

# Burning Tar

a play by

Mark Steven Jensen

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Mark Steven Jensen

Contact Author:  
3656 Flag Avenue N.  
New Hope, MN 55427  
(612) 545-2145  
[requests@markjensenwriter.com](mailto:requests@markjensenwriter.com)

## BURNING TAR

### CAST OF CHARACTERS

**CYNTHIA**-- A gas station attendant. Mother of CRYSTAL. Daughter of JOE and MARION. Middle twenties.

**NATHAN**-- JOE and MARION's son, a cattleman, who helps at home. Brother to CYNTHIA. Mid to late twenties.

**ELAINE**-- Friend of CYNTHIA's. Also works at the gas station. Seventeen.

**BURT**-- A hired hand. CYNTHIA's current boyfriend. Early to mid twenties.

**MARION**-- CYNTHIA and NATHAN's mother. JOE's wife. Early fifties.

**JOE**-- CYNTHIA and NATHAN's father. MARION's husband. Runs a purebred Hereford ranch.

**CRYSTAL**-- CYNTHIA and NATHAN's daughter. Six to eight years old.

**JOHN**-- A road worker who is working on highway seventy-five. Late twenties, early thirties.

### TIME AND PLACE

In and around a small rural Minnesota town. The first scene takes place ten years before the present. But most of the play takes place over one 1989 August weekend, starting Friday night and ending Sunday afternoon.

### NOTE ON DIALECT

These characters speak with a Midwestern Scandinavian accent. This accent is common in northern and central Minnesota, particularly in the region between Brainerd and Fargo. The dialogue will seem direct and rounded in tone; accents come heavy on the ends of sentences.

**FIRST PERFORMANCE**

BURNING TAR was produced at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in August 1993. Directed by Bob May, it was performed as part of the Summer New Play Festival. The play had the following cast:

CYNTHIA-- Christie Parker

NATHAN-- Michael Serna

ELAINE-- Corrine Grover

BURT-- Gregory Gaskill

MARION-- Maggie Winn-Jones

JOE-- Charles Paddock

CRYSTAL-- Aida Le Mere

JOHN-- Dax Pagan

### SCENE BREAKDOWN

The play runs ninety minutes without an intermission: Here is a list of the scenes:

Scene i--Ten years before the present (1979). A ditch along a country road.

Scene ii--Present day (1989). A small town bar on Friday night.

Scene iii--Cynthia's apartment and the Bjornson farmhouse.

Scene iv--The bar. Later that same night.

Scene v--A gas station in town. Saturday morning.

Scene vi--The Bjornson farmhouse. Saturday afternoon.

Scene vii--Cynthia's apartment. Saturday evening.

Scene viii--An isolated road ditch. Saturday night.

Scene ix--The Bjornson farmhouse. Saturday night.

Scene x--A new road in the country. Saturday night.

Scene xi--Cynthia's apartment. Sunday morning.

[The stage is a strange mound, intertwining several locations at once. No area is independent of the other; each suggested location should be able to be used in other scenes. A small bar with a door and beer clock occupies one part of the stage. The bar will also become the checkout counter of the local gas station. This area funnels into the living room of CYNTHIA's low income apartment. Twisted on top of all of this is the kitchen of MARION and JOE's farmhouse. Swerving through this entire mass is part of a curved freshly tarred road. The center yellow line is painted erratically, with swirls, curves and spirals. Orange pylons also sit on this road. A road ditch slants away from the stage, complete with green weeds, pop cans, and beer bottles.]

[CYNTHIA drags NATHAN to the ditch. She is seventeen years old and NATHAN is sixteen. She giggles a little. NATHAN gives her a big sloppy kiss, but then he suddenly backs away, dejected.]

CYNTHIA

Do it again. But do it better this time. Not so much spit. Just more lips, girls don't like that spit all over their face.

[NATHAN nervously kisses CYNTHIA again.]

CYNTHIA (CONT.)

That's better. But pull back some. Just use your lips, not your whole face.

[NATHAN goes to kiss her  
again, but can't.]

NATHAN

This'll be the worst prom ever.

CYNTHIA

You're getting better. C'mon Nate, keep practicing.

NATHAN

But it won't work out the same. I'll pick her up, and she'll be in her nice dress and her parents will take pictures. Everyone smiling. I'll turn all white inside. I'll barely be able to talk.

CYNTHIA

Nate c'mon.

NATHAN

No.

CYNTHIA

Nathan.

[CYNTHIA strokes NATHAN's  
hair.]

