

“Headfirst”

by Dennis Rhodus

READ-ALLOUD SCRIPT

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CHARACTERS

STEVE MCCABE

LAURIE

WILLIS

PAUL (STEVE'S FATHER)

MARTHA (STEVE'S MOTHER)

TV GAME SHOW HOST

CONTESTANT (RICHARD)

STADIUM ANNOUNCER

CINDY

VOICE 1 (GRANT HIGH)

VOICE 2 (GRANT HIGH)

VOICE 3 (GRANT HIGH)

SCENE ONE

[THE LIVING ROOM OF THE MCCABE HOME]

TV HOST: And now, Richard, with a correct answer here, you'll win the Caribbean cruise for two, the 25 cubic foot refrigerator-freezer, six thousand dollars in cash, and a brand new car. Are you ready?

CONTESTANT: Well... I... I sure hope so.

PAUL: Hear that, Martha? He hopes so. For all that stuff, fella, you better get ready!

STEVE: Mother, I've finished my homework and...

PAUL: Quiet, boy! Can't you see I'm watching this?

TV HOST: In 1573, Richard, a man was born in England who was to become one of that country's greatest poetic dramatists. He was a friend and rival to Shakespeare himself, and he wrote such

brilliant plays as Volpone and The Alchemist. Now, Richard, for the cruise, the refrigerator-freezer, six thousand dollars in cash, and the new car, can you name him? You have ten seconds.

PAUL: That jerk can't answer that! Quick, Steve, who do you guess?

STEVE: I don't need to guess. It's Ben Jonson.

CONTESTANT: Uh, is it John Keats?

TV HOST: I'm terribly sorry, Richard. It's Ben Jonson.

PAUL: Turn it off, Martha. I'm tired of that guy's face.

STEVE: Mother, I'm finished with my home-work now. Can I go to the football game tonight?

MARTHA: Well, dear, you'd better ask your father.

PAUL: That's not bad, boy. You ought to get yourself on one of them there shows, smart as you are. You could bring home some money, start earnin' your keep around here.

STEVE: Can I go to the football game?

PAUL: Football, huh? I guess there's nothin' wrong with that. 'Course it ain't the sport boxing is. Boxing, now there's a game. The law of the jungle in a 20 foot ring. Survival of the fittest.

STEVE: I won't be late.

MARTHA: Paul, I really wish you wouldn't go on so much about boxing and fighting and all that sort of thing in front of poor Steven.

PAUL: Oh, you think it's better to make him some limp-wristed pansy?

MARTHA: You know that's not what I mean. But the world isn't a boxing ring either, you know. It's civilized, and men don't have to go around clubbing one another over the head with dinosaur bones just to see who's stronger.

PAUL: Listen, Martha, no matter how civilized we get, we ain't going to change the fact that we're animals. We're all animals. Not mineral, not vegetable, but animal. We still kill other animals to eat their flesh, don't we? We still got physical appetites and instincts, don't we? We still come into the world the same way other animals do, don't we? You think being nice and civilized and having good manners is going to change that?

MARTHA: Well, does that mean we have to live like gorillas in a jungle?

PAUL: What it means, Martha, is that once in a while, even today with your color TV's and microwave ovens and gas-heated homes—once in a while—there still comes a time when there ain't no choice but to kill, or be killed. Right now, say, if a guy was to break in that front door there, start to smash up the furniture, kick my wife around, and try to set the kids on fire, you think I should explain to him we're civilized now and he ought not to do such things? Hell! Just watch me club the creep over the head, with my bare fists if I have to, and once he's down on his knees and I got his attention, then I might explain to him about civilization and all that. A man's got to do what it takes to get the job done!

MARTHA: Okay, Paul, okay. I see your point. I'm just worried about Steven, that's all.

PAUL: So am I, so am I. That's why I'm tryin' to toughen him up a little. And don't start in again about how smart he is. I know how smart he is. All A's. Not a single B yet. Well, that's all fine

and good, but let me tell ya somethin'; if that boy had to defend hisself right now—I mean really defend hisself— he'd be in big trouble, and all them A's wouldn't be worth one good punch.

