

*To the memory of*  
MEDGAR EVERE,  
*and his widow and his children,*  
*and*  
*to the memory of the dead children of Birmingham.*

*notes for*  
**BLUES**

THIS PLAY HAS BEEN on my mind—has been bugging me—for several years. It is unlike anything else I've ever attempted in that I remember vividly the first time it occurred to me; for in fact, it did not occur to me, but to Elia Kazan. Kazan asked me at the end of 1958 if I would be interested in working in the Theatre. It was a generous offer, but I did not react with great enthusiasm because I did not then, and don't now, have much respect for what goes on in the American Theatre. I am not convinced that it *is* a Theatre; it seems to me a series, merely, of commercial speculations, stale, repetitious, and timid. I certainly didn't see much future for

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me in that frame-work, and I was profoundly unwilling to risk my morale and my talent—my life—in endeavors which could only increase a level of frustration already dangerously high.

Nevertheless, the germ of the play persisted. It is based, very distantly indeed, on the case of Emmett Till—the Negro youth who was murdered in Mississippi in 1955. The murderer in this case was acquitted. (His brother, who helped him do the deed, is now a deputy sheriff in Ruleville, Mississippi.) After his acquittal, he recounted the facts of the murder—for one cannot refer to his performance as a confession—to William Bradford Huie, who wrote it all down in an article called “Wolf Whistle.” I do not know why the case pressed on my mind so hard—but it would not let me go. I absolutely dreaded committing myself to writing a play—there were enough people around already telling me that I couldn’t write novels—but I began to see that my fear of the form masked a much deeper fear. That fear was that I would never be able to draw a valid portrait of the murderer. In life, obviously, such people baffle and terrify me and, with one part of my mind at least, I hate them and would be willing to kill them. Yet, with another part of my mind, I am aware that no man is a villain in his own eyes. Something in the man knows—*must* know—that what he is doing is evil; but in order to accept the knowledge the man would have to change. What is ghastly and really almost hopeless in our racial situation now is that the crimes we have committed are so great and so unspeakable that the acceptance of this knowledge would lead, literally, to madness. The human being, then, in order to protect himself, closes his eyes, compulsively repeats his crimes, and enters a spiritual darkness which no one can describe.

But if it is true, and I believe it is, that all men are brothers, then we have the duty to try to understand this wretched man; and while we probably cannot hope to liberate him, begin working toward the liberation of his children. For we, the American people, have created him, he is our servant; it is we who put the cattle-prodder in his hands, and we are responsible for the crimes that he commits. It is we who have locked him in the prison of his color.

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It is we who have persuaded him that Negroes are worthless human beings, and that it is his sacred duty, as a white man, to protect the honor and purity of his tribe. It is we who have forbidden him, on pain of exclusion from the tribe, to accept his beginnings, when he and black people loved each other, and rejoice in them, and use them; it is we who have made it mandatory—honorable—that white father should deny black son. These are grave crimes indeed, and we have committed them and continue to commit them in order to make money.

The play then, for me, takes place in Plaguetown, U.S.A., now. The plague is race, the plague is our concept of Christianity: and this raging plague has the power to destroy every human relationship. I once took a short trip with Medgar Evers to the back-woods of Mississippi. He was investigating the murder of a Negro man by a white storekeeper which had taken place months before. Many people talked to Medgar that night, in dark cabins, with their lights out, in whispers; and we had been followed for many miles out of Jackson, Mississippi, not by a lunatic with a gun, but by state troopers. I will never forget that night, as I will never forget Medgar—who took me to the plane the next day. We promised to see each other soon. When he died, something entered into me which I cannot describe, but it was then that I resolved that nothing under heaven would prevent me from getting this play done. We are walking in terrible darkness here, and this is one man's attempt to bear witness to the reality and the power of light.

James Baldwin  
New York, April, 1964

Cast of Characters  
(in order of appearance)

MERIDIAN HENRY	a Negro minister
TOM	
KEN	
ARTHUR	
JUANITA	Negro students
LORENZO	
PETE	
MOTHER HENRY	Meridian Henry's mother
LYLE BRITTEN	a white store-owner
JO BRITTEN	Lyle's wife
PARNELL JAMES	editor of the local newspaper
RICHARD	Meridian Henry's son
PAPA D.	owner of a juke joint
HAZEL	
LILLIAN	
SUSAN	
RALPH	
ELLIS	white townspeople
REV. PHELPS	
GEORGE	
THE STATE	
COUNSEL FOR THE BEREAVED	
Congregation of Rev. Henry's church, Pallbearers, Blacktown, Whitetown	

## *Act I*

MULTIPLE SET, the skeleton of which, in the first two acts, is the Negro church, and, in the third act, the courthouse. The church and the courthouse are on opposite sides of a southern street; the audience should always be aware, during the first two acts, of the dome of the courthouse and the American flag. During the final act, the audience should always be aware of the steeple of the church, and the cross.

The church is divided by an aisle. The street door upstage faces the audience. The pulpit is downstage, at an angle, so that the minister is simultaneously addressing the congregation and the audience. In the third act, the pulpit is replaced by the witness stand.

This aisle also functions as the division between WHITETOWN and BLACKTOWN. The action among the blacks takes place on one side of the stage, the action among the whites on the opposite side of the stage—which is to be remembered during the third act, which takes place, of course, in a segregated courtroom.

This means that RICHARD's room, LYLE's store, PAPA D.'s joint, JO's kitchen, etc., are to exist prin-

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cipally by suggestion, for these shouldn't be allowed to obliterate the skeleton, or, more accurately, perhaps, the framework, suggested above.

For the murder scene, the aisle functions as a gulf. The stage should be built out, so that the audience reacts to the enormity of this gulf, and so that RICHARD, when he falls, falls out of sight of the audience, like a stone, into the pit.

In the darkness we hear a shot.

Lights up slowly on LYLE, staring down at the ground. He looks around him, bends slowly and picks up RICHARD's body as though it were a sack. He carries him upstage drops him.

LYLE: And may every nigger like this nigger end like this nigger—  
face down in the weeds!

(Exits. BLACKTOWN: *The church. A sound of mourning begins. Meridian, Tom, Ken and Arthur.*)

MERIDIAN: No, no, no! You have to say it like you mean it—the way they really say it: nigger, nigger, nigger! Nigger! Tom, the way *you* saying it, it sounds like you just *might* want to make friends. And that's not the way they sound out there. Remember all that's happened. Remember we having a funeral here—tomorrow night. Remember why. Go on, hit it again.

TOM: You dirty nigger, you no-good black bastard, what you doing down here, anyway?

MERIDIAN: That's much better. Much, much better. Go on.

TOM: Hey, boy, where's your mother? I bet she's lying up in bed, just a-pumping away, ain't she, boy?

MERIDIAN: *That's* the way they sound!

TOM: Hey, boy, how much does your mother charge? How much does your sister charge?

KEN: How much does your wife charge?

MERIDIAN: Now you got it. You really got it now. That's them.

Keep walking, Arthur. *Keep walking!*

TOM: You get your ass off these streets from around here, boy, or  
•we going to do us some cutting—we're going to cut that big,  
black thing off of you, you hear?

MERIDIAN: Why you all standing around there like that? Go on and  
get you a nigger. Go on!

(*A scuffle.*)

MERIDIAN: All right. All right! Come on, now. Come on.

(*Ken steps forward and spits in Arthur's face.*)

ARTHUR: You black s.o.b., what the hell do you think you're doing?  
You mother—!

MERIDIAN: Hey, hold it! Hold it! Hold it!

(*Meridian wipes the boy's face. They are all trembling.*)

(*Mother Henry enters.*)

MOTHER HENRY: Here they come. And it looks like they had a time.

(*Juanita, Lorenzo, Pete, Jimmy, all Negro, carry placards, enter, exhausted and dishevelled, wounded; Pete is weeping. The placards bear such legends as Freedom Now, We Want The Murderer, One Man, One Vote, etc.*)

JUANITA: We shall overcome!

