

Tennessee Wet Rub

A Play

by Kim E. Ruyle

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Tennessee Wet Rub

Cast of Characters

<u>HANK DUNWIDDIE</u>	White male, 60s. Speaks with a Tennessee mountain dialect, Appalachian English.
<u>BERTHA DUNWIDDIE</u>	White female, 60s. Hank's wife.
<u>DUNK FREEMAN</u>	Black male, early 20s. Highly intelligent and well-spoken. Confident, almost cocky, but very politically savvy and polite.
<u>ARLETA EASTER</u>	White female, teens. Demure. Wary.
<u>VERN</u>	White male, 20.
TIME:	January 30 – 31, 1951.
SETTING:	While a snow and ice storm rages outside, we're safely inside Bertha's BBQ, a quaint establishment in the hills of northern Tennessee not far from the Kentucky border.
SET:	A rustic BBQ restaurant. Better than a shack, but not by much. More of a solid cabin – the floor and walls rough wood. Simple electric bulbs hang from the ceiling. A potbelly wood stove to one side. A couple of dining tables ringed by chairs. A counter with stools. A hand-lettered menu on the wall. Opposite the stove, a door leads upstairs to the proprietors' apartment. Another behind the counter leads to the kitchen. A back door near the stove opens to a path that leads offstage, presumably to the smokehouse in one direction and, in the other direction, to the privy, a sturdy outhouse shitter. Ideally, there's a faint aroma of barbecue in the theatre that grows in intensity through the third scene.
SYNOPSIS:	It's January 30, 1951, and perhaps what is the worst winter storm in Tennessee's history is burying the state under snow and ice. Roads have been shut down, and people are without power. As the storm rages, Bertha and Hank, an older white couple, huddle in their shuttered barbecue restaurant around a kerosene lantern when two young people, a white girl and a black male enter. The values and compassion of Bertha and Hank are put to the test when a deputy sheriff arrives hunting for something or someone.
RUNNING TIME:	~115 Minutes.

"Barbecue sauce is like a beautiful woman. If it's too sweet, it's bound to be hiding something."
~Lyle Lovett

"We are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike."
~Maya Angelou

PRODUCTION NOTES

1. Please love and respect these characters. They are not caricatures.
2. If desired to produce without an intermission, the act transition can be seamless.
3. The Appalachian dialogue is written with an eye dialect, a spelling to approximate pronunciation. Nevertheless, it is important to have dialect coaching for both Appalachian and Scottish dialects. To aid in interpretation the Appalachian dialect, a brief glossary is provided in an appendix.

ACT 1
SCENE 1

Darkness. We hear wind whistling. A moment, then overhead light bulbs flicker a few times before burning steady to illuminate Bertha's BBQ. As the whistle of the wind rises and falls, Bertha wraps her sweater tightly as she shivers and hugs herself. She's a sturdy woman. Sturdy build. Sturdy character. Sturdy as her shoes. For nearly five decades her fortitude has sustained her as she's labored over a wood-fired barbecue pit, pitched platters slathered with meat and slaw, and scrubbed grease from stacks of plates.

Bertha stands downstage looking out front, steeling herself against the weather she sees through an apparent window in the fourth wall. But it's more than weather she sees. Her expression spells impending doom.

The back door bursts open admitting a Hank with a gust of chill wind. He wears his age well, no less sturdy than his wife, but he's no tree stump. More of a vigorous willow branch, tough, wiry, resilient. In one hand, Hank carries a meat hook which he hangs on a peg by the door.

Hank stomps his feet and hangs his cap over the meat hook before removing deerskin gloves. He shakes out his jacket and hangs it on another peg. Hank wears heavy boots, jeans held up by suspenders over a flannel shirt. On his belt hangs a custom holster holding a large meat cleaver.

HANK

Jes ice. Pure ice comin' down. But I got 'er stoked. Good 'til ta'marr least.

Pauses waiting for a response.

Hear me? She's stoked 'til ta'marr.

BERTHA

Continuing to stare outside.

Waste a wood. Nobody comin' out in this weather.

HANK

But still. Gotta keep ice out'n the stovepipe. Keep 'er warm.

The lights flicker again. Hank takes notice, exits to kitchen. He returns momentarily carrying two kerosene lanterns and places one on each of the dining tables but doesn't light them.

HANK (CONT.)

All that ice. 'Bout fell on my ass comin' in... Lines gonna be down 'fore long.

BERTHA

Without turning.

Language.

Pause.

We're in the End Times, Hank. I feel it.

HANK

Aah, Sugar. Ya said same thang last year we's havin' that cyclone. It's jes a lil ice.

BERTHA

This is diff'rent. I feel it. Don' you feel it? It ain't jes ice. It's a darkness descendin'.

HANK

We got wood. Food. Blankets. 'N we got kerosene. Darkness ain't no problem.

BERTHA

This ain't no reg'lar darkness. It's a *mean* darkness descendin'.

HANK

Threw a couple a racks in there. Smokehouse a cookin' now. Lessen three hours, ribs be ready. No cus'mers. Be perfect time t' spearmint.

BERTHA

No wet rub gonna stop what's comin'.

Hank approaches and, from behind, wraps his arms around Bertha, gives a lascivious smile.

HANK

Could use a little darkness. Ya know? Not for spearmintin' with no recipe. But spearmintin' with you.

Bertha breaks free and moves to behind the counter. From under the counter, she pulls out a large cast iron skillet and places it on the counter. From the skillet, Bertha pulls an equally large black Bible and begins paging through.

BERTHA

No time t' be playin' the devil!

Reading, a sense of dread.

For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled.

HANK

Aah, Sugar.

BERTHA

I tell ya, Mister, they's a mean darkness comin'.

HANK

Keep on. Jes keep on. Maybe ya git yer wish.

Hank sighs, begins stoking the wood stove. The electric lights suddenly extinguish leaving the room in near darkness, only illuminated by the glow from the wood stove. Bertha gasps.

BERTHA

Dear Lord Jesus, no! It ain't my wish!

Hank straightens with a smile and goes to light the kerosene lanterns.

HANK

Like I tol' ya. Lines comin' down. It's jes the ice.

The room now lit in the soft glow of kerosene lamps, Bertha brings the skillet and Bible to a table, sits near a lantern, and begins flipping again through the Bible.

BERTHA

Reading with a sense of urgency.

For in those days shall be affliction such as was not from the beginning of the creation which God created until this time, neither shall be.

Hank gives a heavy sigh and moves downstage to look out front. A pause.

HANK

Blowin' white now. Changin' over t' snow.

Bertha rises, joins Hank. He puts an arm around her. A pause as they stare outside.

BERTHA

Ain't white. It's a mean darkness what it is.

HANK

Chuckling.

Looks white t' me, Sugar. Blowin' sideways it is... Why y'all gotta be so –

BERTHA

Ya don' never take thangs serious!

Beat.

'Cep yer recipes. Forty years dry rub's been good 'nough. Why y'all gotta be so obsessed?

HANK

Don' worry yer purty head 'bout it. Once I git the right recipe, wet rub's gonna put us on the map. I tell ya, my wet rub's gonna light up this place.

On exiting to kitchen.

Git some coffee. Want some?

Bertha gasps, terrified by something outside.

BERTHA

HANK! THEY'S SUMPIN OUT THERE!

Hank enters with coffee pot and two cups and chuckles as he places them on the counter.

HANK

Whatchu see, Sugar? A booger? Polar bear? Maybe one a them *abdominal* snowmen?

BERTHA

Sumpin dark! Right outside the window! I saw it movin'!

A moment passes as Hank pours coffee and Bertha continues to stare out the window with concern. The back door suddenly swings open, and a shivering Arleta timidly enters. She's a wisp, not much more than a girl, pale as a ghost and shabbily dressed, no coat, only a light sweater, and shoes better suited to the beach than to snow and ice. She clutches a bundle wrapped in a blanket to her breast.

Hank and Bertha straighten, startled. A moment to take it in, then...

BERTHA (CONT.)

Whatchu doin', Chile! Get on in here out'n the cold!

HANK

And shut that damn door!

BERTHA

Language.

Bertha scoots to shut the door with one hand and grabs a coat from a coat rack with her other. She wraps Arleta with the coat and moves her to a table.

BERTHA (CONT.)

Git 'er some coffee! Dear Lord! You got a baby there?!

ARLETA

Oh, no... Not really.

BERTHA

Whatchu mean, *not really*? Whatchu got there? In yer poke.

Arleta opens her blanket-wrapped bundle to reveal a heavy porcelain doll wearing a frilly dress and a small purse on a dainty chain. Carefully, she places the doll on a chair, positions her just so, and hangs the purse around her neck.

Bertha looks on with wide eyes a moment before pulling out a chair for Arleta and taking a seat beside her. Bertha takes Arleta's hands and begins rubbing.

BERTHA (CONT.)

Yorn hands be freezin'. Whatchu doin' out in that cold?

ARLETA

I's sorry... Uh... The front door was locked.

BERTHA

Ah, Chile. With this wind, we dint een hear ya.

Turning to Hank.

Tol' ya I saw sumpin.

Hank joins them at the table with a cup of coffee for Arleta. He looks at the doll, confusion clouding his face, then studies Arleta. An awkward silence.

Uh... Our car went in a ditch.

ARLETA

Are you/ hurt?

BERTHA

/Where? Whatchu/ mean *our* car?

HANK

They's somebody/ else?

BERTHA

/Y'all dint leave a chile out there, didja?
Nodding to the doll.

HANK

I mean a real chile?

It's my... Uh... My fiancé.

ARLETA

Hank jumps up and throws on his coat.

He hurt? Where is he?

HANK

No, sir. You don' gotta go outside. He's here.
Beat.

ARLETA

There. Sir. He's out there.

Hank opens the back door to reveal Dunk standing on the threshold, no coat, wrapping and slapping his arms. He's tall, lean. And black. Hank stares, then slams the door.

Sweet Jesus! That be yer fiancé?! A negro?! Gurl, whatchu thankin'?!
HANK

Arleta whimpers, and Bertha leaps to her feet.

Mister, you open that door! Don't leave the boy standin' out there!
BERTHA

Hank hesitates, but Bertha wins the stare down, and he opens the door. Dunk just stands there shivering. A beat as they regard each other, then...

HANK

Don' jes stan' there. Git on in here.

Dunk slowly steps in, and Hank slams the door. An awkward pause as Hank and Bertha suspiciously regard Dunk. Arleta softly weeps.

BERTHA

Don' stan' there, son. We're Christian people. Come on in. Git warm.

HANK

Now jes a minute!

Hand to the holstered meat cleaver, shifts gaze from Dunk to Arleta.

Look at me, gurl. Has this boy hurt ya? You tell the truth now.

Arleta, tears streaming, wags her head. She jumps up, runs to Dunk, and embraces him. Dunk doesn't return the embrace. Instead, he stands there awkwardly and warily watches Hank.

BERTHA

No! No, no! None a that in here!

Arleta releases the embrace but takes Dunk's hand.

BERTHA (CONT.)

No touchin' now. You. Come have a seat. And you. Stay yonder by the stove.

HANK

Whatchu thankin', Woman. We can't allow –

BERTHA

Hank! Grab nuther cup. Cain't ya see he's freezin'.

Bertha wins another stare down. Hank reluctantly removes, hangs his coat, and shuffles to the kitchen.

Arleta takes a seat at the table. Dunk relaxes a bit and warms his hands by the stove. Bertha sits next to Arleta as Hank returns, hands coffee to Dunk, and stands aside suspiciously eying Dunk.

DUNK

Thank you, sir.

HANK

Y'all know yer breaking the law, and we cain't –

BERTHA

Hank!

Turning to Arleta.

Who are you, gurl? Where y'all come from?

ARLETA

We're on our way to Detroit. Dunk's got uncles up there.

HANK

Dunk? Who's Dunk?

DUNK

That's me, sir.

HANK

What kinda name's *Dunk*?

DUNK

Jefferson Jasper Freeman. My family calls me JJ, but my friends call me Dunk.

Beat, allowing a slight smile.

I don't play basketball, sir.

HANK

The hell that mean?

Beat.

Jasper? *Jasper?! Ya mean like, what? Y'all some kinda colored peckerwood? Who on God's earth gives a young'un a name like Jasper?*

DUNK

Chuckling.

Colored peckerwood? Well, that's a new one.

Then, quickly losing the smile.

No, sir. It's Dunk. Dunk, just because I like donuts.

HANK

Good God.

BERTHA

Hank.

Beat.

And you?

ARLETA

My daddy's preacher at Jesus Name Pentecostal in Spartie.

BERTHA

So, y'all know the Lord Jesus.

ARLETA

Oh, yes, ma'am.

BERTHA

Look at me, Chile. Straight on in my eyes. Don' be tellin' no stories now.

ARLETA

No, ma'am. I'm spirit-filled and warshed in the blood.

HANK

Then y'all know better than be runnin' with a colored.

DUNK

We're in love, sir. In Michigan we can –

HANK

It's a matter a right 'n' wrong!