SCENE TWO

[*AT THE HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL STADIUM*]

ANNOUNCER: And that ends the fourth quarter, ladies and gentlemen, of this play-off in the Northwest High School Conference. The final score: Bayview High—21, Grant High—14, Ladies and Gentlemen, please leave the stadium by the two exit gates nearest the parking lot. I repeat... leave the stadium by the two exit gates nearest the parking lot. Thank you and goodnight.

STEVE: Laurie, hey, Laurie! Wait up! Laurie! Is that you?

LAURIE: What? Oh! Hi, Steve.

STEVE: Were you at the game? I was looking for you.

LAURIE: I was sitting with some people in the pep squad.

STEVE: Who? Maybe I know them.

LAURIE: Oh, just some friends... of mine.

STEVE: Oh! I, uh, get the distinct feeling these “friends” are friends I wouldn't like.

LAURIE: What do you want me to say? That they're enemies of mine? Or secret admirers of mine? Or they're just girlfriends of mine?

STEVE: Oh, I get a choice, huh? Well then, let's see... I kind of prefer that last one: just girlfriends of yours.

LAURIE: Okay. They were just girlfriends of mine.

STEVE: Whew! Am I glad to hear that! For a minute there I was worried I had some competition! Hmm, it looks like Nick's is open late tonight. Want a cup of coffee or anything?

LAURIE: Sure, why not.

[*THEY CROSS THE STREET TO A SMALL CAFE.*]

STEVE: So... what did you think of the game?

LAURIE: Frankly, I wish we'd lost.

STEVE: What?

LAURIE: Yeah! Do you remember what happened last year when we beat this same school? Grant High School?

STEVE: I don't know. What happened?

LAURIE: Well, This horrible gang of boys from Grant...

[THEY ENTER THE CAFÉ AND SIT IN A BOOTH; WAITRESS APPROACHES.]

CINDY: Hi! My name is Cindy and I'll be your waitress tonight. Can I take your order? Oh, before I forget, the Special tonight is "Soup and Superburger," if you want that, but...

STEVE: I'll make it easy for you: I'll just have a cup of coffee.

CINDY: Okay! One, cof-fee... And you, Miss?

LAURIE: Well...

CINDY: Oh, don't I know you? Weren't you in here last night? You sat right down over there with a guy who...

LAURIE: I'll just have a cup of coffee, too, please.

CINDY: Oh, I'm ever so sorry. I should've checked first, you know, to see if... if your friend last night was... was the same, you know, before I opened my big mouth. I swear, my dumb mouth gets me in more trouble! I wish sometimes I could have it removed! I'm real sorry!

LAURIE: Just two cups of coffee, please.

CINDY: Oh! Yes! Right away. Two coffees *[LEAVING]*.

LAURIE: Uh, Steve, I...

STEVE: What? *[CHOOSING TO IGNORE THE INCIDENT]* Obviously the girl mistook you for someone else. Now, uh, what were you saying, about that gang from Grant High School?

LAURIE: Uh... yes, well... uh, I was... Yes, I was telling you about what Grant High School did last year. After the game—which they lost—a bunch of guys broke in and stole Dane, that huge sheep dog we used as our mascot last year, remember?

STEVE: I didn't live here.

LAURIE: Oh! Well, that dog was so gentle it would follow anyone home. So these guys from Grant tied him up in a gunnysack, threw him into their car and drove off. That Monday morning when everybody got to school, his pelt was up on the flagpole where the banner used to be and all of his bones were in a pile at the bottom of the pole. They had skinned him! And so that we'd know who'd done it, they burned a big G.H.S. for Grant High School into our senior lawn. Can you believe that? It was awful! Why would anyone who loses a simple game take it out on a poor defenseless dog?

STEVE: I don't know. The best thing to do with people like that is stay out of their way.

LAURIE: You'd let them just take over your campus like that?

STEVE: Calm down. Now, to begin with, it isn't my campus. And frankly, I don't think a flag, a lawn, and a dog are worth getting killed over. Do you?

LAURIE: For God's sake, Steve! Aren't you ever going to be committed to anything? You think it's okay to just stand back and never get involved with anything? Never take a stand, never stand up for anything?

STEVE: I don't like violence.

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STEVE: What would you like me to do exactly?

LAURIE: I would like you to shut up.

STEVE: Calm down, Laurie. Please calm down. Hey Laurie, look! Straight ahead! See that light in the window?

LAURIE: No! I don't.

STEVE: Look! Look right down there about a block away. See it? A light in the upstairs window.