LORENZO: We shall not be moved! (*Laughs*) We were moved to-night, though. Some of us has been moved to tears.

MERIDIAN: Juanita, what happened?

JUANITA: Oh, just another hometown Saturday night.

MERIDIAN: Come on, Pete, come on, old buddy. Stop it. Stop it.

LORENZO: I don't blame him. I do not blame the cat. You feel like a damn fool standing up there, letting them white mothers beat on your ass—shoot, if I had my way, just once—stop crying, Pete, goddammit!

JUANITA: Lorenzo, you're in church.

LORENZO: Yeah. Well, I wish to God I was in an arsenal. I'm sorry, Meridian, Mother Henry—I don't mean that for you. I don't understand you. I don't understand Meridian here. It was his son, it was your grandson, Mother Henry, that got killed, butchered! Just last week, and yet, here you sit—in this—the house of this damn almighty God who don't care what happens to nobody, unless, of course, they're white. Mother Henry, I got a lot of respect for you and all that, and for Meridian, too, but that white man's God is white. It's that damn white God that's been lynching us and burning us and castrating us and raping our women and robbing us of everything that makes a man a man for all these hundreds of years. Now, why we sitting around here, in His house? If I could get my hands on Him, I'd pull Him out of heaven and drag Him through this town at the end of a rope.

MERIDIAN: No, you wouldn't.

LORENZO: I wouldn't? Yes, I would. Oh, yes, I would.

JUANITA: And then you wouldn't be any better than they are.

LORENZO: I don't want to be better than they are, why should I be better than they are? And better at what? Better at being a doormat, better at being a corpse? Sometimes I just don't know. We've been demonstrating—*non-violently*—for more than a year now and all that's happened is that now they'll let us into that crummy library downtown which was obsolete in 1897 and where nobody goes anyway; who in this town reads books? For that we paid I don't know how many thousands of dollars in fines, Jerome is still in the hospital, and we all know that Ruthie is never again going to be the swinging little chick she used to be. Big deal. Now we're picketing that great movie palace downtown where I wouldn't go on a bet; I can live without Yul Brynner and Doris Day,

thank you very much. And we still can't get licensed to be electricians or plumbers, we still can't walk through the park, our kids still can't use the swimming pool in town. We still can't vote, we can't even get registered. Is it worth it? And these people trying to kill us, too? And we ain't even got no guns. The cops ain't going to protect us. They call up the people and tell them where we are and say, "Go get them! They ain't going to do nothing to you—they just dumb niggers!"

MERIDIAN: Did they arrest anybody tonight?

PETE: No, they got their hands full now, trying to explain what Richard's body was doing in them weeds.

LORENZO: It was wild. You know, all the time we was ducking them bricks and praying to God we'd get home before somebody got killed—(Laughs) I had a jingle going through my mind, like if I was a white man, dig? and I had to wake up every morning singing to myself, "Look at the happy nigger, he doesn't give a damn, thank God I'm not a nigger—"

TOGETHER: "—Good Lord, perhaps I am."

JUANITA: You've gone crazy, Lorenzo. They've done it. You have been unfitted for the struggle.

MERIDIAN: I cannot rest until they bring my son's murderer to trial. That man who killed my son.

LORENZO: But he killed a nigger before, as I know all of you know. Nothing never happened. Sheriff just shovelled the body into the ground and forgot about it.

MERIDIAN: Parnell will help me.

PETE: Meridian, you know that Mister Parnell ain't going to let them arrest his ass-hole buddy. I'm sorry, Mother Henry!

MOTHER HENRY: That's all right, son.

MERIDIAN: But I think that Parnell has proven to be a pretty good friend to all of us. He's the only white man in this town

who's ever *really* stuck his neck out in order to do—to do right. He's *fought* to bring about this trial—I can't tell you how hard he's fought. If it weren't for him, there'd be much less hope.

LORENZO: I guess I'm just not as nice as you are. I don't trust as many people as you trust.

MERIDIAN: We can't afford to become too distrustful, Lorenzo.

LORENZO: We can't afford to be too trusting, either. See, when a white man's a *good* white man, he's good because he wants *you* to be good. Well, sometimes I just might want to be *bad*. I got as much right to be bad as anybody else.

MERIDIAN: No, you don't.

LORENZO: Why not?

MERIDIAN: Because you know better.

(Parnell enters.)

PARNELL: Hello, my friends. I bring glad tidings of great joy. Is that the way the phrase goes, Meridian?

JUANITA: Parnell!

PARNELL: I can't stay. I just came to tell you that a warrant's being issued for Lyle's arrest.

JUANITA: They're going to arrest him? Big Lyle Britten? I'd love to know how you managed *that*.

PARNELL: Well, Juanita, I am not a *good* man, but I have my little ways.

JUANITA: And a whole lot of folks in this town, baby, are not going to be talking to you no more, for days and days and days.

PARNELL: I hope that you all will. I may have no other company. I think I should go to Lyle's house to warn him. After all, I brought it about and he is a friend of mine—and then I have to get the announcement into my paper.

JUANITA: So it is true.

PARNELL: Oh, yes. It's true.

MERIDIAN: When is he being arrested?

PARNELL: Monday morning. Will you be up later, Meridian? I'll drop by if you are—if I may.

MERIDIAN: Yes, I'll be up.

PARNELL: All right, then. I'll trundle by. Good night all. I'm sorry I've got to run.

MERIDIAN: Good night.

JUANITA: Thank you, Parnell.

PARNELL: Don't thank me, dear Juanita. I only acted—as I believed I had to act. See you later, Meridian.

(Parnell exits.)

MERIDIAN: I wonder if they'll convict him.

JUANITA: Convict him. Convict him. You're asking for heaven on earth. After all, they haven't even *arrested* him yet. And, anyway—why should they convict him? Why him? He's no worse than all the others. He's an honorable tribesman and he's defended, with blood, the honor and purity of his tribe!

(WHITEHORN: *Lyle holds his infant son up above his head.*)  
LYLE: Hey old pisser. You hear me, sir? I expect you to control your bladder like a gentleman whenever your Papa's got you on his knee.

(Jo enters.)

He got a mighty big bladder, too, for such a little fellow.  
JO: I'll tell the world he didn't steal it.

LYLE: You mighty sassy tonight.  
(Hands her the child.)

Ain't that right, old pisser? Don't you reckon your Mama's getting kind of sassy? And what do you reckon I should do about it?

(*Jo is changing the child's diapers.*)

JO: You tell your Daddy he can start sleeping in his own bed nights instead of coming grunting in here in the wee small hours of the morning.

LYLE: And you tell your Mama if she was getting her sleep like she should be, so she can be alert every instant to your needs, little fellow, she wouldn't know what time I come—grunting in.

JO: I got to be alert to *your* needs, too. I think.

LYLE: Don't you go starting to imagine things. I just been over to the store. That's all.

JO: Till three and four o'clock in the morning?

LYLE: Well, I got plans for the store, I think I'm going to try to start branching out, you know, and I been—making plans.

JO: You thinking of branching out *now*? Why, Lyle, you know we ain't hardly doing no business *now*. Weren't for the country folks come to town every Saturday, I don't know where we'd be. This ain't no time to be branching *out*. We barely holding on.

LYLE: Shoot, the niggers'll be coming back, don't you worry. They'll get over this foolishness presently. They already weary of having to drive forty-fifty miles across the state line to get their groceries—a lot of them ain't even got cars.

JO: Those that don't have cars have *friends* with cars.

LYLE: Well, friends get weary, too. Joel come in the store a couple of days ago—

JO: Papa D.? He don't count. You can always wrap him around your little finger.

LYLE: Listen, will you? He come in the store a couple of days ago to buy a sack of flour and he *told* me, he say, "The niggers is tired running all over creation to put some food on the table. Ain't nobody going to keep on driving no forty-fifty miles

to buy no sack of flour—what you mean when you say Joel don't count?

JO: I don't mean nothing. But there's something wrong with anybody when his own people don't think much of him.

LYLE: Joel's got good sense, is all. I think more of him than I think of a lot of white men, that's a fact. And he knows what's right for his people, too.