DUNK

My daddy's a preacher, too, sir. I know right and wrong.

BERTHA

Yer daddy's okay with this?

DUNK

Ma'am, my daddy's fine with it.

BERTHA

I ast *her*.

ARLETA

My daddy's... He's a good man.

BERTHA

But he knowed you're runnin' away?

ARLETA

He knowed... We's in love.

Hank returns to table and drops to a chair.

HANK

God almighty. What kinda gaumed up sichiation we got here? A negro travelin' with a white gurl. She ain't nuthin but a chile.

BERTHA

Laying a calming hand on Hank's.

What's yer name?

ARLETA

Arleta.

DUNK

A person can't see a thing out there right now, but when it clears up, maybe I can get a push out of the ditch. If we can just wait out the storm, we'd be obliged.

HANK

I don't see how –

BERTHA

Course y'all can stay, least til the storm's over. We're Christian people. Dunwiddies. Hank and Bertha Dunwiddie.

DUNK

Pleased to meet you and thank you for your hospitality.

ARLETA

We smelled the barbecue we got out'n the car. Wind carried that smell right to us. Then we thought we saw lights.

DUNK

My grandma makes the best barbecue in the world.

HANK

Says the jasper.

DUNK

Parrying with a warm grin.

Course, I haven't tasted yours... Sir.

HANK

I got a couple a racks in the smokehouse now. Best dry rub in the state.

DUNK

I believe you, sir. And I believe my grandma does the best wet rub.

HANK

Wet rub?! Hell, you say!

BERTHA

Language, Mister.

DUNK

Thinking about grandma's wet rub barbecue and cornbread... Well, it sure does make a fellow hungry.

Hank slowly rises from his chair walks to the wood stove near Dunk, places a hand on his holstered meat cleaver, gives a suspicious stare that morphs to a stink eye. Uncomfortable pause. Dunk stares at the meat cleaver, considers his position.

DUNK (CONT.)

But any barbecue's good. It's all good.

Hank folds his arms, continues to glare. Dunk shifts on his feet nervously.

DUNK (CONT.)

Sir... Do you ever use a mop sauce with your dry rub?

HANK

Hear that, Bertha? Jasper wants t' learn me all 'bout barbecue.

DUNK

No sir. I didn't mean that. You're the expert. I only know about wet rub.

HANK

Suspicion giving way to intense curiosity.

Wet rub expert are ya? Mind. Don' be tellin' no stories now.

DUNK

Sir, it's not seemly to brag, and I give all the credit to my grandma. But speaking honestly and with all humility, I would say:

Beat.

Yes, sir. I am an expert when it comes to wet rub.

BERTHA

Don' go openin' that door, son, talkin' 'bout no wet rub.

Too late. The door's open, and Hank can't hide his passion for barbecue and newfound interest in Dunk.

HANK

Unable to contain his enthusiasm in ensuing discussion.

They's in the smokehouse. Jes two racks. But I ain't rubbed 'em yet.

DUNK

Don't you have to rub before/ the heat?

BERTHA

Overlapping.

/Tell me 'bout/ the doll.

HANK

Overlapping.

/Ain't gonna dry rub 'em. Fixin' to/ spearmint with some wet rub.

ARLETA

Overlapping.

/Cinderella. That's/ her name.

DUNK

Overlapping.

/But still, it's important to... What's/ your base?

BERTHA

Overlapping.

/She's special t'/ ya.

HANK

Overlapping.

/Ketchup. Corn/ syrup. I'm spearmintin with my recipe. Ain't sayin' no more. It's a secret.

ARLETA

Overlapping.

/Yes, ma'am.

Bertha shifts in her seat. Looks with annoyance at Hank.

DUNK

How about mustard? Got the right kind of vinegar?

HANK

Boy, I got ever'thin'. Ever' spice. Ever'thin' I need fer my spearmints.

DUNK

When are they going to be ready? Shouldn't you be preparing the sauce now?

HANK

Don' go tellin' me how to sauce no ribs! I's jes fixin' t' mix up a batch when y'all showed up.

DUNK

Yes, sir... Would you like some help?

HANK

Don' need no hep.

DUNK

I used to help my grandma. Learned a lot from her.

HANK

Yer grandma, huh?

DUNK

Best wet rub in Tennessee. Recipe passed down from the plantation. Several generations.

HANK

What she use fer her sauce?

DUNK

Family secret. She kept it close to the vest, but I helped her out and know the formula by heart.

HANK

Do ya now? She use beer?

DUNK

Grandma?! Oh, no sir. She said beer was...

Chuckling.

She called it the devil's *piddle*.

Beat.

But you shouldn't wait too long before basting. When will they be done?

BERTHA

Jes hadda open that door dint ya? Y'all got no idee what ya done stirred up gittin' the mister talkin' 'bout wet rub.

Beat.

Let's head on upstairs, Chile. Let these boys talk their barbecue.

HANK

Lightly, slightly grinning.

Naw. Y'all can stay here. I'll take the jasper into the kitchen.

Beat.

Well, come on, then. Let's see whatchu really know 'bout wet rub.

Dunk, catching Hank's enthusiasm, nods excitedly and follows Hank to the kitchen. When they're out of sight, Bertha drills Arleta.

BERTHA

Okay, Chile. I want the story. The whole story.

ARLETA

I got her on my sixth birthday.

BERTHA

Not talkin' 'bout no doll. How'd ya meet *that* boy?

ARLETA

Oh. Well, they was a meetin' of all the county preachers. White folk. But fer this meetin', bein' all Christianly, they een 'vited the coloreds. The preachers. So, Dunk's daddy was there. My daddy, too, but he dint want t' leave me home, so he took me 'long, but I had t' wait outside. So, I's jes waitin'. But then, out yonder behind the church, I seen Dunk sittin' by hisself under a tree.

BERTHA

But ya knowed better than t' be talkin' to him, gettin' him in trouble.

ARLETA

Ast what he was readin'. They was poyems from some Scottish feller named Robert Burns.

BERTHA

Poyems? Have mercy. Our kinfolk come from Scotland, but I shore don' know 'bout no poyems. Mercy.

ARLETA

His voice is so... Don' ya jes love the way he talks? He read me some a them poyems. I mean, he can read 'em jes like he's from Scotland. Then he tells y'all what it all means cuz they got some gaumed up speech in Scotland. Words gaumed up. All kinda si-gogglin... But Dunk... Don' ya jes thank he's really sumpin'?

Dreamy.

I mean, don' ya thank he's really sumpin'? Really... Really... Sumpin'.

BERTHA

Butcha knowed better.

ARLETA

Made me promise not to tell his daddy 'bout them poyems cuz he woun't approve.

BERTHA

So, *he lies to his daddy?* What/ else that boy be lyin' 'bout?

ARLETA

/Oh, no ma'am! Dunk ain't no liar!

BERTHA

And don' be tellin' me yer daddy approves a y'all runnin' with a colored boy... What 'bout yer mama?

ARLETA

I ain't got a mama. She died I's six. Jes after givin' me Cinderella.

BERTHA

Pause, softening.

Aah, Chile... But you gotcha a sister t' hep ya?

ARLETA

Jes me 'n' my daddy.

BERTHA

I mean a sister in yer church family. A Christian woman t' give ya some guidance?

Arleta shrugs, looks down. From the other table, Bertha retrieves Bible in a skillet, finds a reference.

BERTHA (CONT.)

'Fore y'all go gittin' married to a colored, ya gots t' consider what God's Word says 'bout marriage.

ARLETA

Ya keep yer Bible in a skillet?

BERTHA

See what it says here in Ephesians?

Arleta takes a moment struggling to read, lips moving silently. A pause. A nod.

BERTHA (CONT.)

Is that colored boy gonna be able t' love ya like Christ loves the Church?

ARLETA

Dunk knows scripture 'bout as good as ary a preacher.

BERTHA

I don' know what t' thank 'bout it. They ain't nuthin agin marryin' a far'ner. Ruth and Boaz got married, and she became great grandma t' King David. I mean, they was far'ners but not colored. But I ain't really sure. Maybe that's why some the jew people got kinky hair. But jews gotta be white, cuz Jesus was white.

Pausing, groaning.

Tell truth, Chile, I ain't shore what to thank 'bout what's right 'n' wrong. But I know the law. And, Chile, y'all cain't be breakin' the law.

ARLETA

Why we're goin' to Michigan.

BERTHA

Sides, ain't y'all too young t' be gittin' married?

ARLETA

No ma'am. I'll be seventeen nexchear. Dunk says I'm a *bonnie wee thang*. That's from one a them poyems a that Robert Burns feller. But that don' mean I's too young t' marry.

BERTHA

Ah, Chile.

Bertha rises, refills coffee cups and retakes a seat. She looks compassionately on Arleta a moment then pats her hand.

BERTHA (CONT.)

Chile, Chile, Chile. That boy know he's gittin' sich a...? A bonnie wee thang, ya say?

ARLETA

I do thank y'all fer yer kindness.

Pause.

Why ya keep yer Bible in a skillet?

BERTHA

This here's my granny's Bible. And her skillet. I's a lil gurl, they's a far. A turble, turble far. All that was left of granny's house was this skillet and her Bible. It was shore 'nough a miracle. That far burned everthang in her house. But no far could touch God's Word.

Beat.

And this here skillet.

Arleta solemnly takes the Bible, strokes its cover, gives a sniff.

ARLETA

Don' een smell a smoke.

She carefully returns the Bible to the skillet gives a bit of a grin.

ARLETA (CONT.)

Maybe got some barbecue smell, but shore 'nough a miracle.

Silence.

BERTHA

Y'all gots money t' travel?

Arleta twitches, and her eyes dart to the purse hanging around the doll's neck. Then she catches herself.

BERTHA (CONT.)

Y'all gots money in the purse, dontcha?

Arleta shrugs. Bertha takes the purse, removes an envelope containing a wad of bills.

BERTHA (CONT.)

Dear Lord Jesus! Where'd this come from, gurl?! Don' be lyin' now. That boy steal this?

ARLETA

Oh, no ma'am! Dunk got his own money.

Bertha begins counting money out on the table.

BERTHA

Where'd y'all get this?

ARLETA

We just need 'nough to get to the Hudson Motor Company in Detroit. Dunk's uncles are doin' factory work on the Hornet. It's a car. Ya seen one?

Beat.

Leastwise, they say the Hudson Hornet is the future of the automobile.

BERTHA

Where?

ARLETA

Detroit. We can have a future in Detroit.

BERTHA

The money! Where'd y'all git it?

ARLETA

Dunk don't know nuthin 'bout it, ma'am. I swear.

BERTHA

Don' be swearin' with me, missy! Didja steal this money?

ARLETA

I jes...

BERTHA

Yer daddy give it to ya?

Arleta begins to softly cry.

BERTHA (CONT.)

Hunnerd 'n eighty-eight dollars! Oh, dear Lord!

ARLETA

I's gonna pay it back.

BERTHA

You stole it?! This/ gonna git y'all in a pack a trouble.

ARLETA

/No ma'am. Jes borrowed it.

BERTHA

Yer daddy a preacher and ya thank he got this kinda money to spare?

ARLETA

No, ma'am.

Hank enters carrying a jug and a third lit lantern followed by Dunk who carries a jug and pail of utensils. Hank is cheerful now, has a bounce in his step. The men set the jugs on a table, a dramatic victory gesture. They smile, quite a contrast with the sour faces worn by the two women.

Note: third lantern will move to and from kitchen as needed.

HANK

Well, it seems the boy ain't sich a colored peckerwood after all. Least not in the kitchen.

DUNK

Can't contain a chuckle.

Thank you, sir. That's... Quite a compliment.

Silence reigns as looks are exchanged, men grinning, women scowling. Hank turns his attention to the wad of bills in Bertha's fist.

HANK

What's all that?

BERTHA

Sumpin we's fixin' to talk 'bout.

Arleta lets escape a whimper which is overlooked by the men, but not by Bertha.

HANK

Well, y'all gotta give us a few minutes. Dunk here and me are havin' a lil contest.

DUNK

Yes, ma'am, we are. A wet rub contest.

BERTHA

Lord hep us.

Hank tosses a coat to Dunk. They button up to face the cold, grab their jugs, and bounce out back door.

BERTHA (CONT.)

Don' that beat all.

ARLETA

Ma'am?

BERTHA

Hank ain't easy. Man on a mission t' make the world's best barbecue sauce. But he shore ain't easy. Looks like they's gittin' on. Mus' be Dunk done foun' the key t' the feller's... Mercy. Foun' key t' the feller's...

Beat, wag of the head.

Well, let's git ya upstairs, Chile. Find ya sumpin' else t' wear. Yer feet must be freezin'.

Arleta nods as Bertha gathers up the bills and stuffs them back in the purse.

BERTHA (CONT.)

Ain't no tellin' what the mister's gonna say he finds out y'all took money from yer daddy. Yer fixin' t' be in a heap a trouble Chile. They's a mean darkness descendin'.

Arleta shivers. She slowly stands, picks up her doll and purse, and follows Bertha to exit.

