

By the Rivers of Babylon

A play in two acts

by David Greenberg

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CHARACTERS

LYLE.....60, (PLAYS HIMSELF AT VARIOUS AGES)
 JEROME.....40 LYLE'S FATHER
 OLIVIA.....35 LYLE'S MOTHER
 PAPA [HENRY] GARRETT.....78, JEROME'S FATHER
 GREAT-GRANDPA [LYLE] GARRETT.....45, JEROME'S GRANDFATHER
 ETHAN.....40, JEROME'S BOYHOOD FRIEND
 CONGRESSMAN FRANK STUBBLEFIELD.....40S
 GLORY.....60S, A LOCAL WOMAN
 CRENSHAW.....60S, AN OLD MAN
 DAN.....20S, A LOCAL MAN/JANITOR.....70S
 FEMALE INTRUDER.....30-50
 EXTRAS AS DESIRED

(1) *The Twenty Negro Law* was a section of the Second Conscription Act passed by the confederacy during the civil war, exempting from military service one white male for every twenty slaves owned thereby on a Southern plantation.

Papaw, meaning grandfather in colloquial parlance, is pronounced *Pa* (as in *Pam*) *Paw*, with the emphasis on *Pa*.

This drama is based on actual events that occurred in western Kentucky in the 1960s. The peninsula shouldered between the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers, referred to by its thousands of residents as 'the land between the rivers,' was a small society unto itself. Through unrelenting and questionable application of the prerogative of Eminent Domain and subsequent eviction practices that today might be called ethnic cleansing, the Tennessee Valley Authority eradicated the Appalachian culture that had thrived there for almost two centuries. In its place, they created a public campgrounds and recreation area, now known as Land Between the Lakes.

The characters in this play are entirely fictional; their story is not.

*The front of the stage serves as various locales as required. The majority of the stage is a simple kitchen composed of a wooden table, two or three wooden chairs, a table clock, a moonshine jug, a few cups or glasses.

*Scene transition information appears in the right margin in upper case. Scenes are meant to flow, not play out as discreet units.

*Props include an axe or axe handle, double-barreled shotgun and a wooden post.

The Time.....1963 & 2010

The Place..... *Between the Rivers, Kentucky*

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

AT RISE:

LYLE GARRETT is standing (*stage center, front*) on the edge of the Tennessee River looking west as a paddle-wheeler churns past.

He wears a jean jacket, a cap of some sort and construction boots. He has a fairly thick, trimmed beard.

We hear the BLAST of the steam whistle and then after a few moments, the HOOTING of a calliope in the distance.

Lyle grins, waving frantically.

LYLE

Hey! Over here! Hey!

A lively rendition of *Dixie* drifts back over the river towards him.

LYLE (CONT'D)
(calling)

Hey! The steamboat's here! Hey, everybody...the boat's here!

Lyle begins to dance - at least it's what he thinks is dancing. He's imitating the elders at the barn dances and weddings and other social gatherings.

It's the best imitation a ten-year-old boy can manage.

Several adults join him and they all stomp and swing each other around.

One by one they disappear until he dances alone.

He hoots and hollers and jumps around until the paddle-wheeler blows its great horn again and disappears.

(beat)

He watches it leave. He waves.

ACT ONE, SCENE TWO

IN THE KITCHEN A
CROWD BEGINS TO
FORM.

JEROME walks in and plants a jug of moonshine on the table.

[Lyle appears on the stairs.]

The room gets crowded and noisy as people arrive for the meeting.

GLORY, a formidable looking woman, big-boned and with a nineteenth century composure, walks up to Olivia and they embrace.

GLORY
(patting Olivia's bulge)
How you coming along there, young lady?

OLIVIA
(lightly)
If it isn't one thing it's another.

DAN, a bearded man holds up jug.

DAN
This Henry's very own?

JEROME
You'd drink turpentine and wouldn't know the difference.

He takes the jug, opens it and pours them each a shot.

DAN
And have, too, when it come down to it.

They quiet and we hear CONGRESSMAN FRANK STUBBLEFIELD off-stage greeting people.

STUBBLEFIELD (V.O.)
Hey, Larry! Why Grayson James! You still driving that old jalopy! Etc.

A few people respond but it quickly becomes clear that he is not being met with a friendly reception.

A few moments pass before
Stubblefield walks in wearing a
broad-brimmed hat of the period. He
is suited, with a dull narrow tie
and a fat, babyish face that seems
to always be smiling.

STUBBLEFIELD (CONT'D)

Quite the crowd you got here, Jerome. Quite the crowd.

JEROME

(coolly)

Almost make you think there was an election on or something.

Stubblefield laughs too easily and
the silence of the crowd around him
is somewhat unnerving.

STUBBLEFIELD

Mrs. Garrett...could I possibly trouble you for a glass of
water?

OLIVIA

I have ice tea, if you'd prefer?

STUBBLEFIELD

Water would be just fine, thanks-

OLIVIA

Or lemonade?

Stubblefield stands quietly, not
sure how to refuse her a second
time.

JEROME

Give the man some water, 'Liv.

Olivia pushes her way to the sink
among the silent crowd and fills a
glass.

He makes a big display of drinking
it.

STUBBLEFIELD

My throat's dry, I tell you...

DAN

That's from trying to suck and blow at the same time.

Mild laughter.

Stubblefield's grin turns cool and he puts the glass down.

STUBBLEFIELD

Now I know some of you folks are upset-

He barely gets a chance to speak before they bombard him with questions and accusations.

DAN

Upset ain't the word for it, Frank. I haven't been offered anywhere near what my place is worth. How would you take to it if they done that to you? What the hell is going on, anyway? I had some guy come through here and tell me I didn't have anything worth paying for. So what the hell is that all about?

STUBBLEFIELD

Okay...okay...calm down.

OLIVIA

You said this land was being bought by the TVA for development. That's what you said. Big development, you said. People would make money and everyone was going to get a piece of the pie. Those were your words.

DAN

What kinda pie is that, Stubblefield? The kind you find in my pasture?

STUBBLEFIELD

Hold on. Hold on. You are getting way too excited here.