JO (*Puts son in crib*): Well. Selling a sack of flour once a week ain't going to send this little one through college, neither. (A pause) In what direction were you planning to branch out?

LYLE: I was thinking of trying to make the store more—well, more colorful. Folks like color—

JO: You mean, niggers like color.

LYLE: Dammit, Jo, I ain't in business just to sell to niggers! Listen to me, can't you? I thought I'd dress it up, get a new front, put some neon signs in—and, you know, we got more space in there than we use. Well, why don't we open up a line of ladies' clothes? Nothing too fancy, but I bet you it would bring in a lot more business.

JO: I don't know. Most of the ladies I know buy their clothes at Benton's, on Decatur Street.

LYLE: The niggers don't—anyway, we could sell them the same thing. The white ladies, I mean—

JO: No. It wouldn't be the same.

LYLE: Why not? A dress is a dress.

JO: But it sounds better if you say you got it on Decatur Street! At Benton's. Anyway—where would you get the money for this branching out?

LYLE: I can get a loan from the bank. I'll get old Parnell to co-sign with me, or have him get one of his rich friends to co-sign with me.

JO: Parnell called earlier—you weren't at the store today.

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LYLE: What do you mean, I wasn't at the store?

JO: Because Parnell called earlier and said he tried to get you at the store and that there wasn't any answer.

LYLE: There wasn't any business. I took a walk.

JO: He said he's got bad news for you.

LYLE: What kind of bad news?

JO: He didn't say. He's coming by here this evening to give it to you himself.

LYLE: What do you think it is?

JO: I guess they're going to arrest you?

LYLE: No, they ain't. They ain't gone crazy.

JO: I think they might. We had so much trouble in this town lately and it's been in all the northern newspapers—and now, this—this dead boy—

LYLE: They ain't got no case.

JO: No. But you was the last person to see that crazy boy—alive. And now everybody's got to thinking again—about that other time.

LYLE: That was self defense. The Sheriff said so himself. Hell, I ain't no murderer. They're just some things I don't believe is right.

JO: Nobody never heard no more about the poor little girl—his wife.

LYLE: No. She just disappeared.

JO: You never heard no more about her at all?

LYLE: How would I hear about her more than anybody else? No, she just took off—I believe she had people in Detroit some place where I reckon that's where she went.

JO: I felt sorry for her. She looked so lost those last few times I saw her, wandering around town—and she was so young. She was a pretty little thing.

LYLE: She looked like a pickaninny to me. Like she was too young to be married. I reckon she was too young for him.

JO: It happened in the store.

LYLE: Yes.

JO: How people talked! That's what scares me now.

LYLE: Talk don't matter. I hope you didn't believe what you heard.

JO: A lot of people did. I reckon a lot of people still do.

JO: You don't believe it?

LYLE: You know—Monday morning—we'll be married

JO: No. (A pause) You know—Monday morning—we'll be married

one whole year!

LYLE: Well, can't nobody talk about us. That little one there ain't but two months old.  
(*The door bell rings.*)

JO: That's Parnell.

(Exits.)

(*Lytle walks up and down, looks into the crib. Jo and Parnell enter.*)

LYLE: It's about time you showed your face in here, you old rascal! You been so busy over there with the niggers, you ain't got time for white folks no more. You sure you ain't got some nigger wench over there on the other side of town? Because, I declare—!

PARNELL: I apologize for your husband, Mrs. Britten, I really do. In fact, I'm afraid I must deplore your taste in men. If I had only seen you first, dear lady, and if you had found me charming, how much suffering I might have prevented! You got anything in this house to drink? Don't tell me you haven't, we'll both need one. Sit down.

LYLE: Bring on the booze, old lady.

(*Jo brings ice, glasses, etc.; pours drinks.*)  
What you been doing with yourself?

Act One / Blues for Mister Charlie  
PARNELL: Well, I seem to have switched territories. I haven't been defending colored people this week, I've been defending you. I've just left the Chief of Police.

LYLE: How is the old bastard?  
PARNELL: He seems fine. But he really is an old bastard. Lyle—he's issuing a warrant for your arrest.

LYLE: He's going to arrest *me*? You mean, he believes I killed that boy?

PARNELL: The question of what he believes doesn't enter into it. This case presents several very particular circumstances and these circumstances force him to arrest you. I think we can take it for granted that he wouldn't arrest you if he could think of some way not to. He wouldn't arrest anybody except blind beggars and old colored women if he could think of some way not to—he's bird-brained and chicken-hearted and big-assed. The charge is murder.

JO: Murder!

LYLE: Murder?

PARNELL: Murder.

LYLE: I ain't no murderer. You know that.

PARNELL: I also know that somebody killed the boy. Somebody put two slugs in his belly and dumped his body in the weeds beside the railroad track just outside of town. Somebody did all that. We pay several eminent, bird-brained, chicken-hearted, big-assed people quite a lot of money to discourage such activity. They never do, in fact, discourage it, but, still—we must find the somebody who killed that boy. And you, my friend, according to the testimony of Joel Davis, otherwise known as Papa D., were the last person to see the boy alive. It is also known that you didn't like him—to say the least.

LYLE: Nobody liked him.

PARNELL: Ah. But it isn't nobody that killed him. *Somebody* killed him. We must find the somebody. And since you were the last person to see him alive, we must arrest you in order to clear you—or convict you.

LYLE: They'll never convict me.

LYLE: Well, I seem to have switched territories. I haven't been defending colored people this week, I've been defending you. I've just left the Chief of Police.

PARNELL: As to that, you may be right. But you are going to be arrested.

LYLE: When?

PARNELL: Monday morning. Of course, you can always flee to Mexico.

LYLE: Why should I run away?

PARNELL: I wasn't suggesting that you should run away. If you did, I should urge your wife to divorce you at once, and marry me.

JO: Ah, if that don't get him out of town in a hurry, I don't know what will! The man's giving you your chance, honey. You going to take it?

LYLE: Stop talking foolishness. It looks bad for me, I guess. I swear, I don't know what's come over the folks in this town!

PARNELL: It doesn't look good. In fact, if the boy had been white, it would look very, very bad, and your behind would be in the jail house now. What do you mean, you don't understand what's come over the people in this town?

LYLE: Raising so much fuss about a nigger—and a northern nigger at that.

PARNELL: He was born here. He's Reverend Meridian Henry's son.

LYLE: Well, he'd been gone so long, he might as well have been a northern nigger. Went North and got ruined and come back here to make trouble—and they tell me he was a dope fiend, too. What's all this fuss about? He probably got killed by some other nigger—they do it all the time—but ain't nobody

even thought about arresting one of *them*. Has niggers suddenly got to be *holy* in this town?

PARNELL: Oh, Lyle, I'm not here to discuss the sanctity of niggers. I just came to tell you that a warrant's being issued for your arrest. You may think that a colored boy who gets ruined in the North and then comes home to try to pull himself together deserves to die—I don't.

LYLE: You sound like you think I got something against colored folks—but I don't. I never have, not in all my life. But I'll be damned if I'll mix with them. That's all. I don't believe in it, and that's *all*. I don't want no big buck nigger lying up next to Josephine and that's where all this will lead to and you know it as well as I do! I'm against it and I'll do anything I have to do to stop it, yes, I will!

PARNELL: Suppose *he*—my godson there—decides to marry a Chinese girl. You know, there are an awful lot of Chinese girls in the world—I bet you didn't know that. Well, there are. Let's just say that he grows up and looks around at all the pure white women, and—saving your presence, ma'am—they make him want to puke and he decides to marry a pure Chinese girl instead. What would you do? Shoot him in order to prevent it? Or would you shoot her?

LYLE: Parnell, you're my buddy. You've *always* been my buddy. You know more about me than anybody else in the world. What's come over you? You—you ain't going to turn against me, are you?

PARNELL: No. No, I'll never turn against you. I'm just trying to make you think.

