

I just had the pleasure of shaving the pubic hair from an appy patient. Who was the dumb shit who prepped him?

JIMMY (holding up his hand)

Sorry sir. It was me.

DR. JOE *(charges at Jimmy, grabs him by the shirt collar and pins him to the railing.)*

Listen up, stupid shit. When you prep a male for my appies, you shave the entire pubic area. Balls and all. Now for the rest of you, what's this about not serving patients with their trays that Marcia just told me about?

RUBY

It's a union thing, Dr. Joe. Our contract says we don't have to deal with patients we object to.

DR. JOE

I see. So, what was it that the entire nursing staff objected to about a patient this morning?

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MISTY

Dr. Joe, sir. It was Mrs. Jackson, sir. Her private duty nurse called in sick.

Dr. JOE

I have known Mrs. Jackson for years. She pays her bills and we ask her to hire her own nurse. So, what is the big deal when her own nurse is sick?

RUBY (glances a look at John)

Dr. Joe, you know Jackson is a Negro. We find that – how do you say – objectionable.

DR. JOE

So, you folks over at the Ass of God church don't allow African Americans to attend your church?

RUBY

No, we don't. Not even the Algerian students.

JOHN

Nigerian. Hey. Look. I'm standing right here. I took the tray into Mother Jackson. And I must say, I had no idea when I started working here that the entire place is filled with racist assholes.

RUBY (angry)

Whether you like it or not, John, us nurse's aids do not have to serve Niggers!

JOHN

Niggers! My god. It is 1968. Black men and women are dying in jungle warfare to protect your lily-white asses. But none of you need to worry about serving this Nigger. This Nigger is gone. C'mon Babe, let's take off for Boys Town.

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JIMMY (taking John's hand as they both walk off stage right.)

Got it, Babe. Chicago Circle Campus, here we come.

RUBY

Jimmy Jack, you get your queer ass back here.

JIMMY

Ruby, you racist bitch, my queer ass is already gone.

(Curtain falls. Lights out as the remaining cast look at each other with expressions of shock and awe.)

END OF PLAY