JEROME

You said no one had to sell. You were standing right here in my living room when you said it.

STUBBLEFIELD

Please! Nobody *has* to do anything. They're not going to force anybody out of their house or off their land.

ETHAN, a large black man appears at the back of the room.

Several people make way for him.

He appears not to notice the stares and glances.

A woman quickly circles around her husband to put him between her and Ethan.

Stubblefield pauses when he sees
Ethan.

JEROME

Then what is this we hear about eminent domain - again? You said they would buy us out fair and if we didn't want to sell they would leave us alone.

STUBBLEFIELD

There has been talk...

ETHAN

They are not talking about it anymore, Congressman; they have done it.

A silence covers them.

Stubblefield looks a little nervous.

ETHAN (CONT'D)

The TVA decided last week to use eminent domain to take over this entire valley from the Tennessee to the Cumberland. There is no choice about selling out, now. They don't have the choice, do they, Congressman?

Ethan's unexpected intrusion startles them all.

Stubblefield is nonplussed.

Ethan looks at him without blinking.

STUBBLEFIELD

Nice to see you here...*with everybody*, Ethan.

ETHAN

(playing along)

Nice to be here, Congressman.

STUBBLEFIELD

Like I was trying to tell you all. There's been a few changes, like you all just heard, but I'm here to tell you that everybody will get a fair dollar for their place...

OLIVIA

Eminent domain? Five minutes ago you said nobody has to sell...

JEROME

You swore it.

OLIVIA

When were you going to tell us? After we read it in the newspapers?

STUBBLEFIELD

I'm here, ain't I?

Stubblefield's "ain't" is subterfuge; an attempt to get folksy.

DAN

Why you fat-ass son of a-

STUBBLEFIELD

What I am trying to say is... I mean to say that firing shotguns at government men is not going to do anyone any good.

GLORY pushes herself in front of him.

GLORY

You got something to say to me? Here I am, Stubblefield.

The disrespect in using his last name in that fashion does not go unnoticed.

STUBBLEFIELD

I'm not accusing anybody.

GLORY

You're not? I read that story in the newspaper.

DAN

About some crazy woman firing at those TVA bastards!

GLORY

I'll tell you what really happened. I came out of the shower and found those two TVA men, if that's what you people call 'em, poking around my living room just like it was a gas station on the highway or something. So I grabbed my shotgun and I run them off. That's what happened. That stuff in the newspapers is all pure bull. I never fired a shot.

Stubblefield endures the barrage, still smiling but his face is starting to hurt.

STUBBLEFIELD

Folks, folks, you have to keep calm here, now. Nobody is suggesting that kind of behavior-

DAN

I'll tell you what. I got twenty five acres of corn on my west side and two of those surveyor friends of yours drove right over it instead of taking the road. By golly they must have saved themselves at least thirty seconds and a teaspoon of gas. And then they drove another run through the field to leave!

STUBBLEFIELD
(frustrated)

Look-

DAN

-You look. They done the same thing to Randal Weatherby. Cut a fence and let the cattle out. He's still missing a couple heifers. You gonna pay for that Frank?

STUBBLEFIELD

What I'm trying to tell you is that your complaints have been duly noted. The TVA is sending a committee down-

JEROME

What a relief. I guess we can all breathe easy now, boys; there's a committee coming down to straighten things out.

OLIVIA

Glory be!

GLORY

Hallelujah. We're saved.

DAN

I'm from the government and I'm here to help.

This brings a roar of laughter from the group.

Stubblefield is getting increasingly uncomfortable.

STUBBLEFIELD
(annoyed)

You're not hearing me. This committee or commission or whatever you want to call it is set up to hear your complaints and work things out. If you feel you been treated unfairly then you bring it to them and they will try their best to fix it.

They stare at him.

STUBBLEFIELD (CONT'D)

That's how these things are done.

(a little desperate)
(MORE)

STUBBLEFIELD (CONT'D)

And I'm right there with you, believe me. I'll be right there every step of the way...

JEROME

(persisting)

They said they were all done with that last round of domain. They said it was over, last time. You were standing right there when they said so.

STUBBLEFIELD

I don't remember exactly-

JEROME

Well ain't that a surprise. I guess everybody in this room must be hearing things. Funny how we are all hearing the same things, wouldn't you say?

OLIVIA

What changed, all of a sudden? Why are they doing this?

STUBBLEFIELD

(struggling)

Well now...I am not privy to-

DAN

You're a privy alright, you son of a bitch. I seen a lot of them in France and you're right; you look just like it.

GLORY

What do you mean coming down here and telling us to calm down. How would you like it? What will do when they change their minds on something else?

JEROME

He'll just double cross that bridge when he comes to it.

STUBBLEFIELD

Now I will not stand here and-

DAN

You'll stand here, alright, you fat bastard. You'll stand here and tell us what you are going to do to fix this mess.

STUBBLEFIELD

(defiantly)

I am working on your behalf.

JEROME

Well you could sure fool me. It's supposed to be for the public good, isn't it? And you are supposed to pay fair, right? Isn't that eminent domain?

STUBBLEFIELD

Yes...exactly.

OLIVIA

Well how is it in the public good to throw us all out of here for no good reason? If you're not going to develop this place, if you won't let us do something, just leave us be. Go somewhere else.

STUBBLEFIELD

It's not up to me.

JEROME

Aren't we the public? Maybe the TVA doesn't think so, but I got a chunk of Jap shrapnel in my ass says we are.

OLIVIA

You can't just throw 900 families out their homes like it was nothing at all.

DAN

Not without paying for it, by gawd.

STUBBLEFIELD

(giving up)

You are all going to get paid - I promise. The TVA is not some kind of monster. They want to do what's right, believe me. You can take my word for it.

DAN

(disgusted)

To hell with this. You stay away from me, Stubblefield. The next one of your TVA rats comes a-lookin for me, he's going to find me.

STUBBLEFIELD

I am going to have to report your remarks, Dan.

DAN

Do what you want.

He leaves.

Glory sits down, almost stunned.

GLORY

How can they do this? They can't, can they?

