

Prairie Dog Blues

Original Treatment

based on the novel by Mark Conkling

Act One

The Corleys of Albuquerque are the quintessential dysfunctional family. **Janice Corley**, (known as **MOM**) is the spiritual magnet that draws the family together, if begrudgingly, on each of the four annual family dinners that none of them would dare to miss. Janice, a colon cancer survivor is determined to fix each of her children's problems. All three kids are still single. **Jeff** has a dental practice he works twenty-four seven but nonetheless is always broke. Mom suspects his visits to the local casino are responsible for that. **Ida** is an intensive care nurse unable to settle down with just one man and **Roy, Jr.** whom the family just calls "**Junior**" (Pop calls him Dum Dum), has a love for mechanics and carpentry but his demons often get the better of him especially when he drinks. And that's pretty much all the time.

Roy Sr. (everyone calls **POP**) is loving husband but ineffectual when it comes to his kids. He's allowed Janice to talk him into retiring from his excavation and earth moving business, We Move Dirt, Inc. and selling fifteen acres of family land to a developer and giving the kids their inheritance now. Mom hopes this will make

life easier for them and in turn bring them closer together as a family.

Mom's grown children file into the title office and arrange themselves on one side of the conference room table. Jeff sports a new gold chain. He must have had a winning streak this week Pop whispers under his breathe. Ida's pink bra shows through her scrubs. Ida catches Mom's disapproving glance and drops into the chair with exasperation. Mom seemed to always be passing judgment. Mom's worried about Ida's reputation among the group of upwardly mobile doctors she normally dates but never for long.

Across the table, Junior reeks of last night's shots and beer, anxious and unfocused, avoiding Pop's stink eye. Over the past year alcohol had become his best friend. He can't sleep without it. Nightmares haunt him. Although he wouldn't admit it, he no longer drinks to feel good, he drinks to feel normal. He grew up with We Move Dirt, Inc. He learned well and could operate all the equipment better than Pop. He looked to Pop for approval. Instead, all he got was Pop's irritation and criticism. In exchange for taking care of the equipment, Junior gets free rent in a two-bedroom trailer Pop pulled home one day. With water, electricity, and cable TV from the main house the trailer is livable. That was fourteen years ago. Pop is as irritated as usual with Junior. Mom senses it and gives Pop a little pat on the knee, flashes an infectious smile and begins to read the document before her as if it were an old biblical parchment.

Mom and Pop had talked about this sale for the past four months. In her heart, Mom doesn't really want to sell the land, because it's the only balance in her life but she feels it's worth the sacrifice if her family could heal, even a little bit.

Everyone is giddy with anticipation as the developer **Henry Whitman** prepares to seal the deal. Suddenly the attorney from the Title Company enters the room. There's a problem, a pending new Prairie Dog Ordinance that restricts development and creates a number of requirements for property owners. The ordinance is due to become law next month, a material fact that affects the sale. The insurance underwriters and Land America Title Company will not insure the title against endangered species or city animal ordinances and there are hundreds of prairie dogs on the fifteen acres. Mr. Whitman runs the risk of being unable to develop the land until they solve the prairie dog issue. So technically, an environmental issue clouds the property title. The sale is stopped.

Pop slams his gnarled fist on the papers. Ida and Jeff hold back tears. Junior wipes at his dry mouth and pronounces they should have known. "Just like the rest of our lives, nothing ever goes right in this family." Mom puts her hand on the table touching the unsigned papers. They won't be together again until Easter dinner.

Mom looks across the table watching dreams fade: Pop's thirty-two food Winnebago, Jeff's office addition and paying off mounting bills, Ida's condominium and her

Master's degree in nursing, Junior's new Dodge diesel pickup reclaims its place in the dealer's showroom.

As they troop out of the office Mom thinks with a heavy heart how Ida will have to take on extra shifts in the intensive care unit, Jeff will bury himself in work, and Junior will get drunker than usual.

By nightfall Junior has polished off a pint of brandy, loaded his .22 rifle and waits on a mound of earth next to the road ditch on the north side of the property. He watches, drinks and shoots, imagining he's a sniper. He gets off nearly fifty shots, missing every one as prairie dogs scurry into their holes. Before long, the sheriff's car pulls up red lights blinking.