BLACKOUT

END OF SCENE

ACT 1
SCENE 2

The wind whistles loudly. Kerosene lanterns light the empty restaurant. The back door opens to admit Hank and Dunk. They're in good spirits but shivering as they set empty jugs, third lantern, and the pail on a table then remove and hang coats.

DUNK

Never seen so much snow! A heap of snow over a sheet of ice.

HANK

Fraid yer gonna be stuck a while.

DUNK

Maybe tomorrow we'll get a thaw. I really do thank you for your hospitality.

HANK

Ain't got a choice. Lessen y'all wanna build an igloo out by the shitter.

DUNK

I've slept on the floor lots of times.

HANK

Don' say.

Hank grabs the jugs and pail and exits to kitchen. Dunk warms hands at the stove. After a moment, he wanders the room, studies the menu on the wall. Hank reenters.

HANK

Fixin' a fresh pot. Be ready dreckly. Women folk must be upstairs.

DUNK

Got a nice place here.

HANK

Tolable. I's fixin' to expan' the menu. Bertha serves a mean breakfast on Sairdies, but she agin gittin' bigger. Say we don' need no sweetnins on the menu. Got nuthin but corn puddin'. What kinda resternt don' een serve pie? Sides, she say we cain't be addin' nothin' til we get us an indoor crapper. But I ast ya, why people wanna be shittin' indoors anyways? Drop yer shit outside, what I say.

Beat.

'N don' never go sayin' nothin' 'bout servin' no liquor. Gits 'er all riled up.

DUNK

Well, this is a dry county, so...

Hank begins stoking the fire.

HANK

Oh, they's ways. But shee-it-far. Woman's askeered of risk. Don' een like me spearmintin' with wet rub.

DUNK

Just wait until she bites into one of those ribs I basted and that sauce graces her taste buds. The heavens will open, and she'll sing the praises of wet rub.

Dunk takes a seat. Hank straightens up from stove, approaches, serious.

HANK

Yornses wet rub?

DUNK

Well, it's not really mine. Grandma's family recipe.

Dunk grins warmly. Hank, now perturbed with second thoughts about a contest, exits to kitchen, returning momentarily with coffee and a plate of biscuits. He takes a seat.

DUNK (CONT.)

Sorry, sir. I don't mean to be rude, me being a guest and all. But I sure hope you won't see it as an insult or bad manners if Grandma's sauce wins our little contest.

Hank, stewing in his angst, slowly chews a biscuit, makes no offer to Dunk who ogles the biscuits. Finally, Hank swallows.

HANK

You put garlic salt in that sauce?

DUNK

I thought we'd agree to keep our ingredients a secret.

HANK

Seen ya use plenty a minced onion.

DUNK

As did you.

DUNK (CONT.)

Beat.

Sorry, sir, I wasn't trying to spy on you, but I couldn't miss the brown sugar and cayenne pepper. I mean, quite a lot of brown sugar. I think you might have added honey, too. I'm guessing you like your sauce pretty sweet.

Hint of a tease.

You have a good source for honey? Not too expensive?

Hank looks askance, shifts uneasily in his chair.
Awkward pause as Dunk sips coffee, eyes biscuits.

DUNK (CONT.)

You really are curious about Grandma's recipe, aren't you, sir?

Beat and a smile.

Wonder how we'll deal with it... If Grandma's sauce wins the taste contest...

Dunk lets the thought trail off. Hank considers the possibility and speaks soberly, troubled rather than angered by perceived teasing.

HANK

You *is* a jasper, ain't ya? A cock shore jasper.

DUNK

I don't mean to be cocky, sir. I'm not really so... It is Grandma's recipe after all. She's the brains. I'm just a pair of hands.

Hank considers, chews biscuit, and finally passes the plate.

DUNK (CONT.)

Thank you, sir. Hold us til those ribs are ready.

They chew. Dunk sips coffee. Hank slurps.

HANK

Yer granny approve a ya runnin' off with a white gurl?

DUNK

She used to read poetry to me. Grandma did. The Bible, too, of course. She was a teacher. A fine woman. Your missus would have liked her. She's gone on to her reward now, and I miss her something awful.

HANK

She got ary idee what she's in fer? That gurl yorn? Ain't more 'n a baby.

DUNK

Wistfully, affecting Scottish dialect.

Bonnie wee thing, cannie wee thing, lovely wee thing, wert though mine, I wad wear thee in my bosom, lest my jewel I should tine.

HANK

What 'n hell you talkin'?

DUNK

Areleta's a wee thing, sir, but she's not a baby.

HANK

Totes aroun' a baby doll herself. That gurl ain't fully growed.

DUNK

The way she looks at me. She stole my heart.

HANK

Whatchu steal from *her*?

DUNK

Sir?

HANK

Y'all knowed what I mean. Don' make me chew my cabbage twice.

Leaning in with the authority of God.

You havin' relations with that chile?

DUNK

No, sir! We're not married! Not yet! No, sir! Absolutely not!

HANK

No?

Dunk slowly takes Bertha's Bible from the skillet, sets it on the table, very deliberately places his right hand on it, and looks Hank in the eye.

DUNK

Quietly but firmly.

No, sir. I would not do that.

Hank digests this, considers Dunk's sincerity. Slowly nods his head leaning toward acceptance.

HANK
See y'all don' 'fore... Ya know...

DUNK
Yes sir.

A beat to take a deep breath.
In a couple of days we'll be in Detroit –

HANK
What kinda life, though? How's it gonna be livin' 'mongst the coloreds? For her? Shunned by her own people.

DUNK
Our church folk have/ big hearts.

HANK
/Don' get me wrong. I ain't got nuthin agin the colored.

DUNK
No, sir.

HANK
But they's diff'rent.
Beat.
Y'all got yer own ways, all's I'm sayin'.

DUNK
All God's creatures are different... But we're all the same.

HANK
Whatchu mean, *the same*?

DUNK
Warm smile.
For one thing, we both like barbecue.

HANK
Well... Huh.

The import smacks Hank between the eyes. A moment of reflection. He rises and checks stove.

DUNK
Anything I can help with?

Hank gives a dismissive wave, returns to table.

DUNK (CONT.)

I've got a job lined up with Hudson Motor Company. They pay well. My uncles went up after the war. Three uncles. Daddy's brothers. But Daddy stayed in Tennessee. He's got his church. But his brothers chased a dream. Each one's buying a house! Their very own house after only five years! Cars, too! Fine Hudson automobiles... Sir, Arleta's going to have a good life... Going to be a lot better than the one she's got now with... Let's just say her daddy's a hard man.

HANK

Don' say... Let me ast ya, y'all plannin' fer chillins? Ain't gonna be easy fer 'em.

DUNK

Did you have it easy as a child?

HANK

Hell, no, I dint.

DUNK

Me neither. But you're happy now, aren't you, sir? You have a good life.

HANK

We ain't had no chillins.

DUNK

Oh. I'm...

Dunk wags his head. An awkward silence.

DUNK (CONT.)

Sorry. Children are... I would love to have children, but I want Arleta to finish high school.

Hesitating to share.

And, uh... Well, sir... I'm going to become a lawyer.

HANK

A lawyer?! Then ya shorely are a jasper! Thought you was gonna make automobiles.

DUNK

Yes, sir, but I'll work in the car plant second shift and go to law school in the day. Well, that's my hope.

Getting excited.

I haven't been accepted, yet, but the University of Michigan Law School already has negro graduates going way back to 1870. Women, too. Isn't that something? I'm praying I'm good enough to get in.

HANK

Got it all planned out, dontcha?

Dunk holds up a hand as he washes down a bite of biscuit then enjoys displaying a bit of theatrics.

DUNK

Again, affecting Scottish dialect.

But mousie, thou art no thy-lane, in proving foresight may be vain. The best laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft agley, an' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain, for promis'd joy!

HANK

Mousie?! Whatchu sayin', boy? Ya sayin' I'm –

DUNK

No, no! No, sir! It's just the poet making a point that things often don't work out as planned. I think about that a lot. I surely do make plans, sir. I do. *My life's got to count for something!*

Beat.

But it's good to remind myself to be humble. Pride isn't fitting for a Christian man.

HANK

No sich thang as a Christian lawyer. Like a polecat don' stank.

DUNK

I hope to be different kind of lawyer.

HANK

Yeah, well y'all seem mighty proud a that sauce ya whipped up.

DUNK

Oh. Well, I guess maybe it's okay to be proud of my grandma's sauce. But she quoted scripture even more than she did poetry. *For the day of the Lord of Hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up; and he shall be brought low.*

Silence. Hank studies Dunk intently. A long pause. The wheels are turning, and Hank slowly nods head. A mental tug-of-war approaching a tipping point.

DUNK (CONT.)

You think I'm crazy wanting to take a job up north and working to become a lawyer?

HANK

Ever man gots to find his own way.

DUNK

What I'm trying to do, sir.

HANK

What's yer daddy say?

DUNK

Truth is, he doesn't say much. He's bearing his own cross knowing his brothers moved north and seem to be doing so well. But Daddy had a calling to stay with his church. He always says a man shouldn't get to the end of his life with regrets and the surest way to regret is to fail to serve, to miss your calling.

HANK

Shorely those Yankees got churches, too.

DUNK

Yes, sir. That's what I told him. But maybe he's got something in common with your missus. I think he's afraid to take a risk. Of course, I'd never tell him that.

HANK

No. Ain't fittin' tell yer daddy what to do.

DUNK

I respect what he says, but there's more than one kind of calling. There are many ways to serve. Don't you think so?

HANK

I's too ol' fer the army t' fight the Nazis and the Japs, so I ain't ne'er served much 'cept platters a ribs.

DUNK

I would have enlisted, but I was too young. Still, don't our lives count for something?

Pause.

Sir, I imagine you don't have many regrets.

HANK

Ya got quite a cheek, boy! Thankin' ya know my life. Ast me 'bout regrets.

DUNK

Sorry, sir. I didn't mean any disrespect.

Pause.

Surely, God doesn't only call men to be preachers. I can serve people as a lawyer. Serve Arleta as her husband. Give her a better life. If I didn't do those things, I believe I'd have regrets.

HANK

Whatchu mean serve Arleta? Fixin' t' wear an apron? Gonna fix 'er supper?

DUNK

Chuckling.

No, sir. I wear trousers, but there are things I can do for her.

HANK
 Maybe hep 'er grow up.

DUNK
 There are things I can teach her.

HANK
 See? Zackly what I mean. Y'all ain't equal.

DUNK
 Because she's white? Because she's a woman?

HANK
 She ain't een growed up. She ain't no ways a woman.

DUNK
 I guess men and women are never really equal.

HANK
 No they ain't. But y'all still gotta be partners.

DUNK
 Like you and your missus.

HANK
 Mine yer bizness, boy.

DUNK
 Yes, sir. I didn't mean disrespect. I admire that you and wife have built this place. It counts for something. You found your calling.

Long awkward pause as Hank, deep in thought, studies Dunk. The tipping point. Hank, resolute, rises with a start to check the stove. He stares into the fire a moment, then straightens, removes meat cleaver from his holster. With a mighty blow, he embeds the cleaver in a piece of firewood near the stove, then returns to his seat, smiles and leans in.

HANK
 Y'all put sage in yer sauce?

Dunk just returns the grin. A moment passes, then Bertha enters carrying Arleta's purse and quietly closes the door. She approaches the table and gives Dunk a hard stare.

Is Arleta okay?

DUNK

Nappin'.

BERTHA

Bertha tosses the purse on the table in front of Dunk, crosses her arms, and glares. The men look from the purse to Bertha, confounded.

DUNK

Ma'am?

BERTHA

Where'd it come from?!

DUNK

Ma'am?

Beat.

This is Arleta's. Not sure what you're asking.

BERTHA

What's in there?!

DUNK

Well, I suppose she –

BERTHA

How much y'all got?!

DUNK

You mean in the –

BERTHA

No stories, now!

DUNK

I'm sorry, ma'am. I don't know –

BERTHA

I ast ya sumpin!

HANK

What gotcha so riled, Woman? Let the boy talk!

Pause. Dunk's at a loss, trying to comprehend.

BERTHA

They's a hunnerd 'n eighty-eight dollars in that there purse, 'n I wanna know how it got there.

DUNK

A hundred and eighty-eight dollars?!

BERTHA

Gurl seem innocent t' me. Don' strike me as bein' a wicked gurl. Y'all put her up to it?

DUNK

A hundred and eighty-eight dollars?

BERTHA

Her daddy's money.

DUNK

What?! Her daddy doesn't have that kind of money!

Hank opens purse, looks inside. Shows it to Dunk.

HANK

Lord almighty! She rob a bank?!

BERTHA

So, I ast ya, where'd y'all git it?

DUNK

A hundred and eighty-eight dollars. I don't know. I mean, that's nearly a down payment on a house!

BERTHA

Yer idee, then?

DUNK

No, ma'am. I had no idea.

BERTHA

Don' b'lieve it! Gurl don' have gumption t' do it on her own.