LAURIE: All right. I see it. So what?

STEVE: That's the old Simms place!

LAURIE: Again... so what?

STEVE: Old Man Simms just died, about a week ago, wasn't it? Come on, we've got to go right by there on the way to your house anyway. I want to see what's going on. Probably just a bunch of kids playing in the house. But isn't it kind of late for kids to be up?

LAURIE: I don't see what the big deal is.

STEVE: The big deal is life, Laurie! Getting involved with life! One guy sees a light in a vacant house and wants to find out what's going on, and another guy sees the same light and walks away without a second thought. Now, which guy do you prefer?

LAURIE: The one who doesn't make a joke out of it.

STEVE: Okay. No more jokes. I promise. Come on, we're almost there.

SCENE FOUR

[ON THE PORCH OF THE SIMMS HOUSE]

STEVE: Hmm. I don't hear anything, do you?

LAURIE: No, Steve, I don't hear anything.

STEVE: Maybe if I knocked... *[KNOCKING ON THE DOOR]* Hello! Anybody in there?

WILLIS: *[FROM INSIDE]* Who—who's there? Who are you?

STEVE: My name is Steve McCabe. I was just walking home and I happened to see...

WILLIS: Go away! Go away from here!

STEVE: Is there anything wrong? Like I said, I saw...

WILLIS: I'm tellin' ya, ya better go away. Now!

STEVE: Doesn't that sound like Willis Dougherty? We just saw him tonight. You know, "Big Willis," the football player at school. A fullback, I think.

LAURIE: So what do you want, his autograph?

STEVE: Willis! Is that you? Willis Dougherty?

WILLIS: Just go away from here, will ya?

STEVE: Willis, come on, open up. I just want to come inside for a minute.

WILLIS: Is there anybody with you?

STEVE: Just my girlfriend.

LAURIE: I wouldn't be too sure about...

WILLIS: Nobody else?

STEVE: Nobody else! I promise.

WILLIS: [*OPENS THE DOOR*] Hurry! Get in! [*CLOSES THE DOOR*] Did anyone see you come here?

STEVE: I don't think so. What's the matter? What're you doing here?

WILLIS: I'm... well, I'm hiding.

STEVE: Hiding? From what?

WILLIS: I don't think you'd know them.

STEVE: Who?

WILLIS: Just some guys.

STEVE: How many?

WILLIS: I don't know exactly. About nine or ten. Maybe more.

STEVE: Wait a minute. I don't understand this. Why are you hiding from these guys? What do they want with you?

WILLIS: They, uh, they want to hurt me.

STEVE: Why?

WILLIS: On account of I hurt one of them.

STEVE: What'd you do?

WILLIS: Well, I think it was on a number three left sweep... no, wait... it was a number two left sweep... yeah, a number two. I always get those mixed up in my head, and Coach gets mad at me and makes me run extra laps, but I don't mind them 'cause, in a way, you know, extra laps are fun 'cause...

STEVE: Willis! What happened?

WILLIS: Oh, yeah! A number two left sweep is what it was. That's where I get a fake hand-off and then have to open the number six slot for Mike. Mike, see, he gets the real hand-off and sweeps out to the left and is supposed to turn the corner through the number six slot, where I already been through, you know, to clear a path for him. I'm real good at that play, 'cause I make it look like I'm goin' for the number five slot and suddenly I go number six and Mike'll usually get a good eight or nine yards out of the run. I never hurt nobody before, though. I never meant to hurt nobody this time. Honest. Just a number two left sweep was all it was.

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LAURIE: Calm myself down!?! In less than an hour twelve brainless, blood-thirsty animals are going to...

STEVE: Laurie, please. Now, I'm sorry, but...

LAURIE: But what?! You think for one minute I care that you're sorry?

WILLIS: Uh, I been thinkin', maybe if I was...

LAURIE: This is just like you, Steve! Just like you! You got me into this thing, but you just don't have what it takes to get me out of it! Do you?

STEVE: Laurie, please, let me think...

LAURIE: No! I think it's time for you to face up to what you are! You, don't have what it takes, do you? Do you?

STEVE: [*HAVING HAD ENOUGH OF LAURIE'S VERBAL ABUSE*] Laurie, listen to me because I'm only going to say this once. I've heard about all I'm going to hear from your mouth. Now I suggest you shut it!

