

A GOOD MAN

Music by Ray Leslee
Book and Lyrics by Philip S. Goodman

Based on the novel by Jefferson Young

9/02/2012 O'NEILL POST-CONFERENCE draft

© 2011 Ray Leslee and Philip S. Goodman

Ray Leslee
rayleslee@yahoo.com

Philip S, Goodman
philipg411@aol.com
david@dfriedlander.com

Representation::
David Friedlander, Esq.
E-mail: david@dfriedlander.com

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

ALBERT CLAYTON	A sharecropper – a strong, decent man, a natural leader, and a gifted farmer.
LOUELLA	Albert's wife, hard-working, spirited, worn by farm life and wanting change.
LETTIE	Louella's sister, sprightly, sexy, and licking old wounds before she runs off to new adventures.
AUGUSTUS	Albert's buddy just out of the Army. He drinks beer, talks a lot, and has a temper.
GRANNY	Louella's grandmother, battered by age and illness, still sharp, assertive, cranky.
COOTER	Albert's son, a smart kid who loves his papa and can't see any other future but "cotton life".
PREACHER TOM	A man with a quick tongue and lively instincts wearing a frayed and self-conscious piety.
HARDWAY	A cunning, meddlesome friend, with a weakness for gambling and taking what he can.
JOHN TITTLE	Albert's white landlord, a clever, excitable guy, who doesn't know where he fits.
JAKE MATHIS	The town storekeeper, busy demonstrating the authority and importance he is afraid he doesn't really have.

Act 1

Albert Clayton's rickety tenant house on the Tittle farm, the barn, fields, and other places at Oma Creek in Mississippi, on a cold day in April, 1946, after World War II. People are doing chores, fixing and carrying things, and working in the fields. LOUELLA is hanging still-steamy laundry in the back yard. Her husband, ALBERT, is out behind the mule, plowing. LOUELLA pauses and looks out at her world.

ALBERT

(in the field behind the mule, plowing)

Let's go, mule!

FIRST WE GET A KNIFE BLADE,
GET ON, MULE.
SEEDING SACK MY WIFE MADE,
GIDDUP, MULE!
HEY, MAC, MOVE BACK,
BREAK THIS GROUND.
TAKE A MAN OF MUSCLE
PUT A STRAIGHT ROW DOWN.

CHOIR

YOU CAN DRESS YOURSELF UP PRETTY
OR PUT ON SOME UNIFORM.
YOU CAN RUN OFF TO THE CITY,
OR SOME PLACE WHERE IT'S WARM.
BUT YOU GOT IT DEEP INSIDE,
JUST A LITTLE BIT OF PRIDE!

ALBERT

TURN IT TO THE END ROW,
PULL ON, MAC!
LIFT THE BLADE AND TURN SLOW,
WE COMING BACK.

ALBERT & CHOIR

HEY, MAC, MOVE BACK,
BREAK THIS GROUND.
TAKE A MAN OF MUSCLE
PUT A STRAIGHT ROW DOWN.

LOUELLA

(coming down to where ALBERT is working)

Albert! Albert hold up!

(He stops. MUSIC stops)

Something I got to tell you. I'm going to have a child.

ALBERT

(Surprised)

You sure bout that? L'il peanut baby growing in your belly?!

LOUELLA

I don't know if it's a peanut or a sweet potato, but it's in here. You mad bout it?

ALBERT

Why I be mad?

LOUELLA

Cooter almost grown, years since gone by and nothing happen in here. Now, all-of a-sudden – it took.

ALBERT

A man keep dropping seeds, something might sprout.

LOUELLA

Papa, maybe time come to quit Oma Creek, and get a new start. If we go to

St. Louie or New Orleans, you could be fixin radios or cars. Sister and me do beauty culture! We be settin pretty.

ALBERT

I ain't no radio man, mama. Got the dirt, my cotton, and you up yonder cooking up beans – and babies. We settin pretty now! You go lay down before the party tonight. I got one more row. A baby – ain't that somethin! Let's go, mule! Hey!
(MUSIC. He goes back to work.)

ALBERT

MULE HE BE MIGHTY,
BUT HE CAN'T MAKE A CHILE.
STILL HE DO THE BUSINESS
WITH A WICKED SMILE.

ALBERT & CHOIR

HEY, MAC, MOVE BACK,
BREAK THIS GROUND,
TAKE A MAN OF MUSCLE
PUT A STRAIGHT ROW DOWN.

CHOIR

YOU CAN TAKE MOST ANYTHING,
BUT THERE'S A HEAVY PRICE TO PAY.
AND YOU WANTING SIMPLE THINGS,
BUT THERE'S SOME FENCES IN YOUR WAY.
BUT YOU GOT IT DEEP INSIDE,
JUST A LITTLE BIT OF PRIDE!

TOWNSPEOPLE

BEING HEARD AND HEADED,
BEING KNOWN – AND NEEDED.
KNOWING WHERE WE'RE
GOING.
KNOWING WE'RE STILL
GROWING.
OH -----

ALBERT

TAKE A MIGHTY MAN
TO GET A ROW STRAIGHT ON.
ANOTHER DAY OF SWEATIN,
AND THEN I'M GONE. YEAH --

LOUELLA *(softly)*

NOW THE DAYS GET LONGER,
AND THE LIGHT IS STRONGER.
I CAN HEAR THE HUMMING.
ARE THE ANGELS COMING?

(She goes into the house. LIGHTS fade)

That night at ALBERT'S HOUSE a party is in full swing. A wind-up portable phonograph is playing Louis Armstrong's "I've Got the World on a String." Folks dance on the porch. LETTIE, Albert's sister-in-law, snazzy in a red dress and high-heel shoes, spreads a hanky on the porch step, and sits. She takes off her shoe. AUGUSTUS, holding a bottle of beer, leans over.

AUGUSTUS

Miss Lettie, what you doin out here in the rain?

LETTIE

It ain't raining no more, Augustus.

PREACHER TOM

You said you was coming for a ride in my car.

LETTIE

You ain't fixing to leave now, are you, Preacher Tom?

AUGUSTUS

I'm ready for another dance.

LETTIE

You weaverin, Augustus, and my foot's sore.

PREACHER TOM

The lady needs a rest.

AUGUSTUS

She's old enough to decide her own rests.

HARDWAY

You guys want to shoot some craps?

PREACHER TOM

No craps, Hardway! Prince Albert down on it, and the Lord frown on it.

AUGUSTUS

Old turd-bird got the holy word! I hear your mama was a pigeon for religion.

HARDWAY

Uh-oh. Here we go!

*(ALBERT, GRANNY, LOUELLA, HARDWAY gather round,
as AUGUSTUS and PREACHER TOM get into a battle of wit
and rhyme)*

AUGUSTUS

You reckon you can please us day after day repeating words of Jesus?-- psalm-singing till a holy-rolly spirit seize us, and we holler, "You going freeze us!"

PREACHER TOM

You say I making you cold?

AUGUSTUS

Yeah, truth be told, we get the shivers cause you so damn old!

(Squeals and approval from the group)

PREACHER TOM

(warming to it)

Must be the blacksmith angel using holy fire to work your head into a pointy spire. You right, I do require a choir – that's my desire! And maybe you a military liar, a private who never rose up higher, 'cause they're all...small diddly things which you too – do – to aspire.

AUGUSTUS

(mockingly, but a little lamely)

To do, doody-doo doo-doo.

ALBERT

He done good, Augustus!

AUGUSTUS

He selling salvation hereafter. I got a yen for some right now.

(He follows LETTIE as she heads for the privy)

AUGUSTUS

Miss Lettie, doll, I can't hold back from you.

LETTIE

Don't you follow me to the outhouse, Augustus, or I'll take you off my dance card.
(She goes to the outhouse)

AUGUSTUS

Prince, your sister-in-law coming back here has brung 'lectric power where you ain't had it.

ALBERT

It ain't power – it's perfume spinning your head, Augustus.

PREACHER TOM

Decent men in uniform or civvies never follow gals to privies.

AUGUSTUS

The hell with them rhymes! I see the 'piffany of my life coming on!

AS A NERVY CHILD IN MY CURIOUS THREES,
ON THE CHURCH HOUSE FLOOR, I WAS ON MY KNEES,
AND THE MIRACLE BEFORE ME IN THEM PEWS
WAS A LONG BROWN WOMAN IN HER HIGH HEEL SHOES.

BY SIX, WITH TOYS ON MY OWN TOY SHELF,
I HAD MORE FUN PLAYIN WITH MYSELF.
AND THE 'MAGINARY PLAYMATE I WOULD ALWAYS CHOOSE
WAS A LONG BROWN WOMAN IN HER HIGH HEEL SHOES.

COMPANY

OOOOOOOOH --
LONG BROWN WOMAN IN HER HIGH HEEL SHOES!

(LETTIE comes back, joins the company)

AUGUSTUS

AT TWELVE I DECIDED TO QUIT FROM SCHOOL
TO STUDY THE ARITHMETIC OF DICE AND POOL.
I KNEW THE ONLY OCCUPATION I COULD USE
WAS A LONG BROWN WOMAN IN HER HIGH HEEL SHOES

AT SIXTEEN, I TRAVEL WITH A BIG TENT SHOW
AND FOLLOW WHEREVER THE KOOTCH SHOW GO,
CAUSE THE SIREEN CALL I COULD NOT REFUSE
WAS A LONG BROWN WOMAN IN HER HIGH HEEL SHOES.

COMPANY

THE SIREEN CALL HE COULD NOT REFUSE
WAS A LONG BROWN WOMAN IN HER HIGH HEEL SHOES.

AUGUSTUS

SO I JOINED THE ARMY WHEN I HEARD THE CALL.
I HAD A LITTLE PROBLEM WITH ALCOHOL,
BUT I TOLD MY SERGEANT I WOULD GIVE UP BOOZE
FOR A LONG BROWN WOMAN IN HER HIGH HEEL SHOES.

I WAS STRONG, I HAD FIGHTING BLOOD.
JUICED, I GET JEALOUS AND TAKE NO CRUD.
THE FELLA WHO COULD CERTAINLY BLOW MY FUSE
HAD A LONG BROWN WOMAN IN HER HIGH HEEL SHOES.

COMPANY

THE FELLA WHO COULD CERTAINLY BLOW HIS FUSE
HAD A LONG BROWN WOMAN IN HER HIGH HEEL SHOES.

AUGUSTUS

SEE – I HAD THIS BIG OBSESSION
BUT -- I NEVER HAD POSSESSION.
WHY WOULD MY DREAM SLIP AWAY?
WHAT KEPT ME FROM DEPRESSION
WAS THE ALWAYS-THERE IMPRESSION
I'D GET ONE FOR MYSELF SOME DAY --
A LONG BROWN WOMAN IN HER HIGH HEEL SHOES!

DISCHARGED, LIFE IS EASY NOW
IN THE LAND OF THE SAWMILL, THE MULE, AND THE PLOW.
BUT THE THING I NEED THAT'LL CHASE MY BLUES
IS A LONG BROWN WOMAN IN HER HIGH HEEL SHOES.

SOME DAY I'M A SETTLE-DOWN MARRIED GUY
MY NOSE TO THE GRINDSTONE, MY HEAD IN THE SKY.
AND I'LL WORK AND PRAY, SO I NEVER LOSE
MY LONG BROWN WOMAN IN HER HIGH HEEL SHOES.

COMPANY

HE WORK AND PRAY SO HE NEVER LOSE
HIS LONG BROWN WOMAN IN HER HIGH HEEL SHOES!

(MR. TITTLE and MR. MATHIS come from the lane to the front gate. TITTLE is lean, with bite and a twinkle in his eyes. MATHIS, always selling, is paunchy, in bib overalls under an old suit jacket. The moment these white men appear, the lively atmosphere of the party is eclipsed.)

TITTLE

Evening, folks. Sounding like quite a party down here!

ALBERT

Augustus comin-home party. We making too much noise –?

MATHIS

I reckoned there was a revival going on, but that was no hymn I heard, was it? Listen up – Mr. Stuckey’s starting up that saw mill tomorrow. They need logs.

ALBERT

I can cut logs. Gonna be too wet to plow, Mr. Tittle.

MATHIS

Go see Mr. Stuckey , 6:30 tomorrow morning. Hardway, can you make it?

HARDWAY

I’m on the insurance collection, Mr. Mathis.

MATHIS

Preacher?

PREACHER TOM

I’m driving out selling my ‘lixers and flavors.

AUGUSTUS

I go ‘long with you, Prince.

TITTLE

(Recognizing AUGUSTUS)

Augustus Ambrose, ain’t it? Welcome home, Augustus!

MATHIS

Is that Minnie Ambrose’ boy, the soldier? You must love that uniform – still in it, and you been home three days!

AUGUSTUS

These all the clothes I got just yet, Mr. Mathis.

MATHIS

Don’t want us to forget it either, do you?

TITTLE

He's proud of serving his country, like my son was. Prince, step over here, will ya?

(ALBERT steps aside with TITTLE and MATHIS)

TITTLE

(holds out an envelope to ALBERT)

That there's half our cotton prize money -- best lint yield in the county!

ALBERT

I can't take that, Mr. Tittle. This is your farm here.

TITTLE

We're on half shares. That's half the twenty-five dollar prize.

MATHIS

Take the money, Albert! Come spend it up at my store!

ALBERT

Well, thank you. I reckon Louella may need some things.

MATHIS

Come on in. I'll be furnishing all your food and supplies for the year. You got credit. Mr. Tittle here's guaranteed your crop.

ALBERT

I thank you, Mr. Mathis -- Mr. Tittle.

MATHIS

(Holds out a pair of new work gloves)

These are for you too -- a bonus for what you did with them drain tiles. That field you done for me been draining off faster than pancakes sop up syrup. Where'd you learn them things?

ALBERT

I work on a big farm when I was a boy out near Greenville. The owner and his friend from Agriculture school got a lot of ideas.

MATHIS

Picked up a white man's secrets, huh?

ALBERT

Making them tile lines outta cement – that’s my own idea. Like I’m puttin out two acres of pest control tests right here this season.