Act Two

"I'm sorry about yesterday," laments **LeAnn Cooper** before Mom is even half way settled in the hospitality kitchen of the church. Oh God, Mom thinks, now the whole church knows. "Don't think you can just kill God's creatures for money," LeAnn states flatly. "We slaughter beef cattle and chickens every day for money," Mom responds but she can see that isn't sitting too well with LeAnn. Mom changes the subject to LeAnn's daughter's wedding. The discomfort in the kitchen lifts as they discuss the details of organizing Laura's rehearsal and reception dinner.

Mom arrives home to a couple of dozen people walking up the road to her driveway carrying signs: "Save The Prairie Dogs," "God Loves Prairie Dogs," and "Prairie Dogs are Endangered." People point at the Corleys' land and chatter with each other. Pop and Junior are already outside. **Donald Pressman** introduces himself. He's the head of The Forest Guardians, an organization that helps with the environment. And low and behold LeAnn's daughter Laura is a Guardian too! They want the Corleys to stop shooting Prairie Dogs. Mom reaches Pop's side and asks what's going on. "We're being protested!" He spits out. Mom hangs her head. Oh, Lord. All we want is to help our children.

Next morning Junior is awakened by Pop's pounding wake up call, "Up and Adam Dum-Dum, we've got work to do." Junior gets up. Makes coffee, splashes some brandy in it before sitting down to eat a slice of cold pizza for breakfast. When Junior comes into the shop Pop is moving fifty-pound bags of "Kaput-D Prairie Dog Bait. Junior and Pop work together loading up the poison. Pop's plan is to work on the perimeter fence and wait until dark to put out the poison, avoiding the prying eyes of the protestors.

As the dusk and shadows sweep over the prairie dog mounds Pop and Junior put on their rubber gloves, open a bag of Kaput-D and pull their masks over their faces and get to work. They sprinkle Kaput-D into each hole and mark the holes with a splash of lime powder and move on to the next one and then the next. Suddenly they're hit by floodlights from atop of one of the protestor's trucks. They've been caught. Junior races to his truck, reaches

into the cab for his rifle and let's loose on the spotlights. It takes less than fifteen seconds to send the protestors running for cover. Before long the sheriff's car pulls up to the property's locked gate.

Pop argues he's got the right to poison those rodents on his own property. The sheriff agrees that may be so but Junior hasn't the right to shoot at people drunk and disorderly. The sheriff slaps on the cuffs. Mom is devastated as they cart Junior away. "Face it," Pop says, "we've raised a drunk, pure and simple."

Within days an extension agent with the county confiscates the Kaput-D with a court order and enjoins Pop against having it or using the illegal poison on his property. But Junior is not so easily deterred. Out on bail, liquored up and armed this time with a pellet rifle Junior shoots and continues to miss his targets. Maddened he grabs a shovel and runs drunkenly toward the bobbing heads of the prairie dogs. He chases, he swings but his shovel glances off the dirt mound and hits him in the side of his leg leaving a deep, bleeding gash. Junior crawls to the truck, drags his injured leg behind vomiting beer and tequila as he goes. Once inside he takes a few deep breaths and passes out.

When Junior wakes up his foot is wrapped and his mother stands over him. "You had a close call," Mom says quietly. The doctor comes in and lays down the law. The leg will heal but if he doesn't stop drinking he'll die. Junior has a so what attitude. He wants out of the hospital. Mom tells Junior either he signs himself into

the rehabilitation unit or he can go back to jail. Junior searches his mother's face. There's resolve there and a deep sadness. "And," she continues, "when you get out you can find another job, another place to live, and another life." She turns abruptly, leaves the room. Junior signs the papers.

Boom, Boom, Boom, neighbors come running out of their homes. The Guardian protestors are shouting, "Stop the murders! Stop the killing!" Laura donning a new pink baseball cap with a picture of a standing prairie dog with a tear running down his cheek and the words "save me" under the photo, and Donald leading the chant.

In the background a local news truck pulls up. Later when Mom and Pop watch the ten o'clock news, they're shocked to see the piece on POP appearing to be a monster. The TV producer headlines the story "The Exterminator," and the segment replays Pop using his new "Rodenator.