JEROME

I am not an expert on these things...

OLIVIA

Well, we will just have to fight it. Petitions or something like that.

ETHAN

You might try a march. I hear that can be persuasive,
sometimes.

They stare at him, suddenly
remembering his presence.

ETHAN (CONT'D)

Good afternoon.

He leaves.

ACT ONE, SCENE THREE

JEROME WALKS OUT
TO CENTER STAGE
AND SITS DOWN,
CROSS LEGGED.

He holds his hand up to a campfire.

In a moment Lyle joins him and sits down.

They don't speak for a while.

LYLE
What's going to happen, Dad?

JEROME
Nobody knows for sure and certain.

LYLE
Well what do you think is going to happen?

JEROME
What I think doesn't matter.

LYLE
(desperately)
Does President Kennedy know? Why don't you tell him what's going on here and maybe he will tell 'em to stop.

Jerome looks up at him.

LYLE (CONT'D)
We could write him a letter and maybe he would come down and see what's going on.

JEROME
Why don't you do that? He's as likely to listen to you as anybody.

LYLE
You could tell him about your medals from the war. Tell him how we really like it here and we don't want to live anywhere else.

JEROME
He's too busy flying to the moon or some such thing, from what I hear, to be botherin with a bunch of hillbillies.

Seeing he is not getting anywhere,
Lyle goes silent.

Jerome nips from a flask, considers it for a moment and nips again before he puts it away.

LYLE

People are saying they won't leave no matter what.

JEROME

People say a lot of things. It don't make 'em true. Some of the folks don't know anything else. They wouldn't know the first thing about living the other side of these rivers and they are scared.

LYLE

What are they scared of?

JEROME

What they can't see.

Lyle considers this for a while.

LYLE

It's sure making everyone crabby. Even mom.

JEROME

How's that?

LYLE

She yelled at me for dropping a plate, this morning. I didn't mean to. It just slipped but she started hollering at me...I didn't know what to do. And then she said she was sorry.

Jerome nods, but does not respond.

LYLE (CONT'D)

It's alright though. I just told her what you said.

JEROME

(alarmed)

What I said?

LYLE

I told her it was okay because pregnant women get ornery.

JEROME

You told her that?

LYLE

Ya. I said not to feel so bad about gaining the extra weight because the baby needs it.

Jerome stares at Lyle, expressionless for a few seconds.

He takes the flask out and sips quickly.

LYLE (CONT'D)
(to Jerome)

Are they going to make Papaw leave too?

JEROME
(to Lyle)

Everybody.

Papaw is coming through the woods.

He's noisy and he curses a few times.

Jerome chuckles and stares back at the fire.

PAPAW APPEARS
CARRYING A
DOUBLE-BARRELLED
SHOTGUN AND SITS
DOWN BETWEEN
THEM.

JEROME (CONT'D)

Who are you talking to?

PAPAW
(grumpy)

Who said I was talking to anybody.

LYLE

We thought it was a bear.

PAPAW

Careful, youngun

They all have chuckle.

PAPAW (CONT'D)

I was just remembering the times I come through here with my father...just like we are doing now. Maybe something slipped out.

[Silently, GREAT GRANDPA LYLE dressed in tattered Confederate uniform follows, his rifle cradled in his arms.]

He stands there for a while, looking around.

He sits.]

PAPAW (CONT'D)
We'd come here to sort things out.

Another silence encapsulates them.

Lyle is itching to speak but he knows there are always silences between comments.

GREAT GRANDPA LYLE
(to Papaw)
You don't need to sign up. Wait until they call you at least. What the hell you want to go over to Germany for? Let them fight it out themselves.

PAPAW
(to GGP-Lyle)
Is that what you did?

GREAT GRANDPA LYLE
(to Papaw)
That was different.

PAPAW
(to GGP Lyle)
I don't see what's different about it.

GREAT GRANDPA LYLE
(to Papaw)
I'll tell you what is different. I woke up one morning and found General *Useless* Grant and a couple of thousand blue-coats marching across my front yard. That's what. They *invaded* us, Henry. Besides, I didn't have no twenty niggers⁽¹⁾ to get me off the hook so I was basically gonna get called one way or the other. What have these Germans got to do with you? Maybe they won't call you at all, you being older. You could say you were a only son, last of the line.

PAPAW
(to GGP Lyle)
I could, but I wouldn't be much good for nothing after that, would I?

(to Lyle)
Last time I left here was almost forty five years ago. He sat right there and tried to talk me out of going to the war.

Silence.

PAPAW (CONT'D)
I was stuck in Belleau Wood hiding in the bushes while the krauts dropped artillery on us when he died.
(MORE)

PAPAW (CONT'D)

I didn't even find out about it till it was all over.
Never got to tell him.

LYLE

(to Papaw)

Tell him you loved him?

PAPAW

(to Lyle)

Hell no. He knew that. I wanted to tell him he was right; wasn't no percentage fighting Germans in Germany. What a bloody mess that was, all the while me thinking about this little patch of woods where the trees wasn't all knocked over and body parts lying everywhere.

GREAT GRANDPA LYLE

(to Papaw)

You just never know what you are going to find when you come back, Henry. I run off after Fort Donelson fell thinkin' to myself, 'They will be fine.' Damn near to froze my legs off wading Lick Creek in the middle of winter but Bedford Forrest was a man to follow, alright. He was the only one wouldn't surrender. The folks back here, they'd be alright, I figured. I mean we always did for ourselves. Always have.

PAPAW

(to Lyle)

He could track anything. He claimed he picked it up sniffing out Yankees. He wasn't a great shot, I must admit but he could track, by gawd. And he knew these woods...well, he just knew it all.

GREAT GRANDPA LYLE

(to Papaw)

When I come back after Appomattox, did I ever get a surprise.

PAPAW

(to Lyle)

My father said the place was damn near razed to the ground. The cabin was burnt. All the livestock gone. Grant's troops come through here like the plague, killing everything they couldn't eat right away and destroying anything they couldn't carry with 'em. And all the niggers running around like they owned the place. They sowed hatred in these woods that won't cool in another hundred years.