DUNK

If I knew anything about it, ma'am, I'd tell you.

Bertha gives a dismissive snort and wilting stare.
Hank studies Dunk. A pause.

HANK

Softly.

The boy's tellin' the truth.

BERTHA

Whatchu sayin'?

HANK

Standing now, taking a position.

I's sayin'... The boy's tellin' the truth.

BERTHA

I tol' ya, Mister. A mean darkness descendin'. 'N ya wanna stick up fer a thief?

DUNK

Also stands, firmly.

I never stole anything in my life.

HANK

That lawyerin' might come in handy 'bout now fer that gurl a yornses.

DUNK

What did she say about it?

HANK

Whyn'tcha go fetch her?

BERTHA

I'll fetch her. Don' want no thief snooping roun' our room.

HANK

Mind yer tongue, Woman!

Turning to Dunk.

It's okay, son. Head on up there 'n fetch yer gurl.

Bertha shifts on her feet but bites her tongue. Hank hands the purse to Dunk who crosses to and pauses at the door.

DUNK

She's sleeping? Upstairs?

BERTHA

First room top a the stairs. Cain't miss her.

Beat.

Dontchu be touchin' nuthin' up there.

No, ma'am. Of course not.

DUNK

Hank retakes his seat, waits for Bertha to do the same, but she just stands there, arms crossed.

Sit down, Sugar.

HANK

That boy gotcha all –

BERTHA
Still standing.

Sit down!

HANK

That boy –

BERTHA

Sits yer ass down!

HANK

No need t' use that kinda language.

BERTHA

Sits. Yer. *Ass! Down!*

HANK

Bertha recoils a bit but sinks to a chair. Silence.

That boy done –

BERTHA

HANK

That boy?! Tell ya what. That boy say he dint steal nothin' dint he? Well, he plumb shore dint. He got a brain and a backbone, but it ain't in that boy t' tell no stories. He shore as hell ain't gonna steal nuthin.

BERTHA

How you know that?

HANK

I never met sich a negro. Boy been raised right. Respeckful but ain't no Uncle Tom boot-licker. His granny done learned him the scriptures. He a hard worker. Got gumption what he got. Gumption. 'N that boy smart as a whip. Damn shore ain't no jasper.

BERTHA

He do talk good, but that ain't mean nuthin.

Hank struggles mightily to say something but can't find the words. Instead, he rises to unnecessarily check the stove. Bertha follows him with her eyes.

BERTHA (CONT.)

Well, spit it out, Mister. Whatchu wanna say?

Hank returns to table, sits, and takes Bertha's hand.

HANK

I tell ya, Sugar, jes talkin t' him, I feels like...

BERTHA

Feels like what?

HANK

Feels like I's talkin' t' a better man.

BERTHA

Hank! What kinda spell that boy brang in here?!

HANK

It's that gurl done brought a spell with what she stole. She done got him all twisted up. You, too.

BERTHA

Who's all twisted up, Mister? Ain't no colored boy better 'n you. 'N that gurl jes a twig. Cain't twist up nobody.

Hank releases Bertha's hand and leans back.

HANK

Ya hear yerself, Woman? Talkin' 'bout a twig. She same as you ya was fifteen. All sweet 'n innocent. Ya got *me* all twisted up. Me, gittin' all puffed up, thankin' I's gonna be a big man, proteckin' ya. 'N look atcha now, grewed into a guldurn oak tree.

BERTHA

Oak tree?! Whatchu mean I's an oak tree?

HANK

Sugar, shore as hell ain't no twig.

BERTHA

I never knowed ya t' be so mean. Callin' me an oak tree.

HANK

Jes sayin' ya ain't a twig. Ya ain't a weak woman. Shore, y'all ack askeered a yer *end times*. Yer *darkness descendin'*. But ya gotcher faith. Yer solid as a guldurn oak tree what you is.

BERTHA

Yer mockin' me.

HANK

No, Sugar. Ain't mockin.

A beat, growing a smile.

'N ya still get me all twisted up.

Silence. Bertha takes Hank's hand, touches his cheek. Then, from upstairs a barely audible groaning.

DUNK (OFF)

Nooo!

Hank and Bertha swivel their heads to the ceiling, then share a look.

BERTHA

Ah, Mister. What we gonna do?

HANK

Taking a moment, thoughtfully.

Lemmie ast ya sumpin... Whatchu regret?

BERTHA

Regret? Whatchu talkin'? We's got least one thief in our home. What we gonna do?

HANK

In yer life. 'Fore ya die 'n yer lookin' back thankin' on yer life. I know yer sorry we couln't have no chillins, but that ain't sumpin we decide. Ain't sumpin we did or dint do. It jes was. Sumpin God did. But what 'bout when *we's* decidin' things? Watcha gonna regret? Regret we dint open for breakfast on weekdays? We dint move out'n this damn dry county? Dint add pie t' the menu? Dint get an indoor crapper?

Beat.

Y'all gonna regret marryin' me?

BERTHA

Whatchu talkin'?! I ne'er in all my days heered y'all talk sich nonsense!

HANK

Boy's got dreams. Ain't askeerd a takin' a risk.

BERTHA

Mister, I never knowed ya t' be askeerd a nuthin.

As the door opens, Hank and Bertha give each other some space. Dunk enters leading a quaking Arleta by the hand. She wears woolen socks under a more substantial pair of shoes and clutches her doll. Dunk carries the purse, a heavy, heavy load. There's a pause as Hank and Bertha exchange looks with Dunk while Arleta avoids eye contact.

DUNK

Take a seat.

Arleta slowly takes a seat at the table. Dunk stands behind her, hands on her shoulders.

BERTHA

Don' y'all be touchin' now.

Dunk quickly removes his hands.

DUNK

Sorry, ma'am. I wasn't –

HANK

They ain't ruttin', Woman! Let 'em be.

Pause.

DUNK

We owe you an apology.

Arleta softly weeps.

DUNK (CONT.)

We'll return the money to the church as soon as we can get our car moving.

BERTHA

Oh, dear Lord. It ain't her daddy's?!

HANK

She took it dint she?

BERTHA

From the church? Dear Lord Jesus. That's plumb ugly. Uglier 'n homemade sin.

HANK

Then what? Whatchu thank's gonna happen y'all go traipsin' in with a wad a money?

DUNK

I'll take responsibility.

HANK

Like hell you will.

BERTHA

Hank!

DUNK

It's my failure. I'm responsible.

HANK

Uh huh. Well, shore as shootin', y'all be blamed, 'n they'll throw yer ass in the slammer!

DUNK

Maybe not.

HANK

They ain't gonna pin it on the lil white gurl, 'n for a hunnerd 'n eighty-eight dollars, y'all be lucky they don' hang ya.

BERTHA

Somebody gotta pay.

HANK

No. Here's what gonna happen. Y'all gonna git yerselves out'n the state soon as y'all can.

BERTHA

Whatchu sayin?!

HANK

Sayin' *I'll* return the money.

DUNK

Thank you, sir, but I can't/ let you do that.

BERTHA

/Dear Lord! Mister, yer out'n yer gourd!

HANK

Y'all jes sit down and shut up. I gotta go see a man 'bout a dog. Too much coffee.

Hank throws on his coat.

DUNK

I'll be right behind you, sir. I need to make a trip outside, too.

BERTHA

Jes like that! Y'all jes gonna drop this gaumed up sichiation like a hot skillet?!

Hank exits without responding. Dunk throws on a coat and pauses at the door.

DUNK

Don't worry, ma'am. I'm not dropping anything. I'm reflecting real hard on my poor judgment. I've got to figure out a way to return that money without getting myself... Oh, Lord help me... Well, if I can manage that... Either way, I'll see Arleta is returned to her daddy.

ARLETA

Wails and then breaks down sobbing.

Nooo! I cain't go back to my daddy! Please don' take me back!

Dunk looks at Arleta with expressionless eyes until she settles down, then he looks to Bertha

DUNK

And, ma'am, I won't let your mister catch any of our trouble. He's a good man and we appreciate your kindness. Be sure... Our sins always find us out.

Beat.

We'll fetch the ribs when we're out there. Arleta, help the missus get the table ready for supper.

Dunk exits.

BERTHA

Git holt a yerself, Missy. Should be ashamed.

Bertha looks up as lights fade.

BERTHA (CONT.)

Y'all done brought a mean darkness down on this house.

BLACKOUT

END OF SCENE

ACT 1
SCENE 3

Hank, Bertha, Dunk, and Arleta sit around a table littered with dishes, the remnants of a supper, two platters of ribs and a skillet of cornbread. Arleta's doll is on the counter overlooking the table, purse hung around its neck. The mood is somber. Hank picks his teeth, looks at the others who sit and solemnly stare at their plates.

HANK

Helluva thang. We's all ackin like we jes ate our las' supper and now gots t' take a seat in a guldurn leckric chair.

Bertha chides him with a look and wag of the head.

HANK (CONT.)

Whatchy'all thank a the ribs?

DUNK

Solemnly, in Scottish accent.

They wasted o'er a scorching flame, the marrow of his bones; but a miller us'd him worst of all, for he crush'd him between two stones.

HANK

The hell that mean?

BERTHA

Sound just like my granddaddy! Kinda like how he us'd t' talk!

DUNK

Sorry, sir. It's just how I feel. Wasted over a scorching flame. Crushed between two stones.

Bending forward as if a severe stomachache.

When I think about it, I can hardly breathe. Didn't much feel like eating... But you do make a fine wet rub.

HANK

Jes not as good as yer granny's.

Dunk gives a sheepish smile, a noncommittal shrug.

HANK (CONT.)

Bertha?

Bertha looks to Hank, grimaces, then gives a reluctant nod to one of the two platters on the table.

HANK (CONT.)

Well, shee-it.

BERTHA

Softly.

Language, Mister.

HANK

What's it got so special?

BERTHA

Pauses, annoyed, then plants the stake.

Okay, Mister. Y'all gots t' know. First thang in my mouth, Dunk's sauce here made me wanna jump up n' shake a leg. Jes like a fiddle 'n a banjo playin' in my mouth. Then I's chewin' 'n the music changed to a kinda sweet steel gee-tar 'n dontchu know, nex' thang I's dreamin' I's layin' in a field a soft clover in warm sunshine. Dunk's sauce almost made me fergit the darkness done descended on our home.

Dunk can't help but grow a grin. Hank is bewildered.

DUNK

That's poetry, ma'am.

BERTHA

Sorry, Mister, but since ya ast.

HANK

Aah... I knowed it.

Turning to Arleta.

How 'bout you? Y'all gotta poyem for us, too?

Arleta doesn't look up, just slowly wags her head.

DUNK

Your sauce is really good, too... Sir.

HANK

Shee-it.

Hank rises to stoke the fire. Arleta keeps her sad eyes on her plate. Dunk stands, walks to menu on the wall. A moment, then he spins, returns to table.

DUNK

Ma'am, do you have a pen?

BERTHA

A stick pin?

DUNK

An ink pen and piece of paper please.

Bertha fetches pen and paper. Hank returns takes a seat. A moment as everyone watches Dunk write. Then he passes the paper to Hank who studies it.

HANK

That's it?! I'll be damned! How'd yer granny come up with that?!

Hank is beside himself, rises and paces the room as he studies the piece of paper.

HANK (CONT.)

I tried mosta these 'gredients sep'rate but never figgered they's gonna work together.

DUNK

But there's more to it. See what she left out?

Hank studies the recipe and his eyes go wide.

HANK

Cain't be! Cain't be! I jes never...

Hank returns to table, takes a seat, and leans in.

HANK (CONT.)

Yer granny's family's secret. 'N ya jes hand it over?

DUNK

My judgment has been so bad. Somehow, a recipe doesn't seem so important in the big picture. How will I ever make it as a lawyer?

HANK

So, I gots yer permission t'... Ya know...?

DUNK

I think Grandma would be more concerned about my poor judgment than about her recipe. And it's only fair. You're doing so much to help us... The recipe's yours now. But please keep it between us.

HANK

Son, I ain't shore what t' say. I shorely do thank ya for sharin' it... But what I thank, it ain't so much yer judgment as hers.

Bertha nods agreement. They all look to Arleta who finally raises her eyes.

DUNK

From your church. How could you do it?

ARLETA

I dint thank of it like that. It was ol' sister Callahan. A widah lady. Y'all woun't know her, but she real old and smell real bad, and I never in all my days knowed she had no money. Lives in an ol' shack wit a pack a cats 'n dogs. Brother and sister Rogers gives her a ride to church Sunday mornin's and evenin's and t' prayer meetin' on Wednesdays. She ne'er do say much, but when I's a lil gurl, she use t' pinch my cheek. These days, she jes seem like a walkin' death.

BERTHA

'N ya done took 'er money.

ARLETA

Well, no. See, they's a box back a the church for missionaries. Ol' sister Callahan was 'bout last t' leave the service yesterday cuz she walks so slow, 'n I's right back a her. Daddy's still up front busy talkin' wit brother Williams 'n they ain't nobody else in the church. 'N then I see the widah drops an envelope in the box, but it dint go all the ways in.