LAURIE: Who do you think you're talking...

STEVE: I said shut it! Now, I want you and Willis to get every piece of wooden furniture that you can carry and bring it into this room. Then I want you to lock every window in the house except upstairs, where you'll leave four open—one on each exposure to the house. When you're done with that, get the kitchen chairs and put one under the inside doorknob of the front, back, and side doors, then come back and I'll tell you what to do next. I'll be in the garage looking for tools to break up the furniture and board up the windows.

LAURIE: What... what's happened to you?

STEVE: Willis, have you checked all the rooms for a telephone?

WILLIS: Yeah, they been took out already.

STEVE: All right. Just bring me some heavy furniture.

LAURIE: Steve, what's happened to you?

STEVE: Don't worry about what's happened to me; worry about what's going to happen to all of us if you don't do what I told you to do.

LAURIE: Okay! Okay, Steve, but listen, all they want is Willis. Can't we just... you know... let them settle it? I mean, really, it's none of our business.

STEVE: Willis is as innocent of any wrong-doing as... as Christ himself was! What are you waiting for? Go lock some windows!

[*LAURIE LEAVES*]

SCENE FIVE

[*THE SOUND OF HAMMERING*]

STEVE: There. That's the last of the windows.

WILLIS: Uh, no, Steve. There's one more window, over on the side.

LAURIE: That's right, Steve. You forgot the small one in the dining room; it's locked, but it's not boarded.

STEVE: I didn't forget it.

LAURIE: But, won't they find it? And break in?

STEVE: I hope so. Look, we can't stop them from breaking in, no matter what we do. They'll burn their way in through the walls if they have to. Now if they think we've overlooked one of the windows, they'll use it. Then at least we'll have the advantage of knowing where they'll break in. And it's a lot easier to defend one window than a whole house.

LAURIE: I see!

WILLIS: Oh, yeah...

STEVE: Laurie, is that stuff in the kitchen ready?

LAURIE: It's on the stove now. Like you told me; all the grease and oil and candlesticks I could find.

STEVE: How much of it is there?

LAURIE: Well, it's a pretty big kettle. About three or four gallons, I think. Maybe a little more.

STEVE: Good. Willis, I want you to go upstairs, turn all the lights out, then go from window to window all around, and keep an eye out for them. They'll be coming any time now. As soon as you see them, I want you to knock three times on the wall of the side where you see them approaching. Not too hard, though. I don't want them to hear. Do you understand so far?

WILLIS: Yeah. I knock three times on the wall where I see them coming. Not too hard.

STEVE: Good. Now, listen carefully. There's more: When they get up to the house, go to the nearest window over them and throw everything you can find in that room out the window—flowerpots, chairs, books, mirrors, everything. Do you understand?

WILLIS: I throw everything in the room down on them.

STEVE: Right. Now...

WILLIS: Uh, Steve? Am I supposed to... I mean... well, I don't want to hurt them.

STEVE: I don't either, Willis. If there was any other way out of this, I'd take it, but there are times when what we want to do or don't want to do doesn't much matter; there's only what we have to do. And this is one of those times. Now, do the same thing at each window if they go to the other sides of the house. But when they get to the open window—the one in the dining room—don't throw anything. Just tap on the floor with your knuckles, like this. Got it?

WILLIS: Yeah! When they're at the window in the dining room.

STEVE: Good. Then, as soon as you've tapped, I want you to turn the lights on upstairs—all of them; very quietly. Now go on up. And Willis, don't be afraid.

WILLIS: I'm not [*LEAVES*].

STEVE: Laurie, see if you can find me a length of rope or wire six or seven feet long. I want you to tie one end of it to the handle of the kettle. Then turn all the lights down here off. It's my guess that they're watching the house right now, from all sides, and I don't want to give our position away in here.

SCENE SIX

[*AT THE DINING ROOM WINDOW*]

LAURIE: [*STRAINING WITH THE LOAD*] Here's the kettle. Where do you want it?

STEVE: Under the ladder here. Is it hot?

LAURIE: Still bubbling.

STEVE: Good. I hope we don't need it, but if we do, the hotter, the better. There! That should do it. Hand me the loose end of the rope and steady the kettle as I pull it up.

LAURIE: Oh, my God, Steve! Are you doing what I think you're doing?