LYLE

(sternly to Papaw)

You're not supposed to say that word. That's what they're telling everybody.

Looking archly at him.

PAPAW

(to Lyle)

Who is this 'they' that's telling everybody what they can say and what not?

LYLE

(to Papaw)

The teachers and stuff. You are supposed to call them Nee-grows.

Papaw looks down at him for a moment and then away.

PAPAW

(to Lyle)

They call themselves that all the time.

JEROME

(to Lyle)

They say folks were starving. And it wasn't just the damn Federals, neither. They'd turn their backs and confederate troops would come through and do just about the same thing. And they'd leave and just common raiders would follow them. Don't pay to be a civilian in a war, son. Remember that. Take a side; at least you will be able to defend yourself. Sitting it out just won't work.

LYLE

(to Jerome)

Papaw keeps saying...you know, that word - and he won't stop.

JEROME

I know.

LYLE

You are not supposed to say it, dad. It's a bad word, just like...you know. I'm not going to say it, but he keeps on...

JEROME

I know. Been all through it with him a hundred times. There's no way for you to understand him, Lyle. That part of him is out of reach. You should have seen it the day I brought Ethan over. Me and Ethan would hunt together and split the take, no matter who got what. We were real good friends and I wanted to bring him home. I thought I could show him there was nothing wrong with...them, you understand?

LYLE

What happened?

JEROME

He run him off. And then he took a switch to me like I never been switched. I was just about your age...maybe a little older.

LYLE

Papaw did that?

JEROME

That's right. My mother finally got him to stop. He was shaking and snarling like a rabid dog. That's exactly what he looked like. He couldn't even breathe he was so mad. I stood up and I said, Ethan is my friend.

LYLE

What did he do?

JEROME

Never said another word to me about it. It was Ethan's father finally put a stop to it. Told me I would get his son killed or worse and not to come around anymore.

LYLE

(to Jerome)

Ethan's our friend, now isn't he?

GREAT GRANDPA LYLE

(to Papaw)

They just turned 'em loose on everybody. I mean here I am on my property give to me by my Pa who got it from his Pa who got it damn near from General George Washington himself and it's overrun with Niggers like they owned the place.

(taking out a document)

Look right here. What's that say? Never mind, I'll tell you. (reading, slowly)

This...warrant to survey and lay off in one or more surveys...they did write queerly - for Aubrey Garrett his heirs or assigns...that's you and me - the quantity of two hundred acres of land due unto said Aubrey Garrett in consideration of his services for three years as a soldier in the Continental line. That's the army. Signed right there by the Governor...1783. You damn rights

PAPAW

(to Lyle)

Don't you tell me about niggers.

JEROME

(to Papaw)

Dad, you can't talk like that around the boy. We don't want it. I didn't buy it in my day and I don't want it for him. He ain't being brought up to be another ignorant bigot.

PAPAW

(to Jerome)

That what you think of me?

JEROME

I don't have to think it; I know it. And so do you. And don't pretend you ain't proud of it.

PAPAW

My father would be turning over in his grave.

JEROME

I expect he would, too. I'm not saying we're going to have them over for dinner and cards, for cryin out loud. I just don't want people treating Lyle like white trash. It isn't the same world.

PAPAW

Where I come from we call a spade a spade.

JEROME

Well I come from the same exact place and sometimes we don't have to saying anything at all.

LYLE

(to Jerome)

Ethan's our friend now, isn't he?

JEROME

(to Lyle, hesitating)

Well. We are friendly...yes. After the war things were just all different for everybody. I followed Papaw into the marines and Ethan joined up with the Navy. When I came home there was quite a hoedown and nothing I said would put them off. It was in the papers and they told how I got wounded and everything and I had to tell about the medals. Ethan spent four years on a battleship but here was no mention whatsoever of his arrival home that I could ever find.

LYLE

Because he was a Neegrow?

JEROME

No. Because he was a *Nigger*. That is a curse word, Lyle and you are right not to use it. It's casts an evil spell on the person sayin it and everyone around him.

GREAT GRANDPA LYLE

(to Papaw)

It was a rich man's war and a poor man's fight, is all it was, Henry. The Book says what you sow ye shall reap...It damn near ruint us altogether. Hell. It did ruin us. Nothin was the same after that. I went in I was fifteen years old and when I come out I was about seventy five. My brother Gray stayed back and worked the Lewis mine breaking ore for the cause until it caved in on him. Kilt him and a bunch others while I was away. My ma was dead and buried from the cholera; my dad killed at Petersburg.

(MORE)

GREAT GRANDPA LYLE (CONT'D)

They said a Choctaw Injun took him down from more than two hundred yards. I think maybe their Injuns was better than ourn.

PAPAW

(to Lyle)

When I got back, everything was the same, mostly. I was so happy to be home. I walked these woods for a week just eating what I come across. The French run off and left us to fight our way through Belleau Woods and when we left, every tree was broke. Bodies stinkin everywhere. And the only frog around was over croaking in the pond, yonder.

(they laugh)

That didn't last too long, either. You think it makes 'em cannibals?

(more giggling)

Damn, but they eat stuff you wouldn't even step on for messing your shoes...

(beat)

It was all mostly for nothing, boy. Wasn't twenty years before the krauts started it all up again...and then the Japs...Shit. Pardon my French. This here is the only place worth fighting for and the only reason I went.

(noticing a movement)

Now, you see that fat little squirrel pasted up against the tree? Just look after the place right and it will always feed you.

GREAT GRANDPA LYLE

(to Papaw)

So I just started all over again and built it all back up. I wasn't going to be the one who lost it. Everybody in my family fought for this little piece of land and I suppose you are right, Henry. Now the day has come for you to do the same.

He stands up and leaves.

Silence enfolds them.

PAPAW

Lot of stories told around this pit.

JEROME

It isn't over yet, dad.

Jerome and Papaw stand up and leave.

Lyle remains, staring into the fire for a while.

He stands up and kicks at the ground.

LYLE

I was sure that old campsite was right around here somewhere.
(chuckling)
Great. Now you are talking to yourself.

He leaves.