BERTHA

'N ya jes hepped yerself.

ARLETA

Figgered might be a dollar or two in there and –

BERTHA

Stealin's stealin'!

ARLETA

I knowed it, but Dunk ain't got much money t' git us to Detroit 'n I wanted to hep in case we needed sumpin fer gas 'n I's gonna pay it back.

DUNK

Robbing from missionaries.

ARLETA

Gonna pay it back. I was. I swear.

DUNK

Don't swear!

HANK

Whatchu got goin' fer y'all, prolly nobody gonna miss it.

DUNK

The missionaries will miss it.

HANK

Don' have t' be a problem. When weather clears, I jes hop in my truck, run it back lickety split, 'n drop it right back in the box.

ARLETA

Oh, woudja?

BERTHA

Don' seem right.

HANK

It ain't right what she done, but we's gonna make it right.

DUNK

We have some time to decide. I need to think on this. I'm just so disappointed.

ARLETA

I tole ya and tole ya and tole ya. I's sooo sorry.

DUNK

More disappointed in myself. Practicing law is about ethics and good judgment.

HANK

Women don' always have best judgment. When Bertha's 'bout same age as yer gurl, she got the bright idee t' get us some honey from up one a them honey trees, ya know, with the bee's nest down in the tree.

BERTHA

Don' go tellin' no stories now, Mister!

HANK

Lissen here. Ya gonna go inta a bee's nest, y'all gots to have some smoke or a net on ya or sumpin. But the gurl clumb up that tree real careful-like thankin' she go slow 'nough, the bees ain't gonna mind.

ARLETA

Wadn'tcha wearin' a dress?! Daddy never let me climb no trees cuz I always gots to wear a dress.

HANK

Grinning.

I dint mind none she's wearin' a dress.

BERTHA

Hank!

ARLETA

Gotcherself self stung, I bet.

HANK

Chuckling with the memory.

A mite stung, yes, ma'am, she did. But y'all know I's got a bit more sense, so I's standin' way back jes watchin'. Them bees come out'n that tree in a cloud, and the gurl come down that tree faster 'n ary a boomer.

Arleta smiles and Dunk manages a chuckle.

BERTHA

Don' b'lieve a word he say.

HANK

She lit out for the crick, a cloud of bees trailin' off'n her head.

Bertha can't hide a grin. Arleta's smile turns to giggles. Dunk's chuckle turns to outright laughter.

BERTHA

'N ya jes stan' there laughin' yer fool head off.

HANK

Gurl dove plumb headfirst inta the crick and was under that water long 'nough, I thought she muss be drowned.

Now everyone's having a good laugh.

HANK (CONT.)

I was fixin' t' go fetch her out'n there, but then, the gurl come up –

BERTHA

Don' ya dare, Mister!

HANK

Come up out'n the water –

BERTHA

If'n you do!

HANK

That thin cotton dress all wet and stuck to her like she ain't wearin' a stitch.

BERTHA

Lord forgive you, Mister.

HANK

I tell y'all, that pitcher a her standin' there 'n that crick, jes as God made 'er, in all her natchrul beauty was better'n all the honey in the world.

Raucous laughter by everyone, even Bertha.

HANK (CONT.)

Poin' is, son, sometime a woman's poor judgment don' end so bad.

BERTHA

It ain't jes women!

HANK

Whatchu talkin' 'bout, Sugar?

BERTHA

Time was we had us a real poor scratch farm 'fore we built our resternt. Mister had an ol' mule fer plowin'...

HANK

Name a Buster. Ornery ol' cuss.

BERTHA

One day, the mister wanted to take down an ol' tree near the barn –

HANK

No ya ain't, Woman!

BERTHA

Turnabout, Mister.

Dunk, loosened up now, joins with Arleta to chuckle at the teasing going on between their hosts.

BERTHA (CONT.)

So, the mister, using all that high 'n mighty manly judgment, he chop 'bout clean through that tree so it jes 'bout to fall in on our barn.

HANK

Now who tellin' stories?

BERTHA

Then, mister high 'n mighty with the soun' mind 'n glory-be judgment go and tie a rope to hisself. Loops it right inta his britches –

DUNK

Oh, oh.

BERTHA

Yes, he shore 'nough did, 'n then he throw the rope over a big ol' limb –

HANK

Ya don' gotta tell this story, Woman!

BERTHA

This here ain't no story. No. The mister ties the other end of that rope to ol' Buster

ARLETA

Why'd he go 'n do that?

DUNK

To keep the tree from falling on the barn.

HANK

See? Ain't sich a dumb idee.

BERTHA

Lessen ya pull the tree down on top a ya!

DUNK

Tell me he didn't.

BERTHA

No. Tree dint fall on him, but ol' Buster dint thank it sich a good idee did he, Mister?

HANK

Ya gonna pay, Sugar.

ARLETA

What happened?

BERTHA

Soon as the mister here pick up the axe to finish choppin' the tree, the mule gits skeert and –

ARLETA

Askeert a the axe?

BERTHA

Don' know, Chile. Who knows what lights a far under an ol' mule? But shore 'nough, mister's fixin' to take one more swing at that tree, and ol' Buster takes off like a wasper done stung his hind end.

Infectious laughter all around. Bertha's laughing so hard, she can barely finish her story.

BERTHA (CONT.)

'N dontchu know, Buster takes off 'n hoisted the mister by his britches right up into the tree.

Laughter ratcheted to raucous hilarity.

BERTHA (CONT.)

There he is, the mister hangin' upside down in the tree... But –

HANK

What the woman do?! Jes stands there laughin' her fool head off!

BERTHA

Man coun't git hisself free. Hangin' upside down holdin' the axe, and then, dontcha know, one a them suspenders on his britches come loose and –

DUNK

Oh! He could have broken his neck!

HANK

Like-ta broke my back!

BERTHA

So, y'all tell me how good the judgment of a man hangin' upside down in a tree 'bout to slide out'n his britches and fall on his head in his skivvies?

Hank joins in the laughter which continues for a bit. As the laughter dies away, Hank stands and pulls Bertha up, wraps her in a hug, picks her up, and swings her around as she squeals.

HANK

Still love ya, Sugar.

Dunk and Arleta watch their hosts mugging it up. Arleta lays her hand on Dunk's. He jerks his hand away without making eye contact. Just like that, Arleta's glee turns to anguish.

Hank and Bertha return to their seats, hold hands, and consider each other before returning attention to their guests.

DUNK

What happened to your barn?

HANK

Yer sittin' in it, son.

DUNK

What?!

BERTHA

The mister done wriggled hisself down out'n that tree but wountcha know, the tree fell on the barn anyways.

HANK

Naw. Jes kinda leant 'gainst it. Dint hurt it none.

BERTHA

That's when we 'cided to –

HANK

She 'cided.

BERTHA

We 'cided t' foller the mister's dream a buildin' a resternt and do barbecue.

HANK

I sol' that damn mule 'n tore down the barn. Moved the lumber up near the road and built this place.

DUNK

That's an amazing story.

BERTHA

They's times we makes mistakes but they lead t' sumpin' better.

HANK

Follered my dream. Coun't done it without ya, Sugar.

BERTHA

Ever man needs a hep mate.

DUNK

From God's lips... Why you named your restaurant *Bertha's* Barbecue.

HANK

Shorely did. Yes, sir.

Pause. Arleta straightens with recognition and her eyes widen as she looks at Hank. Then...

ARLETA

Softly, to Dunk.

He called ya *sir*.

The stunning import sinks in, and everyone reacts in their own way. Silence.

HANK

Uh... So whatchu wanna do, son?

DUNK

Standing.

Arleta and I are going to do the dishes.

BERTHA

Oh, no, ya ain't! Y'all are guests.

DUNK

Please allow us. Least we can do.

ARLETA

Yes, ma'am, please. I really wanna hep.

HANK

I mean, whatchu wanna do 'bout the money? 'Bout takin' the gurl t' Detroit?

An uncomfortable pause, Dunk troubled, Arleta hopeful.

DUNK

I surely appreciate all you've done for us.

BERTHA

Ain't no answer, son.

HANK

If'n y'all decide, I can take the gurl to her daddy when I take the money back.

DUNK

I need to think on it, sir. Tomorrow we'll see about getting my car out of the ditch. By then I believe I'll know in my heart what's the right thing to do. You and the missus have been so generous. We'll take care of the dishes.

Without waiting for a response, Dunk begins clearing dishes. Arleta joins him. Very quickly, they clear the table and exit to the kitchen leaving Hank and Bertha staring at each other.

BERTHA

Boy's mama learnt him some good manners.

HANK

Boy fightin' a battle 'tween his goober 'n his brain.

BERTHA

Fer a man, that battle don' never end. Started with y'all when I clumb out'n that crick 'n yer goober swolled up like a zucchini squarsh.

HANK

Ya seen that didja?

BERTHA

Man cain't hide no zucchini in his britches. Nex' day yer down on yer knee astin me t' marry ya.

They share a tender moment.

HANK

I do like the boy but ain't shore the gurl's right for 'im.

BERTHA

Course not. She ain't colored.

HANK

Yup. That's a problem fer shore. But...

Pause.

BERTHA

But? Whatchu thankin'?

HANK

Maybe wit his church folks... Up north... Boy seems t' have thought it through. He ain't convinced me. Not really. But they's more to it than jes the colored aspeck.

BERTHA

Ya thank she stupid?

HANK

Ne'er said that. But boy got big dreams. That gurl gonna hep him chase those dreams?

BERTHA

She all ate up in love.

HANK

But what she –

BERTHA

Y'all thank it don' mean nuthin! But, Mister, that means ever'thang! She plumb ate up in love.

HANK

Lissen, Sugar. If'n they's both saviors, that's okay. If'n they's both sinners, een that's okay. But cain't jes one of 'em only be a savior 'n tuther only a sinner.

BERTHA

Whatchu talkin', Mister?

HANK

Jes sayin', sometimes she cain't only be the sinner. Sometime she gotta be his savior or they ain't never gonna be equal like we's equal.

BERTHA

Well, Mister! I don' thank I een knows ya no more! Talkin' 'bout me bein' equal...

Hank gives sheepish grin, quickly turns serious.

HANK

Dontchu thank she got t' be punished.

BERTHA

Well... The poor gurl ain't got no mama.

HANK

Sugar, yer a hard woman t' foller. Cain't 'cide if'n ya wants t' turn her over your knee and spank her or put the lovin' on her.

BERTHA

Spankin'. Lovin'. A mama's gotta do it all.

HANK

You ain't her mama, Sugar.

BERTHA

'N y'all ain't the boy's daddy.

HANK

Boy's daddy?! Whatchu talkin'?

There's a sharp rapping on the door.

HANK

The hell?

Dunk sticks his head out from the kitchen.

DUNK

What's that?

HANK

Y'all git yerself back in the kitchen. Keep that gurl quiet.

BERTHA

Well, see t' the door, Mister.

Hank opens door and a gust of wind pushes Vern into the room. He's well bundled up in heavy hooded coat and gloves, but the exposed cheeks of his baby face are red from the cold. Vern holds a big flashlight which he'd used to rap on the door.

HANK

Vern! Come on in out'n the cold.

VERN

Hank.

Hank closes the door as Vern gives his arms a shake, steps to stove, and removes his gloves.

HANK

Whatchu doin' all the ways outcheer?

VERN

God damn, it's a mess out there! Roads slicker 'n owl shit! Ever damn thang coated with ice and then covered up wit snow. Impossible to drive or een walk. Fell on my ass three times walkin' up here. Slicker n' snot on a fuckin' doorknob.

BERTHA

Well, ain't that a fine way t' talk!

VERN

Oh! Mrs. Dunwiddie. I'm sorry, ma'am. I dint see ya there.

BERTHA

I should hope not!

VERN

Uh, how're y'all doin'?

BERTHA

A harumpf and hard stare before speaking.

Gitcha some coffee. We's got ribs 'n cornbread in the kitchen.

VERN

That'd be mighty nice, ma'am. Fraid I ain't gonna make it home for supper t'night.

BERTHA

Might wanna warsh out that mouth 'fore ya eat.

Bertha exits to the kitchen as Vern groans and hangs his head. He sets his flashlight aside, sticks his gloves in a pocket, and removes his coat. Hank hangs it. Vern turns his backside to the stove and stands there in his deputy sheriff uniform, a shiny star on his chest, and a pistol on his belt.

VERN

Dint mean t' offen' the missus.

HANK

Nuthin she ain't heard b'fore. So... Y'all gotcher self stuck, didja?

VERN

The department got one a them surplus army son-of-a-jeep Willys sposed t' go anywhere, but that ain't figgerin' fer ice. Slid right into the ditch.

HANK

In the ditch? Where? Uh, whyntcha come on over, take a load off.

Hank takes a seat. Vern takes notice of Arleta's doll. Puzzled, he starts to say something but only shakes his head and takes a seat. Bertha returns with coffee and sits.

BERTHA

Coffee. Gotcha some ribs heatin'.

VERN

Much obliged.