Just pretend she's me. See? Isn't it easy?

NATHAN

But it's different.

CYNTHIA

She's a girl, I'm a girl. What's the difference? You've gotta date girls sometime. Here, stand up.

NATHAN

No--

CYNTHIA

Stand up.

[CYNTHIA places her arms  
around NATHAN's neck.]

What do you do when you get in this position?

NATHAN

Are we slow dancing?

CYNTHIA

We could be. But what if she looks up at you like this?

NATHAN

Stop that.

CYNTHIA

Cooperate Nate, or this won't help. Now, whatta you do?

[NATHAN leans slightly and kisses her. CYNTHIA mumbles encouraging grunts to him as they kiss. The kiss is noticeably improved and CYNTHIA gives NATHAN the thumbs up. NATHAN tries to pull away.]

CYNTHIA (CONT.)

Mm-mm!

[CYNTHIA pulls NATHAN close. She presses her body against his.]

CYNTHIA (CONT.)

Nate, you'll have to relax or you'll make her uncomfortable.

NATHAN

I'm trying.

CYNTHIA

Don't dwell on it. Just do it.

NATHAN

Well--

[CYNTHIA grabs NATHAN's face and gives him a long kiss. She tries to get NATHAN to put his arms lower on her back.]

CYNTHIA

Don't get so tight, relax.

NATHAN

I'm trying! I'm really trying!

CYNTHIA

Okay, okay. I won't say anything anymore. But you've just gotta do it. Y'know. Don't get uptight. Be natural, and you'll do it.

NATHAN

It's hard to be natural when you're worried about screwing up.

CYNTHIA

You won't screw up. Just don't think about it. Think about something you like instead. That'll help you through it. Like chocolate ice cream. That's your favorite dessert, so that's all you worry about. You see chocolate ice cream?

NATHAN

Yeah, I do.

CYNTHIA

You gotta see it, taste it.

NATHAN

I am. A whole mound of it.

CYNTHIA

That's what boys are like to me.

NATHAN

Are they? This really helps.

CYNTHIA

Good. I thought it might. Now, let's try a--

[NATHAN takes her by surprise and kisses her. He grips her close, totally going with the moment. He lowers CYNTHIA into the grass.]

CYNTHIA (CONT.)

Whew, Nate! Now that's how you kiss.

[NATHAN goes to kiss her again.]

CYNTHIA (CONT.)

We better quit.

NATHAN

Huh?

CYNTHIA

What if Mom and Dad come? They can't see us like this.

NATHAN

They still won't come home for awhile! Dad's gonna take forever hauling them cows. C'mon, please. We're in a ditch, who can see us? You're really helping me. Don't you want to help me?

CYNTHIA

I am helping you... ain't I?

NATHAN

You got me all tense again. Why'd you mention Ma and Dad? When I'm with a girl, I always get paranoid. Y'know? It's almost like they're in the car watching us, telling me what

NATHAN (CONT.)

they would do together. I can't imagine they would do anything.

CYNTHIA

I'm sorry, c'mon Nate. You're so close to understanding. Chocolate ice cream. Nate. Chocolate ice cream.

NATHAN

I was just learning how.

CYNTHIA

Chocolate ice cream. Nate, don't back away. Think chocolate ice cream.

NATHAN

Give me a second. Chocolate ice cream. Chocolate ice cream.

CYNTHIA

Chocolate.

NATHAN

Chocolate ice cream. Got it.

[NATHAN starts kissing her again, and the two lay down in the grass. CYNTHIA strokes the back of NATHAN's head. A pick-up approaches.]

NATHAN (CONT.)

Someone's driving up the road! I think it's dad!

CYNTHIA

C'mon! Let's go in the woods!

Will we do some more? NATHAN

Yes! C'mon! CYNTHIA

[CYNTHIA and NATHAN exit. The pick-up gets very close and its brakes squeal to a quick stop. Someone gets out and slams the door.]

[Enter simultaneously JOE and ELAINE. ELAINE is so furious that she is crying. She notices her purse is missing and runs back off stage.]

[JOE wears dirty coveralls and a baseball cap.]

JOE  
Cynthia? Nathan? Why are you two horsing around in the ditch? Cynthia? I saw you two, come on now. Dangerous out here. Car could slide off the road and hit you both!

[CYNTHIA is seen trying to run away.]

JOE (CONT.)  
Wait there Cynthia. Say, I mean it!

CYNTHIA  
Just get outta here Dad! Jeeze.

JOE  
What tricks you got Nathan doing now?