Revolutionary Burrowing Rodent Exterminator." The Rodenator uses propane, filling the prairie dog hole with the gas and then a sparks causes an explosion. There's Pop remarking that the Rodenator is humane just as an explosion blows dirt and prairie dogs everywhere. The next morning they're served with an injunction against any more killing until the hearing. Pop is infuriated relating the day's event to Jeff over dinner. Jeff is contemplative. Pop wonders what he's thinking. "Well," Jeff says, "if we can't kill them then we should have the right to move the little squatters and trespassers off our property, don't you think?" Pop grins.

Cut to:

"Prairie Dog Relocators--Gentle and Humane" is painted in bright purple across the tank on the truck carrying **EDDIE ADASHEK**, a tall scruffy man with a missing front tooth and big smile gets out of the truck. Eddie looks out over the field and smiles even wider. All Jeff can see is chamisa, clumps of grass and prairie dog mounds, but Eddie's lips move as he counts.. He can almost see the dollar signs. "Wow, there's one helluva lot of prairie dogs here." "Can you move them to a more suitable home?" Mom asks. "Sure will. I'll relocate them to a nice piece of rangeland." Pop tells Eddie they'd like to move 100 prairie dogs now to see how it goes and then propose it the City Council meeting next week when they hope to move them all.

Eddie sets up his truck. He makes some soapsuds with baby shampoo in a large tub that he unstrapped from the back of the truck. He puts a small hose in the first prairie dog hole and hooks it to the fittings on the tub and then to the outflow of the vacuum pump. He starts the engine and the prairie dog hole fills with soapsuds. As the prairie dogs peek out Eddie vacuums them up through the side of the tank and Jeff, Mom and Pop watch the prairie dogs shooting out of the end of the hose and bouncing helter-skelter around the foam padding. Then they settle down and huddle together, wet, soapy, and confused. The sound of their collective chatter comes through the wall of the tank. Pop's impressed.

Mom goes to the church kitchen with a soul full of joy. In a month or so, they would sell the land and her plan would start fresh. Mom is in charge of food service and table decorations for the annual Valentine Sweetheart Dinner sponsored by the Martha Circle of women as a fundraiser for their mission activities. As Mom bustles around the kitchen she feels a mild sense of dread when Laura suddenly shows up.

"There have been some changes." Laura's brassy voice fills the room. "And what changes might those be?" Mom asks softly. Laura proceeds to tell Mom she doesn't want her to cook for her rehearsal dinner or her wedding reception and moreover Mom is expected to step aside from her position as church hospitality director. When Mom looks to LeAnn she sees little support. As Laura continues, "You're killing animals. It's murder and I don't want you touching my food." Mom's stomach feels her stomach gripped by a sharp pain.

Mom returns home and sits quietly in her chair with a heating pad on her stomach. She feels sad and adrift.

"Oh for Christ's sake," Ida says with an exasperated sigh. "I have all my clothes on." She and Mom are replaying the same squabble they always have about the way Ida dresses. They're at the rehab center looking in on Junior.

DANNY SANDOVAL heads towards Mom and Ida and introduces himself. Danny has smooth light brown skin. His chiseled features frame a gentle bright smile and blue eyes. Ida notices they are exactly the same height, and his smile makes wrinkles by his eyes. Danny is a volunteer at the rehab center and Junior's sponsor. He just wanted to talk with them for a few minutes before their visit with Junior. A former alcoholic himself he'll support Junior through the next few months. Mom says she wants to help. Danny explains everything he and Junior talk about is confidential and that they need to give him some breathing room and time. Right now he needs someone he can trust who will help him be accountable. As he sees Junior walking towards them he stands up to leave, shakes Mom's hand then turns his attention to Ida. He holds eye contact for a second longer than necessary then moves away as Junior arrives. Ida feels a little tingle up her back.

Junior's been dry for eight days. When Junior appears his eyes are sunken and his face is gaunt. Nevertheless he musters a slight smile though it looks like it makes his face hurt. Junior tires easily and leaves soon after to take a nap waving feebly at Mom and Ida as he makes his way back to his ward.

Mom worries about whether Junior's rehabilitation work. Ida points out that Junior has some serious issues. He's angry. Probably hates everyone, including himself. "But why," Mom wants to know. "It started with the church scouts. The troop leader was a child molester," Ida blurts out. "God, Mom, you really are clueless." Mom is stricken.

The City Council meeting is in order and the Corleys' prairie dog issue is up for discussion.