LYLE: I notice you didn't marry no Chinese girl. You just never got married at all. Women been trying to saddle old Parnell for I don't know how long—I don't know what you got, old buddy, but I'll be damned if you don't know how to use it!

What about this present one—Loretta—you reckon you going to marry her?

PARNELL: I doubt it.

JO: Parnell, you're just awful. Awful!

PARNELL: I think I'm doing her a favor. She can do much better than me. I'm just a broken-down newspaper editor—the editor of a newspaper which *nobody* reads—in a dim, grim backwater.

LYLE: I thought you liked it here.

JO: Parnell, I don't like it here. But I love it here. Or maybe I don't. I don't know. I must go.

LYLE: What's your hurry? Why don't you stay and have pot-luck with us?

PARNELL: Loretta is waiting. I must have pot-luck with *her*. And then I have errands on the other side of town.

LYLE: What they saying over there? I reckon they praying day and night for my ass to be put in a sling, ain't they? Shoot, I don't care.

PARNELL: Don't. Life's much simpler that way. Anyway, Papa D.'s the only one doing a whole lot of talking.

JO: I told you he wasn't no good, Lyle, I told you!

LYLE: I don't know what's got into him! And we been knowing each other all these years! He must be getting old. You go back and tell him I said he's got it all *confused*—about me and that boy. Tell him you talked to me and that I said he must have made some mistake.

PARNELL: I'll drop in tomorrow, if I may. Good night, Jo, and thank you. Good night, Lyle.

LYLE: Good night, old buddy.

JO: I'll see you to the door.

(Jo and Parnell exit. Lyle walks up and down.)

LYLE: Well! Ain't that something! But they'll never convict me. Never in this world. (*Looks into crib*) Ain't that right, old pisser?

(BLACKTOWN: *The church, as before.*)

LORENZO: And when they bring him to trial, I'm going to be there every day—right across the street in that courthouse—where they been dealing death out to us for all these years.

MOTHER HENRY: I used to hate them, too, son. But I don't hate them no more. They too pitiful.

MERIDIAN: No witnesses.

JUANITA: Meridian. Ah, Meridian.

MOTHER HENRY: You remember that song he used to like so much?

MERIDIAN: I sing because I'm happy.

JUANITA: I sing because I'm free.

PETE: For his eye is on the sparrow—

LORENZO: And I know he watches—me.

(*Music, very faint*)

JUANITA: There was another song he liked—a song about a prison and the light from a train that shone on the prisoners every night at midnight. I can hear him now: Lord, you wake up in the morning. You hear the ding-dong ring—

MOTHER HENRY: He had a beautiful voice.

LORENZO: Well, he was pretty tough up there in New York—till he got busted.

MERIDIAN: And came running home.

MOTHER HENRY: Don't blame yourself, honey. Don't blame yourself!

JUANITA: You go a-marching to the table, you see the same old thing—

JIMMY: All I'm going to tell you: knife, a fork, and a pan—

(*Music stronger*)

PETE: And if you say a thing about it—

LORENZO: You are in trouble with the man.

(*Lights dim in the church. We discover Richard, standing in his room, singing. This number is meant to make vivid the Richard who was much loved on the Apollo Theatre stage in Harlem, the Richard who was a rising New York star.*)

MERIDIAN: No witnesses!

(*Near the end of the song, Mother Henry enters, carrying a tray with milk, sandwiches, and cake.*)

RICHARD: You treating me like royalty, old lady—I ain't royalty. I'm just a raggedy-assed, out-of-work, busted musician. But I sure can sing, can't I?

MOTHER HENRY: You better learn some respect, you know that neither me nor your father wants that kind of language in this house. Sit down and eat, you got to get your strength back.

RICHARD: What for? What am I supposed to do with it?

MOTHER HENRY: You stop that kind of talk.

RICHARD: Stop that kind of talk, we don't want that kind of talk! Nobody cares what people feel or what they think or what they do—but stop that kind of talk!

MOTHER HENRY: Richard!

RICHARD: All right. All right. (*Throws himself on the bed, begins eating in a kind of fury.*) What I can't get over is—what in the world am I doing here? Way down here in the ass-hole of the world, the deep, black, funky South.

MOTHER HENRY: You were born here. You got folks here. And you ain't got no manners and you won't learn no sense and so you naturally got yourself in trouble and had to come to your folks. You lucky it wasn't no worse, the way you go on. You want some more milk?

*Act One / Blues for Mister Charlie*

RICHARD: No, old lady. Sit down.

MOTHER HENRY: I ain't got time to be fooling with you. (But she

sits down.) What you got on your mind?

RICHARD: I don't know. How do you stand it?

RICHARD: Stand what? You?

MOTHER HENRY: Living down here with all these nowhere people.

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RICHARD: That's a good reason, Grandmama. Let me tell you about New York. You ain't never been North, have you?

MOTHER HENRY: Your Daddy used to tell me a little about it every time he come back from visiting you all up there.

RICHARD: Daddy don't know nothing about New York. He just come up for a few days and went right on back. That ain't the way to get to know New York. No ma'am. He never saw New York. Finally, I realized he wasn't never going to see it—you know, there's a whole lot of things Daddy's never seen? I've seen more than he has.

MOTHER HENRY: All young folks thinks that.

RICHARD: Did you? When you were young? Did you think you knew more than your mother and father? But I bet you really did, you a pretty shrewd old lady, quiet as it's kept.

MOTHER HENRY: No, I didn't think that. But I thought I could find out more, because they were born in slavery, but I was born free.

RICHARD: Did you find out more?

MOTHER HENRY: I found out what I had to find out—to take care of my husband and raise my children in the fear of God.

RICHARD: You know I don't believe in God, Grandmama.

MOTHER HENRY: You don't know what you talking about. Ain't no way possible for you not to believe in God. It ain't up to you.

RICHARD: Who's it up to, then?

MOTHER HENRY: It's up to the life in you—the life in you. That knows where it comes from, *that* believes in God. You doubt me, you just try holding your breath long enough to die.

RICHARD: You pretty smart, ain't you? (A pause) I convinced Daddy that I'd be better off in New York—and Edna, she convinced him too, she said it wasn't as tight for a black man up there as it is down here. Well, that's a son.

white bastards was always sniffing around my mother, always around her—because she was pretty and *black*!

MOTHER HENRY: Richard, you can't start walking around believing that all the suffering in the world is caused by white folks!

RICHARD: I can't? Don't tell me I can't. I'm going to treat every one of them as though they were responsible for all the crimes that ever happened in the history of the world—oh, yes! They're responsible for all the misery I've ever seen, and that's good enough for me. It's because my Daddy's got no power that my Mama's dead. And he ain't got no power because he's *black*. And the only way the black man's going to get any power is to drive all the white men into the sea.

MOTHER HENRY: You're going to make yourself sick. You're going to make yourself sick with hatred.

RICHARD: No, I'm not. I'm going to make myself well. I'm going to make myself well with hatred—what do you think of that?

MOTHER HENRY: It can't be done. It can never be done. Hatred is a poison, Richard.

RICHARD: Not for me. I'm going to learn how to drink it—a little every day in the morning, and then a booster shot late at night. I'm going to remember everything. I'm going to keep it right here, at the very top of my mind. I'm going to remember Mama, and Daddy's face that day, and Aunt Edna and all her sad little deals and all those boys and girls in Harlem and all them pimps and whores and gangsters and all them cops. And I'm going to remember all the dope that's flowed through my veins. I'm going to remember everything—the jails I been in and the cops that beat me and how long a time I spent screaming and stinking in my own dirt, trying to break my habit. I'm going to remember all that, and I'll get well. I'll get well.

MOTHER HENRY: Oh, Richard. Richard. Richard.

RICHARD: Don't Richard me. I tell you, I'm going to get well.

MOTHER HENRY: I know, Grandmama. But I just wish, that day that Mama died, he'd took a pistol and gone through that damn white man's hotel and shot every son of a bitch in the place. That's right. I wish he'd shot them dead. I been dreaming of that day ever since I left here. I been dreaming of my Mama falling down the steps of that hotel. My Mama. I never believed she fell. I always believed that some white man pushed her down those steps. And I know that Daddy thought so, too. But he wasn't there, he didn't know, he couldn't say nothing, he couldn't *do* nothing. I'll never forget the way he looked—whipped, whipped, whipped, whipped!