MATHIS

Is that so? I’d like to control some of my IOU pests with an electric cattle prod.

(To Tittle)

I suspect he means insect pests, don’t he?

(To Albert)

I reckon you’re the big pajandrum in the tenant league. Don’t let it go to your head. I got a wet, fifteen acre field near the railroad tracks. Maybe you can fix that at lay-by.

ALBERT

There’s a lotta clay near them railroad tracks. We do a lot better in that holler near the live oak, Mr. Mathis.

MATHIS

(He stares at Albert, smiles without humor)

You do what I tell you. Don’t contradict me, boy.

(Wags his index finger admonishingly, turns and talks to all the others)

All right then, we done here. Y’all can go back to singing psalms.

TITTLE

G’night all!

(They go up. ALBERT comes back to the porch. LETTIE and AUGUSTUS start dancing)

HARDWAY

Prince Albert, you having a new baby, time you get some life insurance.

ALBERT

It’s hard enough paying granny’s burial policy, Hardway.

HARDWAY

Picture this: you get kicked by that mule and down you go! Louella, Granny and Cooter still needing subtenance. What happen then?

AUGUSTUS

If that mule kick Prince Albert down, he better have vet’nary insurance.

(They all laugh)

You reckon them white men mockin my uniform, Prince?

ALBERT

Naw! Mr. Tittle's boy, Jeff, been a soldier, got killed on some island. Mr. Mathis just fixin to sell you a store suit, Augustus.

(COOTER, 14, comes running from the lane, excited and out of breath)

COOTER

Papa! You gotta come look! Snowing whole cotton balls up there at the road – big as peaches!

(Pointing)

Look! There it is – coming down here! Lookit the size of them snows!
(The air is filled with BIG DOLLOPS OF SNOW.)

GRANNY

What is that stuff – devil's confetties?

PREACHER TOM

God shake his ravel sleeve!

LETTIE

That's big, fat Chicago snow – It'll bury you if you don't keep moving.

LOUELLA

They say snow in Spring, birds don't sing.

AUGUSTUS

Hey, now, Prince Albert! What you grinning at?

(ALBERT does seem enraptured, arms out, palms up, walking down into the field. COOTER joins him. The house's roof is white and luminous in the steely light)

COOTER

Our house shine in the night, don't it?

ALBERT

Sure do. Seem like it talking right to me.

COOTER

What it say?

ALBERT

ONCE I SAW A WHITE HOUSE ON A RISE,
A HANDSOME, CLEAN, AND BRIGHT HOUSE UNDER BLUE SKIES.
AND IT WAS PRETTY, LIKE AN IVORY BOX,
LIKE A WOMAN IN A BRIDAL FROCK,
LIKE THE MOON FACE OF A GRANDPA CLOCK,
LIKE IT BEEN WASHED AND BLEACHED,
AND HUNG OUT FOR THE WORLD TO SEE.
SOMETHING ABOUT IT REACHED RIGHT OUT TO ME.

OH, WHITE HOUSE,
SEE-IT-IN-THE-NIGHT HOUSE –

LOUELLA

(coming down from the house, interrupting)

What you fellas doing out here– stargazing? Cooter, go on up and go to sleep.

COOTER

You want me make a fire?

LOUELLA

No fire. It ain't that cold inside. Go on.

(He goes. When Cooter is out of earshot)

Albert, my stove's still warm and I got some sweet potato pie and marshmallow sauce.

ALBERT

Maybe later.

LOUELLA

Ain't you cold out here?

(He shakes his head)

You can come up and keep me warm.

ALBERT

I be up in a minute.

LOUELLA

I be waitin.

(She goes up to the house.)

ALBERT

GOT AN OLD GRAY TENANT PLACE WITH JAILHOUSE RIBS,
AND THE WINTER WIND LICKS THROUGH 'EM IN A STORM.
AND THE FIREPLACE NEAR THE BED,
WHERE I LAID DOWN THE NIGHT I WED,
KEEPS MOMMA AND THE KID JUST LESS'N WARM.
WHEN SUMMER'S HIGH AND THE COTTON'S LAID BY,
IT BAKES UP SO HOT, I 'M AFRAID OLD
GRANNY'S GONNA DIE.
BUT BEFORE SHE DO
I'M FIXING TO
MAKE THIS PLACE MY OWN. I KNOW
IT'S NOT LIKE I CAN BUY IT.
NO USE TO EVEN TRY IT.
BUT STILL I CAN'T DENY IT.

THAT PARTICULAR CRACKED OLD TENANT SHACK
IS WHERE I AM, IT'S WHAT I GOT,
MY SHOT, MY POT A' GOLD.
I'M GONNA MAKE IT MINE,
LIKE I HAD IT IN MY MIND
ALL THIS TIME.

ONCE I SAW A WHITE HOUSE,
SEE-IT-IN-THE-NIGHT HOUSE,
TIGHT HOUSE,
ALWAYS BEEN THE RIGHT HOUSE FOR A MAN LIKE ME.
THAT'S WHAT THIS TOWN IS GONNA SEE.

(LIGHTS change as he goes up)

*EARLY EVENING a few days later. MR.
TITTLE is at the stump outside his BARN,
with an awl and pliers, fixing a leather
harness and collar.*

TITTLE

Prince, bring the mallet and hit this thing, willya?

*(ALBERT comes out of the barn with the mallet, and
pounds the flange. He is distracted, looking out at
TITTLE's house)*

TITTLE

You got those two test acres ploughed quick. You gonna plant early there?

ALBERT

Yes, sir. I brung in some fire ant nests. Reckon they goin eat hell out of the worms, if they come.

TITTLE

Fire ants? I'll bet they will.

(Holds up the collar with well-prepared holes)

I do pretty good with leather, don't I?

ALBERT

You sure do.

(Casually, looking at the house)

Mr. Tittle, I aim to paint my house down there come fall, if that be all right.

TITTLE

Paint your house? Well, damn, Prince, what the hell for?

ALBERT

I like to see us family live in a white house-- like yours and some others over yonder. White house make a man feel like he somebody.

TITTLE

It's just a rickety old tenant house, Albert. And it's not exactly yours, you know that.

ALBERT

We live in that house six years now. Louella havin a baby, things look good. Could I fix and paint the house, I believe I be onto something.

TITTLE

Louella's pregnant?

(ALBERT nods)

I'll be damned. What brought that on?

ALBERT

Same old thing, Mr. Tittle. All a sudden, it took.

TITTLE

(Laughs)

Well, congratulations. Life's full of surprises, ain't it?

(Looking at the harness, thinking)

I'll have to think about this notion of painting the house, Albert. I gotta say, throwing money into that old place don't seem to make much sense.

ALBERT

It ain't gonna cost you nothing, Mr. Tittle. I pay for it and I do it myself.

TITTLE

It's not the cost, Prince. Look around. There's never been a white tenant house anywhere around here that I've seen – not even occupied by white people.

ALBERT

Is there something wrong with a tenant house painted white?

TITTLE

It ain't illegal. It just ain't the way it is. Some folks might not like seeing a colored tenant with a fresh-painted white house. It's kind of show-offy.

ALBERT

Why anybody care if I paint my house?

TITTLE

Well, they might - I'm guessing they will. Anyway, it ain't yours. It's mine. And I have too much regard for you to let you do some...piddling thing that sticks out -- and could stir up more trouble than you realize. You better forget it.

ALBERT

(Pauses, surprised at his own quick anger)

I ain't goin' stay on here less'n I do it.

TITTLE

What's got into you, Albert? It's for your benefit, not mine I'm sayin' no. Let it go! Let's finish planting, and move on. We're a week late.

(lifts the harness)

Here, this harness is fine now. Take it down to the mule, will you?

(He tosses the collar to ALBERT, who doesn't raise his hands. It hits him, falls. TITTLE is stunned. ALBERT stares at him, then turns and goes down the lane.)

TITTLE

Albert!

(Picks up the harness. To no one in particular:)

God damn high-walking son of a bitch!

EVENING: The PORCH AND YARD OF ALBERT'S HOUSE. LETTIE is showing PREACHER TOM how to jitterbug. AUGUSTUS, on the step, watches. There are empty bottles and pie tins on the floor.

LETTIE

Put your left foot out first, then right- left--
(Chanting a "swing" rhythm)

Da, doo-dah, da, doo-dah – just like me, only opposite – my left, your right.
Yeah! And you turn me 'round -- like that. Augustus, you know this, don't you?

AUGUSTUS

I ain't no ballerina, but I do something like it.

LETTIE

C'mon, c'mon.

(She pulls AUGUSTUS up, and dances with him)

Da, dah-da, de-da, doo-dah, de-da da doo-da, de da da-

(as AUGUSTUS throws her across his thigh and up)

Whoop! I seen *that* in N'Orleans!

PREACHER TOM

(Raises a pie pan and chants, imitating a street vendor's come-on)

Red hot! Red hot! Pickle in the middle, Onion on the top!

Make your mouth go flippity flop!

LETTIE

I like what you selling, Preacher Tom!

PREACHER TOM

They sell everything right on the streets in N'Orleans.

LETTIE

That's my city.

AUGUSTUS

What you do there, Lettie? You work or you somebody's gal?

LETTIE

I did some domestic for awhile. Rather work in a sawmill than do that again. I work in Miss Elle beauty shop mostly – and a restaurant.

PREACHER TOM

You cook?!

LETTIE

Not me. I can't fry ham without burning my fingers. I'm fixin to have a beauty shop of my own down there some time. Maybe sister come in with me.

AUGUSTUS

Why you come back here, Lettie?

LETTIE

I follow after the wrong man, Augustus. Need a long rest from that.

AUGUSTUS

Get yourself a vet'ran who take charge and show you happy times!

PREACHER

Fine on Saddy night. Sunday to Friday you look to makin a home.

LETTIE

Fellas, don't crowd on me. I still got a girl's heart.

NO USE SETTIN IN A SCHOOLYARD
WATCHIN BIRDS FLY AND GRASS GET LONG
BETTER I WALK UP BOURBON STREET
AND LISTEN TO A TRUMPET SONG.

GONNA TAKE A TRAIN DOWN TO N'ORLINS
GET ME SOME GUMBO THERE
I'M GONNA DANCE THE BOOGIE WOOGIE
RIDE THE STREETCAR SOMEWHERE

GONNA TAKE A BOAT DOWN TO N'ORLINS
THERE'S MIGHTY FINE HOUSES ON THE SHORE
THEY GOT SHUTTERS ON THE WINDOWS
AND BIG BRASS KNOCKERS ON THE DOORS.

(LOUELLA comes out to watch. COOTER follows.)

I'M GOIN' TO N'ORLINS
I'M GOIN' TO N'ORLINS
I'M GOIN' TO N'OR - LINS
RIGHT NOW. RIGHT NOW.

I AIN'T GONNA STAY DOWN IN N'ORLINS
CAUSE ALL THEM FANCY PEOPLE'S NO GOOD
BUT IF THEY GIVE ME ALL THEIR MONEY
I'LL SPEND IT LIKE A GOOD GIRL SHOULD.

*(the MUSIC plays and LETTIE dances, ALBERT comes from
the lane. He stands watching. LOUELLA goes to him and
takes his hand. She immediately feels the tension in him)*

LOUELLA

Somethin goin' on?

ALBERT

I'll talk to you later.

(He goes around back and into the house)

LETTIE

WE GOIN' TO N'ORLINS, WE GOIN' TO N'ORLINS
WE GOIN' TO N'OR- LINS
RIGHT NOW. RIGHT NOW.

LETTIE

AND WE'RE GONNA STAY DOWN IN N'ORLINS
AT HOME IN EASY CITY FOR GOOD
AND WHEN THEY GIVE US ALL THEIR MONEY
WE'LL SPEND IT LIKE A GOOD GIRL SHOULD!

WE'LL MAKE A MOUNTAIN OF MONEY
AND I'LL SPEND IT LIKE A GOOD GIRL SHOULD!

(The listeners applaud)

PREACHER TOM

If we goin get some ribs, Lettie, time we go.

LOUELLA

Y'all go on. I'll get these things.

(picks up pans and bottles)

LETTIE

You goin up to the road, Augustus? We can drive you.

AUGUSTUS

I go cross that pasture. I like fresh air, not no gas clouds.
(he goes off)

(Inside, ALBERT is at the kitchen table, the need to do something boiling in him. He gets up and goes into the front room where GRANNY is dozing. He grabs a shirt, a pair of pants, dresses, and a jacket from nails on the wall, and throws them onto the kitchen floor. GRANNY wakes up, startled, as ALBERT pulls a battered old chest from the wall)

GRANNY

You burnin like hell fire! You got a life insurance on me?

ALBERT

Nobody give no life insurance on you, you too old.

(LOUELLA and COOTER come in the front door. They see the chest and the clothes on the floor)

ALBERT

Mama, get us stuff together. We leavin here tomorrow. Cooter, get your cloes and your books. Put em in a corn sack and throw em on the porch.

LOUELLA

You want to tell me what's goin on?

ALBERT

Mr. Tittle won't let me paint this house.

LOUELLA

So what we going do -- go paint another one? Where?

ALBERT

(Forced to get real, he gropes)

Maybe out near Hazelton. Maybe Mr. Mathis want me make a crop.

LOUELLA

Mathis? Mr. Tittle is God's angel compare to him. How you reckon you find any landlord anywhere willing to plant weeks late and let you paint a house?

ALBERT

Do like I tell you. I ain't looking for sassin right now.

LOUELLA

I ain't sassing! You all fired up on going -- let's go right to N'Orleans like I been saying! Sister got friends there. We can quit this cotton life where we getting fifty dollars a year even when picking's good!

ALBERT

Plain bull! We get fifty or sixty cash when they already took out credit bills for a whole year! And I make extra – two, three times that!

LOUELLA

Sister and me doing beauty culture in the city, we can bring in fifty a week!

ALBERT

Oh, yeah, you goin' wear your feet out totin' it to the bank! And what I do? Country man what I be. What I goin' do in some showboat New Orleans?

LOUELLA

Carpenter, telephones – there's lots of things, you take a notion! You're a good man, papa – smart and strong! You need room to grow out and show out!