The women from the Martha Circle at Grace Church sit together. Donald Pressman, a couple of young protestors and scores of supporters gather in the remaining seats as the Corleys' counsel states their position. The Corleys should have a chance to relocate the prairie dogs before the ordinance is passed and thereby be grandfathered in as an exempt property.

A parade of speakers, which includes Laura Cooper, lines up in opposition. Then Donald Pressman rises and argues that moving the prairie dogs disturbs their culture and their breeding cycles. Both sides are at each other's throats. Then the lid blows off when Pressman presents a photo of a family armed with .22 rifles, each holding a dead prairie dog by the tail. "These are some of the prairie dogs the Corleys relocated." Laura raises her eyebrows at Jeff and smirks. Mom drops her head into her hands. Above the din of enraged voices **Dr. Chuck Pentoff** breaks through and asks "May I address the Council?" Dr. Pentoff has a solution. He can find out if the prairie dogs lived on the land as a full and undisturbed homeland prior to the Corleys' ownership by monitoring the language of the prairie dogs. He claims he can tell from their language development how many generations have lived there and for how long. The cautious district Councilor seizes this opportunity to calm things down. He

states he has an obligation to be fair to everyone. This idea of life-rights could have a bearing. Both people and animals have a right to life. "Let's find out who was there first."

Ida and Danny hang back as the crowd empties out of the council room. She asks him how Junior is doing. He can't tell her much. It's private but he assures her Junior is fine and improving. He asks Ida to join him for a bite to eat. Over dinner they rehash the council meeting. Danny tells her about losing his father and that he runs an animal shelter. Danny's gaze is intense. Ida wonders what they might be noticing about her and it makes her uneasy. But he doesn't stare and hold eye contact too long like her last doctor boyfriend, creepy-eyes. When he invites her to visit the shelter her smile says yes.

Over the next few days, Danny and Ida grow closer. Danny is a good listener. Ida talks openly about her disappointments. Ida invites him home. Danny lets her know he sees the loneliness behind her eyes. Ida can't help responding to him as he kisses her and gently leads her to the bedroom.

After Dr. Chuck Pentoff's first week on the property he invites Jeff, Mom and Pop to visit his tent and see the progress of his research. He shows them an array of photos, favorite females for each of the dominant males. He explains the meaning of their recorded chatter pointing out the characteristics of each of the prairie

dogs. He's even gone so far as to name them. The one with the white tuft on his head he's called Topper. The big one with the large flanks and chest is Big Al and the nervous hyperactive one he calls Skipper. There's an unusual and unexpected affinity between them as Dr. Chuck points out other prairie dogs. Pop notes one of the prairie dogs scampers with an unusual gait suggesting he once broke his leg and it didn't heal well. Pop proposes Dr. Chuck name him Hopalong. Mom gives Pop a look that says what has come over you?

Cut to:

Mom is visibly distressed as Ida fusses over her. "Is your pain worse?" Ida tells Mom she's ready for another CAT scan. But Mom puts her off. Easter is only four weeks away she's looking forward to the family dinner and Junior will be home by then.

At home Ida expresses her concerns to Danny that Mom is getting sick again. Her surgery was six years ago and the chemo probably only put things on hold for awhile. Ida wishes they could just sell the land. Mom is convinced the money will fix the family. Danny says, "maybe not getting the money will fix your family."

Junior's counselor ushers the family into his office. Junior has been sober for twenty-four days. He's been working with his sponsor Danny attending AA meetings but

this is still a critical time and he wants them to understand that alcoholism involves the whole family.

It's time to clear the air. Junior takes a deep breath as he turns in Pop's direction. "I feel worthless when you call me dum-dum. I need you to stop doing that." Pop looks up at Junior and smiles. This is the man he wants Junior to be. "I guess dum-dum can get old after a while, huh?" He tells Mom she treats him like a five year old entering his trailer and doing, doing, doing for him whether he likes it or not. It's not that he wants her to stay away from him but just to give him some space and privacy. He points out Jeff's superior attitude because he's a dentist and Junior moves dirt. Ida is always making medical comments and observations about him when he just wants her to be his sister and a friend. It's an eye opening meeting but everyone sees their part in this and agrees to be different.