ACT ONE, SCENE FOUR

A WOMAN WANDERS
INTO THE
KITCHEN.

She is dressed in vacation garb and jewels and binoculars hang from her neck. Her Bermuda shorts show bare, white legs that terminate in white socks and sneakers. Her sunglasses reflect the dim light of the kitchen. She wears a straw hat.

She looks around, lifting a salt shaker here or checking the backside of a plate, there.

She continues her inspection and then finally spots a copper cookie tin with a lid. She lifts it and examines it closely.

While she concentrates on the tin, she doesn't notice OLIVIA GARRETT enter the kitchen.

Olivia stares at her in silence for a moment.

OLIVIA
What do you think you're doing?

The woman looks up, startled and drops the tin.

WOMAN
Oh! I didn't know there was anyone here.

OLIVIA
(frowning)
So you just thought you'd walk in and help yourself, is that it?

WOMAN
No! Of course not. They told us everyone was gone...that everything was going to be flooded so I thought...doesn't everything belong to the government now?

OLIVIA
Get out!

WOMAN
(insinuating)

Maybe I'm not alone.

OLIVIA

Sorry?

WOMAN

And how do I know you're not just here to take the best stuff for yourself?

At this moment, JEROME GARRETT walks into the kitchen.

Seeing the two women he stops.

JEROME

What's going on, Olivia?

The woman is getting a little nervous.

OLIVIA

This lady was just asking for directions...

JEROME

Directions to where?

OLIVIA

Anywhere but here, I'd say.

The woman sniffs at them and turns on her heels, glancing back over her shoulder as she exits.

WOMAN

Don't think I won't report this.

Olivia and Jerome stare after her.

They look painfully at each other for a moment.

OLIVIA

Have you ever!?

(sitting)

I-

(can't finish the thought)

Lord.

Jerome picks up the copper cookie tin, puts the lid on and tries to place it back on the counter where it was.

OLIVIA
She walked right into my kitchen like it didn't matter at all.

JEROME
They are getting bold.

OLIVIA
(angry now)
You need to tie Buster up in the front yard. Maybe that would humble them some.

JEROME
Buster ain't never been tied up. He might not understand.

She relents, her anger dissipating.

OLIVIA
My own sister wouldn't come in here without knocking first.

JEROME
Come now, Olivia. You must let it go. It ain't good for the-

OLIVIA
-Oh, I see how it is. Exactly how many children have you carried that you are sworn to give me advice on the subject?

JEROME
(chastised)
Well...

OLIVIA
Well shut up.

She moves the cookie tin a few millimeters to satisfy herself.

Jerome looks at her with much gravity and then shakes his head.

Lyle watches her as she putters around the kitchen.

She sits down at the table and rests her head on her arms.

Lyle walks over and puts a hand on her shoulder.

Lyle stands there for a moment
looking at her.

Olivia rises with some effort and
taking a rag from the counter,
wipes her perfectly clean kitchen
table.

JEROME

These guys have been walking in on folks all over the
county. Everybody has found them in the hen house. It's not
just us.

OLIVIA

Is that supposed to be some consolation? I don't normally
take pleasure in another's troubles.

JEROME

I just meant...hell...I just meant...

OLIVIA

The audacity of it! You have to wonder how these people
were brought up...Would you ever do such a thing?

JEROME

Maybe they don't know any better.

OLIVIA

Are you making excuses for them?

JEROME

I'm just trying to say that somebody will catch on and put
a stop to this. They have to.

OLIVIA

Like Mr. Frank Stubblefield, no doubt.

JEROME

There is a few have phoned him.

OLIVIA

And what did he say?

JEROME

They haven't actually got through to him directly yet but
they left all the details with his secretary or whoever
answers the telephone up there.

OLIVIA

And she said she would get right on it.

JEROME

What else can we do, Liv? I truly believe once Stubblefield
hears about this he will put a stop to it.

OLIVIA
What exactly is he going to do?

JEROME
I guess he will straighten it out, somehow.

OLIVIA
Well now isn't that helpful.

JEROME
Liv-

OLIVIA
I never would have imagined the audacity of it...

JEROME
Come on...You never been lied to in your life? You know what they say: A politician is lying when his lips are movin.

OLIVIA
Well then how is calling him supposed to solve anything? He'll just lie about that according to your way of thinking.

He doesn't know what to say.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)
(gives up)
Oh never mind.

JEROME
I'm pretty sure when he sees what has happened that he will do something about it. They can't do this...

OLIVIA
(sitting again)
You are repeating yourself but I have yet to hear what is actually going to happen to fix this mess. It's just foolish to believe anything at this point.

JEROME
I got proof who's the fool around here.

OLIVIA
Excuse me?

JEROME
Look who I married and look who you married?

She barely smiles.

OLIVIA
I never even thought of such a thing. What would happen if I walked into somebody's house up there in Washington? They would have me arrested in a blink.

Seeing he cannot assuage her feelings, he stands up.

JEROME

I guess I will get back...

He leaves.

Lyle watches them.

After a few moments, Olivia takes out pen and paper and begins to write.

Lyle wanders around the kitchen picking up objects and examining them; their weight and texture; their form and smell.

He runs his hands across the oil cloth on the table.

He checks the cookie tin.

He leans over his mother's shoulder and tries to read what she is writing.

He reaches out very slowly and touches her shoulder.

ACT ONE, SCENE FIVE

JEROME APPEARS
ON A DIRT ROAD.

He stops by the post and waits.

A few moments later, Ethan appears carrying a double-barrel shotgun over his shoulder.

He sees Jerome and stands it against the pump.

He pumps water into a dipper and takes a long draught.

JEROME

No luck?

ETHAN

Might be luck, or a lack thereof; I think that lake-water is pushing everything down from the hills and nobody knows where they live anymore, including the rabbits.

JEROME

Did you try in that thick bramble across from Galloways?

ETHAN

(nodding)

What do you want, Garrett?

JEROME

Why do you have to be so snarky?

ETHAN

Yassuh, boss. Sorry boss...

Jerome flies into a fury and attacks Ethan.

They half wrestle, half box until they come to a stand-still, gasping.