STEVE: [*STRAINING AS HE LIFTS AND POSITIONS THE POT OF HOT GREASE OVER THE WINDOW.*] What do you think I'm doing?

LAURIE: That's a trap! And it's rigged to scald anybody who tries to come in that window! But Steve, that grease is boiling! Do you know what the boiling point of grease is? You'll kill them! I didn't know you could be so... so vicious.

STEVE: Hmmm! I seem to remember you telling me less than two hours ago that I—How did you put it?—I wasn't “involved” enough. Anyway, you've misread the mechanics of the trap. I could have rigged it to scald them and yes, probably kill them, but I didn't. Look, this window opens inward, so after they break the glass and unlock it, it'll fall inward of its own weight. When it does, it'll trip this line, and that will cause this side to slip down which will slide this back and that will tip the kettle, and pour hot oil down the face of the window, over the sill and down the wall outside. See? Now, the guy who reaches in to unlock the window will get his hand scalded—I can't help that, but... [*THE CRASH OF FURNITURE FALLING OUTSIDE*] All right! This is it! That came from over there, the north side.

LAURIE: Are they coming? What should I do?

STEVE: [*TALKING QUIETLY*] Sh-h-h. Just stay calm and don't move or make...

VOICE 1: [*FROM OUTSIDE, YELLING*] Hey! You in there! You get our letter? It was the one that came air mail, remember? Well, we're back! We promised you a little party, and we always keep our promises. We've been watching you and we're so glad you all decided to stay. And, uh, we noticed you've decorated the house for us—with boards on the windows and things like that! That

was real nice of you. Oh, by the way, you don't need to roll out a carpet for us or anything; part of the fun of this party will be us finding our own way in. See you real soon!

STEVE: Okay, by the sound of his voice, I'd say they're about 30 or 40 feet from the house. But there are only 3 or 4 of them on that side... the others are probably surrounding the house. Are you okay?

LAURIE: ...yes...

VOICE 1: [*FROM OUTSIDE*] That almost hit me!

VOICE 2: [*FROM OUTSIDE*] Look! Up there!

VOICE 3: [*FROM OUTSIDE*] That's him!

VOICE 1: [*FROM OUTSIDE*] Oh, so you want to play rough, huh? Well, we know that game.

STEVE: Don't worry, they can't get to the up-stairs windows; all they can do is break them. That sounds like a signal. They'll probably attack from another side now.

[*SOUND OF WILLIS KNOCKING*]

STEVE: Where was that? The back or the side?

LAURIE: The back, I think.

STEVE: They must be working their way around the house.

LAURIE: Steve, I'm scared! If they have the house surrounded how're we ever going to get out?

STEVE: You'll see. If they do what I've planned on them doing.

LAURIE: What have you...?

STEVE: Willis is something. Last year he was a quarterback; he could have hit any one of those guys by now, if he wanted to. He's missing them on purpose. All right. Get ready. We're next.

LAURIE: What do you want me to do?

STEVE: Just stay right here, and whatever you do, don't make a sound. I'll be right back.

LAURIE: Where're you going?

STEVE: Sh-h-h! [*LEAVING*]

SCENE SEVEN

[*A MINUTE OR TWO LATER, STEVE RETURNS*]

LAURIE: Where did you go?

STEVE: Never mind. Did Willis tap on the floor yet?

LAURIE: Yes, just a few seconds ago.

STEVE: Okay, as soon as he gets down here, we'll get started. Willis! Did you remember to turn the lights on up there?

WILLIS: I remembered.

STEVE: You've been just great, Willis. Now, what we have to do... They're trying to break in the back!

LAURIE: Oh, Steve, what're we going to do?

STEVE: Darn! They haven't found the open window yet! You fools! It's right here! Sh-h-h. I think somebody just found it.

VOICE 2: *[FROM OUTSIDE]* Johnny, go get Frank. I think we just found a way in. *[PAUSE]* Hey, Frank, look at this. They must not have seen this one.

VOICE 1: *[FROM OUTSIDE]* Yeah, I think you're right. Good! We'll use it. It'd take us another hour to get through back there. Well now, look at that! Up there! It seems our "hosts" have already withdrawn to the "parlor" upstairs. Great. We've got them trapped up there, so let's not keep them waiting. Joey, go around the house and bring back two guys from each team with you, leave one on each side of the house to keep guard, just in case.