The Council meeting is in order once again and everyone is making their statements. It's finally Dr. Pentoff's turn. After conducting an intensive scientific study of the prairie dogs on the Corleys' property he has concluded that their community contains at least eight distinct words and that this is a mature prairie dog culture with a history of hundreds of generations. The prairie dogs have lived in that habitat for at least one-hundred sixty years, well before the time the Corleys bought the property in nineteen thirty-two. The prairie

dogs were there first! The Corleys are devastated by this outcome.

There's a glum mood over the start of Easter dinner but soon it's replaced by a light-hearted chatter as everyone enjoys Mom's delicious meal. Jeff even manages to joke about Dr. Pentoff and his names for the prairie dogs.

Pop tells Ida to tell everyone about Donald Pressman's million-dollar offer. A donor for the Forest Guardians has offered a million dollars for five acres if Mom and Pop will give ten acres to a land trust. All fifteen acres would go to the trust. That way, Mom and Pop would have the money and the prairie dogs stay.

Mom wants the kids to have the money from the ten acres. Ida thinks the choice belongs to Mom and Pop. She doesn't want the money. With Danny's help she's come to realize that she can help herself through school by cutting expenses, getting a student loan and attending school part time. It would take a little longer but she could do it. Pop is opposed to giving away the land his father gave him. Jeff thinks they have good chance fighting this in court. Junior is pensive. It's unlike him to be so quiet. Junior clears his throat. All eyes turn to him. "We're not selling. What would you think of a park?"

Act Three

No one every cared what he had to say before and now Junior's prairie dog park has put him in the spotlight. Junior works his ideas and sketches in the machine shed

while Jeff meets with the City Planning Department. These meetings take a lot of preparation and time. Jeff finds himself making fewer trips to the casino poker tables and not missing it either and he was finding a new sense of esteem. But, more than that it was Mom's new attitude. After giving Jeff a two thousand dollar check, she had frowned and told him she wouldn't give him another dime except for the fees required to hire an accounting firm to straighten out his finances. Maybe it was her Al-anon group or maybe her illness but she stood strong and told Jeff, "Our little secret is over-it's high time you grew up." Jeff accepted her ultimatum, and even appreciated it.

The City Council and the Forest Guardians rally around the idea. Over the weeks that follow a number of organizations ask to run the concession stands but Junior wants the Corleys to do that and scheduling and tickets. The City Council meeting moves through the approval process in a matter of minutes. After hearing the support of neighbors, the Forest Guardians, and people from the churches the Council vote is unanimous. The zoning approval followed the next week. The Corley Prairie Dog Park is on its way.

The building permit process is painful enough to drive Junior to drink but with everyone's help and support he takes each it one day at a time and stays sober. Mom hasn't seen Pop so animated or the family pulling together like this in years. Finally Mom feels like things are going right for this family.

The church wants Mom back as hospitality director. There have been complaints about the cost and the food. But Mom feels that the park construction and her health will keep her from resuming that position. Mom has since had another CAT scan and she and Ida have made the rounds of labs and specialist. The mass in her abdomen is inoperable and growing fast. After Sunday night dinner Mom take's Ida's hand and prepares herself to tell the rest of the her family the news.

"How much time?" Pop asks. "About a month or two, but it will be a good time." Pop gets up from his chair, kisses Mom on the forehead and steps out the door.

Junior and Pop start work just after sunrise each morning and work until dark. They have a silent pact to finish the park quickly.

Opening day is a tremendous success. Mom magnanimously invites Laura to sell hats, shirts, plates and cups at the concession stand. The family, which now includes Danny, watches and shares Mom's joy. Tired Mom gets into her golf cart and drives down the path as she beams and waves to visitors. Ida looks after her. "Why does she have to die now?" Ida weeps quietly into Danny's shoulder.

Junior sits with Mom and Pop in the shade of the Corley Education Building drinking sodas looking over the park they've built. Junior tells them how sorry he is for all

the grief he's caused them over the years. Pop tells him "Junior, you're the smartest of all the kids. You've soaked up more than Jeff and Ida combined. Don't you know that?" Mom asks if she's let him down. Junior tells her "You haven't let me down Mom; I haven't been able to grow up. But, now I want to take responsibility for myself, deal with what happened to me in the past and not blame anyone least of all me. Mom pulls a tissue out of her pocket and begins to cry. Junior kneels beside her and hugs her.