MOTHER HENRY: She fell, Richard, she *fell*. The stairs were wet and slippery and she *fell*.

RICHARD: My mother *fell* down the steps of that damn white hotel! My mother was *pushed*—you remember yourself how them

JUANITA: Ain't you a mess? So you finally decided to come back here—come here, let me hug you! Why, you ain't hardly changed at all—you just a little taller but you sure didn't gain much weight.

RICHARD: And I bet you the same old tomboy. You sure got the same loud voice—used to be able to hear you clear across this town.

JUANITA: Well, it's a mighty small town, Richard, that's what you always said—and the reason my voice got so loud so early, was that I started screaming for help right quick.  
(*Pete enters.*)

Do you know Pete Spivey? He's someone come on the scene since you been gone. He's going to school down here, you should pardon the expression.

RICHARD: How do you do, man? Where you from?  
PETE: I'm from a little place just outside Mobile.

RICHARD: Why didn't you go North, man? If you was going to make a move. That's the place. You get lost up there and I guarantee you some swinging little chick is sure to find you.

JUANITA: We'll let that pass. Are you together? Are you ready to meet the day?

RICHARD: I am *always* together, little sister. Tell me what you got on your mind.

PETE: We thought we'd just walk around town a little and maybe stop and have a couple of drinks somewhere. Or we can drive. I got a car.

RICHARD: I didn't think I'd never see you no more, Juanita. You been here all this time?

JUANITA: I sure have, sugar. Just waiting for you to come home.

RICHARD: Don't let this chick upset you, Pete. All we ever did was climb trees together.

*Act One / Blues for Mister Charlie*

(He takes a small, *sawed-off pistol from his pocket.*)

MOTHER HENRY: Richard, what are you doing with that gun?

RICHARD: I'm carrying it around with me, that's what I'm doing with it. This gun goes everywhere I go.

MOTHER HENRY: How long have you had it?

RICHARD: I've had it a long, long time.

MOTHER HENRY: Richard—you never—?

RICHARD: No. Not yet. But I will when I have to. I'll sure as hell take one of the bastards with me.

MOTHER HENRY: Hand me that gun. Please.

RICHARD: I can't. This is all that the man understands. He don't understand nothing else. *Nothing else!*

MOTHER HENRY: Richard—your father—think of your father—

RICHARD: Don't tell him! You hear me? (A pause) Don't tell him!  
MOTHER HENRY: Richard. Please.

RICHARD: Take the tray away, old lady. I ain't hungry no more.

(*After a moment, Mother Henry takes the tray and exits.*

(*Richard stretches out on the bed.*)

JUANITA (Off): Meridian? Mother Henry? Anybody home in this house? (*Enters*) Oh! Excuse me.  
RICHARD: I think they might be over at the church. I reckon Grandmama went over there to pray for my soul.

JUANITA: Grandmama?

RICHARD: Who are you? Don't I know you?  
JUANITA: Yes. I think you might.

RICHARD: Is your name Juanita?  
JUANITA: If your name is Richard.  
RICHARD: I'll be damned.

*Act One / Blues for Mister Charlie*  
PETE: She's had me climbing a few trees, too. But we weren't doing it together.

(PAPA D.'S JUKE JOINT: *Juke box music, loud. Less frantic than Richard's song. Couples dancing, all very young, doing very lively variations of the "Twist," the "Wobble," etc. Papa D. at the counter. It is now early evening. Juanita, Pete and Richard enter.*)

PETE: Try you making it, Papa D.? We brought someone to see you—you recognize him?

PAPA D.: It seems to me I know your face, young man. Yes, I'm sure I know your face. Now, wait a minute, don't tell me—you ain't Shirelee Anderson's boy, are you?

RICHARD: No. I remember Shirelee Anderson, but we ain't no kin.

PETE: Try again, Papa D.

PAPA D.: You your father's boy. I just recognized that smile—you Reverend Henry's son. Well, how you doing? It's nice to have you back with us. You going to stay awhile?

RICHARD: Yes sir. I think I'll be around for awhile.

PAPA D.: Yeah, I remember you little old string bean of a boy, full

of the devil. How long you been gone from here?

RICHARD: Almost eight years now. I left in September—it'll be eight years next month.

PAPA D.: Yeah—how's your Daddy? And your Grandmother? I ain't seen them for awhile.

PETE: Ain't you been going to church, Papa D.?

PAPA D.: Well, you know how it is. I try, God knows I try!

RICHARD: They fine, Papa D.

PAPA D.: You all don't want nothing to eat?

RICHARD: We'll think about it.

(They sit down.)

PETE: Old Papa D. got something on everybody, don't he?

JUANITA: You better believe it.

RICHARD: He's kind of a Tom, ain't he?

PETE: Yeah. He talks about Mister Charlie, and he says he's with us—us kids—but he ain't going to do nothing to offend him. You know, he's still trading with Lyle Britten.

RICHARD: Who's Lyle Britten?

RICHARD: Peckerwood, owns a store nearby. And, man, you ain't seen a peckerwood until you've seen Lyle Britten. Niggers been trading in his store for years, man, I wouldn't be surprised but if the cat was rich—but that man still expects you to step off the sidewalk when he comes along. So we been getting people to stop buying there.

JUANITA: He shot a colored man a few years back, shot him dead, and wasn't nothing never said, much less done, about it.

PETE: Lyle had been carrying on with this man's wife, dig, and, naturally, Old Bill—his name was Bill Walker, everybody called him Old Bill—wanted to put a stop to it.

JUANITA: She was a pretty little thing—real little and real black.

RICHARD: She still around here?

PETE: No. She disappeared. She went North somewhere.

RICHARD: Five mothers. They can rape and kill our women and we can't do nothing. But if we touch one of their dried-up, pale-assed women, we get our nuts cut off. You remember that chick I was telling you about earlier, lives in Greenwich Village in New York?

PETE: What about her?

RICHARD: She's white, man. I got a whole gang of white chicks in New York. That's right. And they can't get enough of what little Richard's got—and I give it to them, too, baby, believe me. You say black people ain't got no dignity? Man, you

ought to watch a white woman when she wants you to give her a little bit. They will do anything, baby anything! Wait—I got some pictures. That's the one lives in the Village. Ain't she fine? I'd hate to tell you where I've had that long yellow hair. And, dig this one, this is Sandy, her old man works on Wall Street—

PETE: We're making Juanita nervous.

JUANITA: Don't worry about me. I've been a big girl for a long time. Besides, I'm studying abnormal psychology. So please feel free. Which one is this? What does her father do?

RICHARD: That's Sylvia. I don't know what her father does. She's a model. She's loaded with loot.

PETE: You take money from her?

RICHARD: I take their money and they love it. Anyway, they ain't got nothing else to do with it. Every one of them's got some piss-assed, faggoty white boy on a string somewhere. They go home and marry him, dig, when they can't make it with me no more—but when they want some loving, funky, down-home, bring-it-on-here-and-put-it-on-the-table style—

JUANITA: They sound very sad. It must be very sad for you, too.

RICHARD: Well, I want *them* to be sad, baby, I want to screw up *their* minds forever. But why should I be so sad? Hell, I was swinging, I just about had it made. I had me some fine chicks and a fine pad and my car, and, hell, I was on my way! But then—then I screwed up.

JUANITA: We heard you were sick.

RICHARD: Who told you I was sick?

JUANITA: Your father. Your grandmother. They didn't say what the sickness was.

(Papa D. passes their table.)

RICHARD: Hey, Papa D., come on over here. I want to show you something.

(Papa D. comes over.)

Hey, look at these, man, look! Ain't they some fine chicks? And you know who each one of them calls: Baby! Oh, baby!

That's right. You looking at the man.

Where'd you steal those pictures, boy?