STEVE: Willis, I want you to take Laurie and go down to the cellar—the stairs are in the kitchen—and go to the window on the extreme south side of the house—that's that way—and open it, very quietly. Wait for me there. And have a chair ready under the window.

LAURIE: Are we going to go out that window, Steve? Is that...?

STEVE: Now go! Both of you.

LAURIE: What're you going to do, Steve? Why can't you go with us now?

STEVE: I can't explain. Just go!

VOICE 3: *[FROM OUTSIDE]* It's locked, all right. We'll just have to break the glass.

VOICE 1: *[FROM OUTSIDE]* Hey Sam! Come here and hoist me up. We're going in! Dan, give me that rock by your foot there.

VOICE 2: *[FROM OUTSIDE]* Here we go!

VOICE 1: *[FROM OUTSIDE]* A little higher, Sam. I can't quite reach the lock. Ah, good... Aaaaoh! My hand! My hand!

[THE NEXT FIVE LINES ARE SAID SIMULTANEOUSLY]

VOICE 3: Look Out!

VOICE 2: It's hot!

VOICE 3: What's going on?

VOICE 2: Look out, he's falling!

VOICE 1: My hand!

VOICE 3: Get back! Johnny! Go get the others! We're breaking in here! All of us! We're going to teach them a lesson! Nobody burns a friend of mine and gets away with it!

VOICE 2: Frank, how's your hand?

VOICE 1: I'll live, but they won't!

STEVE: [TO HIMSELF AS HE LEAVES TO JOIN LAURIE AND WILLIS] That should occupy them for a while, at least until that grease cools down.

SCENE EIGHT

[IN THE BASEMENT]

STEVE: Willis!

LAURIE: Steve!

WILLIS: Over here!

STEVE: Is the window open?

WILLIS: Yeah... but, I don't know, I think I can get my head through all right, but, well, I mean, look at me, and then look at that window!

STEVE: Any opening that a man can get his head through, he can get his body through. That's a fact. Where the head goes, the body must follow. We're even born that way, Willis. Headfirst!

LAURIE: What I want to know is how you got everybody on one side of the house.

STEVE: Did you ever try to climb up a greasy wall, holding onto a greasy window sill? Believe me, they'll need everybody they can get. And when they do get in, they'll be heading upstairs; they're too mad to do anything else. All right, we've got to move. I'll go out first, just in case there's someone still on guard out there. Laurie, you come next, then you, Willis. Ready?

STEVE: Ready.

WILLIS: I guess so.

[VOICES ARE FROM INSIDE, ON THE FIRST FLOOR]

VOICE 3: Benny, you and Sam stay here and help the others in. Dan, you come with me and Nathan. We got a little "work" to do upstairs.

VOICE 2: Hey, save some for us!

VOICE 3: Don't worry, we're just going to soften them up a little.

[STEVE IS OUT]

STEVE: Okay! The coast is clear. Laurie, give me your hand.

VOICE 2: Yeah, I think Frank wants to soften that girl up a little!

VOICE 1: I just said she might could help me get my mind off my burned hand, that's all. Don't get the wrong idea, you guys.

VOICE 3: Oh, we got the right idea, all right!

STEVE: All right. Willis, your turn.

VOICE 2: We know you got “hot hands!”

VOICE 3: I think I'm really beginning to like this party!

STEVE: Willis, kick the chair away from the window. Come on! You've got it! Come on...

[ALL THREE ARE OUTSIDE NOW]

WILLIS: I still don't believe all of me came through that window!

STEVE: Willis, that window's been a tight squeeze for all of us.

WILLIS: What?

STEVE: Never mind. Let's close it to cover our tracks and get out of here. All right, we're going to run, that direction, and once we start, don't look back; we're not stopping till we get to a phone booth. Let's go!

VOICE 1: *[FROM UPSTAIRS]* Hey! They ain't nobody up here!

VOICE 3: Aa-aw, they're just hiding from you, you idiot! Check in all the closets, the attic, downstairs. Sam! Benny! Everybody! Spread out! Cover the house! They're in here somewhere, and we ain't leaving until we find 'em.