CYNTHIA  
Nothing.

JOE  
Nate, you get out of the woods.

CYNTHIA  
He's not here. It's just me.

JOE  
Get in the pickup now. Please?

[CYNTHIA runs away laughing.  
ELAINE storms onstage,  
slinging her purse over her  
shoulder.]

JOE

Do not run away from me! Good night! Nate! C'mon on  
now....

[JOE follows CYNTHIA, calling  
out for both CYNTHIA and  
NATHAN. When ELAINE speaks it  
becomes ten years later.]

ELAINE

Oh, screw you Leon! I'll find my own way home! Just get  
the hell out of my face, would you?

[The pick-up engine revs on the  
pavement outside. Wheels peel  
out on the tar, and the pick-  
up sound fades away.]

ELAINE (CONT.)

Oh, you're a real man, now! Asshole!

[ELAINE enters the bar area  
and storms over to a  
payphone.]

ELAINE (CONT.)

Don't I even have a quarter? Where is one! C'mon Elaine,  
don't freak out on me now. You got one, it's in here  
someplace....

[NATHAN sits at a table with  
three open beer bottles.]

NATHAN

Hey! You can't be in here. Aren't you too young?

ELAINE

Just shut up, okay?

NATHAN

There isn't some new law letting high schoolers in here, is  
there?

ELAINE

I think I know I'm not old enough to be in a stupid bar. This is the only place open, Nate, and I need to use this phone! God. Oh....

[She fishes in her purse for a quarter, after awhile she finds one.]

NATHAN

Yeah, that didn't stop me either. One time after prom I tried to sneak in here too. Got caught though.

ELAINE

Don't look at me! Just go drink something. Okay?

[ELAINE dials the phone.]

NATHAN

I, I was just joking kinda. Well c'mon, you're not someone I'd, I'd expect in here. Y'know what I mean... sorta?

ELAINE

Would you quit for once!

ELAINE (CONT.)

[In phone.]

C'mon, c'mon!

NATHAN

Jeeze, sorry! Already getting told off. Expected that when they came but....Sure are taking their sweet time getting here.

ELAINE

I don't want to be talked to, especially by men in general, all right? Even if you are Cynthia's brother. I just... just need to get home. Dammit, aren't they there?

NATHAN

Need a ride? I could take you somewhere--

ELAINE

No! For the last time Nate!

NATHAN

Sure, I'll leave you be. Real good at that. Real good.

[NATHAN sets the other two bottles on opposite sides of the table.]

NATHAN (CONT.)

Three. I've bought one for everybody.

[CYNTHIA and BURT enter.]

ELAINE

Oh God. You're here too?

CYNTHIA

Elaine? What are you doing in a bar?

ELAINE

Ah... it's nothing.

CYNTHIA

Sure doesn't look like it.

ELAINE

Just, it's nothing.... Do you have to look at me? Would you stop looking? What is it? Haven't seen anyone use the phone before?

CYNTHIA

Whoa, Elaine, what--

ELAINE

God!

[ELAINE slams the phone down  
and runs into the bathroom.]

CYNTHIA

Say, you don't have to go.

[CYNTHIA sees NATHAN.]

NATHAN

Hi ya Cyn! Look at how those teenagers act these days. Stupid kids. We sure weren't like that.

CYNTHIA

[Whispering to BURT.]

Did you tell him we'd be here?

BURT

He beat us! Nate was still in the barn when I went.

CYNTHIA

Did you tell him?

He asked. What could I say? BURT

Oh great Burt! CYNTHIA

What was I supposed to do? He always finds some way to wheedle it outta me. There's no law against him drinking in the same place. BURT

We'll go someplace else. CYNTHIA

We just got here. BURT

Burt, please. We don't need him tagging along. CYNTHIA

I'm pooped out. At least let me relax for a little bit. BURT

God Burt! CYNTHIA

Yes, I am. Thank you for noticing. BURT

Don't start with your stupid jokes either! CYNTHIA

You wanna fight with your brother, go over there. I'm not. He's not my brother. BURT

But he is your friend. Tell 'em to buzz off! CYNTHIA

Sh, Cynthia. You want him to think we're having a fight? Huh? Hey Nate! BURT

Yeah? What? NATHAN

You're feelin' a little stiff, I bet. BURT

NATHAN

I'm fucking sore is what I am! The way that bull calf popped me.

BURT

Yeah.

NATHAN

Jeeze, Dad's let them calves get too big. I'm pretty sure some of them mothers were a hundred and fifty pounds.