PAPA D.: Where'd you steal girls' pictures. I'm telling you the truth!

PETE: Put them pictures away. I thought you had good sense.

PAPA D.: (He goes back to the counter.)

RICHARD: Ain't that a bitch. He's scared because I'm carrying around pictures of white girls. That's the trouble with niggers. They all scared of the man.

JUANITA: Well, I'm *not* scared of the man. But there's just no point in running around, asking—

PETE: —to be lynched.

RICHARD: Well, okay, I'll put my pictures away, then. I sure don't want to upset nobody.

PETE: Excuse me. I'll be back.

(Exits.)

RICHARD: You want to dance?

JUANITA: No. Not now.

RICHARD: You want something to eat?

JUANITA: No. Richard?

RICHARD: Yeah?

JUANITA: Were you very sick?

RICHARD: What d'you want to know for?

JUANITA: Like that. Because I used to be your girl friend.

RICHARD: You was more like a boy than a girl, though. I couldn't go nowhere without you. You were determined to get your neck broken.

*Act One / Blues for Mister Charlie*

JUANITA: Well, I've changed. I'm now much more like a girl than I am like a boy.

RICHARD: You didn't turn out too bad, considering what you had to start with.

JUANITA: Thank you. I guess.

RICHARD: How come you ain't married by now? Pete, now, he seems real fond of you.

JUANITA: He is fond of me, we're friends. But I'm not in any hurry to get married—not now. And not here. I'm not sure I'm going to stay here. I've been working very hard, but next year I think I'll leave.

RICHARD: Where would you go?

JUANITA: I don't know. I had always intended to go North to law school and then come back down here to practice law—God knows this town could stand it. But, now, I don't know.

RICHARD: It's rough, huh?

JUANITA: It's not that so much. It is rough—are you all right? Do you want to go?

RICHARD: No, no. I'm all right. Go on. (A pause) I'm all right. Go on.

JUANITA: It's rough because you can't help being scared. I don't want to die—what was the matter with you, Richard, what were you sick with?

RICHARD: It wasn't serious. And I'm better now.

JUANITA: Well, no, that's just it. You're not really better.

RICHARD: How do you mean?

JUANITA: I watch you—

RICHARD: Why do you watch me?

JUANITA: I care about you.

RICHARD: You care about me! I thought you could hold your liquor better than that, girl.

JUANITA: It's not liquor. Don't you believe that anyone can care about you?

RICHARD: Care about me! Do you know how many times chicks have told me that? That they cared about me?

RICHARD: Well. This isn't one of those times.

JUANITA: I was a junkie.

RICHARD: I was a junkie.

JUANITA: A what?

RICHARD: A junkie, a dope addict, a hop-head, a mainliner—a dope fiend! My arms and my legs, too, are full of holes!

JUANITA: I asked you tell *me*, not the world.

RICHARD: Where'd Pete go?

RICHARD: He's dancing.

JUANITA: You want to dance?

RICHARD: You want to dance?

JUANITA: In a minute.

RICHARD: I got hooked about five years ago. See, I couldn't stand these chicks I was making it with, and I was working real hard at my music, and, man, I was lonely. You come off a gig, you be tired, and you'd already taken as much shit as you could stand from the managers and the people in the room you were working and you'd be off to make some down scene with some pasty white-faced bitch. And so you'd make the scene and somehow you'd wake up in the morning and the chick would be beside you, alive and well, and dying to make the scene again and somehow you'd managed not to strangle her, you hadn't beaten her to death. Like you wanted to. And you get out of there and you carry this pain around inside all day and all night long. No way to beat it—no way. No matter how you turned, no matter what you did—no way. But when I started getting high, I was cool, and it didn't bother me. And I wasn't lonely then, it was all right. And the chicks—I could handle them, they couldn't reach me. And I didn't know I was hooked—until I was

hooked. Then I started getting into trouble and I lost a lot of gigs and I had to sell my car and I lost my pad and most of the chicks, they split, naturally—but not all of them—and then I got busted and I made that trip down to Lexington and—here I am. Way down upon the Swance River. But I'm going to be all right. You can bet on it.

JUANITA: I'd like to do better than that. I'd like to see to it.

RICHARD: How?

JUANITA: Well, like I used to. I won't let you go anywhere without me.

RICHARD: You still determined to break your neck.

JUANITA: Well, it's a neck-breaking time. I wouldn't like to appear to be above the battle.

RICHARD: Do you have any idea of what you might be letting yourself in for?

JUANITA: No. But you said you were lonely. And I'm lonely, too.

(Lyle enters, goes to the counter. His appearance causes a change in the atmosphere, but no one appears to stop whatever they are doing.)

LYLE: Joel, how about letting me have some change for cigarettes? I got a kind of long drive ahead of me, and I'm out.

PAPA D.: Howdy, Mister Lyle, how you been? Folks ain't been seeing much of you lately.

LYLE (Laughs): That's the truth. But I reckon old friends just stays old friends. Ain't that right?

PAPA D.: That's right, Mister Lyle.

JUANITA: That's Lyle Britten. The one we were talking about before.

RICHARD: I wonder what he'd do if I walked into a white place.

JUANITA: Don't worry about it. Just stay out of white places—believe me!

RICHARD (Laughs): Let's TCB—that means taking care of business. Let's see if I can dance. Perhaps she is teaching him the "Fight," (They rise, dance. Perhaps she is teaching her the "Pony"; they are enjoying each or he is teaching her the "Pony"; they are enjoying each other. Lyle gets his change, gets cigarettes out of the machine, crosses to the counter, pauses there to watch the dancers.)

LYLE: Joel, you know I ain't never going to be able to dance like that.

PAPA D.: Ain't nothing to it. You just got to be supple, that's all. I can yet do it.

(Does a grotesque sketch of the "Twist.")

LYLE: Okay, Joel, you got it. Be seeing you now.

PAPA D.: Good night, Mister Lyle. (On Lyle's way out, he jostles Juanita. Richard stops, holding Juanita at the waist. Richard and Lyle stare at each other.)

LYLE: Pardon me.

RICHARD: Consider yourself pardoned.

LYLE: You new around here?

PAPA D.: He just come to town a couple of days ago, Mister Lyle.

RICHARD: Yeah. I just come to town a couple of days ago, Mister Lyle.

LYLE: Well, I sure hope your stay'll be a pleasant one. (Exits.)

PETE: Man, are you anxious to leave this world? Because he wouldn't think nothing of helping you out of it.

RICHARD: Yeah. Well, I wouldn't think nothing of helping him out of it, neither. Come on, baby, records going to waste—let's TCB. (They dance.)

So you care about me, do you? Ain't that a bitch?

(THE CHURCH: *Pete and Juanita, a little apart from the others.*)

PETE: Why have you been avoiding me? Don't answer that. You started going away from me as soon as Richard came to this town. Now listen, Richard's dead but you still won't turn to me. I don't want to ask you for more than you can give, but why have you locked me out? I know—you liked me. We had nice times together.

JUANITA: We did. I do like you. Pete, I don't know. I wish you wouldn't ask me now. I wish nobody would ask me for anything now!

PETE: Is it because of Richard? Because if that's what it is, I'll wait—I'll wait until you know inside you that Richard's dead, but you're alive, and you're supposed to live, and I love you. JUANITA: When Richard came, he—hit—me in someplace where I'd never been touched before. I don't mean—just physically. He took all my attention—the deepest attention, maybe, that one person can give another. He needed me and he made a difference for me in this terrible world—do you see what I mean? And—it's funny—when I was with him, I didn't think of the future, I didn't dare. I didn't know if I could be strong enough to give him what he needed for as long as he would need it. It only lasted four or five days, Pete—four or five days, like a storm, like lightning! And what I saw during that storm I'll always see. Before that—I thought I knew who I was. But now I know that there are more things in me than I'll ever understand—and if I can't be faithful to myself, I'm afraid to promise I'll be faithful to one man!

D

PETE: I need you. I'll be faithful. That helps. You'll see.

JUANITA: So many people need so much!