SCENE NINE

[A BLOCK OR TWO AWAY, AT A PAY PHONE]

STEVE: Yes, officer, I'd like to report—well, I guess it's a case of “breaking and entering.” *[PAUSE]* Right. Steve McCabe, *[SPELLING HIS NAME]* M, c, capital C, a, b, e. *[PAUSE]* The 1200 block of Hillsdale Avenue. *[PAUSE]* Right, the old Simms house. *[PAUSE]* Yes sir. *[PAUSE]* No sir, no violence that I know of. *[PAUSE]* About twenty minutes ago, but they're having something of a party, so if you send a car out right away... *[PAUSE]* Right, a party. *[PAUSE]* No sir, I'm just a concerned citizen who... well, “got involved” you might say.

Discussion/Writing Activity

“HEADFIRST”

1. Did you agree or disagree with Steve's father when he said, “...once in a while, there still comes a time when there just ain't no choice but to kill, or be killed.” Support your answer with specific examples from your past or your own ideas to make your point.
2. Mr. McCabe said: “...if that boy had to defend hisself right now—I mean really defend hisself—he'd be in big trouble! And all them A's wouldn't be worth one good punch!” What does this reveal about Mr. McCabe? Support your answer by referring to specific details in the play.
3. When Laurie related the incident a year earlier, when the boys from Grant High School skinned the dog, Steve said, “The best thing to do with people like that is stay out of their way.” Laurie violently disagrees and accuses Steve of never taking a stand.
 - a. How do you feel about this? Should one, in a situation like the dog skinning incident, “stay out of their way” or take some other form of action?
 - b. What are some of the options one would have in dealing with a situation such as this?
 - c. What might be the consequences of some of the “wrong” ways to handle situations like this?
 - d. What do you think is the “right” way to handle this kind of situation? Why do you think this way would be better than other ways?
4. When the waitress recognized Laurie as someone who was in the cafe the night before, Laurie became nervous and embarrassed. Steve was no dummy, obviously he was aware that she was there with another boy, but instead of questioning Laurie further, he chose not to pursue the issue. He said, “What? Obviously the girl mistook you for someone else.” Some people would interpret this as evidence that Steve was a coward and afraid to confront Laurie.
 - a. How would you interpret Steve's reason for handling this situation as he did? Do you believe Steve was right in the way he handled it? Why? or why not?
 - b. In what other way might Steve have handled this situation? If he had handled it this “other way,” what do you think would have happened?
5. When the rock with the message was thrown through the window, Laurie became disturbed and upbraided Steve by saying: “This is just like you, Steve! Just like you! You got me into this thing, but you just don't have what it takes to get me out of it! Do you?” What does this tell the reader about Laurie?
6. After the rock with the message was thrown through the window, Laurie became angry at Steve when he tried to apologize. Laurie said to Steve, “But what? You think for one minute I care if you're sorry?” Before Steve can answer, Willis says, “Uh, I been thinkin', maybe if I was...”
 - a. What was Willis going to say?
 - b. What does this tell the reader about Willis?
 - c. Do you think this is an admirable quality? Why or why not?
7. When Laurie became mad at Steve, he finally says, “Laurie, listen to me because I'm going to say this once. I've heard about all I'm going to hear from your mouth. Now I suggest you shut it.” What does this tell you about Steve?
8. After Laurie calms down a little and when Willis is out of hearing, she says “...listen, all they want is Willis. Can't we just, you know, let them settle it? I mean, really, it's none of our-business.” What does this tell you about Laurie?
9. The title of the story “Headfirst” has a SYMBOLIC as well as a literal meaning.
 - a. What is the literal meaning?
 - b. What is the SYMBOLIC meaning?

Discussion/Writing Activity (Possible Answers)

“Headfirst”