The Park's visitors continue to swell. As Mom's illness takes its toll she asks Jeff to take over handling the money at the park. Mom's vote of confidence brings tears to his eyes.

As the month of May passes into the first week of June Jeff discovers the cash is exactly one hundred dollars short. He counts again, separates the ticket sales, but still it comes up short. The same thing happens on Friday night. He tells Pop and Junior. They decide not to tell Mom for fear that the added worry will sap her already fading strength. But, when more than one thousand dollars disappears the following week Pop, Jeff and Junior tell Mom what they've discovered and that they've decided to install a security camera. Two nights later, they view the CDs and watch pictures showing Laura stuffing twenty dollar bills into her bra and closing the drawer. The next morning two detectives appear and arrest Laura amidst her piercing protests.

A cameraman moves into position as **Karen Thomas** begins her live report from the Corley Prairie Dog Park. She's interviewing Mom, Pop and Donald Pressman about the community's amazing response to the Park. They all agree that it's s a testimonial to the best in human nature that all involved came together in such a beautiful way. The camera crew walks along the interpretive trail, making stops along the various viewing stations. As the interview comes to an end the camera crew collects their gear. Mom drives her golf cart back to the entrance area. Pop and Junior walk. People are shouting and pointing when Pop and Junior come around the concession stand. Mom's golf cart lies on its side, and Mom struggles on the gravel. Blood drops from a deep cut on her knee. Pop runs up to her. Karen tells them an ambulance is on its way.

Pop and Ida walk into the concession stand where Jeff is counting the day's receipts. Junior arrives with the cash from the ticket booth. Pop puts his hands into his pockets and tells them how proud he is of all of them. His voice breaks. Ida takes over for him. It's time to call in hospice for Mom. "We've know this was coming," Jeff says. The next afternoon the hospice nurse tells them what to expect in the tough weeks ahead.

Cut to:

A simple brown urn containing Mom's ashes sits in a glass box on the altar display of Grace Church. Mom's admirers fill the Church. Many of Pop's working friends along with Junior's AA friends and Ida's fellow nurses from work. Jeff closed his practice for the day and his also staff joins in saying good bye to Mom.

Through the heat of August the family goes through the motions of running the park. Everyone misses Mom in their own way. One day as Pop and Junior walk out to the burrows they notice a stench rising from the holes. There are dead prairie dogs everywhere.

The vet comes out the next day and double bags a couple of the carcasses and heads to the New Mexico Center for Disease Control where they confirm the presence of tularemia, a virus deadly to prairie dogs and transferable to humans. The CDC requires immediate closing of the park and extermination of all the remaining prairie dogs.

With the Park closed Pop and Junior fix up equipment and make bids on a couple of jobs. Jeff takes on extra patients and Ida puts in double shifts and attends night school. Pop feels lost, adrift. He stands in Mom's rose garden and asks "Janice Corley, what should I do?"

Sunday morning, everyone is gathered for coffee and donuts. Pop looks to his three kids. "I've been thinking.

It was Mom's dream that we sell the land. Maybe we should."

Cut to:

Pop assembles the family at the Title Company. Pop takes his place at the head of the table, and the others in birth order, Jeff, Ida and Junior. Ida invited Danny and he settles in beside her.

Henry Whitman turns to Pop. "I have the three million plus closing costs just like you said." Pop doesn't move.

"I've been thinking." Pop says. Jeff grins at Pop, "Now we're in trouble." "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Junior asks as he lays a hand on Pop's shoulder. "I think so," Pop says. "Now hold on, don't even think about backing out" Mr. Whitman jumps up from his chair. "We have a firm verbal agreement. I can sue on that basis." Ida turns to the title company officer. "Oh, by the way, have you sent out your inspector?" "Yeah," Pop says getting the idea, "I saw a couple of prairie dogs scurrying around." "I saw some too, Junior jumps in. The title office is stunned. "Oh my gosh, you did?" "I think Danny saw some too." Danny furrows his brow. "I thought I saw a couple of females by the parking lot headed for the field."

Junior, Jeff, Ida and Danny stand up and the Corleys walk out together. As they cross the parking lot Jeff shakes his head, throws up his hands, and laughs. "I think I can find that guy Eddie the Relocator. I'll bet he's got some

prairie dogs from Santa Fe.