PETE: So do you. So do I, Juanita. You take all my attention. My deepest attention.

JUANITA: You probably see things that I think are hidden. You probably think I'm a fool—or worse.

PETE: No. I think there's a lot of love in you, Juanita. If you'll let me help you, we can give it to the world. You can't give it to the world until you find a person who can help you—love the world.

JUANITA: I've discovered that. The world is a loveless place.

PETE: Not yet—

(The lights of a car flash in their faces. Silence. They all listen tensely as the lights of another car approach, then pass; they watch the lights disappear. The telephone rings in the office. Mother Henry goes off to answer it. They listen to the murmur of Mother Henry's voice. Mother Henry enters.)

MOTHER HENRY: That was Freddy Roberts. He say about two-thirty his dog started to barking and woke him up and he let the dog out on the porch and the dog run under the porch and there was two white men *under* Freddy's porch, fooling around with his gas pipes. Freddy thinks the dog bit one of them. He ran inside to get him his rifle but the rifle jammed and the men got away. He wanted to warn us, maybe they might come prowling around here.

LORENZO: Only we ain't got no rifles.

JUANITA: It was the dog that woke him up? I'll bet they come back and kill that dog!

JIMMY: What was they doing under the man's house, messing around with his gas pipes, at that hour of the morning?

PETE: They was fixing to blow up his house. They *might* be under your house, or *this* house, right now.

LORENZO: The real question is why two white men feel safe enough to come to a black neighborhood after dark in the first place. If a couple of them get their heads blown off, they won't feel so goddamn courageous!

JUANITA: I better call home.  
(*Exits into office.*)

PETE: Will you have your mother call my house?

LORENZO: And have his mother call my house?

JIMMY: And tell all the people that don't have rifles or dogs to stay off their porches!

LORENZO: Tell them to fall on their knees and use their Bibles as breast-plates! Because I know that each and every one of them got Bibles! (*Meridian has walked to the church door, stands looking off*)

MOTHER HENRY: Don't they, Meridian?  
MOTHER HENRY: Hush.

(*We hear Juanita's voice, off. Then silence falls. Lights dim on the students until they are in silhouette. Lights up on Meridian. We hear Richard's guitar, very lonely, far away.*)  
(*A car door slams. The voices of young people saying good night. Richard appears, dressed as we last saw him.*)

RICHARD: Hello, Daddy. You still up?

MERIDIAN: Yeah. Couldn't sleep. How was your day?

RICHARD: It was all right. I'd forgotten what nights down here were like. You never see the stars in the city—and all these funny country sounds—

MERIDIAN: Crickets. And all kinds of bugs and worms, running around, busy, shaking all the bushes.

RICHARD: Lord, if I'd stayed here, I guess I might have married old Juanita by now, and we'd have a couple of kids and I'd be sitting around like this *every* night. What a wild thought.

MERIDIAN: You can still marry Juanita. Maybe she's been waiting for you.

RICHARD: Have you ever thought of marrying again?

MERIDIAN: I've thought of it.

JUANITA: Did you ever think of marrying Juanita?

RICHARD: Why do you ask me that?

MERIDIAN: Because I'd like to know.

RICHARD: Because you like to know?

MERIDIAN: Why would you like to hide it? I'd like to know because

RICHARD: Why would you like to tell me? I can ask you to tell me the I'm a man now, Daddy, and I can ask you to tell me the

I'm making up for lost time. Maybe you should try truth. I'm making up for lost time too.

MERIDIAN: Yes. I've thought of marrying Juanita. But I've never to make up for lost time too.

MERIDIAN: I've thought of marrying Juanita. But I've never spoken of it to her.

RICHARD: That's the truth?

MERIDIAN: Yes.

RICHARD: Why didn't you tell me the truth way back there? Why didn't you tell me my mother was murdered? She was pushed down them steps.

MERIDIAN: Richard, your mother's dead. People die in all kinds of ways. They die when their times comes to die. Your mother loved you and she was gone—there was nothing more I could do for her. I had to think of you. I didn't want you to be—

poisoned—by useless and terrible suspicions. I didn't want to wreck your life. I knew your life was going to be hard enough. So, I let you go. I thought it might be easier for you—if I let you go. I didn't want you to grow up in this town.

RICHARD: But there was something else in it, too, Daddy. You didn't want me to look at you and be ashamed of you. And you didn't know what was in my eyes, you couldn't stand it, I could tell from the way you looked at me sometimes. That was it, wasn't it?

MERIDIAN: I thought it was better. I suppose I thought it was all over for me, anyway. And I thought I owed it to your mother

and to girls like your mother, to try—try to change, to purify this town, where she was born, and where we'd been so happy, and which she loved so much. I was wrong, I guess. I was wrong.

RICHARD: You've just been a public man, Daddy, haven't you? Since that day? You haven't been a private man at all.

MERIDIAN: No, I haven't. Try to forgive me.

RICHARD: There's nothing to forgive. I've been down the road a little bit. I know what happened. I'm going to try again, Daddy.

(A pause. Richard takes out the gun.)

Here. Grandmama saw this this morning and she got all upset. So I'll let you hold it for me. You keep it till I ask you for it, okay? But when I ask you for it, you got to give it to me. Okay?

MERIDIAN (*Takes the gun*): Okay. I'm proud of how you've come through—all you've had to bear.

RICHARD: I'm going to get some sleep. You coming over to the house now?

MERIDIAN: Not yet.

RICHARD: Good night. Say, Daddy?

MERIDIAN: Yeah?

RICHARD: You kind of like the idea of me and Juanita getting together?

MERIDIAN: Yeah. I think it's a fine idea.

RICHARD: Well, I'm going to sleep on it, then. Good night.

MERIDIAN: Good night.

(Richard exits.)

(After Richard's exit, the lights come up on the students.)  
JUANITA: Lord it's gone and started raining.

.

PETE: And you worried about your hair.

PETE: I am not worried about my hair. I'm thinking of wearing juanita: I am not worried about my hair. I'm thinking of wearing it the way God arranged it in the first place.

MERIDIAN: Now, now, Mau-Mau.

LORENZO: This chick is going through some weird changes.

PETE: That's understandable. We all are.

MERIDIAN: That's understandable. We all are.

MERIDIAN: Well, we'll see you sometime tomorrow. It promises to be a kind of active day.

MERIDIAN: Yes, we've got some active days ahead of us. You all better get some sleep.

JUANITA: How're you getting home, Jimmy?

MOTHER HENRY: Pete's driving us all home.

JUANITA: And then—are you going to drive all the way to your house alone, Pete?

PETE: You're jumpy tonight. I'll stay at Lorenzo's house.

LORENZO: You can call your house from there.

MOTHER HENRY: You get some sleep, too, Meridian, it's past three o'clock in the morning. Don't you stay over here much longer.

MERIDIAN: No, I won't. Good night, all.

MOTHER HENRY: Good night, children. See you in the morning, God willing.

(They exit. Meridian walks to the pulpit, puts his hand on the Bible. Parnell enters.)

PARNELL: I hear it was real bad tonight.

MERIDIAN: Not as bad as it's going to get. Maybe I was wrong not to let the people arm.

PARNELL: If the Negroes were armed, it's the Negroes who'd be slaughtered. You know that.

MERIDIAN: They're slaughtered anyway. And I don't know that. I thought I knew it—but now I'm not so sure.

PARNELL: What's come over you? What's going to happen to the people in this town, this church—if you go to pieces?

MERIDIAN: Maybe they'll find a leader who can lead them somewhere.

PARNELL: Somebody with a gun?

(Meridian is silent.)

Is that what you mean?