Silence as Hank and Bertha nervously study Vern who slurps coffee and stares at the doll.

HANK

Dint spec t' see no one out'n this weather.

VERN

Yeah.

Uncomfortable pause.

BERTHA

How's yer mama doin'? I need t' pay 'er a visit.

VERN

Well, y'all knowed she gots the gout real bad. Don' een wanna get out'n the bed lessen it's fer one a us t' hep 'er to the rockin' chair.

BERTHA

Mercy. Poor soul.

VERN

She done got us waitin' on 'er hand n' foot.

BERTHA

Maybe I can –

HANK

What in hell y'all doin' out'n this weather?!

VERN

Sheriff worried 'bout his sister way out'n back a the Doyle holler. Sent me out t' check on 'er.

BERTHA

She okay?

VERN

Sadly wagging head.

Ne'er made it.

BERTHA

She died?!

VERN

Oh, no ma'am! *I* ne'er made it. Was on the way when/ I slid in the ditch.

BERTHA

/Thank the Lord... That she okay.

HANK

Standing.

Come on. I can hep. Give ya a push.

BERTHA

Hank! Let the man have his coffee 'n vittles.

VERN

Well, we's prolly gonna need a chain and ratchet winch, 'n I ain't shore we wanna be tryin' that in the dark with snow comin' down 'n wind wailin' like a banshee.

Hank slowly sits, nods.

BERTHA

Lemmie check on them ribs.

Bertha exits.

VERN

The pahr and phone lines are down cuz a the goddamn ice. Y'all tried your phone? Anyways, lucky they's a radio in the jeep, and I gots a message through t' dispatch t' let 'em know I's stuck. But this damn storm got 'em scramblin'.

Bertha returns with a plate of ribs and cornbread.

VERN (CONT.)

Well, thank ye, ma'am. Anyways, Jimmy's got the deuce 'n a half 'n all the gear to get me out 'bout noon ta'marr if'n it's okay for me to... I can jes make a pilla out'n my coat and nap in a corner... If'n it's okay.

Hank and Bertha share a look as Vern attacks a rib.

BERTHA

Course it is.

VERN

Mouth full.

Hot damn, Hank! Whatchu done with these ribs?! I ain't never!

Bertha pats Hank's hand, gives a consoling look.

HANK

New recipe.

VERN

Best ribs I ever had! Ain't no lie! Come t' Jesus ribs what they is!

Another bite, continuing to talk with full mouth.

Y'all seen anyone else about?

HANK

Whatchu mean?

VERN

Continuing to stuff his face.

Nuther car slid off out there not fer from my jeep. Gots t' ast cuz I don' want nobody freezin' out there whilst I'm here fillin' my belly with these come t' Jesus ribs.

HANK

No.

BERTHA

Shooting a look of rebuke to Hank.

What he means, ain't nobody outside freezin'... But we do gotta guest in the kitchen.

VERN

Stopping mid-chew, suddenly attentive.

A guest? Who y'all got back there?

BERTHA

Well, they's a young lady back there. Come in from the storm.

VERN

Bring 'er on out so's I can see if'n she needs any hep.

HANK

She's fine.

Vern wipes his hands, looks at Bertha who averts her eyes. He looks at the doll. He looks to Hank.

VERN

Hank, anythang I need t' know.

HANK

Nuthin'.

Pause as Vern studies the discomfited couple.

BERTHA

Well, then... I'll go on 'n fetch her.

Bertha exits and returns momentarily tugging a reluctant Arleta by the hand. Vern stands and considers Arleta's demeanor and Hank and Bertha who are oddly reticent and uncomfortable.

VERN

Ma'am, I'm a deputy sheriff. I unnerstan' yer car slid into the ditch.

ARLETA

Yes, sir.

VERN

So that's yer car out there? A young gurl ort not be drivin' in this kinda weather.

ARLETA

Well, sir, I ...

HANK

Course it's her car.

Dunk steps out of the kitchen.

DUNK

Actually, it's my car, sir.

Vern stumbles back, catches himself, fumbles in drawing his pistol and training it on Dunk.

VERN

Hank! What in hell's goin' on here?!

BLACKOUT

END OF ACT

ACT 2
SCENE 1

We continue as we left the previous scene. With trembling hands, Vern trains his pistol on Dunk who stands behind Arleta. Everyone holds their breath for a moment as Dunk pulls Arleta aside and steps in front of her.

VERN

Gonna answer me, Hank?! What ‘n hell’s happenin’ here?

HANK

Take it easy, Vern. Put the gun away. Jes a couple stranded travelers like y’all.

VERN

Yers ain’t no colored stablishment, ‘n I –

HANK

That’s fer us t’ figger out.

VERN

Well, I wanna know what’s a white gurl doin’ with a colored boy.

BERTHA

We cain’t throw ‘em out in the cold! Y’all put that gun away!

Bertha takes a couple of steps in Vern’s direction, but Hank blocks her.

HANK

Git yerself back, Woman!

Hank steps up, lays a hand on Vern’s gun hand. Vern’s attention darts between Dunk and Hank.

VERN

Don’ touch me, Hank! Don’ be innerferin’!

HANK

The boy ain’t no danger. Put the gun down.

Vern hesitates, glances at Hank, but then warily keeps an eye on Dunk as he slowly lowers his pistol. He does not holster it.

BERTHA

Why dontchy'all sits yerselves so we can 'splain? Chile, git on over here 'n take a seat.

Arleta haltingly takes a seat, and Bertha sits beside her. The men continue their standoff.

DUNK

Sir, our car slid into a ditch, and this couple was gracious enough to take us in until the storm passes. Surely the most hospitable folks you'll ever want to meet.

VERN

Whatchu doin', boy, with a white gurl?

HANK

Put the gun away.

BERTHA

She ain't in no danger!

DUNK

We're on our way to visit family.

VERN

Family? Whose family?

HANK

If'n y'all put that gun away, we can sit down and 'splain things t' ya.

Dunk reaches into a pocket, and Vern reacts by raising his gun again. Dunk freezes. Slowly, he holds up a free hand.

DUNK

I'm just getting my car key.

Slowly, Dunk pulls a key from his pocket and holds it out.

DUNK (CONT.)

Sir, if it will ease your mind and you'll holster your gun, you can hold on to my car key until we're able to get our car out of the ditch.

A moment with no one moving. Then, Hank grabs the key and hands it to Vern.

HANK

Put the damn gun away! Cain't ya see the boy ain't no danger?

Not fully convinced, Vern reluctantly takes and pockets the key and holsters his gun.

HANK

Okay now. Whyn'tcha jes sit back down 'n finish yer ribs?

VERN

Fergit the ribs. Y'all take a seat. I'll stand.

Hank shrugs, takes a seat. Dunk does likewise.
Vern pulls a pad and pen from a pocket, takes notes.

VERN (CONT.)

Let's start with you. What's yer name?

ARLETA

Arleta Easter.

VERN

Smirking.

Easter. Like the bunny?

ARLETA

Well –

DUNK

As in the day the Lord Jesus rose from the dead.

Vern stops writing, glares at Dunk.

VERN

Where y'all from?

ARLETA

Our family's in Detroit.

Vern studies Arleta while Dunk, Hank, and Bertha share a look: *What the hell's she saying?*

VERN

Y'all don' sound like any goddamn Yankee... But he does!

DUNK

Sir, I do have family in Detroit, but my daddy is a preacher in White County. Arleta's daddy's also a preacher. I've never been in trouble with the law... Sir.

VERN

So ya say. What's yer name?

DUNK

Jefferson Freeman but my friends call me... Uh, well I guess that's not really important.

VERN

Course it's important if'n y'all gots an alias.

DUNK

Alias? No, no. It's not like that.

BERTHA

Leave the boy be. His friends call him Dunk.

VERN

Dunk? What the hell kinda name's that?

BERTHA

Leave the boy be, Vern, lessen y'all wan' us all call you by yer nickname.

VERN

Ma'am, yer fixin' t' cross a line.

BERTHA

Turning with a knowing smile to Dunk.

When he's lil, ever'one called him *Dumplin'*. Mama's Lil Dumplin' cuz boy loved his mama's dumplins.

VERN

Y'all ain't no cause t' be –

BERTHA

Now, serious.

Time was, boy was cute as a dumplin, too, 'fore he got all growed up and rough 'roun' the edges thinkin' he gots to use sich ugly language t' be a man.

ARLETA

My mama used t' make dumplins.

HANK

I thought it cuz he all roly-poly wit cheeks like dumplins.

Hank and Bertha chuckle. Dunk and Arleta allow nervous smiles. Pause. Vern glares until everyone sobers up so he can continue taking notes.

VERN

So, the boy gots an alias... *Dunk.*

HANK

Ain't no alias. Jes what he go by wit'n his friends.

VERN

That's whatchy'all call him, Hank? Y'all sayin' this boy a friend a yers?

HANK

Blame it on them come t' Jesus ribs yer so fond of.

VERN

Jesus Christ!

BERTHA

Standing.

All right! That's jes 'bout enough, young man! We knowed ya since yer a baby. The mister n' yer granddaddy grew up t'gether. The Lord know I watched yer mama change yer diapers! Yer in my house now, 'n that badge don' give y'all no cause t' be usin' the Lord's name in vain 'n cursin'! It ortta be good 'nough fer ya that the mister and me are vouchin' fer these two young'uns. So y'all can jes stop writin' and sit yerself down and ack like ya knowed us. If'n y'all don' wanna respeck us, jes throw yer coat on 'n go sit yerself outside smack dab in a pile a snow.

Vern considers, nods, pockets his pad and paper, and takes a seat.

VERN

Okay... If'n y'all give yer word for these two... Guess it orta be good 'nough fer me.

BERTHA

Yoant me t' het 'em up?

VERN

No, thank ye. They's fine.

Bertha retakes her seat. Vern hesitates a moment, bites into a rib, and reacts to the flavor with a moan of satisfaction. A beat, and then...

VERN (CONT.)

Detroit ya say?

DUNK

Yes, sir.

HANK

So, yer department gotcherselves one a them jeeps.

VERN

Yer car's headed wrong direction to be visitin' White County.

HANK

They's headed back to Detroit... Them jeeps gotta a hardtop? Got a good heater?

VERN

Whatchu doin' up in Detroit?

HANK

Boy's workin' in one a them car fack'ries.

DUNK

Well, sir, I –

HANK

It's okay, son. Y'all can tell him 'bout the lawyer school.

VERN

What's that?

HANK

Boy's goin' t' school t' be a big-time lawyer.

VERN

No shit?!

Acknowledging Bertha.

Sorry, ma'am.

Beat.

Big-time lawyer ya say? Huh. Guess don' surprise me none they's colored lawyers up there.

DUNK

They even have colored deputy sheriffs.

Vern puts down a rib, wipes his hands, leans back, and looks hard at Dunk.

VERN

Lissen here, boy. My job t' be 'spicious. This here county, we's having robberies, rapes,/ even murders.

BERTHA

/Mercy!

HANK

Boy ain't no crim'nal.

VERN

We gots a real problem wit bootleggers, too.

BERTHA

Y'all cain't thank these two be bootleggers!

DUNK

I don't drink, sir, and don't know any bootleggers.

VERN

Says the son-of-a-colored-preacher boy.

BERTHA

Why, I never!

VERN

Well, ain't many coloreds op'ratin' the stills.

DUNK

Why do you think that is?

VERN

Huh?

DUNK

Because we're law-abiding... Or maybe we just can't understand the complexities of evaporation. Can't fathom the intricacies of condensation.

VERN

Perturbed, unsure how to respond to thinly veiled teasing.

I's jes sayin' they's some colored boys bein' used to move hootch roun' the state. Moonshiners hide out in the woods 'n let the coloreds take the risk makin' deliveries.

HANK

That right?

VERN

Colored boys getting' screwed ever which way. Stiffed by the moonshiners, and I don't need tell y'all what happens when John Law pulls over a coon wit a load a shine.

HANK

Ain't no need for them kinda stories front a the womenfolk!

Pause.

DUNK

Affecting Scottish dialect.

Thus ev'ry kind their pleasure find, the savage and the tender; some social join, and leagues combine, some solitary wander: Avaunt, away! The cruel sway, tyrannic man's dominion; the sportsman's joy, the murd'ring cry, the flutt'ring gory pinion.

VERN

The hell that mean?! That Yankee talk?

HANK

The boy jes –

DUNK

The world's always had its cruel tyrants. No end of cruelty until the Lord returns.

Pause as Vern looks hard at Dunk.

VERN

Lemme tell y'all what's cruel. One a them colored boys runnin' hootch pulled a razor on a deputy over t' Cumberland County. Deputy got hisself sliced all t' hell 'fore he able to put a bullet in the boy's brain.

Beat.

Y'all ain't got a razor in yer pocket do ya, boy?

DUNK

No, sir, I don't. Don't even have a pocketknife anymore. I used to have a boy scout jack knife. A present for my seventh birthday... But it was stolen.

VERN

Y'all was in the boy scouts?