1. Did you agree or disagree with Steve's father when he said, “...once in a while, there still comes a time when there just ain't no choice but to kill, or be killed.” Support your answer with specific examples from your past or your own ideas to make your point. [*Answers will vary.*]
2. Mr. McCabe said: “...if that boy had to defend hisself right now—I mean really defend hisself—he'd be in big trouble! And all them A's wouldn't be worth one good punch!” What does this reveal about Mr. McCabe? Support your answer by referring to specific details in the play. (CHARACTER) [*This tells the reader that Mr. McCabe believes that grades are not as important as physical strength when it comes to dealing with life's problems. The statement indicates that Mr. McCabe doesn't put as much importance on formal education as he does in helping a person deal with life. His English usage (using “hisself” instead of “himself” and “them” instead of “those”) indicates that Mr. McCabe has probably had very little formal education.*]
3. When Laurie told about the incident a year earlier, when the boys from Grant High School skinned the dog, Steve said, “The best thing to do with people like that is stay out of their way.” Laurie violently disagrees and accuses Steve of never taking a stand. [*Answers will vary.*]
 - a. How do you feel about this? Should one, in a situation like the dog skinning incident, “stay out of their way” or take some other form of action?
 - b. What are some of the options one would have in dealing with a situation such as this?
 - c. What might be the consequences of some of the “wrong” ways to handle situations like this?
 - d. What do you think is the “right” way to handle this kind of situation? Why do you think this way would be better than other ways?
4. When the waitress recognized Laurie as someone who was in the cafe the night before, Laurie became nervous and embarrassed. Steve was no dummy, obviously he was aware that she was there with another boy, but instead of questioning Laurie further, he chose not to pursue the issue. He said, “What? Obviously the girl mistook you for someone else.” Some people would interpret this as evidence that Steve was a coward and afraid to confront Laurie. (CHARACTER) [*Answers will vary.*]
 - a. How would *you* interpret Steve's reason for handling this situation as he did? Do you believe Steve was right in the way he handled it? Why? or why not?
 - b. In what other way might Steve have handled this situation? If he had handled it this “other way”, what do you think would have happened?
5. When the rock with the message was thrown through the window, Laurie became disturbed and upbraided Steve by saying: “This is just like you, Steve! Just like you! You got me into this thing, but you just don't have what it takes to get me out of it! Do you?” What does this tell the reader about Laurie? (CHARACTER) [*This tells the reader that Laurie has very little respect for Steve. She may like Steve, but it is obvious that she thinks she can't rely upon him to take care of her. It tells the reader that Laurie is the kind of girl who believes that a “real” man must be temperamentally as well as physically capable of protecting a girl.*]
6. After the rock with the message was thrown through the window, Laurie became angry at Steve when he tried to apologize. Laurie said to Steve “But what? You think for one minute I care if you're sorry?” Before Steve can answer, Willis says, “Uh, I been thinkin', maybe if I was...”
 - a. What was Willis going to say? [*He was probably going to suggest that he leave and face the gang of boys alone rather than get Steve and Laurie into trouble with the gang.*]
 - b. What does this tell the reader about Willis? (CHARACTER) [*This tells the reader that Willis has a conscience and has a great deal of courage. He would rather face this vicious gang of boys alone rather than get someone else hurt.*]

- c. Do you think this is an admirable quality? Why or why not? [Answers will vary.]
7. When Laurie became mad at Steve, he finally said, “Laurie, listen to me because I'm going to say this once. I've heard about all I'm going to hear from your mouth. Now I suggest you shut it.” What does this tell you about Steve? (CHARACTER) [*This tells the reader that Steve can be pushed just so far. It tells the reader that Steve, when the chips are down, has the qualities to be a leader.*]
8. After Laurie calmed down a little and when Willis was out of hearing, she said, “...listen, all they want is Willis. Can't we just, you know, let them settle it? I mean, really, it's none of our business.” What does this tell you about Laurie? (CHARACTER) [*This tells the reader that Laurie is a self-centered person. She obviously would leave Willis to the gang of boys with very little consideration as to what would happen to him. This statement is in direct contradiction to what she said earlier: “For God's sake, Steve! Aren't you ever going to be committed to anything? You think it's okay to just stand back and never get involved with anything? Never take a stand, never stand up for anything?” Obviously Laurie doesn't believe in the philosophy she preaches.*]
9. The title of the story “Headfirst” has a SYMBOLIC as well as a literal meaning.
- a. What is the literal meaning? [*The literal meaning is in reference to the way Steve, Laurie, and Willis went out the small basement window. They went through head first We can go through a small opening easier when we go head first, rather than feet first.*]
- b. What is the SYMBOLIC meaning? [*The symbolic meaning refers to using the brain to get out of a tight situation. It is an answer to Steve's father's statement about the survival of the fittest. Mr. McCabe meant that the fittest is the person who has the greatest physical strength. This - symbolic meaning is a statement of theme in the story. It is saying that there are times when - survival depends more on using one's brain than on using one's physical strength. The title means that if we use our brain we can overcome great obstacles.*]