ALBERT

I grows cotton and I mighty good doing it. I don't have to go to New Orleans to paint us a house.

TITTLE

(KNOCKS on the open front door, peering in)

Excuse me. Good evening, Louella, Cooter. Albert, I'd like a word with you. Will you come out here a minute?

(ALBERT hesitates, then walks out onto the porch. TITTLE strikes a post restlessly with his palm)

TITTLE

All right, paint the damn house! What do I know? I'm an outsider here even after six years. You and me got an arrangement that works. I don't want you running off somewhere. Where you gonna get money for paint and stuff?

ALBERT

Lime and salt don't cost a heap.

TITTLE

Whitewash? No, you need paint! And you're gonna have to fix all the sills and the broken boards, and shutters. Can you get enough money for all that?

ALBERT

I get it.

TITTLE

When do you want to do this?

ALBERT

How bout after we gin the cotton?

TITTLE

All right. Now, listen, this painting thing is your responsibility. If something starts up, don't look to me. And don't let on about this up at the store. Sooner or later there'll be talk anyway.

ALBERT

I got to plan it out, Mr. Tittle.

TITTLE

Yeah, fine. Plan, don't talk! Those old jackals in town don't need an excuse to see apocalypse comin right down the road. All right, enough of that! Let's get planted so you can find time to bring in extra cash. A man with a white house might have to get hisself a Sunday suit. G'night.

ALBERT

(Waits, then raises both fists – a triumphant salute)

All right!

LOUELLA

(Comes out of the house)

You wanna say what's going on now?

ALBERT

He change his mind, say I can do it. We goin have us a spanking white house.

LOUELLA

Where you gonna get money for spanking up a house?

ALBERT

I got some notions.

LOUELLA

You gettin them every day. Putting perfume on a skunk cabbage ain't goin' make it into no rose bush neither. Seem you dotin on that high-tone house a lot more'n you dotin on me! I ain't such high-tone folks, Mr. Prince. You can't paint me white!

(ALBERT laughs, comes to her, sings...)

ALBERT

I LOOK FOR CHANGE IN SEASONS,
WANT RAIN WHEN THINGS IS DRY.
THERE'S PLENTY OF GOOD REASONS
TO SWITCH CROPS AND SEEDS I TRY.
I OFTEN REARRANGE A LOTTA THINGS I WANT TO DO,
BUT I DON'T WANT NO CHANGE IN YOU.

YOU ALWAYS THERE,
LIKE AIR AND SUN UP IN THE SKY.
YOU RISE AND SHINING ON
THO CLOUDS MAY HIDE YOU FROM MY EYE

I'M GLAD TO HEAR YOUR VOICE
TALKING IN THE OTHER ROOM.
IT'S ALMOST LIKE A DANCE WHEN YOU
GO SWISHING WITH YOUR BROOM.
THERE'S SATISFACTION KNOWING 'XACTLY
HOW YOU GONNA DO --
AND I DON'T WANT NO CHANGE IN YOU.
DON'T WANT NO CHANGE IN YOU.

LOUELLA

I KNEW YOU NEVER HURT ME
EVEN WHEN I GOT YOU MAD
I NEVER THOUGHT YOU LOOK FOR WOMEN
BETTER THAN YOU HAD.
I THOUGHT YOU ALWAYS FIT ME
JUST LIKE SOMEONE'S OLDEST SHOE,
AND I DON'T WANT NO CHANGE IN YOU.

I WANT LOVE,
MO' KISSES THAN YOU EVER WANT TO GIVE.
THAT'S NO BIG CHANGE IN THINGS,
JUST TURNIN' UP THE HEAT ON HOW WE LIVE.

YOU STEADY AND YOU STRONG,
SO I GAVE YOU ALL MY HEART.
I FIGURED WE BOTH WANT THE SAME,
AND NEVER BE APART.
I THOUGHT YOU WAS THE WAY
TO MAKE MY WISHES ALL COME TRUE,
AND I DON'T WANT NO CHANGE IN YOU.
I DON'T WANT NO CHANGE IN YOU

ALBERT
I WANT TO SEE YOUR FACE
WHEN I GOT NEWS TO TALK ABOUT.

LOUELLA
WHEN IT'S TIME TO MAKE A VISIT
I WANT YOU TO TAKE ME OUT.
SO DON'T SURPRISE ME WITH A SHIFT
THAT MAKE YOU SOMEONE NEW,

TOGETHER
CAUSE, DARLING, FROM MY POINT OF VIEW,
I DON'T WANT NO CHANGE IN YOU.
DON'T WANT NO CHANGE IN YOU.

(ALBERT embraces and kisses LOUELLA. They go inside.)

A few days later. In the BACK YARD, under the sweet gum tree is a shed and a STALL with a four-foot high plank wall. Inside it, COOTER is holding a rope, pulling and struggling sith something three feet high, alive, and stubborn, kicking the boards.

COOTER
Damn you, calf, come in here! Come on, dammit! Come in and eat!

(LETTIE comes out the back door, GRANNY behind her with two walking sticks)

GRANNY
What's all that hoop-dee-doo? Damn-damming left and right!

LETTIE
What you got there, Cooter? Oh, Lord have mercy, ain't that a sweet thing!

GRANNY

Don't pull on that critter, boy! Get behind and push on his butt. Do him nice!

COOTER

(Trying to be "nice", and pushing)

Look over there, calf! Lookit that mush with cream papa made! Hey! He lickin it! Lookit that!

PREACHER TOM

(Coming from the lane)

Good afternoon, everybody!

(They answer "Afternoon! Good day to you, Preacher Tom")

Cooter, it's done, they gonna take you in that negro high school. You can come and go when your pa don't need you on the farm. I already arrange with the county bus to get you there. You start 'round lay-by time.

GRANNY

What they going learn him? He already reading too much.

PREACHER TOM

Arithmetic. English, I suppose.

COOTER

Biology -- I can use that.

GRANNY

They got girls in that school?

PREACHER TOM

Uh-huh.

GRANNY

No biology! He been peepin at his aunt Lettie through a knot-hole in the outhouse.

COOTER

I did not!

LETTIE

You did too. I saw your whole eyeball.

PREACHER TOM

(Looking at the calf)

Your papa gonna butcher that calf, I'll be happy to help with the cooking and eating.

GRANNY

Shoulda got a pig. Cow ribs ain't worth a lick.

COOTER

He ain't no cow. He's a bully boy. Papa going get him good and fat and sell him so we can paint this house white.

GRANNY

(With ridicule)

This house? White?

PREACHER

Tom-foolery and vanity. You tell your papa I want to talk to him personal.

(looks at a pocket watch)

I got to go right now.

(he goes up the lane)

ALBERT *(off)*

Yo, Cooter!

LETTIE

Come in and finish your medicine, Granny.

GRANNY

What fo'? It don't do me no good.

(GRANNY and LETTIE go into the house as ALBERT comes from the field)

ALBERT

I hear you and the womens yammering clear cross the field. You brung that calf?

COOTER

He's in that stall, papa.

ALBERT

You got two more rows to do. That mule waiting.

COOTER

(Going, slouching)

I bet old Mac's droop-down tired by now, the way we working him.

ALBERT

Fine, you pull the plow – and let him drive for a while.

(LOUELLA, wearing a straw hat and carrying a cloth bag, comes from the lane)

ALBERT

What you doing here, mama? I thought you doing Miss Maureen's washing.

LOUELLA

Not today I ain't. Did Cooter fill that woodbox?

(She looks at the calf in the stall)

ALBERT

He was getting that calf. I'll get the wood for you.

(He sips water)

Something happen with Miss Maureen?

LOUELLA

She ain't paid me no money goin' on six weeks! Been paying me with old dresses. Today she left another one for me, so I left. I ain't goin' do her washing no more!

ALBERT

Seem she give you money if you just keep asking. Us all need to stay busy if we going to fix up this house. I hope you ask again.

LOUELLA

Don't hope too hard. You know how them folks is and how they do. I ain't going work for nothin.

(Looking at the house)

How much that fixing and painting going cost anyway? You got a number?

ALBERT

Got to figger it out.

A week later the sawmill's NOON WHISTLE blasts. MUSIC starts, a bouncing vamp. At the HOUSE, COOTER runs out onto the porch.

COOTER

Sawmill closing! Saturday noontime now!

*(Out on the road, HARDWAY, moving fast, encounters
PREACHER TOM)*

PREACHER TOM

Where y'all rushing, Hardway?

HARDWAY

Prince Albert wanna figure the paint for his house today! Ain't you coming?

PREACHER TOM

The Crown Prince of Oma Creek looking for trouble. I got better things.

(AUGUSTUS walks quickly by, with a pad and pencil)

HARDWAY

Augustus! Wait up!

*(LOUELLA and ALBERT step out on the porch. ALBERT nails
a crude sign saying A. Clayton to a post)*

LOUELLA

All them folks a-coming! Will you look at that! Don't they know we got to go to the store?

COOTER

I want a pop!

LOUELLA

Put your shirt-tail in and button your overalls.

*(LETTIE arrives from the lane. GRANNY, in a clean blue
dress, steps out with canes, grunting at each step.
AUGUSTUS and HARDWAY come from the lane.)*

LETTIE

I got the measuring tape! Ain't that your burial dress, Granny!

GRANNY

Ain't no burial dress if I still walkin.

HARDWAY

Hey, Prince! There's two ways to figure this – big, broad strokes – or precise, and measure every part. Hard to be precise, but let's take a shot, ok? You want to start right off?

(GRANNY watches as they all pace back and forth and around, measuring, chalking marks, writing, singing.)

Hardway: WALK A LITTLE, TALK A LITTLE.
MARK IT WITH A CHALK A LITTLE.

Augustus: LOOK TO ME LIKE A DOOR IS THREE.

Hardway: THAT'S SIX- BY- FOUR.

Louella: ARE YOU SURE IT ISN'T MORE?

Hardway: NOW YOU PACE THAT SIDE,

Cooter: AND THE TOP IS TWICE AS WIDE!

Lettie AND THE BOARDS IS BAD.

Granny: PUT THIS'N ON THE PAD --

Hardway: AND IT SHOWS THE MANY FIGURES THAT WE
GOTTA TAKE ACCOUNT,

Granny: WHILE THEY JUGGLE WITH THE GALLONS IN
RIGHT AMOUNT!

Hardway: WALK A LITTLE, CHALK A LITTLE.
THINK WE BETTER TALK A LITTLE.
DID YOU RECKON FOR THE WINDOWS,
CAUSE THEY GOT THEM PAIRS OF SHUTTERS?

Granny: IF YOU GONNA MAKE IT WHITE YOU GONNA NEED
RAIN GUTTERS!

Cooter: IS THAT EIGHT OR NINE?

Augustus: WHAT'S SEVEN TIMES FOUR?

Lettie: DID YOU GET THE LITTLE RIDGES? DID YOU ADD
THE OTHER DOOR?

Hardway: NOW YOU JIGGLE ALL THEM NUMBERS, AND YOU UP IT
TEN PERCENT.

Granny: WHY YOU TRICKIN' OUT A BUILDING THAT YOU
DON'T EVEN RENT?

(HARMONICA BREAK. Cacophony-- everyone suggesting, demanding, complaining, offering, joking, until--)

Hardway: WALK A LITTLE, TALK A LITTLE
All: WALK A LITTLE, TALK A LITTLE
Hardway: MARK IT WITH A CHALK A LITTLE
All: MARK IT WITH A CHALK A LITTLE

Louella: I THINK WE BETTER ADD ANOTHER GALLON FOR
THE SPILL

Hardway: AND WE DIDN'T MAKE ALLOWANCE
FOR THE BROKEN WINDOW SILL.

Cooter: DID YOU GET THE ADDING RIGHT?
I THINK YOU LEFT A COLUMN OUT.

Lettie: THOSE SIXES SHOULD BE SEVENS,
AND YOU TURNED IT ALL ABOUT.

Augustus: WHAT'S EIGHT TIMES NINE WHEN DIVIDED INTO
FOUR?

Granny: THAT ELEVEN ISN'T EVEN, MAN, IT SURELY MUST
BE MORE!

Hardway: I THINK WE GOT A PROBLEM WITH THE
NUMBERS IN THE BOOK.
AND MY PENCIL GOT NO POINT.

Lettie, Louella: WE BETTER TAKE A SECOND LOOK!

Hardway: WALK A LITTLE, TALK A LITTLE
All: WALK A LITTLE, TALK A LITTLE
Hardway: MARK IT WITH THE CHALK A LITTLE
All: MARK IT WITH THE CHALK A LITTLE –

GRANNY

(Interrupting, over them, a fog-horn blast)

Whoa! Hold up now! Y'all been runnin round like a circle saw! Forget precise,
and just look on that house! Got fo' sides, ain't it? Each one o' them sides going
take one gallon!

HARDWAY

Broad strokes, Prince! She cuttin right through.

GRANNY

But Prince Albert going need him some extra fo' them high spots, and low spots --
and po' spots – and mo' spots.

AUGUSTUS

Great rhyme and another gallon!

GRANNY

That be five gallon! But that house mighty gray and dreary!

LETTIE

Miserable!

GRANNY

Prince going need two coats all over, and cover that miserable gray! So five and five make ten. Ten gallon what you need here! That's it.

(She sits – almost falls – into the porch chair)

ALBERT

Ten it is! Let's go on up to the store. I buy one pop or a candy bar for everyone!

(All go up the lane except GRANNY. COOTER looks back at her and waves as they all disappear. GRANNY rises carefully, reaches for a porch post, and drops one of her sticks. She tries to pick it up, but can't bend over. She totters, and holds onto the post)

GRANNY

OH LORD, I'M TIRED OF THE BAD DAYS,
TIRED OF THE LONG NIGHTS TOO.
LOST MY TASTE FOR HONEY POT AND WINE GLASS.
WANT TO SING, LORD, LIKE YOU LIKE ME TO.
I LONG TO BE NEAR ROCKING BABY JESUS,
ENJOYING MY BLESSINGS AS I'M SUPPOSED TO DO.