DUNK

No, sir, I wasn't, but I had a cousin join a negro boy scout troop in Knoxville.

VERN

Don' say.

DUNK

How about you, sir? Were you in the boy scouts?

VERN

Got merit badges for archery and marksmanship with the rifle.

HANK

Your granddaddy, ol' Jake... He was helluva shot, too.

BERTHA

Mister.

HANK

We's boys, we had single-shot twenty-twos. Yer granddaddy 'n me. He ne'er missed nary a squirrel.

DUNK

I overheard you say your mama has gout.

VERN

What's that t' you, boy?

DUNK

I'm really sorry about that. We had a sister in our church who suffered from gout. I imagine it's a heavy load, caring for your mama. I'll keep her in my prayers.

VERN

Oh... Well...

Vern's flustered response causes things to go quiet. Hank rises to stoke the stove. He returns to and surveys the table, Vern's plate, empty but for bones.

HANK

Git you anythang else, Vern? More coffee?

ARLETA

Oh, let me get that.

Arleta rises as Vern wags his head, holds out empty plate. Arleta takes plate to kitchen. Hank goes to window, strikes a pose looking out, guardian of the castle. Arleta returns to refill coffee.

BERTHA

Thank ya, Chile.

DUNK

Thank you.

VERN

So, y'all ain't married, are ya?

DUNK

No, sir, but we're making plans. Out of state, of course. Planning isn't illegal, is it? Sir.

VERN

Uh...

HANK

Without turning from window.

Gonna be a long night.

VERN

What kinda daddy een approves a plannin' t' marry a colored? Ain't natchrul.

BERTHA

Yer sista still plannin' t' git married nex' month? Wit yer mama doin' so poorly?

VERN

She workin' on it... But not t' no colored boy.

ARLETA

My daddy ain't got nuthin' agin coloreds. He say God created us all, 'n a colored boy cain't hep he's colored any more 'n a gurl can hep she's a gurl.

VERN

Boys 'n gurls are diff'rent, 'n y'all don' go mixin' boys 'n gurls in the same bed. Y'all shoun't be mixing races neither. We's diff'rent.

DUNK

In some ways we are. We're alike in lots of ways, too.

VERN

Like what?

HANK

Again, without turning from window.

Barbecue.

VERN

What?

Silence.

DUNK

It would be interesting to make a list of all the ways you and I are different and another of all the ways we're alike. Which list do you think would be longer?

VERN

Don' get smart wit me, boy.

DUNK

You love your mama, don't you?

VERN

Whatchu sayin', boy?!

DUNK

Of course, you do. I love my mama, too. I went to school. Went to church. Bet you did, too, as a boy at least. I had friends. Liked to climb trees. Used to catch fireflies in a mason jar. Hunt for bullfrogs. I love my brothers but that didn't stop us from fighting sometimes. I was always shy around girls but still, sometimes I showed off for the girls. Played the fool. I like to fish. I love baseball. How about you? Sir.

Unable to speak, Vern seethes in silence.

HANK

Half turning but staying at window.

I done all those things, I's a boy. Jake did, too. Yorn granddaddy 'n me used t' catch a mess a frogs, 'n his mama'd throw the frog legs in when she fryin' chicken.

DUNK

I think we probably have a lot in common, but I'm sure you're right about us being different, too. Couple of years ago, just one store in Sparta carried baseball cards. I wanted to go in, take a look at an Enos Slaughter card, maybe buy Peewee Reese. I wasn't allowed in to even look at those cards.

VERN

That ain't on me.

DUNK

No. Of course not.

With a start, Hank returns to stove, pulls the meat cleaver from the piece of firewood and then strikes another mighty blow embedding it in the wood as everyone stares at him. Agitated, he returns and takes a seat at the table leaning in toward Dunk.

HANK

Son, lemme ast ya... Yer a kid, some peckerwood stole yer knife. That right?

DUNK

Well, it wasn't just one kid...

Hank hesitates, visibly tormented. Everyone waits.

HANK

I jes 'membered sumpin me 'n Jake done we's kids, maybe twelve, thirteen. Ne'er tol' nary a sole 'bout it cuz... I ain't proud 'bout it.

Beat, getting emotional.

We seen a colored boy standin' by Jensen's Market. Boy weren't doin' nuthin', jes standin' there like he got nuthin else t' do. Ain't botherin' nobody.

Pause to stay in control, a big breath.

But... We beat up that colored boy 'n stole a jack knife off'n 'im.

BERTHA

Ah, Mister.

VERN

My granddaddy done that?

HANK

Don' know what made us do it. Cain't remember no reason. 'N I ain't sayin' it was yer granddaddy's idee. Prolly I's t' blame.

Wagging head in shame.

Purty shameful now I think on it. 'N now... Ain't nuthin I can do 'bout it.

Awkward silence.

DUNK

Well... The boys who stole my knife were not white boys. They were... Like me...

Statement hangs in the air, everyone uncomfortable.

DUNK (CONT.)

And they beat me up, too.

Beat.

Like the poet says, *The cruel sway, tyrannic man's dominion.*

Silence.

ARLETA

My daddy say the world's a changing. Colored folk gittin' more druthers.

VERN

Druthers? Hell that mean?

ARLETA

Like when y'all druther eat pie than beans.

Hank and Bertha chuckle. Even Dunk grins. But Vern scowls and wags his head.

VERN

Well, who wouln't druther eat pie than beans?

HANK

Looking to Bertha but pointing to menu on the wall.

Like I tol' ya!

ARLETA

I cain't 'splain ever'thin' my daddy say, but he learnt lots 'bout God's Word, and he say God ain't got nuthin' agin the colored. God loves all the people because... Well, I ain't shore why, but he say it ain't right t' be treatin' colored people poorly... Course, when it comes to me wantin' to...

Looking to Dunk.

My daddy ain't so...

BERTHA

Yer daddy's jes lookin' out fer ya.

DUNK

Nothing wrong with looking out for our kids. Looking out for each other. The question is: What do we *see* when we're looking out?

VERN

What we see when we's lookin' out? Y'all unnerstan' a word come out'n this jasper's mouth? He talk like he some kinda goddamn far'ner.

Looking to Bertha.

Sorry.

HANK

We learnt t' see thangs we's lil. Yer granddaddy 'n me go in the farrest 'n we see ever squirrel cuz we learnt t' see em. The missus here go in the farrest 'n see ever flower but nary a squirrel. I ain't lookin' for flowers cuz my eyeballs peeled for the squirrels.

DUNK

There might be more than one poet in this house.

ARLETA

I see squirrels when I's in the farrest.

VERN

Nobody learnt me t' see squirrels or flowers, but I see 'em. This here conversation... It's like y'all are cross-eyed 'n swimmin' in butter. Only natchrul fer a boy t' see squirrels. Boys are born t' see 'em. Boys are boys 'n gurls are gurls. Gurls go in fer the flowers. Ain't no myst'ry 'bout it.

DUNK

There's truth to that.

VERN

Y'all unnerstan' me, but cain't say I unnerstan' mosta whatchy'all say.

DUNK

There's truth to that, too.

Vern, seething, can't find the words.

DUNK (CONT.)

My Aunt Bertha – same name as yours, ma'am – she used to tell me to watch out for anyone with blue eyes. She said blue eyes meant a person had the devil in them.

VERN

Finding the words now, angry.

Well, there ya go! Buncha hateful speech that! *My eyes are blue 'n I ain't no devil!*

DUNK

No sir, of course not.

HANK

My uncle used t' say same thang 'bout brillo heads. What he call the coloreds. He say ever brillo head has a devil inside hettin' em up 'n turnin' their skin black, makin' their hair curl.

Pause.

Poin' is, we see what we learnt t' see... Maybe jes see what we wanna see.

Bertha stands and gives Hank a kiss on the cheek.

BERTHA

I bes' see about gittin' some beddin' for y'all. You men gonna sleep down here and the gurl 'n me be takin' the bed upstairs. Les go, Chile.

ARLETA

Standing.

I bes' make a trip outside 'fore goin' t' bed.

BERTHA

We gots a chamber pot upstairs if'n y'all wanna wait til mornin'.

Arleta nods and looks to Dunk. He makes eye contact but then turns away.

ARLETA

G'night, then.

DUNK

Nods but averts eye contact.

Good night.

Arleta, crestfallen, grabs her doll and purse from the counter and exits with Bertha. Hank clears tables.

HANK

We get these tables clear, y'all can lay out there. Git yerselves off'n the floor. I'll jes curl up by the stove.

DUNK

I don't mind the floor, sir.

VERN

Well, I ain't sleepin' on no table.

Bertha enters with blankets and pillow and piles them on one of the tables.

BERTHA

Jes one pilla, but they's plenny a blankets 'n coats hangin' by the door.

DUNK

Thank you, ma'am.

BERTHA

Y'all need anythang else?

HANK

Thank ya, Sugar.

BERTHA

Y'all keep things quiet down here. Don' wanna hear y'all raisin' a ruckus. That gurl got the weak trembles 'n needs her sleep.

Bertha gives Hank another quick kiss on the cheek and exits.

DUNK

Mr. Dunwiddie, sir. Hank. May I talk with you about Arleta?

Hank and Dunk huddle at a table whispering. Vern pulls a chair to the middle of the room and another facing it across the room. He grabs his coat, sits in one chair, and watches the two men whispering.

VERN

Whatchy'all talkin' 'bout?

Hank and Dunk look up briefly but don't respond. Another moment of whispering, then Dunk begins writing something as Vern looks on.

VERN (CONT.)

Boy, I wantcha sittin' right there in that chair where I can keep an eye on ya.

DUNK

Yes, sir.

Dunk finishes his note, hands it to Hank, and then takes a seat in the chair facing Vern who makes it very obvious when he draws his pistol and lays it across his chest, finger on the trigger.

VERN

Ta'marr Jimmy comin' with the deuce 'n a half t' pull us out'n the ditch, but 'fore we go our sep'rate ways, we's gonna learn the truth 'bout y'all. Already radioed in yer license plate b'fore when I saw yer car in the ditch. Ta'marr, we's gonna learn the truth, boy. Ain't no foolin'. We's gonna learn the truth 'bout y'all.

Beat, turning attention to Hank.

How 'bout turnin' down the light a bit? Ain't gonna git no sleep, but I could use a bit a darkness.

HANK

Y'all and the missus... Talkin' 'bout darkness...

Hank sighs, reaches for a lantern, and lights dim.

BLACKOUT

END OF SCENE

ACT 2
SCENE 2

Wind whistles in the darkness. Then, a beam from Vern's flashlight illuminates the backdoor and gives just enough light for us to see Vern, bundled up in his hooded coat, stealthily go outside.

As the door shuts, all goes dark again but we hear some stirring, and then Hank lights a single kerosene lamp.

Dunk, now visible in a chair, begins to stir. He stands, yawns, and watches Hank stoke the stove.

DUNK

What time is it?

HANK

Vern jes left outside. Don' know if'n he's goin' to the shitter or to his jeep. Prolly both.

Dunk moves to look out front window. Hank lights a second lantern and checks his wristwatch.

DUNK

Can't see much but looks like it stopped snowing.

HANK

Comin' up on six 'clock. Speck the womenfolk be down shortly. I'll start the coffee.

DUNK

He's got a radio in his jeep.

HANK

'N he still gots yer car key.

DUNK

Think he's going to make a problem for me?

HANK

I knowed that boy his whole life. He ain't really so mean and tough as he makes out. Boy jes tryin' his bes' t' do the right thing. He confused. Wanna know the truth, he *skeered*. Skeered a ya more 'n he lets on.

Hank exits to kitchen. Dunk folds blankets, hangs coats.

Bertha enters followed by Arleta who clutches her doll and throws an apprehensive look of longing in Dunk's direction. Dunk ignores her.

BERTHA

Mornin' there, Dunk. How'dja sleep?

DUNK

Good morning, ma'am. Thanks again for your hospitality.

Bertha pauses and looks from Dunk to Arleta expecting them to say something. They only share a look before Dunk quickly crosses, puts on a coat.

DUNK (CONT.)

Hank's making some coffee. I'll be right back.

Dunk exits. Arleta walks to the door, a heavy sigh.

ARLETA

He ain't ne'er gonna fergive me, is he?

BERTHA

Boy's gotta north star that ain't likely t' move. Cain't speck 'im to jes perten' y'all dint do nuthin. Boy ain't gonna fergit a hunnerd eighty-eight dollars. But he gotta good heart, so...

ARLETA

What can I do?

BERTHA

Don' know, Chile. The mister say Dunk cain't only all time be a savior 'n y'all cain't only all time be a sinner.

ARLETA

What's that mean?

BERTHA

If'n Dunk feels like he only takin' care a ya all the time, then he only gonna love ya like a man loves his dog. That ain't an equal kinda love.

ARLETA

I ain't no dog.

BERTHA

Course not. But yer stuck t' the boy like a hair stuck in a biscuit. Y'all carry 'roun' that doll like ya ain't fully growed. Cain't always be follerin' the boy 'totin' a doll like a puppy with a bone.