BURT

They were getting pretty big to castrate.

NATHAN

Wanna beer, Cyn?

CYNTHIA

You alright? You should go to the doctor if you got kicked.

NATHAN

I'm fine. Hell, it was just a tap. C'mon guys, get over here, I've bought ya a round.

CYNTHIA

We are going to take another table.

NATHAN

Cyn, I haven't seen you all week. That's just plain terrible, as close as we are.

CYNTHIA

I've been working.

NATHAN

Have you? I didn't know the gas station was open that late.

CYNTHIA

It's not. I have been trying to spend some time with Crystal. That's why I haven't been by the farm.

NATHAN

Oh, I understand. Doing that mother thing.

CYNTHIA

Yes Nate, doing that mother thing.

NATHAN

Burt and me's been busy on the place, I guess.

CYNTHIA

Then we've both been busy.

NATHAN

Y'know Burt, I was pretty impressed by how quick you're getting at castrating.

BURT

Sure takes a little practice.

NATHAN

Mighty impressive. Really, he was. You shoulda been with today, Cyn, you woulda seen some fast bull pinching. We were popping them bull calves in the chute so fast. Once we got their heads stuck in the clamp bar, Burt would whip out the pincers and clip, clip! It was all over for those boys.

CYNTHIA

Great.

BURT

Glad that's done.

NATHAN

Yeah, it's a crappy job. I sure hate it.

BURT

That's for sure.

NATHAN

Yup.

BURT

To the end of a bad job.

[BURT chinks his beer bottle on top of NATHAN's. It starts to foam.]

NATHAN

You fucker!

BURT

Got ya.

NATHAN

You got something to wipe this up?

CYNTHIA

No.

NATHAN  
It's gonna run all over the floor, find something.

CYNTHIA  
Can't you?

NATHAN  
Would you just get something?

CYNTHIA  
Hang on then.  
[Whispering to BURT.]  
I'm having such a good time.

[CYNTHIA grabs some napkins.]

NATHAN  
What's with her tonight? Jeeze.

BURT  
I don't know. But it's got nothing to do with me.

NATHAN  
So, you got her mad. Hell, this could be your night.  
Somebody told me that temper of hers makes her real hot to  
trot.

BURT  
Sh big guy, don't shoot off that talk. Not in front of  
Cynthia.

NATHAN  
Why not?

CYNTHIA  
He blabbin' about my sex life again?

BURT  
Ah... no.

NATHAN  
Course I was.

CYNTHIA  
Must've been a short conversation. Here.

NATHAN  
Thanks.

CYNTHIA  
You're welcome.

NATHAN

You better put out tonight. Ease your bitchy mood.

CYNTHIA

If one more foul thing comes outta your mouth--

BURT

Hey, let's cool it, huh?

CYNTHIA

Hand me those napkins. I'll throw them away.

[CYNTHIA gets the napkins and heads for the bathroom.]

BURT

Jeeze Nate! I mean she is your sister.

NATHAN

So? She's still a woman. Just like all the others. Get what they want and they dump ya.

CYNTHIA

You watch it.

[CYNTHIA exits into the bathroom.]

BURT

Me dating her makes you uncomfortable, doesn't it? It must.

NATHAN

Yes, Burt it does. It really stinks and you're an asshole! It's the day Burt. C'mon. Cutting bull calves gets me weirded out. Or something. Hell, you get her away from that apartment. Away from that... kid. Besides, not like she'll stay with you anyway.

BURT

You sure 'bout that, huh?

NATHAN

Okay. Whatever you wanna think.

BURT

We are fine, Nate. It is different, though. I mean I can't tell you things about... her.

NATHAN

Yeah. Oh God Burt. I don't care.

Thank you, I am. BURT

Har, har, har! NATHAN

[NATHAN taps BURT's beer bottle with his beer bottle. It starts to fizz over.]

Damn it! BURT

One for one tonight. We're dead even. NATHAN

Yeah. BURT

Dead even. NATHAN

[A phone rings. CYNTHIA's apartment is revealed. A cheap love seat, coffee table. Rock music comes from an unseen television. CRYSTAL sits on the floor watching the music videos. MARION sits on the love seat, watching in boredom. MARION grabs the phone.]

MARION  
Cynthia Bjornson's apartment. This is her mother.

[JOE stands in MARION's kitchen. He impatiently holds a phone.]

It's Joe. I need you back out here. JOE

What? Why? MARION

The neighbor's bulls are in with our cows. Half our herd's in heat! JOE