MM, I HEAR THE ANGELS' GOLDEN VOICES,
APPLE BLOSSOMS, FIG TREE ON THE HILL.
DON'T WANT NO MORE TO FILL MY HEART WITH CHOICES.
I'M READY, LORD, TO DO YO' EVERY WILL.
LET ME DRINK PURE WATER OF YOUR RIVER,
PLANT MY SOUL UPON YOUR WINDOW SILL

Sunday In CHURCH. PREACHER TOM is at the lectern, preaching excitedly to his flock, mostly at Albert. The ladies wear hats.

PREACHER TOM

There be some who toil long days in the vineyard and reckon they deserve more than them who work less. They want more pay for more work. But Jesus teach us that we all deserving, even them who work less. The Master give, they accept, whatever it is --

(looking pointedly at ALBERT)

not demanding more. More, more, and more! You know that word, more?

CONGREGATION

More. Sure do. That word more.

PREACHER TOM

More take us back to the deadly sins. One is pride. And another is greed.

CONGREGATION

The sin of greed! We know it. Yes.

PREACHER TOM

More put one against another, and we get envy and anger – and trouble on us all. In John, Jesus said, “take my yoke upon you, learn of *me*.” Accept what God give in this world and his love be mighty in the next one. That’s your reward forever. Bless you, brothers and sisters. The word of the Lord!

PREACHER TOM

I WAS HUNGRY, AND YOU GAVE ME BREAD.
I WAS RESTLESS, AND YOU LET ME ROAM.
WHEN I THOUGHT, IN MY PRIDE,
MY OWN SCHEMES WERE MY GUIDE,
YOU WERE THERE, LORD, TO BECKON ME HOME.

I WAS FOOLISH, AND YOU GAVE ME TIME.
I WAS FITFUL, AND YOU STAYED YOUR HAND.

WHEN I THOUGHT I WOULD DARE
TO TAKE MORE THAN MY SHARE,
YOU STILL WAITED FOR ME TO COME HOME.

CONGREGANTS

LOST IN THE STORMY SEAS OF PLEASURE,
FOOLED BY THE TREASURES I CRAVED,
EARTHLY REWARDS MY ONLY MEASURE,
I TURNED JUST IN TIME TO BE SAVED.

PREACHER TOM
LIKE A PRODIGAL, RETURNING TO FAVOR,
CALLED TO ACCOUNT BY GOD'S PATIENT LOVE,
TEN THOUSAND VOICES CRY "SALVATION."
THEY'RE CALLING ME TO COME ON HOME.

ALL
TEN THOUSAND ANGELS CRY "SALVATION!"
SO, C'MON LORD, TAKE ME,
C'MON LORD, TAKE ME,
C'MON LORD, TAKE ME HOME.

COOTER
Preacher Tom! "Take my yoke" ain't John, it's Matthew.
(He goes off)

PREACHER TOM
There's a brain fever they call "overstudy," and that boy gettin the bug. Prince Albert, that painting of yours stirring up big trouble!. You ain't no white folks -- what for you want to look like them?

ALBERT
I reckon there's no chance of that, Preacher Tom.

PREACHER
You got no idea what you doing, do you? You want to make yourself shine, and they don't like it! They got the gear shifts, Prince. They got the power!

HARDWAY
Don't you let him talk you out of painting your house! You got the mean, do the dream!

PREACHER TOM
You stay outta this, Hardway! This is between a man and his preacher.

ALBERT
Go on, Hardway. Leave us be.
(HARDWAY walks away)

PREACHER TOM

Mr. Mathis pledged twenty-five dollars for the church building fund, which he going take back now cause he heard what you doing! He's blaming all us cause you walking way outta your place!

ALBERT

I can't take count of some fuss bout painting my house. People expect a man to work hard, grow good crops, keep up his place. I been thinking on a white house before my papa and me came here.

PREACHER TOM

You wasn't thinking how they think here. In these parts a white house is for white folks!

ALBERT

I never heard that.

PREACHER TOM

That's the way it is. The house reflect the person.

ALBERT

Then maybe I should paint it black. Hardway, he kind of yellow. Can he have a yellow house?

PREACHER TOM

You don't listen to nothin, do you?

ALBERT

I'm listening, but you ain't making much sense.

PREACHER TOM

Mr. Mathis likes you, Prince. He thinks you a good man. But you throw this in his face, there's no telling what might happen. You know how they can be, working theyselves up. They dangerous when they like that. Will you tell me something?

ALBERT

No, no more! You gave your counsel. I heard it. Let's drop it.

PREACHER TOM

(drawing himself up, trying to keep his dignity)

I s'pose to come over your house and see Miss Lettie this evening. You goin let me come in?

ALBERT

Yeah, you allowed. It ain't no white man's house yet, is it?

OUTSIDE TITTLE'S BARN, late morning the next day. TITTLE, in a paint-spattered shirt and a hat, kneels in front of the open barn door, trying to glue a leg onto a small table. He sees ALBERT coming, and rises, wiping his hands on a rag.

TITTLE

I been waiting for you to come up. God's own blazing sun, Albert, do you realize what you went and done?

ALBERT

What I done, Mr. Tittle?

TITTLE

Advertised to the whole damn county you're fixing to paint that house! Ten gallons! You might as well've got an airplane to write it in the sky! Well, you started something now, I warned you! Look.

(TITTLE pulls the barn door. He watches Albert's face as he reveals a dead possum hanging from a nail, dripping blood)

ALBERT

Who put that up there?

TITTLE

Some rowdy jackass must've done it last night. Good thing my wife didn't see it! I knew this would all land on me, I damn well knew it!

ALBERT

Why they do that?

TITTLE

Don't act dumb. You know what it's about – a white house! Jake Mathis wants to see you up at the store – right now.

(ALBERT just stands there)

Did you hear me?

ALBERT

I'll go up after I do some chopping.

TITTLE

Albert, listen to me! Get on up there and tell him the painting business is over – dropped! Just set it aside like it was nothing -- no importance. You understand?

(ALBERT wants to be defiant, but can't find the words or the confidence right now. He walks away)

TITTLE

I can't fight 'em all, Albert! I can't! I won't!

MATHIS' STORE. Shelves of canned goods, an ice chest, a barrel. On a counter are a half a wheel of cheese under a flyscreen, a jar of pickled pigs feet, an old electric fan, and a shotgun. MR. MATHIS brings a bottle crate and puts it down, starts putting bottles in the ice chest.

ALBERT comes in. MATHIS doesn't look up. He lifts the shotgun, so he can pull the beaded chain of the fan. He mops his brow with a big handkerchief.

ALBERT

You want see me, Mr. Mathis?

MATHIS

(Turns, as if noticing him for the first time. He smiles, nods)

I was gonna give you a piece of my mind today, Albert. But I decided to take a different line. I heard somebody nailed a dead possum on John Tittle's barn door. You know about it?

(ALBERT nods, almost imperceptibly).

Speak up, Albert. I don't hear so good. I'll talk straight to you, and I want you to talk out straight to me. All right?

ALBERT

Yes, sir.

MATHIS

What do you think about that dead possum?

ALBERT

I don't know what to think, Mr. Mathis. It don't make no sense.

MATHIS

Oh, it makes sense, all right. Somebody's mad – and we damn well know what it's about, don't we? It's about you yearning for a white house. But to me, it's a dumb-ass, juvenile thing to do – especially to John Tittle. Got no cause for that kinda thing here in Oma Creek. You agree with that, don't you?

(Pause)

For the luvva God, speak up, Albert.

ALBERT

Yes, sir.

MATHIS

Stuff like that's what we don't want in this town. A little patience and common sense, and we're all better off. Right?

ALBERT

Yessir, I'm glad you thinkin that way, Mr. Mathis.

MATHIS

You're a good man, Albert, You work hard. You take care of your family. I know all you want is to do well and get along. You don't want to make trouble, do you?

ALBERT

Nossir. I sure don't want no trouble.

MATHIS

Good. Come, lay-by, Mr. Stuckey needs help at the sawmill. I want your services doin things on my farm. And hell, I want to sell to you. That's what I'm here for. You're a customer. Whatever you need, I can get it for you, even if I don't have it. That's the way you want it, ain't it?

ALBERT

I want to buy from you, Mr. Mathis. I don't want you figuring I was going anywhere else for that paint neither. I can put that order with you now for them ten gallons I needing. Going be lumber, nails, couple-a doors too.

MATHIS

(A long silent moment, then...)

So you figure on goin ahead with it, do you?

ALBERT

Yessir.

MATHIS

You missin my point. Tell me, Albert, why do you want to paint that old beat-up house? What brought it to mind?

ALBERT

(Trying to choose words)

I been thinking bout it for years. Been doing nicely. Louella pregnant. I want to do something for us I can feel...good 'bout it – make me feel proud.

MATHIS

(Nodding, grinning contemptuously)

Proud, yeah, proud.

(Singing the 20's hit. with a little dance)

“How'm I doin? Hey, hey! Twee-twee, show my stuff.”

(He snorts, comes right up close, in Albert's face)

You're cut off, Sir Prince! You a sharecropper without any credit. You get nothin here --

(He pokes him with a finger, again and again)

Not – one – slice of cheese, not one can of oil! See how you do without me furnishing you while you're trying to make a crop. And you gonna pay me for the flour, the dried beans, everything you took from here till now. I want cash for your whole bill.

(The repeated jabbing with the finger is something ALBERT has never experienced before, humiliating, and arousing a fierce and impotent rage)

ALBERT

I don't have that cash, Mr. Mathis. Mr. Tittle guarantee us crop.

MATHIS

That's fine for Mr. Tittle, it don't cover you. You better find the money! You got some high and mighty ideas these days. Nothing's good enough! I hear your wife been putting on airs too, too good for scrubbing cloes. You want a white house? Well, we ain't gonna have no white nigger house round here! And you ain't gonna get diddly shit until you get your feet back on the ground. Now get out of here, and don't come back til you get your head straight. And give your family hard change if they want a candy or a pop or a spool a thread. Get out of my store!

(ALBERT stands mute, lost in stifled anger and humiliation)

MATHIS

You hear me? *Get out!*

(ALBERT goes)

LIGHTS FADE in the store as ALBERT comes down the lane. Alone, he looks around, trying to sort out what's happening and who he is.)

ALBERT

IF A BEE-COMB'S RIGHT HERE, GOT A RIGHT TO THE HONEY.
IF I SELL SEVEN BALES, GOT A RIGHT TO THE MONEY.
I DON'T GOT TO LAUGH IF A JOKE ISN'T FUNNY.
I GOT A RIGHT.
FROM THAT TREE IN MY YARD I CAN EAT ALL THE PEARS.
IF THE WORKING WAS HARD, OR I'M WEARY WITH CARES,
GOT A RIGHT TO LAY DOWN, OR WALK OFF INTO TOWN.
I GOT A RIGHT.

I GOT A RIGHT TO A DRINK WHEN I'M THIRSTY AND DRY.
GOT A RIGHT TO THE AIR, TO THE RAIN, TO THE SKY.
GOT A RIGHT TO HUNT POSSUM AND CATCH FISH TO FRY.
I GOT A RIGHT.

IF I DO SOMETHING GOOD, GOT A RIGHT THE PRAISE.
IF I TALKS KIND OF FUNNY, GOT A RIGHT TO MY WAYS.
IF THE MEAT COSTING MONEY, I CAN EAT IF I PAYS.
WELL, ALL RIGHT! I GOT A RIGHT!

MY WIFE GOT A RIGHT TO SOME RIBBONS AND BOWS.
MY BOY GOT A RIGHT TO SOME CLEAN SUNDAY CLOTHES.
GOT A RIGHT TO MY HAIR, TO THE SHAPE OF MY NOSE,
TO THE STRENGTH IN MY ARM, TO THE THINGS WHICH I
GROWS

I'M A NATURAL MAN, GOT A RIGHT TO STAND TALL,
AND TO DRESS MYSELF UP OR THROW PAINT ON THAT
WALL!
AND TO DO WHAT'S MY RIGHT IS THE BEST THING OF ALL!
I GOT A RIGHT, AND IT'S RIGHT.

I'M A MAN, AND I CAN.
I AIN'T STARTING NO WARS, I AIN'T BREAKING NO LAWS.
I GOT A RIGHT.
I WILL FIND A WAY!

End Act 1

Act 2

A MEADOW on a July 4th evening. COOTER, HARDWAY, AUGUSTUS, ALBERT, and PREACHER TOM are at a small fire, holding wieners on sticks, bottles of beer, and soda pop. COOTER watches distant FIREWORKS fly up and explode.

PREACHER TOM & GROUP

LET ME BE, LET ME BE, LET ME BE.
LET ME KNOW THAT THE LORD TRUST IN ME
LET ME SPURN, LET ME PRAISE.
LET ME LEARN ALL MY DAYS.
LET ME BE, LET ME BE, LET ME BE!

COOTER

Why'nt we over there at them white folks fireworks? We Americans too.

ALBERT

Not like them.

PREACHER TOM

They celebrating Independence from England, 1776. We ain't much part of it.

HARDWAY

We gotta find our own way to be free and independent.

COOTER

What's yours, Hardway?

(The GROUP HUMS, CLAPS RHYTHM behind testimony)

HARDWAY

(Smiles)

Say I'm in a barn down in Lousiana, front of a long table with a "Casino Craps" layout: aces, boxcars at thirty to one, hard tens, eights, sixes. Fifteen to one on any seven. Pass-no-pass all around. It's a work of art!

PREACHER TOM

Sinner's coat of arms!

HARDWAY

I put \$20 on “pass,” and I throw 4 and 3. Yeah! Leave it, roll seven again. Don’t touch it! 5 and 2! My point’s, eight now, bam! 4 and 4. Stay on pass. Eleven, another seven. Another point, and on my eleventh comin’ out, I throw eleven. November eleven’s my birthday! Eleven-eleven, I’m done! What I pick up, friends, is forty thousand, nine hundred and sixty dollars! There’s my Independence Day!