JEROME

(breathing hard)

You got no cause to talk to me like that.

ETHAN

(offering him water)

Sorry man, all you people look alike.

He gives him a minute to catch his
breath.

ETHAN (CONT'D)
What do you want Garrett?

JEROME
I just want what's mine, that's all.

Ethan shakes his head slowly.

ETHAN
Where are you going to go?

JEROME
Where am I going? I'm not going anywhere. This is my home,
my land.

ETHAN
Yours? I thought it belonged to the TVA as of last month
some time. What makes it yours?

JEROME
That graveyard over by Twisted Crik. My name where I carved
it in a hundert trees - right beside yours. Five
generations is what. What the hell are you talking about?

ETHAN
Five generations! And how did your great-gran'pappy or
whomever get hold of it in the first place? Maybe he helped
load those last Cherokees onto the barge that took them to
oblivion.

(caustically)
Yours.

JEROME
Well I don't see no Indians making claim, so let's leave
them out of it.

ETHAN
All I'm sayin is, your being here don't make it yours and
when John Kennedy sends in his ants to take it...it will
be his.

JEROME
Not if we stop him, it won't.

ETHAN
(pointedly)
We?

He looks around ostentatiously

ETHAN (CONT'D)

You and me? You need to read more history and less poetry.

JEROME

So I've been told. They can't go against all the people...not all of us.

ETHAN

(derisively)

You are an ignorant man, Jerome. And proud of it.

JEROME

And you are overly proud of that education of yours if you ask me. It don't seem to have done you all that much good. You're still here, same as me, eating squirrel pie and drinking moonshine. And don't give me no sob-story, either. Remember who you are talking to, here.

ETHAN

Shit. That was a long time ago.

He sits down and rolls himself a cigarette. He offers the makings to Jerome who does not respond.

ETHAN (CONT'D)

Right.

He draws deeply and stands up again.

He breaks the gun and pockets the shells.

ETHAN (CONT'D)

You think you can drive off the government like night sweats but these men are ants. Did you know that the jaws of an ant's severed head continue to snap long after the rest of him been carted away?

JEROME

More of that education of yours. That's a real useful piece of information; i'll try and remember it.

ETHAN

Again, I ask you? Why are you here?

JEROME

Don't this apply to you just as much as me?

ETHAN

Not really. I am high enough and outside the range that they will leave me here to pass my days.

JEROME
And the rest of Little Chicago?

ETHAN
(smirking)
You want them to come help you, is that it?

JEROME
That's what I was thinking...You think you all are going to be left alone?

Ethan starts to laugh but it is not humorous laughter.

JEROME (CONT'D)
Okay, Ethan. What is so funny?

Ethan smiles to himself.

JEROME (CONT'D)
You're going down with the rest of us, like it or not. But maybe if we hold tight as a group...everybody, all nine hundred families sign the petition that will show them.

ETHAN
You just got bushwhacked by the Honorable Frank Stubblefield and here you are going back to him for more of the same. It's called a learning curve, Jerome and yours appears to be flat.

JEROME
We're not just talking to him. We're going to the papers...Liv is writing a letter to the president.

ETHAN
(humored)
You're what? You're writing a letter to the president. Why I can just see them busting up a meeting of the joint chiefs: Mr. Kennedy, a bunch of crackers down in western Kentucky need your help! You sure that Jap metal isn't in your head, somewhere?

(beat)
Ask not what your country can do for you, buddy...

He starts laughing again.

JEROME
So you are not going to help, is that it?

ETHAN
I don't believe so.

JEROME

You have been here as long as me...your family has been living here since, I don't know when...since slave times, anyway...

ETHAN

We have been here, I'll grant you that. But this is not ours.

JEROME

(insisting)

This is your place as much as it is mine.

ETHAN

No it isn't. I have a deed and a right of claim and all the rest of the legal stuff that's good until they decide it isn't - I ain't no fool - but this is a white, cracker enclave in the middle of an ocean of dumbass white faces.

JEROME

(angrily)

So what are you doing here?

ETHAN

I have been chosen to witness.

He opens his arms in a histrionic and totally fake rapture - still grinning.

ETHAN (CONT'D)

I'll tell you what, Jerome. You get all your friends and relatives to join up with us. We'll take a bus ride together down through Mississippi and Alabama, you know visit all the famous lunch counters and bathrooms and drinking fountains along the way. We sure could use your help. I mean this is your country, too, ain't it?

Jerome doesn't know what to say.

ETHAN (CONT'D)

(going to the post)

This here's the very place.

JEROME

What place is that?

ETHAN

Where Old Black Moses come down from the mountain. This is yours, Ethan, he said and you plant this post right here near the road where everybody can see it and remember what was and you tell 'em it was me said it was alright. Me and the government, of course.

(wiggling the ring)

(MORE)

ETHAN (CONT'D)

This is where they would put the chains through to hold you up. You see? This ring would hold you upright, keep you from falling to the ground. Cuz they didn't want you to fall to the ground too soon. No sir. Not till they had their fill. And there you'd be strung up like that and looking this way and that but you can't see right behind you where it's coming from. And all the folks would gather round in a big circle, just like those prayer circles at the Baptist Church.

And this was one place where the darkies all got the best seats in the house...right up front where you couldn't miss a thing.

You could see the nigger's eyes flying around in his head like a couple trapped foxes with no way out. And you could see the sweat rolling down his temples and breaking out under his arms. You could hear his breath rushing in and out like a smithy's bellows. And you could see the piss staining his trousers dark and smell the fear starting to come off him like nothing you have ever smelled before.