MERIDIAN: I'm a Christian. I've been a Christian all my life, like my Mama and Daddy before me and like their Mama and Daddy before them. Of course, if you go back far enough, you get to a point *before* Christ, if you see what I mean, B.C.—and at that point, I've been thinking, black people weren't raised to turn the other cheek, and in the hope of heaven. No, then they didn't have to take low. Before Christ. They walked around just as good as anybody else, and when they died, they didn't go to heaven, they went to join their ancestors. My son's dead, but he's not gone to join his ancestors. He was a sinner, so he must have gone to hell—if we're going to believe what the Bible says. Is that such an improvement, such a mighty advance over B.C.? I've been thinking, I've had to think—would I have *been* such a Christian if I hadn't been born black? Maybe I *had* to become a Christian in order to have any dignity at all! Since I wasn't a man in men's eyes, then I could be a man in the eyes of God. But that didn't protect my wife. She's dead, too soon, we don't really know how. That didn't protect my son—he's dead, we know how too well. That hasn't changed this town—this town, where you couldn't find a white Christian at high noon on Sunday! The eyes of God—maybe those eyes are blind—I never let myself think of that before.

PARNELL: Meridian, you can't be the man who gives the signal for the holocaust.

MERIDIAN: Must I be the man who watches while his people are beaten, chained, starved, clubbed, butchered?

PARNELL: You used to say that your people were all the people in the world—all the people God ever made, or would make.

You said your race was the human race.  
You said your race was the human race!

MERIDIAN: The human race!  
(Parnell is silent.)  
Is that what you mean?

MERIDIAN: You've heard it before. You just never recognized it before. You've heard it in all those blues and spirituals and gospel songs you claim to love so much.

PARNELL: I was talking about *you*—not your history. I have a history, too. And don't be so sure I've never heard that sound. Maybe I've never heard anything else. Perhaps my life is also hard to bear.

MERIDIAN: I watched you all this week up at the Police Chief's office with me. And you know how to handle him because you're sure you're better than he is. But you both have more in common with each other than either of you have with me. And, for both of you—I watched this, I never watched it before—it was just a black boy that was dead, and that was a problem. He saw the problem one way, you saw it another way. But it wasn't a *man* that was dead, not my *son*—you held yourselves away from *that*!

PARNELL: I may have sounded—cold. It was not because I felt cold. There was no other way to sound, Meridian. I took the only tone which—it seemed to me—could accomplish what we wanted. And I do know the Chief of Police better than you—because I'm white. And I can make him listen to me—because I'm white. I don't know if I think I'm so much

better than he is. I know what we have done—and do. But you must have mercy on us. We have no other hope.

MERIDIAN: You have never shown us any mercy at all.

PARNELL: Meridian, give me credit for knowing you're in pain. We are two men, two friends—in spite of all that could divide us. We have come too far together, there is too much at stake, for you to become black now, for me to become white. Don't accuse me. Don't accuse me. I didn't do it.

MERIDIAN: So was my son—innocent.

PARNELL: Meridian—when I asked for mercy a moment ago—I meant—please—try to understand that it is not so easy to leap over fences, to give things up—all right, to surrender privilege! But if you were among the privileged you would know what I mean. It's not a matter of trying to hold on; the things, the privilege—are part of you, are *who* you are. It's in the gut.

MERIDIAN: Then where's the point of this struggle, where's the hope? If Mister Charlie can't change—

PARNELL: Who's Mister Charlie?

MERIDIAN: You're Mister Charlie. All white men are Mister Charlie!

PARNELL: You sound more and more like your son, do you know that? A lot of the colored people here didn't approve of him, but he said things they longed to say—said right out loud, for all the world to hear, how much he despised white people!

MERIDIAN: He didn't say things *I* longed to say. Maybe it was because he was my son. I didn't care *what* he felt about white people. I just wanted him to live, to have his own life. There's something you don't understand about being black, Parnell. If you're a black man, with a black son, you have to forget all about white people and concentrate on trying to save your child. That's why I let him stay up North. I was wrong, I failed, I failed. Lyle walked him up the road and killed him.

PARNELL: We don't know Lyle killed him. And Lyle denies it.

MERIDIAN: Of course, he denies it—what do you mean, we don't know Lyle killed him?

PARNELL: We don't know—all we can say is that it looks that way.

And circumstantial evidence is a tricky thing.

When it involves a white man killing a black man—if

MERIDIAN: When did he kill him, Parnell, who did?

Lyle didn't kill him. Parnell, who did?

PARNELL: I don't know. But we don't know that Lyle did it.

PARNELL: I don't know. But we don't know that Lyle did it.

MERIDIAN: Lyle doesn't deny that he killed Old Bill.

MERIDIAN: Lyle doesn't deny that he killed Old Bill.

PARNELL: No.

PARNELL: No. And we know how Lyle feels about colored people.

MERIDIAN: And we know how Lyle feels about colored people.

MERIDIAN: From your point of view. But—from another

PARNELL: Well, yes. From your point of view—Lyle hasn't got anything *against* colored

people. He just—

MERIDIAN: He just doesn't think they're human.

PARNELL: Well, even *that's* not true. He doesn't think they're *not* human—after all, I know him, he's hot-tempered and he's far from being the brightest man in the world—but he's not mean, he's not cruel. He's a poor white man. The poor whites have been just as victimized in this part of the world as the blacks have ever been!

MERIDIAN: For God's sake spare me the historical view! Lyle's responsible for Richard's death.

PARNELL: But, Meridian, we can't, even in our own minds, decide that he's guilty. We have to operate the way justice always has to operate and give him the benefit of the doubt.

MERIDIAN: What doubt?

PARNELL: Don't you see, Meridian, that now you're operating the way white people in this town operate whenever a colored man's on trial?

*Act One / Blues for Mister Charlie*  
MERIDIAN: When was the last time one of us was on trial here, Parnell?

PARNELL: That can't have anything to do with it, it can't. We must forget about all—all the past injustice. We have to start from scratch, or do our best to start from scratch. It isn't vengeance we're after. Is it?

MERIDIAN: I don't want vengeance. I don't want to be paid back—anyway, I couldn't be. I just want Lyle to be made to know that what he did was evil. I just want this town to be forced to face the evil that it countenances and to turn from evil and do good. That's why I've stayed in this town so long!

PARNELL: But if Lyle didn't do it? Lyle is a friend of mine—a strange friend, but a friend. I love him. I know how he suffers.

MERIDIAN: How does he suffer?

PARNELL: He suffers—from being in the dark—from having things inside him that he can't name and can't face and can't control. He's not a wicked man. I know he's not, I've known him almost all his life! The face he turns to you, Meridian, isn't the face he turns to me.

MERIDIAN: Is the face he turns to you more real than the face he turns to me? You go ask him if he killed my son.

PARNELL: They're going to ask him that in court. That's why I fought to bring about this trial. And he'll say no.

MERIDIAN: I don't care what he says in court. You go ask him. If he's your friend, he'll tell you the truth.

PARNELL: No. No, he may not. He's—he's maybe a little afraid of me.

MERIDIAN: If you're his friend, you'll know whether he's telling you the truth or not. Go ask him.

PARNELL: I can't do it. I'm his friend. I can't betray him.

MERIDIAN: But you can betray me? You are a white man, aren't you? Just another white man—after all.

PARNELL: Even if he says yes, it won't make any difference. The jury will never convict him.

MERIDIAN: Is that why you fought to bring about the trial? I don't care what the jury does. I know he won't say yes to them. He won't say yes to me. But he might say yes to you. You say we don't know. Well, I've got a right to know. And I've got the right to ask you to find out—since you're the only man who can find out. And I've got to find out—whether we've been friends all these years, or whether I've just been your favorite Uncle Tom.

PARNELL: You know better than that.

MERIDIAN: I don't know, Parnell, any longer—any of the things I used to know. Maybe I never knew them. I'm tired. Go home.

PARNELL: You don't trust me anymore, do you, Meridian?

MERIDIAN: Maybe I never trusted you. I don't know. Maybe I never trusted myself. Go home. Leave me alone. I must look back at my record.

PARNELL: Meridian—what you ask—I don't know if I can do it for you.

MERIDIAN: I don't want you to do it for me. I want you to do it for you. Good night.

PARNELL: Good night.  
(Parnell exists. Meridian comes downstage. It is dawn.)

MERIDIAN: My record Would God—would God I had died for thee—my son, my son!

Curtain

END OF ACT ONE