HARDWAY/GROUP

LET ME BE, LET ME BE, LET ME BE.
LET ME PLAY EVERY GAME LUCKILY
LET ME KEEP WHAT I GAIN
LET ME DANCE IN THE RAIN
LET ME BE, LET ME BE, LET ME BE.

COOTER

Preacher Tom, what’s yours?

PREACHER

The day I went in that Seminary school God been watching and looking. I can’t see him, but can’t shake him neither! He’s there, checking sins, judging my private ways. If I get my own woman, sanctified and pure, He’ll cut me slack, not be watching no more. That’s my freedom! There’s my Independence Day!

PREACHER/GROUP

LET ME BE, LET ME BE, LET ME BE.
LET ME CLEAVE TO THE GAL MEANT FOR ME,
FREE TO LIVE THE GOOD LIFE,
WITH A SWEET LOVING WIFE.
LET ME BE, LET ME BE, LET ME BE.

COOTER

What you after, Augustus?

AUGUSTUS

Set my own clock, my own work, my own play. I been told when to rise and when to shine since age four by someone I called “Daddy” who wasn’t mine, and by daddies with stripes and bars through that whole World War. I got bugle blues. My Independence be doing how I want, with them off my back and off my mind.

AUGUSTUS/GROUP

LET ME BE, LET ME BE, LET ME BE.
LET ME TASTE WHAT IT’S LIKE TO BE FREE.

WHERE THOSE BLESSINGS ARE STORED,
THAT'S WHERE I'M HEADING TOWARD
LET ME BE, LET ME BE, LET ME BE.

COOTER

Papa, you tell. What's yours?

ALBERT

Everybody know what I want this year.

HARDWAY/PREACHER TOM/AUGUSTUS

A white house!

ALBERT

How I get it maybe end your bugle blues too, Augustus.

AUGUSTUS

How's that, Prince?

ALBERT

You don't control nothing 'less you own it. You need to wake up every day, get your own clock. You want to leave town quick, you need wheels. I got to own that house to paint it mine. You be my partner, Augustus, and we buy that farm, we own it. That's how we get our Independence!

AUGUSTUS

That's it! I'm in. Whatever you need, brother, to pay-down, it's yours.

ALBERT

(Exultant, he takes Augustus's hand)

Hey now! Mr. Tittle just cross that pasture. I go get him and find out!

PREACHER TOM

Hold up now! Did I hear right? You think you gonna *buy* that house and land, and paint it? You the cow jumpin over the moon! Where in twenty miles around here you ever see a black man own a white man's plantation?

ALBERT

There's black men own farms all over. I knew three near Greenville.

PREACHER

Maybe in Coon Park you seen it. Not in no White Folks Manor! You think Mr. Tittle gonna sell *you* a farm here in his back yard?

ALBERT

I reckon he might.

PREACHER TOM

Mr Tittle's a good landlord, but he ain't the Tooth Fairy. Your family hurting now -- no furnish from the store, ain't had a piece of cheese in weeks, even running out of laundry soap. You fight the whole town, you gonna lose every battle,

ALBERT

You no soldier. What d'you know 'bout battles?

ALBERT

LET ME BE, LET ME BE, LET ME BE!
LET ME FEEL WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE FREE.
LET ME WIN, LET ME LOSE,
LET ME SING MY OWN BLUES.
LET ME BE, LET ME BE, JUST LET ME BE!

(He goes out after Tittle)

At the BARN, TITTLE is coming up as ALBERT hurries right behind him.

ALBERT

I saw you cross the pasture. I reckoned you was going be with them firework folks this evenin.

TITTLE

I had enough of town meetings yesterday, with Mr. Mathis calling me an *imbecile* about you in front of half the town. "You're responsible!" he says. And he's right! You're a tenant on my land! I *am* responsible!

ALBERT

All right, you let me take it on. Sell me the house.

TITTLE

(confused)

You're not serious, are you? You want to buy the house?

ALBERT

More 'n the house -- a farm, 'bout eighty acres.

TITTLE

Where in God's forsaken backyards would you get the money for such a thing? -- maybe a few thousand dollars!

ALBERT

I give a cash payment. You give a mortgage for the rest.

TITTLE

(off balance and tempted)

Huh! I sure could use the money. You'd work my cotton too?

ALBERT

On shares. Yes, sir.

TITTLE

I tell you what – you get me a – three hundred dollar deposit. I'll talk to my wife and get a lawyer on it.

ALBERT

I bring you a check from Augustus tomorrow.

TITTLE

Augustus! You gonna be partners?

(ALBERT nods. Tittle sees a game-changer)

Lord, he's a veteran, Prince! That could guarantee a *bank* loan – maybe hold off a heap of trouble! I can't say sure, but I'll get on it, I will! Now you be quiet – real quiet!

(Starts for his house, stops)

Send Cooter up to the house tomorrow. I been cleaning out some stuff of Jeff's; there's some books he might want.

ALBERT'S HOUSE, last glow of twilight, the SAME EVENING. LETTIE comes out on the porch in a red dress. GRANNY follows with one cane, walking with difficulty, clutching a long string of amber beads.

LETTIE

You all gussied up for July fourth social?

GRANNY

These swings when you dancin.

(She does a little Charleston step. It hurts)

LETTIE

Oh, my Lord, lookit that!

*(LOUELLA sees it too as she comes from the back yard,
dragging a hoe. Granny collapses into the porch chair)*

GRANNY

That be enough social. You gawn out with one o' yo faithful dogs?

LETTIE

Preacher Tom comin, and Augustus say he fetch me some chocolates.

GRANNY

A Hershey with nuts what you get from him.

LOUELLA

Papa be happy if you marry Augustus. He a strappy young man and he like you a whole lot.

LETTIE

I like him fine, but he ain't got no car.

GRANNY

Pick one them, girl, o' there be nobody to feed you when you old and useless.

LETTIE

THEY SAY A GAL SHOULD BE LOOKIN FOR LOVE
SO SHE CAN HOOK UP FO' HER LIFE.
BUT I EXPECT LOVE'S NOT WHAT'S COOKIN FO' GALS
WHO'S NECK'S IN THE YOKE OF A WIFE.

WITH ONE MAN, ONE MAN,
YOU MUST KNEEL FOR THE BIG BOOGALOO.
BUT GET TWO HUNGRY FELLAS WHO LONG FOR YO' TOUCH,
AND THEY DOWN ON THEIR KNEES BEFO' YOU.

BATHSHEBA TOOK BATHS WHERE KING DAVID, SHE KNEW,
COULD LOOK ON HER CHARMS, WET AND BARE.
SO URIAH, HER HUSBAND, GOT SLICED INTO TWO
CAUSE THE KING WASN'T WILLIN TO SHARE.

WITH ONE MAN, ONE MAN,
HE'S THE LION AND YOU BE HIS PRIDE
BUT WITH TWO STEAMY STALLIONS IN-STALLED IN YO' BARN,
YOU GET BUCKED FOR A DOUBLE-HIGH RIDE!

THE HOUSEWIFE'S A SEAMSTRESS AND WASHER AND COOK,
A FLOP WITH A MOP IN HER HAND.
BUT A GAL WITH TWO SUITORS AIN'T NEVER FORSOOK
AND HER JEWEL BOX CAN ONLY EXPAND.

WITH ONE MAN, ONE MAN,
YOU'RE NEGLECTED, INSPECTED, AND USED.
BUT WITH TWO MOONY STEADIES TO FETCH WHAT YOU ASK
YOUR BEST WISHES ARE SELDOM REFUSED.

IT AIN'T LIKE I'M ASKIN' TO LEAD A WHOLE BAND,
IT'S PLAYIN' FOR ONE I DON'T SEE.
I'D RATHER MAKE MUSIC WITH TWO BEAUS IN HAND,
WHO BOTH WANT TO FIDDLE WITH ME.

WITH ONE MAN, ONE MAN,
YO' FUDGE POP WILL MELT IN THE HEAT.
BUT IF ONE POP IS POOPED, AND THERE'S 'NOTHER TO GRAB,
SWEET LICKINS AIN'T NEVER COMPLETE.

SO LISTEN UP GALS TO THE WORDS OF MY SONG,
DON'T STEP INTO HARNESS TOO QUICK.
A SATISFIED MAN WITH NO GUN AT HIS BACK'S
LIKE A CANDLE WITHOUT ANY WICK.

SIGHIN "ONE MAN, ONE MAN,"
MAYBE SOME DAY I'LL CANCEL MY SPREE
BUT FO' YEARS COMIN' ON MY BEST BET'LL BE ON
TWO KNIGHTS TESTIN THEIR METTLES FO ME.

LA-DEE-DA, LA-DEE DA, LA-DEE-DA DEE
MIGHT EVEN DO BETTER WITH THREE!

LETTIE

(To LOUELLA)

You get Cooter to hoe that garden. You got a baby inside a you!

LOUELLA

Nothin' inside a you, and you don't even move your butt to make coffee.

(hears the men coming from the field)

All I got here for supper is corn mush, and some fried chicken Bessie give me.

(She goes around back to put away the hoe. GRANNY hovers on the porch. PREACHER TOM enters with a nosegay of wildflowers, AUGUSTUS behind with a lit sparkler)

LETTIE

(Taking one gift, then the other)

Oh -- wild flowers and a Liberty light!

AUGUSTUS

Lettie, there's a tent show over at Lawrence. You want to go, we can catch the last bus.

(He hands her a paper bag)

LETTIE

(Gives Preacher Tom the sparkler, takes the bag)

Maybe we all ride in your car, Preacher Tom. A tent show just what I need tonight.

(She looks in the bag)

Hey, a Hershey with nuts!

(GRANNY snorts, goes inside. LETTIE and her suitors leave)

PREACHER TOM

I don't see how some low-down tent show goin' inspire my sermon for Sunday.

AUGUSTUS

Why you don't wait here and see if the lightnin strike your head?

(In the house GRANNY drops into her front room chair. ALBERT sits in the kitchen. LOUELLA comes from the back)

LOUELLA

(Impatiently, to Albert)

What you sittin in the dark fo'? Why you don't light the lamp?

ALBERT

Ain't much oil in it. Best we don't use it up.

LOUELLA

(strikes a match and lights the lamp)

We ain't gonna live in the dark. Bessie give me some chicken. There ain't much else. I don't know how you think we goin get by on nothin.

ALBERT

I hunt – and we got beans and them collards.

LOUELLA

(Preparing two plates)

Them collards got bugs already. And there's other things we needin -- like cheese – and shoes! I ain't had a real kiss from you in over a month neither.

ALBERT

Got things on my mind. Some good times comin soon.

LOUELLA

(puts a plate in front of ALBERT, brings a plate to GRANNY)

Granny, eat some supper.

(No response from GRANNY)

Papa, come over here! Somethin wrong with her!

(ALBERT goes into the front room, bends to look, then picks GRANNY up to put her on the bed. He leans close to her, lets out a breath and grunts)

ALBERT

She gone, Mama. She dead.

LOUELLA

She dead? Oh, no...

(She cries. ALBERT puts his arms around her. After a moment she withdraws from him, opens the top bureau drawer, and pulls out folded papers)

You go up yonder and call 'bout this burial insurance right away.

(ALBERT doesn't move, abashed and guilty)

What's the matter?

ALBERT

Hardway didn't give over the premium money coupl'a months. That insurance canceled. I was gonna get it fixed, but I never got to it.

LOUELLA

Damn that Hardway! How could you let it go? All these years we pay and pay! What we gawn do? How we gawn bury Granny?

ALBERT

I reckon we bury her plain.

LOUELLA

What's plain? We ain't goin' bury her in no cotton-sack! We hold on a few days, and you sell that calf, get Granny a funeral she deservin!

ALBERT

I got them old planks out back. I make her a box in the mornin.

LOUELLA

You put my granny in some dirty old wormified planks?

ALBERT

She dead, Mama, and we stuck.

LOUELLA

No, we ain't stuck! You sell that calf! You do that!

ALBERT

Don't you give no orders! That calf got a purpose.
(He turns and goes out)

LOUELLA

For this house? For paint?! You do like that to my Granny for some buckets of paint! You mean, low, selfish man!
(Desolate, feeling spurned and rejected, she sings)

WHAT I SAY DON'T MEAN MUCH NOW,
NOTHIN I WANT GETS DONE.
MOST OF MY PRAYERS NOT ANSWERED
AS I STRUGGLE FROM FROM SUN TO SUN.
YOU LOSE YOUR NAME
WHEN LIFE ROLLS ON,
AND CHANGES WHAT YOU DO.
YOU HOPE YOU ALWAYS BE THE SAME,
BUT NOW THERE'S A DIFF'RENT YOU.

SHE WAS A DANCIN GIRL,
SAND IN HER TOES,
CHARMIN ALL THE PEOPLE SHE COULD SEE.
HEART LIKE A FLYING BIRD
UNDER HER POSE,
PRETTY AS A PRETTY GIRL CAN BE.
HOW DID ALL MY WISHES GET SO CROSSED?
HOW DID THAT HAPPY GIRL GET LOST?

THERE WAS A HARVEST FAIR,
CARNIVAL TIME,
SHE HAD A YELLOW RIBBON IN HER HAIR.
COTTON WAS CANDY THEN.
SIX HOOPS FOR A DIME,
SHE WON HER SWEET AND HAN'SOME TEDDY BEAR.
NEVER DREAMED THAT WINNIN HAD A COST.
HOW DID THAT HAPPY GIRL GET LOST?

ALMOST EVERY WANT WAS MET,
HER SECRET WISHES ALL GOT HEARD.
HERE, I CRY MY HEARTACHE OUT, YET
NO ONE EVEN HEARS A SINGLE WORD.

SOMEWHERE TONIGHT THERE'S A GIRL WITH A BOY,
HER SONG AND DANCE ARE LIGHTIN UP HIS LIFE.
AND SHE SHOULD TAKE ALL OF THE PLEASURE SHE CAN
BEFORE HE CALLS HER MAMA 'STEAD OF WIFE.
LIKE A SUMMER FLOWER RANKLED BY A FROST,
THAT'S HOW THE HAPPY GIRL GETS LOST.
THAT'S HOW THE HAPPY GIRL GOT LOST.