You'd be right there, just a few feet away and you could watch that snake raise itself up and stop for a second and then lash straight down on that back. You could hear it humming through the air and then that lightning crack as it landed on that smooth, brown skin all filled with all those nerves. And you might get a speck of blood or flesh flicked onto your face - you were that close and then this pulsing welt would break open and blood run down just like rain on a window...and you could hear the gravel in his throat when he screamed, the weeping, the begging, the shrieking of his children and wife...you got to hear it all right up close. You never missed a thing...and you would stand there and watch and you daren't close your eyes or look away for fear it would be you up there next. And the snake would land again and again, tearing off little pieces of flesh and calling out the blood and the screaming would race across the commons and disappear into the woods. You could imagine the animals all stopping when they heard it. Then the birds would break and squirrels would run for the high branches...the deer would stop their grazing and then slip deeper into the woods...anything to get away from that screaming and begging and pleading. But not you. You would stand there and watch and count every time that snake came down, tearing off a little more flesh until bones started to show through...ribs and shoulder blade standing and dripping with that crimson honey...and you would stand there and pray for mercy and it would come.

(MORE)

ETHAN (CONT'D)

The screams would diminish, bit by bit and lose their power and get smaller and smaller until they were just guttural croaks and rumblings and that *nigger* would be sagging now against the post, his eyes finally closed, his breath, shallow and quiet and intermittent and his arms stretched right up above his head and his blood already drying in the dust and finally there would be silence...except for the hum and snarl of the snake as it continued its course, raising its head and lashing down against that bloody, mutilated surface that blessedly could no longer feel...the snake would land with a wet thud and finally it would raise its head no more. And you would stand there until that white man who owned the snake told you otherwise. Oh yes. Take a good look, he'd say. Memorize it. This is what happens to *niggers* who start rebellions or join up with abolitionists. Anyone else, he'd ask? And then you would help cut the dead man down from the post, his face calm and relaxed now. You'd wrap him in some sacking they'd left behind and you'd help drag him over to the grave that he had dug himself that morning while another white man stood by with a gun, watching and making sure it got done just right. Keep digging, *nigger*, he'd say and if only that man realized how much better off he would have been to make a break for it and be shot down or even taken by dogs in a swamp where it would be over in seconds -or even minutes - if only. But he did what he was told, what the boss man said to do. And you'd throw dirt over him until he was all gone and someone would hammer a rough cross into the mound and then you'd go back to your quarters, grateful for the scraps from the master's table. Grateful, by god, or else! Unless of course they decided to do another one that day...and then you'd have to stand there again and watch it all again...Take a good look...take a good look. Yes sir, it was one hundred and three years ago to be exact when they took my great-great-grandfather, Randall Trigg and chained him to this very post. Do you know why they did that to him? They did that because there was a rumor going around about a possible slave rebellion at the iron mine! A rumor about a possible rebellion. A rumor!

JEROME

This is your world you're helping drown...not that old one.

ETHAN

Yes, yes, I know and I have waited all my life to see such an event. The flood is coming, Jerome. You *ain't* going to stop it. It's going to roll in here and it is going to fill up every hollow stump and rock crevice and sink hole and then it's going to rise and rise, slow and sure, creeping up the trunks of all those mighty trees and it's going to climb the flanks of the hills and one by one they are going to pop out of sight...and that water is going to get deeper and deeper and deeper until there *ain't* nothing left to see except that ripple where the wind passed...And anything that doesn't outrun that water is going down under it;

(MORE)

ETHAN (CONT'D)

so unless you can grow gills I'd suggest you get aboard and pull the door closed after ye...Boy. And me? I'm goin to be sitting right here on my front porch with a glass of lemonade and I am going to watch.

The men look at each other.

ETHAN (CONT'D)

It's always nice reminiscing with you, Garrett. Come by again.

Ethan leaves.

ACT ONE, SCENE SIX

JEROME APPEARS
IN THE KITCHEN.

He gets out his jug and a glass.

Olivia looks up for a moment and then drops the pen and crumples up the letter she has been writing.

JEROME

You still working on that letter, I see.

OLIVIA

Jerome-

JEROME

You'll get it. You are smart that way.

OLIVIA

What exactly do you think I should say?

JEROME

Tell them they can't just walk in here and-

OLIVIA

-Lord! If I had a dime for every time someone around here said that! The walking-in part is over. Did you read what they're saying in the papers?

(lifting a newspaper)

Here. Listen to this: This is probably the best thing that has happened to these primitive people since reconstruction. They are dirt poor and ignorant as anyone kept out of the mainstream of society can be. We are doing them and the nation a great service by relocating them to more civilized conditions where they can take part in the American Dream.

(she puts the paper down)

Jerome studies his glass.

He takes the newspaper and reads for a while.

JEROME

What the hell are they talking about? We have plumbing.

OLIVIA

That reporter went down to Grant Hollbrooke's place, you know that little cabin he keeps out on the edge of his property?

JEROME

That ain't nothing but a grumble shed.

OLIVIA

Well he wrote it up like it was a regular house around here. Outdoor plumbing...meaning out doors. Period.

JEROME

(reading)

And this picture?

OLIVIA

Doreen Halliday's chicken house.

Jerome slams the paper down. It is a gesture that startles both Olivia and Lyle still hiding on the stairs.

She is distressed, but she doesn't cry. She reaches down and massages her bulging belly.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)

I'm sorry...you go back to sleep.

Jerome splashes more into a glass.

JEROME

Want a little bit?

OLIVIA

Lost the taste for it...maybe after the baby is born.

Seeing her distress, he affects a cheeriness that only deepens her sense of gloom.

JEROME

They'll ease off, Liv. They say they are going to come around here and force everyone out but they wouldn't really do it. How could they? I know it's hard but we just have to hold on. I have never even imagined selling out. Even when everyone was bragging how the TVA was going to make 'em all rich, I never thought about selling.

She doesn't answer right away and it draws his scrutiny.

JEROME (CONT'D)

Liv?

OLIVIA

I thought about it.

JEROME

Well of course I thought about it but I meant-

OLIVIA

I thought about how maybe for Lyle to grow up in this world...maybe living here wasn't the best thing.

JEROME

(surprised)

What would be the best thing?

OLIVIA

I don't know. Maybe living like this isn't the best thing for everybody.

Jerome doesn't know what to say.

JEROME

You want us to leave here?