BERTHA (CONT.)

Beat.

Lissen, Chile, if'n y'all ain't a puppy, ya gots t' stan' up fer yerself. Stan' up fer him. Hear what I's sayin'?

ARLETA

But I ain't no puppy dog 'n ain't no sinner neither. Shore did make a turble mistake, but I ain't no sinner.

BERTHA

Chile, we's all sinners.

In her frustration, Arleta plops her doll on the counter near the door with emphasis. Hank enters with coffee pot and cups and sets them on a table.

HANK

Mornin', ladies. Got biscuits in the oven. Gonna let y'all whip up the gravy.

BERTHA

Well, bless yer heart, Mister.

Dunk enters, hangs coat. Hank pours coffee.

BERTHA (CONT.)

Where's Vern?

HANK

Checkin' on his jeep I speck.

BERTHA

Okay, Chile. Let's git to our bizness... Someday maybe we don' gots go outside t'...

Bertha and Arleta bundle up and exit.

DUNK

Can I help with anything?

HANK

Guess we can git the table set.

DUNK

Sure.

Dunk follows Hank into the kitchen. A moment later, Vern enters. The hood on his heavy coat is up, and his hands are in his coat pockets. He closes the door and steps well into the room and looks around.

Dunk enters with a stack of plates and stops short when he sees Vern. The two men stare at each other, hunter and prey.

VERN

Set them dishes down.

Dunk complies.

DUNK

Sir?

VERN

I's gonna have t' take y'all in. Yer headed fer jail 'n the gurl's goin' back to her daddy.

Hank enters from kitchen with silverware and a plate of biscuits. Stops short.

HANK

Ever'thang okay?

VERN

Less do this easy like, boy.

HANK

What's goin' on?

VERN

Yer boy here's wanted for kidnapping in White County, 'n I's fixin' to take him in. That gonna be problem fer ya, Hank?

HANK

Kidnappin'?! Whatchy'all talkin'?! Boy ain't no kidnapper.

VERN

They's a bulletin jes put out on 'im, 'n I's got t' do my duty. Turn 'roun'. I gots t' put the cuffs on ya.

Dunk slowly turns.

Y'all ain't gotta cuff 'im, Vern!

HANK

Vern pulls handcuffs from a coat pocket and approaches Dunk.

Y'all gonna put cuffs on 'im 'fore he even gits his coat on?! Thank 'bout it!

HANK (CONT.)

Vern stops short and gives it some thought.

All right. Spose he can put his coat on, but I do gotta use the cuffs.

VERN

I don't have a coat with me.

DUNK

Go on, son. Take one a mine.

HANK

Dunk dons coat, faces Vern, holds out his hands.

Turn around.

VERN

Hank, highly agitated, steps in Vern's direction.

Damn it, Vern! This is crazy!

HANK

Git yerself back lessen y'all wanna be takin' in, too.

VERN

Don' worry son. I'll git down t' the sheriff's office 'n straighten this out.

HANK

Dunk nods and turns, hands behind his back.

The door opens and Bertha and Arleta enter just as Vern is about to slap the cuffs on. He turns toward the women.

What's goin' on here!?

BERTHA

VERN

Y'all keep back. Boy unner arrest fer kidnappin'.

As Vern starts to cuff Dunk, Arleta grabs her doll, emits a feral scream, and smashes the heavy porcelain doll into the back of Vern's head. The doll smashes to pieces.

Vern slumps to knees then falls to his side. His pistol falls from his pocket. Arleta snatches it, points it with shaky hands at Vern. Hank grabs Bertha and pulls her to him out of the way.

HANK

The hell ya doin, gurl?!

BERTHA

Oh, dear Lord!

Vern is dazed. Dunk helps him to stand on wobbly legs. Wincing, Vern feels the back of his head.

Dunk rushes to a weeping Arleta, wraps her in a hug. They hold on for dear life, but for a moment. Then Dunk gently takes the pistol from Arleta. He holds it out butt first as if to hand it back to Vern but doesn't fully extend his arm.

DUNK

Are you okay?

Vern tries to focus, doesn't respond.

DUNK (CONT.)

She didn't mean that. It was just a reaction. I'll go with you peacefully if you can find your way to overlook her indiscretion.

VERN

Recovering a bit from the blow.

O'erlook her *what*?

DUNK

Just let the girl head upstairs out of the way so you and I can leave peacefully.

Arleta sobs, has to be restrained by Bertha. Vern gives Dunk the slightest nod. Bertha forcefully ushers the wailing girl toward the exit to upstairs. Then, as Dunk starts to hand the gun over, Hank quickly steps forward and grabs it.

VERN

What ‘n hell y’all doin’?! Ya seen the gurl tack me, ‘n y’all know I’s got t’ take the boy in.

HANK

Bertha!

The women stop and turn, but Bertha maintains her control of Arleta. Hank empties shells from the pistol, pockets them, hands the pistol to Bertha.

HANK (CONT.)

Take this upstairs with ya ‘n don’ give it back to nobody but me.

Bertha nods. The women exit to upstairs.

VERN

Well, now ya done it! Innerferin’ with an arrest, Hank. Y’all gonna be in a hep a trouble.

HANK

Me? I dint git blindsided and my pistol tooken by no tiny lil gurl. Y’all don’ want me tellin’ that story t’ the sheriff now do ya?

Vern glares at Hank, doesn’t respond.

DUNK

Sir, I don’t think that’s –

HANK

Here’s what we’s gonna do. We ain’t fur from Kaintucky, ‘bout five miles. We’s gonna git yer car out’n the ditch, ‘n yer gonna drive. Drive real careful like. Keep them tars on the road, but y’all gonna git out’n this state. Vern ‘n me are gonna watch y’all disappear. When Jimmy gits here later on, we take our time gittin’ the jeep out. Vern, I’ll go wit y’all t’ visit the sheriff if’n yoant.

Beat.

I can splain the whole story. How the gurl weren’t no kidnappin’. ‘N I know cuz we got t’ know y’all. I’ll splain how Vern got knocked on the head and done lost his gun to a gurl wit a dolly. The sheriff ‘n I go way back. Not too worried ‘bout me gittin’ ‘n any kinda trouble. Whatchu thank he gonna say, Vern?

They wait. Vern rubs the back of his head.

VERN

Well, shee-it... Good thang I’s wearin’ my hood.

Dunk bends down and picks up pieces of Arleta's smashed doll. Lights fade to a single tight spot on the doll fragments in Dunk's hand. A moment, then the spot fades to...

BLACKOUT

END OF SCENE

ACT 2
SCENE 3

The kerosene lanterns are noticeably dimmer now. On one table is a pile of porcelain doll fragments, another pile of six bullets, and Bertha's Bible in a skillet. Hank sits at the other table next to a lantern studying the recipe he received from Dunk with a sense of joy and wonder. One of the lanterns slowly dims and then extinguishes leaving the room dimly lit. Hank looks to the darkened lantern.

HANK

Well, shee-it.

Bertha enters, comes behind Hank, and wraps her arms around him.

HANK (CONT.)

How's she doin'?

BERTHA

The shakes done drained plumb out'n her. Now, she's a limp rag. 'Bout all cried out.

Beat.

Tore her up the boy dint een say g'bye.

HANK

Thought he might change his mind after the gurl lit inta Vern.

Chuckling.

Ol' Vern ne'er knew what hit 'im.

BERTHA

Doll heavier than it looked.

HANK

In that moment, she kinda growed up, dint she? Really showed us sumpin'. Showed Dunk sumpin'. But he –

BERTHA

Showed she ate up in love what she showed!

HANK

Yeah, but the boy gots a straight back and ain't no way he gonna bend. Her stealing from the church... He thank ever'thang 'n this world's black 'n white, but he gonna find out when he gits to be a lawyer, ain't nuthin' black or white. It's a gray world. Ever'thang gray.

Silence.

HANK (CONT.)

They don't git the pahr lines fixed, we's gonna be usin' candles t'night.

BERTHA

Do she hafta go?

HANK

Ah, Sugar. Whatchu thank her daddy –

BERTHA

Ya thank her daddy really wants her back?! He gonna be ashamed! Ashamed a the gurl! The whole sichiation! Her daddy's a hard man, and she skeered t' go back.

A pause as Hank thoughtfully considers. Then, a despondent Arleta enters carrying the weight of the world. She sits and, as she fiddles with porcelain doll fragments, begins to softly weep. Hank and Bertha watch. They wait.

ARLETA

Cain't believe he left without me. Dint een tell me. Not a word. Jes left...

HANK

Oh! Yeah. He left ya sumpin'.

Hank pulls note from a pocket, hands it to Arleta.

ARLETA

A letter?! Fer me?

Arleta studies the note, screws up her face, looks to Bertha with pleading eyes. Bertha sits next to her and holds the note under a lantern. She reads with a passable Scottish accent.

BERTHA

Had we never lov'd sae kindly, had we never lov'd sae blindly, never met, or never parted, we had ne'er been broken-hearted. Fare-thee-weel thou fair and fairest! Fare-thee-weel thou best and dearest! Thine be ilka joy and treasure. Peace, enjoyment, love, and pleasure!

ARLETA

What's that mean?! Is he comin' back fer me?!

BERTHA

I'd say his heart's broken same as yers and he's holdin' y'all in that broken heart a his'n.

ARLETA

But is he comin' back fer me?

BERTHA

Ne'er say ne'er, Chile, but won't be any time too soon I speck.

Silence.

ARLETA

Do I gotta go back t' Spartie? I mean... Thank I might stay on with y'all?

Hank and Bertha share a look.

ARLETA (CONT.)

I'm a hard worker. Can hep y'all with –

HANK

This here wet rub recipe gonna make us busier 'n ten peckered hoot owls... Can y'all bake pie?

ARLETA

Yes, sir. I make a fine apple skillet pie. My daddy alway say so.

Bertha smiles, rises, sits next to Arleta, and carefully removes her Bible from the skillet. She cradles and strokes the skillet.

BERTHA

This here skillet was my granny's. Ne'er had no one to pass it down to...

Bertha ceremoniously hands the skillet to Arleta.

BERTHA (CONT.)

Take care a this, Chile. It be yers now. Y'all can use this fer yer pies... But don' be crackin' some jasper on the noggin with it.

HANK

Least it woul'n't git all busted up if'n she did.

Arleta manages a smile, takes the skillet, caresses it, a suitable replacement for her doll.

HANK (CONT.)

When I return the money to the church, gonna have to get yer daddy's blessin'.

BERTHA

Take a pitcher a me to show ‘im. The one where I’s ‘n the red hat.

HANK

That’s a good pitcher.

BERTHA

Tell her daddy that now the gurl gots a mama.

Arleta sets the skillet down and hugs Bertha. Tears of joy from both women. Pause as Hank looks on, wheels turning, then becoming animated.

HANK

If’n ya stay on wit us, we can figger our way to do breakfast weekdays!

BERTHA

Ah, Mister. Yer all lit up like a Christmas tree.

HANK

Nuther thang, y’all gotta finish high school. Dunk wanted that fer ya.

ARLETA

Yes, sir. I’ll make him proud.

HANK

What else we can do, in honor a Dunk... Add donuts to our menu!

BERTHA

Pie *and* donuts?

HANK

I tol’ ya, Sugar. Wet rub’s gonna put us on the map. This here recipe’s gonna light up this place.

BERTHA

Ah, Mister. Guess it’s settled, then.

The final lantern flickers and goes out leaving the room in near darkness. Silence.

BERTHA (CONT.)

Oh, dear Lord. What I tell y’all ‘bout –

And just like that, the power's back on and the room is flooded with electric light. Bertha and Arleta look up at the lights in surprise. Hank holds up the wet rub recipe, slaps it with the back of his hand. He jumps up and walks to look out the front window.

HANK

Whatchu see now, Sugar?! Whatchu see now?

BLACKOUT

END OF PLAY

APPENDIX: PARTIAL GLOSSARY

Agin – against
 Ary – any
 Askeerd – ascaered, afraid
 Ast – asked
 Booger – monster
 Boomer – a red squirrel
 Dreckly – directly
 Een – even
 Far – fire
 Far'ner – foreigner
 Farrest – forest
 Gaumed up – dirty, confused
 Goober – penis
 Hettin' – heating
 Idee - idea
 Jasper – a stranger, undesirable
 Jes – just
 Nexcheer – next year
 Pahr – power
 Peckerwood – poor white trash
 Pilla – pillow
 Poke – a bag, bundle
 Polecat – a skunk
 Poyems - poems
 Prolly – probably
 Resternt – restaurant
 Sairdies - Saturdays
 Shee-it-far – shit-fire
 Sich – such
 Sichiatiion – situation
 Si-gogglin' – crooked, pronounced “sigh-gogglin”
 Spearmintin' – experimenting
 Spicious – suspicious
 Sumpin – Something
 Sweetnins – desserts
 Ta'marr – tomorrow
 Tar – tire
 Torable – tolerable
 Turble – terrible
 Wasper – hornet
 Widah – widow
 Yoant – you want
 Yorn /Yornses – your