A few weeks later. ALBERT comes up from the field. A FLASH of lightning and a loud crack of THUNDER. A board from the shed roof is knocked down. COOTER stands up inside the stall, shaking his head. ALBERT puts the hoe in the shed.

ALBERT

That calf all right?

COOTER

(Coming out of the stall, shaking his ear)

He ain't all right! He layin on the floor here, all wet behind him and underneath. Stink somethin awful.

ALBERT

(Galvanized, calling out as he goes quickly to the stall)

Mama! Boil some of those old towels. And I goin need your baking soda.

LOUELLA

(Inside the back door)

The soda box empty!

ALBERT

Cooter, fetch some pails of water, one for me here, one for mama.

(in the stall)

Then take the spade and go find some blackberry plants. I need the roots. Fetch half a bushel. He got scours.

COOTER

(At the pump, filling the pail)

What's that?

ALBERT

He crappin out all the water inside. Got to stop the fever and get water back in.

(COOTER picks up the pail, goes into the stall)

ALBERT

(Rising, grim but certain)

Mama! I need two baby bottles! You got some from Bessie's sister.

(LOUELLA looks out the back door, holding a wash basin)

Boil em! Bring em here!

(The sky darkens quickly. There's a double stroke of jagged LIGHTNING, and a BLAST of thunder that becomes a long echoing roll, the hiss and the patter of rain as LIGHTS FADE)

NIGHT. INSIDE the STALL, lit by a kerosene lantern. The calf is on his side on the floor, breathing, covered with damp corn sacks. ALBERT holds a bottle to the calf's mouth, COOTER sleeps with his head against the wall)

ALBERT

Come on, fella. You didn't drink enough tonight to fill a dog stomach, and my hands is tired. Few more sips and we take a break.

COOTER

(Stirring)

I'll feed him.

ALBERT

Put more water on them sacks. He need cooling.

(COOTER takes a cup,, sprinkles and pours water)

ALBERT

Two nights now he hardly move.

COOTER

I hold the bottle a while.

(He takes it. ALBERT moves back, reclines on his elbow)

COOTE

We never gave him no name. “Feed Long John” sound better than “feed that calf.”

ALBERT

He don’t need no name. When I was a boy my papa got us a calf, and I give him the name T-bone. I regret that.

COOTER

(After a pause)

Papa, why you want to paint this house so bad?

ALBERT

Soldiers get a medal. Farmers and folks who ‘mount to somethin get them a white house. Make me fightin mad some white man say I can’t have one. Seem he can make up any damn thing –might get a notion I can’t grow cotton, cause he doin it. Well, I ain’tworkin for him, and slavery’s done.

(sitting up)

Cooter, that bottle ain’t in his mouth! Gmme that!

(COOTER slides back on the sacks and straw)

This calf might not last till morning. You be sorry if you gotta say John’s dead.

COOTER

Long John.

ALBERT

He ain’t so long. Why you call him that?

COOTER

(Leaning against the stall wall)

Long John Silver. He’s a pie-rate in that book, Treasure Island. You reckon the calf goin die, Papa?

ALBERT

It’s up to the Lord and Nature. Always something might come up you don’t figure. You want to give him a name, Cooter?

(No answer. COOTER is asleep)

C'mon Long John calf, I been countin' on you. Few more sips maybe turn you round. Well, yeah! You suckin now! More! Hey, I do believe you comin round!

DAYLIGHT COMES. The sun rises over house and country. COOTER comes out of the stall, looks at the house. ALBERT comes from the shed with a sack of wood chocks, and a small sledge hammer. MUSIC fills the morning.

COOTER

Papa, where's the calf?

(ALBERT points out in the pasture. COOTER grins and quickly runs out there)

He walkin! Hey, T-bone!

ALBERT comes down to the field. On every side mid- summer cotton flowers are blooming, the field spattered everywhere with pink and white.

ALBERT

THE TIME IS COME TO SET ASIDE
AND LEAVE THE PLANTS TO THRIVE,
TO FATTEN UP AND MAKE THE CROP
THAT KEEP US ALL ALIVE.
THEY SAFER NOW -- THE WEEDS IS DONE,
DON'T HAVE TO CLEAN THE ROW.
I LIKE WHEN I CAN LAY ASIDE,
AND LET THAT COTTON GO.

LAY-BY, LAY-BY
LAY-BY, PUTTING BY,
SUNDAY IN THE FIELDS.
NUT GRASS SLEEPING IN THE SHADE,
AND FLOWERS MAKIN YIELDS.

LAY-BY, SETTING BY,
DRINKIN' SUN AND RAIN.
TAKE THE FEAST THAT NATURE LAYS,
AND GIVE IT BACK AGAIN.
AND GOD GIVES BACK AGAIN.
I DID MY JOB TO GET US HERE,
NOW COTTON, DO YOUR STUFF.
PUFF UP THEM BOLLS TO MAKE THE BALES,
WE NEVER GET ENOUGH.

LISTEN TO THE KATYDIDS SINGIN,
ENJOY THE SEA OF FLOW'RS.
THINK ON THE SERMON THAT NATURE GIVES
AS DAYS STRETCH OUT THEIR HOURS.

LAY-BY, GOIN' BY,
SUMMER EASING STRIFE.
BLESS THE POWER GIVEN ME
TO HARVEST MY OWN LIFE.

*(ALBERT bends to pick up his sack of chocks and the hammer,
and sees TITTLE coming down, carrying an envelope.)*

TITTLE

(hands ALBERT the document)

That there's a lien on our crop filed by Mr. Mathis. It's a legal paper. When we sell the cotton, he gets any money you owe him first, before anything else. You open the irrigation ditches?

ALBERT

Yes, sir. We layin by. First thing, I goin over and see Mr. Stuckey 'bout cuttin logs.

TITTLE

(Rattled. Here comes trouble)

Forget about cutting logs. Mr. Stuckey ain't gonna give you nothin'.

ALBERT

(That hurts. He suspected, but hoped it wouldn't happen)

You reckon Mr. Mathis want me put in them drain tiles by the railroad?

TITTLE

Mr. Mathis wouldn't throw you a rope if you were drowning in liquid shit. Keep away from town! There's posts and rails on the south bottom need fixin – and you got those test acres to look after. How we doing out there? You gonna spray that pesticide mix?

ALBERT

We only got about 4 larvas for every hundred plants. I'll do it if the count go up.
(picks up the chocks. He feels control slipping)

You got that mortgage contract done, Mr. Tittle?

TITTLE

(ashamed and angry)

No. Nothing's gonna get done. I can't sell you land. I couldn't sell you a plot to bury yourself. It would violate the deed to any land in this county owned by white people. I can't sell to anyone with negro blood.

ALBERT

Why you didn't tell me that, before you took that money?

TITTLE

I didn't know that! I'm from Missouri. The lawyer explained it. This land is in my wife's family. I never thought about it.

ALBERT

What about that money?

TITTLE

I'll get that check back from the lawyer. I sure had it right when you told me you wanted to paint the house. I told you forget it. You wouldn't listen.

ALBERT

You say go ahead and paint!

TITTLE

You blackmailed me – said you'd leave before planting.

ALBERT

You want me make a crop, I want a white house. We settle it. That's your word. I trust you stick to it!

TITTLE

You're a stubborn fool to rouse up those demons.
(He goes up toward the house)

(ALBERT walks off, frustrated, and angry)

ON A DIRT ROAD, LOUELLA comes on carrying a burlap bag and a stick. She beats the grass, then bends to pick greens from the ditch. LETTIE, carrying a paper bag of beauty supplies, comes from the other direction and stops.

LETTIE

What you doin' out there in the ditch?

LOUELLA

Pickin greens for supper. What you got?

LETTIE

Stuff for fixin hair I had sent. I can teach you. Albert say he goin lay by today.

LOUELLA

Is the calf dead?

LETTIE

Uh-Uh, he's out in the pasture, eatin grass.

LOUELLA

He did it, huh? I was sure that calf goin die last night. And Albert be grievin' and regrettin for the rest of the year.

LETTIE

You dog-mad at your big, brave husband?

LOUELLA

Mad for what they saying bout us in town – and the way folks is. That Miss Maureen -- I do her laundry seven years. Bout fifteen minutes ago she drive up yonder in her big car, and stop in the road. She say, "You must be real hungry, eatin dirt." I say nothing, and she say, "You grasping nigger bitch, I hope they burn y'all down to the ground."

LETTIE

Honey, you brush off them words like dead leaves, let em fall. Miss Maureen jealous cause you having a child, cause you walk pretty, and got a better man.

LETTIE

WHO ARE WE, SISTER?
THE ROYAL FOLK.
WE LOOK BETTER, COOK BETTER, FEEL DEEPER, SING SWEETER,
AND THAT'S NO JOKE.
GOT PATIENCE LIKE A SPIDER,
THE LASTING LOVE OF RUTH.
CARRY VICTORY INSIDE US,
AND THAT'S THE HOLY TRUTH
WE GOT LIFE!
WE GOT LOVE!

WHO ARE THE BROTHERS?
THE ROYAL MEN.
THEY TALK PROUDER, BRAG LOUDER, BLEED REDDER,
KISS WETTER NOW AND THEN.
LIKE A PROPHET OF THE BIBLE
WITH A CLEVER, HONEY TONGUE,
THEY ARE TERRORS WHO ARE LIABLE
TO GET HOPELESSLY UNSTRUNG.
WE GOT LIFE!
WE GOT LOVE

TOGETHER

MISERY COME,
HATEFUL SPITE
CAN'T PULL US APART.
IN GOD'S SUN OR SATAN'S NIGHT
WE'RE THE QUEENS OF HEART.
WE ARE THE LIGHT.

LOUELLA

WHO ARE WE SISTERS?
ANGELS WITHOUT WINGS.
WE SHINE BRIGHTER, CLING TIGHTER, SLICE THICKER,
RUN QUICKER, WORK LONGER, LOVE STRONGER,
FIGHT SMARTER, PRAISE HARDER,
AND HELP THE LITTLE KINGS.
PUT SUPPER ON THE TABLE,
THEN DANCE THE NIGHT AND SING.

CARRY LIFE AND LOVE INSIDE US,
AND THAT IS EVERYTHING.

TOGETHER

WE GOT LIFE! WE GOT LOVE!
WE GOT LIFE! WE GOT LOVE!
WE GOT LIFE!

LOUELLA

You a lazy bitch, but I'm glad you come and stay a while.
(She hears a CAR MOTOR getting louder, accelerating)
That Miss Maureen's car coming on again.

LETTIE

Coming fast.

LOUELLA

(Suddenly alarmed)

Get off the road, sister! Get off!

(LETTIE steps back, lurches, trips and falls. LOUELLA throws herself into the ditch as the SHADOW OF THE CAR SWEEPS ACROSS with a ROAR. They hear LAUGHTER as the car motor fades. LOUELLA helps LETTIE up. LETTIE picks up her bag, now dripping brown liquid)

LOUELLA

You all right? They come right at us -- right at us, you see that?

(LETTIE nods, tears coming as they go down the road)

At ALBERT'S HOUSE, late afternoon. ALBERT is at the fence, nailing a picket. AUGUSTUS comes on carrying a sack of something)

ALBERT

Ain't you workin today?

AUGUSTUS

They close the sawmill, and I'm outta work for good. Mr. Stuckey said something 'bout you rile me so, I could've killt him right there. But I got to walk away, my gut so churned up, I like to puke.

(He touches his hand, a kerchief wrapped around it)

I put my fist in the back of that storehouse wall. Prince, I love you man, but I can't stay here. This town full of poison. I goin' mouth off or hit somebody or kill somebody, and they sure gonna kill me back. I got to go.

ALBERT

(takes the check from his pants pocket)

I got that three hundred back from Mr. Tittle. Here.

AUGUSTUS

You hold onto that! You goin' need it!

ALBERT

No. Take it. You can't be no partner if you ain't here, Augustus.

AUGUSTUS

(takes the check)

They got Hardway. He's in Lawrence jail.

(LOUELLA comes out to spread a towel on the back of the porch chair. AUGUSTUS brings his sack to Louella. ALBERT takes his tools to the shed)

AUGUSTUS

Louella, I brung some beans Bobby growed. There's some cans of fish too.

LOUELLA

(Looks in the bag)

We got no right taking your food, Augustus. My paint man what bringing on hungers and wars.

AUGUSTUS

Right place, they give some medal to a man like him. You take them things.

(He sits on the porch step)

I'm goin' away anyway. They shut down the mill.

LETTIE

(comes out, a bit dressed up)

Where you going, Augustus?

(She sits near him. ALBERT comes back)

AUGUSTUS

Been thinkin Memphis. I can learn some training and get a truck job up there. Truth is, though, I don't like goin' there by myself.

LETTIE

Who you reckon goin' go with you?

AUGUSTUS

Maybe somebody round here come with me, style my hair, share my place.

(With a smile, LETTIE takes a few steps to the tree and twirls on her toes. AUGUSTUS watches her with pleasure)

LETTIE

Why you lookin like that, Augustus?

AUGUSTUS

Maybe you want to go too, Lettie, way things is. You want to come 'long with me?

LETTIE

What you do for me, Augustus?

AUGUSTUS

Buy you a silk dress, girl, and black high-heel shoes.

LETTIE

That it?

AUGUSTUS

I get you a gold ring for that number three finger, you promise to wear it.

LOUELLA

Better hurry. Here come Preacher Tom.

LETTIE

(goes to sit by AUGUSTUS)

I guess I go with you, Augustus. Time done come.

PREACHER TOM

Where y'all goin'?

AUGUSTUS

Hey, now! Up the Mississippi, Preacher Tom! We goin' away together!

PREACHER TOM

No, Lettie, you don't want to go off like *that* –

LETTIE

Time for me to move on, Preacher Tom. I tell you what I do want – I want you to marry us. We need your blessing.

(PREACHER TOM is speechless, crestfallen)

ALBERT

Preacher Tom, seem they making a righteous decision. You the spirit leader, the rock we stand by. You got to do what you been called to do. No one get all their hopes – you say that to me, time and time.