OLIVIA

I am tired of finding strangers in my kitchen and TVA men wandering around in my back yard. The other day I was out front hanging up laundry and this big car stopped on the road. What now? I thought. I watched it and the window rolled down and there was a woman sitting there, looking at me. She waved me over and I figured they must be lost or something and as I got closer I saw there were people in the back and they were all grinning. Can I help you? I said and this woman she grinned at me and said: You stand over there. We want to take your picture. I didn't even know what to say, Jerome. And then she raised up this little camera and it flashed at me. I can't imagine the look on my face. I couldn't even speak. I turned around and I heard them giggling, just like it was a circus or something.

JEROME

They will give up if we just hold on. I swear those folks selling out for fifty cents on the dollar are going to regret it. This is still the United States and the government-

He stops, seeing she is not hearing him.

OLIVIA

I can't do it anymore.

JEROME

Are you saying to me we should just...
(spluttering)

I don't know what you are saying.

OLIVIA

I am saying for you to go to Knoxville and ask that committee to make a better offer. That's what Stubblefield said, isn't it? They will reconsider any offers that you ask them to.

JEROME

That is nothing but a waste of time and gasoline. We are going to drive more than two hundred miles and stand there holding our hats in front of a bunch of two-bit suits who already been paid off.

OLIVIA

Probably.

JEROME

And they are going to smile and nod and write things down and whisper in each other's ears like a bunch of school girls and then they are going to thank us for coming and telling them our troubles.

OLIVIA

Yes.

JEROME

And then we are going to drive back more than two hundred miles and sit here for a month or two or three or whatever it takes them to make it look good and then they are going to offer us another ten bucks an acre which will bring us up to about fifty cents on the dollar of what it's worth. And I won't have it! I will not be the one who lost this place.

OLIVIA

You can't blame yourself. If it was up to us it would be different. But it isn't anymore. They are going to run us off without enough money to rent a double-wide somewhere in the trash end of a city we never heard of. Is that what you want for us? What about this baby? Unless of course you have some cock-eyed notion...

JEROME

What would that be?

OLIVIA

I know all about the talk. You think you can keep a secret like that around here?

JEROME

That's just talk.

OLIVIA

Just talk until some fool has one too many and decides it's not any longer. Then what?

Olivia takes his jug away and corks it.

She stands up and puts it back on the shelf.

JEROME

(weakly)

I just don't see the point, is all.

OLIVIA

The point is that we don't have any money, Jerome. All we've got is this place and if they are going to take it we have to get as much as we can for it. Think about Lyle. Think about-

JEROME

He seems pretty happy to me.

OLIVIA

He's happy because he's got you and Papaw and all summer he runs around like a wild Indian. And when this place is gone and we're scraping by somewhere...you want to tell him you were too proud to go and try and make things better?

JEROME

That's got nothing to do with it.

OLIVIA

Sure it does. And you know it and so do I. Do you think I don't know you? You'd starve before you asked for a handout and that's fine. It's part of the reason I married you; but what about these children? Will you let them suffer for your pride? I won't.

JEROME

Jesus, woman. Now we're starving to death.

OLIVIA

We need that money, Jerome. We need every cent we can get out of those bastards if we are going to make a go of it somewhere else...somewhere we don't know about. That is your job.

JEROME

To go begging to the damn government!

(shouting)

No! I won't.

OLIVIA

(calmly)

Don't raise your voice to me. I will not have it. You are not the only one suffering here. I know the worst of it is falling on you...

He calms

JEROME

(curtly, embarrassed)

I apologize.

OLIVIA

If I didn't already know you were sorry I'd be gone. You want to keep Lyle here with you. You and Papaw Henry and Lyle, just like it has always been. But it's not going to happen. Now he is going to have to rub up against life outside of this valley.

Jerome nods slowly.

JEROME

You ask him if he wants to leave here. You go right ahead.

OLIVIA

And he'll say whatever you want him to. I don't believe you will do that to him.

He leaves; she remains sitting at the table, writing for a while and then goes.

ACT ONE, SCENE SEVEN

JEROME SHOWS UP
AT THE CAMPSITE.

He jumps around a bit and blows on his hands.

In a few moments Papaw shows up.

PAPAW

Lord, I thought must be a train engine run off the tracks out here with all that steam. Between the two of us we have probably chased away everything for a mile around.

JEROME

Prob'ly.

PAPAW

Where's the boy?

JEROME

Home watching The Beverley Hillbillies.

Papaw grunts and sits down.

PAPAW

Might as well relax, sonny; going to be a while before things settle down enough to shoot something.

Jerome sits.

They stare at the fire in silence.

Papaw casts several sideways glances at Jerome.

PAPAW (CONT'D)

Can't say I care much for television. Sit there all day staring at it like some kind of retard. When I was eleven years old I never had time to spare on something like that.

Jerome finally looks at him.

JEROME

Is that a fact? You didn't even have electricity when you were eleven years old, never mind television.

PAPAW

I'm just sayin'. You seemed to do okay without it.

JEROME

I guess. Maybe if it had been around I would have got hypnotized just like everyone else. Maybe you too.

PAPAW

I heard about some Amish went around and bought off these television sets from folks and then clobbered them to pieces right there and then in the front yard.

JEROME

Well there's another bunch think they can keep the Red Sea from closing in on 'em, I guess.

PAPAW

(reluctantly)

They leaning on ya pretty hard, are they?

JEROME

Damn surveyors are everywhere like rats. One of them is going to get shot sooner or later.

Another long silence ensues.

PAPAW

Why don't you show them your medals. Maybe that'll scare em off.

JEROME

Sure makes you wonder. Off you go to war when they call you, leave everything behind and then when you come back they kick you out and have a party in your living room.

PAPAW

Nothin new about that. Hell. Look what they done to the Bonus boys in '32. McArthur didn't have no trouble running them down with horses and shootin a few if he had to. Same thing. It's government, Jerome. Shit. Here.

Jerome drinks from the offered flask and hands it back.

PAPAW (CONT'D)

My daddy always said we got the civil war all wrong. Should have freed the slaves and sent 'em all north. Run 'em right out of the country and the Federals wouldn't've had nothin to fight about.

He looks long at his father.

JEROME

You would've had a whole different bunch of scoundrels telling you what to do. I am beginning to think there is no such thing as good government except where there is no government.

PAPAW

You got that right.