LOUELLA

This ain't about you, Preacher Tom. It's about my sister. God call you to help her.

PREACHER

I ask coupl'a days patience.

(PREACHER TOM, turns and walks away – stops, LIGHTS CHANGE and time changes, as he comes back to a space between baskets of flowers. He picks up his bible. AUGUSTUS and LETTIE come before him.)

PREACHER TOM

And so by the responsibility given me by the peoples of Mississippi and in the eyes of God, I pronounce you husband and wife.

(They kiss. Congratulations as people bring on things for a wedding party: platters of chicken, beer and wine, a cake)

ALBERT

Augustus, this for you married folks.

(He gives him an envelope. AUGUSTUS looks inside)

AUGUSTUS

We ain't takin no cash money from you – I'm a rich man, Prince!-- got discharge money and a GI bill. I got that woman! You hold onto that.

(He puts the two dollars in ALBERT's pocket)

PREACHER

Your attention, everybody! Time for a special performance! Cooter been learnin guitar in his school, so here he is now with the first public performance of a song he put together hisself.

COOTER

(Strums a few chords on a guitar, sings)

I WAS BORN IN COTTON COUNTRY
WHERE THEY SAY YOU'RE BORN TO STAY.
GOT NO CAUSE TO HANG FOREVER,
I HEAR MUSIC FAR AWAY.

NO NEW SOUNDS IN COTTON COUNTRY,
WHERE CICADAS SCRAPE THEIR WINGS.
I GET LOST IN COTTON CHATTER.
I HEAR MUSIC FAR AWAY.

THERE ARE FACTORIES MAKING THINGS.
SO MANY ROOMS ARE FILLED WITH STYLE.
AND FOLKS TAKE OFF ON WINGS,
ABOVE THE CLOUDS, THREE THOUSAND MILES.

THERE'S ELECTRIC STREETCARS CLANGING,
AND NEW PAINT ON EV'RYTHING.
THERE'S NO LIMIT TO THE CHOICES.
I HEAR MUSIC FAR AWAY.
I HEAR MUSIC FAR AWAY.

ALBERT

That's a pretty song, Cooter, but maybe cotton got more than you seeing just yet.

AUGUSTUS

But sung from his heart! Prince, listen to me --you come on up to Memphis after you sell your cotton. Live with us! We need you --
(ALBERT puts up his hand to stop this subject)

LETTIE

Augustus, don't –

AUGUSTUS

Let me talk here. Just quit this place! It's dying. And them dumb-ass white folks here need you a lot more'n you need them. Show them the back of your ass! Louella go 'long, Prince. She lookin for a change.

PREACHER TOM

He talkin sense, Prince.

ALBERT

(Resenting the pressure, trying to control himself)

This is our place here! I got the smell of it in my cloes, the dirt under my finger nails. This where her mama and papa and granny buried. My pa buried in that churchyard. Now Cooter goin to that school. This where we belong!

PREACHER TOM

Cooter can't stay in that school – walk every day, six miles up, six back.

ALBERT

He ain't walking. He got that bus.

PREACHER TOM

No, he ain't got that bus! The bus passin him by. When I seen that driver look away and pass that boy, it hurt my heart. I rode him there two days last week. But I can't do that all the time.

ALBERT

Cooter, come over here.

(He looks hard at him)

That school bus pass you by?

COOTER

First few weeks he stop, then he don't, even if I stick out my hand. Why don't we go to Memphis, Papa, like Augustus saying?

ALBERT

Cause we belong here now! And I reckon that school mean something. You want to go there, don't you, Cooter?

COOTER

Yes, sir. I do.

ALBERT

All right, then. I goin' fix it – right now.

(Eyes on him as he turns and walks quickly up the lane)

(LOUELLA picks up the cake)

LOUELLA

Let's go in and cut this cake. Cooter?

(COOTER follows the guests inside. LIGHTS OUT)

LIGHTS UP: MATHIS's store: HARDWAY, in an apron, is sweeping. ALBERT enters.)

ALBERT

Well, you sure change your line of work, didn't you?

HARDWAY

I couldn't get back with the insurance, Prince. Mr. Mathis paid my bail, put me to work. I'm good with numbers – better'n him.

ALBERT

Is he here?

HARDWAY

He had to go up to Hattiesburg. I don't reckon I can sell to you, Prince. He put you in the hole. He gotta let you out.

ALBERT

You help put me in dump ditch, Hardway.

HARDWAY

I'm sorry 'bout that insurance.

(Pulls a small bankroll from his pocket, peels 4 dollars)

It was two dollars for them premiums. There's four right there, get you interest.

ALBERT

(Takes two dollars from the four, pockets them)

Two's what you took.

(Mr. MATHIS walks in from the back, carrying a clip board.)

MATHIS

(To HARDWAY)

The truck's back there. Load up those two sacks of feed.

(HARDWAY moves off quickly. MATHIS looks at ALBERT)

You want see me about something?

ALBERT

Yes sir. I reckon I step outta line round here. Full of pride like my wife sayin, which...that's all over now. I'm sorry I give you -- and other folks -- cause to fret 'bout me paintin a house that ain't mine and I got no business doin' it.

MATHIS

You musta practiced that speech a couple of hours, didn't you?

ALBERT

I been over it in my mind, yes, sir.

MATHIS

You get a gold star. That's what they call a humble apology, ain't it?

ALBERT

I reckon so.

MATHIS

All right then. Let's just drop it. You want a pop?

ALBERT

No, sir, thank you. But it's been awhile, and I needin some other things on us furnish account -- salt meat, sack of flour, nails, coal oil -- I got a list here.

(He hands the list to MATHIS. HARDWAY comes back)

MATHIS

I can give you all these things, Albert, but not on no credit account. You pay cash. That's your penalty for bein' outta line. We'll talk about furnishing you next year if things go all right.

ALBERT

(thwarted, he is silent for a moment, then speaks flatly)

How I goin pay cash for things I needin' till we sell the cotton?

MATHIS

I'm sure you'll work something out.

(The WALL PHONE RINGS. MATHIS moves to answer)

Give him whatever he wants, Hardway. Cash only.

(He goes to the wall and picks up the telephone ear piece)

Mathis store. Yes. You finally got it, huh? You missed the train, Bobby D.

(During MATHIS's phone conversation, ALBERT goes to the shelves, picks up a gallon of paint and puts it on the counter. HARDWAY puts the can in a paper bag).

HARDWAY

Two dollars, even.

MATHIS

(On the phone)

I got something else. Yeh, but it come too late. I'll keep it in mind. Bye, Bobby.

(MATHIS hangs up. ALBERT has put two dollars on the counter, takes the bag and walks out. MATHIS comes to the counter. HARDWAY is holding the two dollars)

MATHIS

(takes the money)

What'd he buy?

HARDWAY

A gallon of white paint.

MATHIS

(Digesting that, he is flustered, near panic)

You go after and give him this money back!

HARDWAY

You want to give him his money?

MATHIS

Get the paint!

HARDWAY

Sir, I can't do that, Mr. Mathis! It's bought and paid for. Gone!

MATHIS

(tears up the dollar bills, throws them on the floor)

God damn son of a bitch! Making a fool out of me!

HARDWAY

Why you think that, Mr. Mathis?

MATHIS

Sweep that up! Never mind! Just— pick it up and give it to me!

HARDWAY

Yes, sir!

(He picks up the torn pieces. MATHIS takes them, crumples them, puts them in his pocket, goes out back. HARDWAY stands still and folds a paper bag, impressed by ALBERT's moxie, and how MATHIS lost it)

Morning AT THE COTTON GIN: the ROAR of the suction pipe, trucks, buzzers, bells make a steady din. A worker, silhouetted, swings the pipe, sucking up raw cotton. Farmers, wives, workers come and go, moving bales, stopping to talk, take a cigarette. HARDWAY, holding a clipboard, comes on from one side, MATHIS comes from the GIN office, opposite side.

MATHIS

(Shouting to Hardway over the noise)

Hardway! Get that number 3 off the scale. That blue truck's waiting for the gin!

(HARDWAY goes off. MATHIS watches impatiently. TITTLE comes out of the office, carrying papers.)

TITTLE

You mind my asking what you sold for?

MATHIS

Twenty-eight cents a pound.

TITTLE

Speculators pullin out. I came here expecting to get thirty-seven cents.

MATHIS

We all did. What'd you get, twenty-six?

TITTLE

Twenty-four.

(Hands MATHIS an envelope)

There's your cash. That covers your lien on Albert's and my crop.

(MATHIS looks inside. TITTLE gives him a pen)

Sign the receipt, please.

(He stares at MATHIS)

You feel good coming down so hard on one of the best farmers and most decent men in the county? Putting him to ruin?

MATHIS

You blaming me for cotton prices?

TITTLE

For destroying his crop year, cutting his credit, his chance for extra work – all over nothing!

MATHIS

He damn well thinks he's better'n you or me.

TITTLE

He's a damn sight better farmer than I am. So what? You'd be making twice as much money if you took advantage of what he knows about cotton.

MATHIS

Stuff he learned from some white men a long time ago.

TITTLE

Who cares where he learns? He wants to know. He went to visit those men last winter, changed our seed, took two inches off the space between rows, came back with all kinds of ideas and chemicals. That's why we set up those test acres. If he knows more than you about farming, use it! You ought to pray every negro in town knows more about something. You'd be a fat cat – gettin' that know-how at half price and selling them everything they need at double.

MATHIS

You hold Clayton so high, why didn't you paint that house? It's yours. You threw it all on him.

(That hits home. TITTLE is speechless)

How'd you do with those two test acres?

TITTLE

Picked two bales on them – a little under.

MATHIS

(Chuckles, pleased)

No yield prize for that, huh?

(ALBERT comes on. MATHIS walks right past Albert, heading for the trucks.)

TITTLE

I SEE THE FARMERS AT THE BIGBY GIN
WITH NO ILLUSIONS'ABOUT THE GAME WE'RE IN.
OUR LIFE'S A GAMBLE, WE KNOW, AND YET
WE THOUGHT WE HAD A HANDLE ON THE PRICE WE GET –

TITTLE, FARM FOLKS AND WORKERS
NO-FACE DEALERS IN A SMOKY ROOM
BUYING AND SELLING SUCCESS OR DOOM.
THEY DON'T GROW NOTHIN', NO SENSE OF SHAME.
WE ALL TAKE A LICKIN IN THE NUMBERS GAME.

I'VE BEEN LOST,
STUCK IN TIME.
BLOCKED AND CROSSED,
A WITNESS TO A CRIME.

TITTLE

(goes to ALBERT, hands him a kraft envelope)

I sold for twenty-four cents a pound. After the lien and debts, you cleared nineteen dollars and change. I'm real sorry, Albert. Let me check the test bales. I'll be right back.

(He goes into the Gin office)

(MATHIS comes back, heading toward ALBERT, who is in his path. For a moment ALBERT is unmoving; then he steps back)

MATHIS

(Stops)

You better watch every step you make. You right on the edge.

(MATHIS goes into the office. TITTLE comes out)

TITTLE, FARM FOLKS AND WORKERS
NOW EIGHTY SEVEN GROWERS AT THE BIGBEE GIN
ARE STUCK WITH HALF THE MONEY THAT THEY OUGHT TO
BRING IN.

AND LOTS OF HUNGRY VICTIMS, MEN WITH WIVES AND KIDS,
WILL QUIT THE COTTON COUNTRY WHEN THEY HIT THE
SKIDS,
WHEN THEY HIT THE SKIDS...

TITTLE

WE STAYED WITH COTTON CAUSE IT'S WHAT WE KNEW,
TOO SPENT TO LOOK FOR SOMETHING ELSE TO DO.
LANDLORDS AND TENANTS, WE'RE ALL THE SAME.
WE ALL TAKE A LICKIN IN THE NUMBERS GAME.

I'VE BEEN LOST,
STUCK IN TIME,
BLOCKED AND CROSSED,
AN ACCOMPLICE TO A CRIME.

TITTLE

(to ALBERT)

I can't deal with all this anymore. I'm goin' back to Missouri. I am.

(He walks out to the truck. ALBERT follows)

FARM FOLKS, WORKERS
IT'S A NUMBERS GAME.

*IN A SHACK: BLACKNESS. Two bright
FLASHLIGHTS come on, one pointed toward us.
Shoes pound and shuffle on loose floorboards. A
METAL CAN is kicked. A BOTTLE clatters and
rolls. DARK FIGURES, etched by the backlight,
move and flail in the dark, backlit shadows.
VOICES are curt, barked out, and vicious.*

VOICE 1: Shit! Tie him Tie him to the chair.

VOICE 2: Gimme that wire.

VOICE 1: You hold still!

VOICE 2: Get his feet. The rope!

VOICE 1: Tight! Break the glass. Now!

(A PANE of GLASS smashes and shatters. BLACKOUT)

ALBERT's HOUSE, A cold October morning. The sunlight is pale through a grey sky and fast clouds. Tree branches move in a gusty wind. The gate swings.

LOUELLA sits on the woodpile sipping from a tin cup, the shotgun alongside, tired even early in the day, in her 7th month. She seems turned inward on herself. ALBERT comes out the back door.

ALBERT

I'm goin' up to the barn and milk the cow, Then I fix that shoe on the mule.

LOUELLA

You took that cornbread and bog tea?

ALBERT

Yeah.

LOUELLA

Any more of them corns up in the barn?

ALBERT

Some – they for seed.

LOUELLA

I can grind em. Feedin me and my baby more important than seed. Where's Cooter?

ALBERT

I told you. He stayed up at Bessie. He be back soon.

LOUELLA

You shouldn't have let him go out there last night. You plenty fraid for him too, ain't you? You goin leave me here alone?

ALBERT

Nothing goin happen. I be right up yonder.

LOUELLA

Some mob come, what I do? Shoot them?

ALBERT

Nobody comin.

LOUELLA

You lying to my face. Yesterday they took that gallon of paint. There was a car, goin'back and forth up on the road while you cuttin stubble –come back a half hour ago, again. You didn't want Cooter here. You scared, ain't you?

ALBERT

There's no mob. Folks different when they gang up and full of licker. This Mr. Tittle's land. He don't go 'long with them.

LOUELLA

Mr. Title five hundred miles away. He couldn't stop them if he was right here.

ALBERT

That livestock man comin in his truck 'bout one hour. I 'spect he buy the calf.

LOUELLA

So! Today's the day! You still hopin that calf save your paint scheme – save your pride. The man of hope.

LOUELLA

I THINK YOU GOT A BURDEN,
AND I PRAY YOU PUT IT DOWN,
HEAR MY PLEA AND DON'T DO WHAT YOU DARE,
THEY GONNA PUT YOU AWAY
TO WHERE THERE'S NO RETURNING,
AND I NEVER, NEVER FIND YOU ANYWHERE.
BLACKBIRD, WILD BIRD,
FLAPPIN' WINGS AND SPOILIN' THE NEST.
BLACKBIRD CAN'T HEAR NOTHIN,
CAUSE HE THINK HE KNOW BEST.

ALBERT

(exasperated, he faces LOUELLA)

A MAN WITHOUT HOPE
LIKE A COW IN A STALL,
CHEWIN' CUD WITH NO PLACE TO GO.
A MAN WITHOUT DREAMS
LIKE A FIELD AIN'T BEEN PLANTED,
CHOKED WITH WEEDS AND THERE'S NOTHIN' TO HOE.
SCARECROW, SCARECROW –
ALL ALONE, A FOOL FOR THE BIRDS.
SCARECROW DON'T KNOW NOTHING,
CAUSE HE AIN'T GOT NO WORDS.

TOGETHER

WHAT MIGHT COME THERE'S NO WAY OF KNOWIN',
AUTUMN HERE AND THEM COLD WIND'S A-BLOWIN'.
CAN'T YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?
DON'T TURN THE OTHER WAY!
LISTEN TO ME, LOVE ME,
HEAR WHAT MY HEART SAY.

CAN'T YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?
DON'T TURN THE OTHER WAY!
LISTEN TO ME, LOVE ME,
HEAR WHAT MY HEART SAY.
CAN'T YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?

ALBERT

I'll come down here with the cattle man. He take the calf, I get cash money. I get that paint – and it's finished. All us hopin', prayin' and fightin be done! Over, less then a week! You got a clean white house to cook in. We got cash. Goin be fine, Mama. Fine!

LOUELLA

Just fine. Town full of riot, a house we cook in – and ashes I can smell already.

(ALBERT gives up, turns and goes up the lane. LOUELLA is grim. She looks around the yard, then turns and picks up the shotgun. She looks at it, then at the stall, filled with foreboding)

LOUELLA

ONE LEFT STANDING AT THE DOCK OF HEAVEN'S FERRY
ONE LONE SCARECROW IN THE CORN.
RED-EYE BLACKBIRD THINKS HER SCREECHIN' NECESSARY.
DEVILS WAITIN', SAY THE ANGELS ALMOST GONE.

(Going slowly to the stall)

ONE STILL MOVIN' THAT CAN TIP THE BALANCE OVER.
CONJURE WOMAN, SEE THE FIRE GROWING WILD.
LAST FEW MINUTES IN
THE SHADOW OF OCTOBER
ONE LEFT, LOOKIN' FOR A WAY TO SAVE THE CHILD.

(LOUELLA points the shotgun over the stall rail. She holds her breath and FIRES, jolted by the recoil. There is a MUFFLED BLEAT AND A SOUND OF COLLAPSE. In seconds ALBERT, terrified, comes running down the lane and around to the back)

ALBERT

Louella!!!

(He sees her, the shotgun still smoking in her hands. He runs to the stall, looks inside. It takes him a confused moment to comprehend what has happened)

ALBERT

What you done? You shoot that calf? You killed him!!

LOUELLA

(lets the shotgun fall, holds her pounded shoulder)

I told you stop, you won't listen. I got to do somethin.

ALBERT

How could you do that?

LOUELLA

They gonna come down here and beat and burn –
(She goes right on --)

ALBERT

They didn't come! They didn't do nothin here!

LOUELLA

You don't care. I got to stop you gettin' that paint, and save your life --

ALBERT

Save?! What you talkin' 'bout, save?

LOUELLA

You won't see they gonna bring you down!

ALBERT

Not them. You brung me down –

(Shaking her)

You -- brung – me -- down!

LOUELLA

(backs up, and almost falls near the wood pile, crying)

I'm 'fraid, can't you see? What I do if you gone? What I do with a new baby? How I goin live?

ALBERT

Oh, Jesus, Lord, don't. It's over. They want to have their way, they got it!

(COOTER appears from behind the outhouse. ALBERT is stunned. COOTER looks grotesque. White paint, almost dry now, has been spilled and poured over his head. His face and arms have been smeared with it, his clothes stiff with paint, streaked and criss-crossed by dark lines where he was tied up. LOUELLA gasps)

LOUELLA

Cooter, where you been? Oh, my God!

ALBERT

What happen? You all right, son? Are you hurt?

COOTER

I be all right. I just...messed up, and ashamed.

ALBERT

Who done this, Cooter? Who?

COOTER

Some white boys. I don't know them. They took me to that old shack by the bridge last night. Tie me on a chair with wires. Then they dump paint on me, and smear it all over. Left me 'lone in there. I couldn't do nothing.

ALBERT

You there all night?

COOTER

I couldn't get loose in the dark – couldn't see, 'fraid I fall on rusty nails or stuff.

(His voice trails off. He looks up at ALBERT)

I got loose when light come, and I hid in them woods till I know you home.

(He looks back at the stall)

I heard a shot. The calf dead?

(ALBERT glances at LOUELLA, nods yes. He looks at COOTER, holds him tight)

ALBERT

Mama, there's turpentine and rags in that shed. Will you clean him up? Now.

(LOUELLA takes COOTER into the shed. ALBERT picks up the shotgun, and sinks onto the woodpile. He looks around the yard, as if noting all the calamities that surround him. He shakes his head)

ALBERT

RAGGEDY MAN,
BOTTOM TORE OFF, AND THE STRAW FALLING OUT ON THE
GROUND.

I COULDN'T GET LOWER DOWN.

WHAT AM I FOR

WHEN I'M SIX INCHES TALL?

CRAWL IN THE DIRT WITH MY BACK TO THE WALL,
AND I AIN'T GOT THE WILL TO PUSH OFF.

I BEEN TOSSED OUT IN THE RIVER,
AND I'M TOO SPENT TO MAKE FOR THE SHORE.
I CAN'T PUSH AGAINST THE CURRENT,
AND I DON'T WANT TO FIGHT ANY MORE.

WHEN YOU LOSE A CROP, YOU LOSE IT ALL
LIKE THE WELL OF LIFE IS DRIED.
AND THE RAIN OR DROUGHT OR WEEVIL
MAKE YOU EVIL SICK INSIDE.
WHEN DISEASES TAKE YOUR STOCK,
OR THE SOIL IS HARD AS ROCK.
THEN, COME APRIL, FOOLISH MEN,
WE GO DO IT ALL AGAIN.
WE GO DO IT ALL AGAIN!

MATHIS

(Coming from the lane)

Albert! You back there?

(ALBERT's pulse pounds at the sound of MATHIS's voice. He grabs the shotgun and holds it ready. MATHIS comes around to the back, and freezes in his tracks.)

MATHIS

Jesus Christ, put that down! If you mean to shoot me, you'll be hanging from a rope before Christmas. If you don't, don't let me think it even five seconds, or I'll be back with ten men ready to send you to hell before supper. Put it down!

ALBERT

(lowers the gun, puts it aside)

I didn't know what you come here for.

MATHIS

I sure didn't come alone to shoot you. I heard about your boy being grabbed by some gang last night. I want you to know I had nothing to do with that.

ALBERT

Seem you got...somethin to do with it. Who stopped that school bus? Who got the town worked up? You the leader here.

MATHIS

People get mad when things go out of control.

ALBERT

Who I turn to if you get out of control?

MATHIS

You control your mouth! I didn't come here to argue. I came here to ask you a question about your cotton. You want to talk?

(ALBERT nods)

What did you do to get so much lint cotton on your two test acres?

ALBERT

(Trying to understand what Mathis means)

Wasn't much. We picked less'n two bales.

MATHIS

But you got almost 15 percent more lint cotton per pound out of those test bales. Fourteen point seven. You didn't know that?

ALBERT

No.

MATHIS

You left before the gin office had that. I asked, they told me. It pissed me off too. If I had that kinda return on my 200 acres, I'd've come out all right. What'd you put on those two acres –? Special seeds? You spray for boll worm?

ALBERT

I spray my own mixes – different pesticides, some fruit liquors, other stuff .

MATHIS

What do you mean, “fruit liquors”? What’s “other stuff?”

(ALBERT is silent)

You better speak up, boy, maybe get you some cash money. You get nowhere acting dumb.

(LOUELLA and COOTER appear in the shed doorway)

ALBERT

I can't answer questions on chemicals and business if you want me be a schoolboy.

MATHIS

You give me sass, I'll slap your face and walk right the hell out of here.

ALBERT

I reckon there's something you want, and maybe you get it, which that sure ain't goin happen if you mad and slappin', and rushin' up the road.

MATHIS

I'll give you three dollars a gallon. Four!

ALBERT

I don't have it! I use what I had, and I ain't sure what cause that yield. What you lookin for, Mr. Mathis?

MATHIS

(Pauses, and reveals his big offer)

Mr. Tittle's gone. I want you to make a hundred-acre crop on my land next year, fifty-fifty shares, you make the decisions – seed, space between rows, pesticides – everything. Push yield up...10 percent you get a hundred dollar bonus.

ALBERT

Mr. Tittle be back at least one season. I best stay here this year.

MATHIS

Then just handle my spray program. I pay for chemicals. Got a John Deere tractor and tools on order – to rent out. When it's available, you can use it here, free, for one year. You can do a lot of acres with that. For me, I want you to go after that extra yield.

ALBERT

You trust me do it?

MATHIS

I think you're an honest man, yes.

ALBERT

I glad you say that, but it don't fit right.

MATHIS

Go to hell! You're jamming me. And you're gonna be goddam sorry.
(He turns to go)

ALBERT

Mr. Mathis, please. I try and hold off trouble. Let me see if some way we work this out. I get you that yield – I can do it.

(Takes a moment, then...)

You put ten gallons of white paint on my credit account at the store tomorrow.

MATHIS

(Eyes narrowing, he takes his own time)

I thought you'd get to that.

(Pause)

You'll handle my spray program just like I said?

ALBERT

Four dollars a gallon, like you said. If them sprays work, you be the only dealer selling it in three counties!

MATHIS

In the whole state. If Mr. Tittle wants to get this old tenant house painted, and he wants you to do it, I reckon I could sell the paint for it.

ALBERT

Also goin need a couple of doors, turpentine, nails, tar paper for the roof – and some other things like cheese – and shoes. I pay for it when I got the money, you know that.

MATHIS

Up to \$150 – if Mr. Tittle guarantees it.

ALBERT

That's fair.

MATHIS

I'm gonna have to do some explaining – so folks understand what's going on here.

ALBERT

Good thinkin on that too.

MATHIS

All right. We got a deal.

ALBERT

Yes, sir.

MATHIS

I want you to know I'm not doing this for nothing but selfish reasons. I'm no damn abolitionist!

(He spits in a handkerchief)

They call this eating crow. You know what that is?

ALBERT

Yeah, I done lot of it – my whole life. We called it somethin else.

(MATHIS measures him, waves his finger as a caution, turns, and leaves the yard. LOUELLA and COOTER come out)

ALBERT

Hoo-eee! How bout that? Mama, I know I push you all summer long – set in my mind. Didn't want to hear how scared you was –'fraid I catch it myself. I'm sorry 'bout all that. I reckon my business with Mr. Mathis ain't goin be no easy time. Likely we both be eatin more crows.

(He looks at the house)

And I got to say, paintin this house don't seem so extra fine like it did a while back. But we get on with it. Woman, Louella, you want to go 'way, and, be quit of me? I sure hope you don't. I like the way you look, how you do. I need you here. I want you stay with me and Cooter and that new child –

LOUELLA

You hush now. No way I goin leave you. But I will go anywhere from here to the moon if you leadin' the way.

(filled with love and pride, and relief)

You my Prince, Albert Clayton.

*(They hug tight. ALBERT kisses her. MUSIC swells.
People in the choir come on, as in the play's opening)*

CHOIR

SOON THE DAYS GET LONGER
AND THE LIGHT IS STRONGER
I CAN HEAR A HUMMING.
ARE THE ANGELS COMING?

ALBERT & LOUELLA

SOON THE DAYS GET LONGER
AND THE LIGHT IS STRONGER
I CAN HEAR A HUMMING.
ARE THEY ANGELS...?
THEY'RE COMING!

ALL

AND YOU GOT IT DEEP INSIDE,
JUST A LITTLE BIT OF PRIDE!
JUST A LITTLE BIT OF PRIDE!

ALBERT

MY WIFE GOT A RIGHT TO SOME RIBBONS AND BOWS.
MY BOY GOT A RIGHT TO SOME CLEAN SUNDAY CLOTHES.

LOUELLA

GOT A RIGHT TO MY HAIR, TO THE SHAPE OF MY NOSE,
TO THE STRENGTH IN MY ARM, TO THE THINGS WHICH I GROWS.

ALBERT
I'M A NATURAL MAN, GOT A RIGHT TO STAND TALL,

LOUELLA
AND TO DRESS MYSELF UP OR THROW PAINT ON THAT WALL.

BOTH
AND TO DO WHAT'S MY RIGHT IS THE BEST THING OF ALL!

ALBERT
I GOT A RIGHT,

LOUELLA
AND IT'S RIGHT.

ALBERT
I'M A MAN –

LOUELLA
AND I CAN!

COMPANY
I AIN'T STARTING NO WARS.
I AIN'T BREAKING NO LAWS.
I GOT A RIGHT.
I HAVE FOUND MY WAY!

END OF PLAY