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With the Past in My Pockets:
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Alan Keith Newton
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**WITH THE PAST IN MY POCKETS:
A COLLECTION OF POETRY AND DRAMATIC WRITING**

By

Alan Keith Newton

A THESIS

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

WITH THE PAST IN MY POCKETS: A COLLECTION OF POETRY AND DRAMATIC WRITING

By

Alan Keith Newton

This collection of creative writing consists of three parts: poems on various subjects; selected dramatic monologue poems from a series entitled, "Chevron, USA"; and a full-length play, entitled A Roof of Flame. The poems in first section represent a variety of subject matters and forms; several of them are dramatic monologues in the voices of Southern characters. The selected dramatic monologue poems from "Chevron USA" are all told in the voice of single narrator, called "Bony," and feature recurrent characters and events. Set in a Southern college town, these poems chronicle Bony's psychological growth as he participates in various events with young men who are more socially aggressive and experienced. Finally, A Roof of Flame is a realistic three-act drama set in a small Southern town. The two main characters are teachers at a private, segregated academy, and the play chronicles their evolving relationship against the backdrop of *de facto* segregation in the New South.

This work is dedicated to Professor Anita Skeen of the Department of English at Michigan State University, my teacher, mentor, and friend.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A number of people have given the instruction, guidance, and support that promoted the completion of this work. My parents, Merlin and Wesley Newton, and also my companion, Deborah Shoemaker, have given the love and encouragement that propelled me to finish not only this thesis but also my graduate studies in general. At Michigan State University, Professors Arthur Athanason and Frank Rutledge, of the Departments of English and Theatre respectively, helped me to understand dramatic structure and to view plays as blueprints for performance and not simply as literary texts. Professor Athanason also provided valuable instruction in playwriting as well as counsel concerning a host of theater-related topics. Finally, Professor Anita Skeen of the Department of English supplied the guidance for the writing and revision of all three parts of this thesis. Not only were my poems crafted under her teaching, but also she is largely responsible for helping me to adapt my ideas and skills into dramatic writing. Equally important, she has been unfailing in offering emotional support and advice in all sorts of academic and non-academic matters. I cannot imagine the completion of this work without her involvement, and for that I will be always grateful.

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INTRODUCTION

I came to Michigan State University primarily to write poetry. My first writing course was English 833, the graduate poetry workshop, taught by Professor Anita Skeen. My poems at that time were lengthy and narrative, frequently dramatic monologues in the voices of Southern characters. Professor Skeen was helpful in teaching me to focus on narrating clear and simple stories based on cohesive conflicts, on condensing my language and infusing it with imagery, and on experimenting with different shapes to find the appropriate structure for the particular story being told. Most important, she encouraged me to continue exploring my Southern heritage and creating a variety of narrative voices that reflected different social classes and levels of awareness.

One of the poems I wrote for that first workshop was a dramatic monologue in the voice of a thin young man called “Bony” by his workmates. Set in a small Southern college town, the poem contains several male characters who work with Bony at a Chevron station, and who are much more socially aggressive and experienced. I was fascinated by Bony’s persona; he primarily tends to observe other characters engaged in raucous and self-destructive behavior, and his occasional and futile attempts to help them in moments of destruction are both noble and pathetic. The poem is based loosely on several older young men I worked with in high school, and I related to Professor Skeen the multitude of stories I could tell about my experiences from this time. She offered to guide me in an independent study project where I would work on a series of monologue poems, all in the voice of Bony and containing recurrent characters and events.

The resulting series of fifteen dramatic monologues explored several themes that were related to conflicts in both the personal life of the narrator and also the larger world of the post-Civil Rights South. Race relations obviously is a common theme, and a few of the poems are centered on specific racial conflicts (e.g., “Jack’s white Lincoln”). In most cases, such conflicts are simply part of the landscape in which Bony works and socializes. By utilizing a narrator who generally observes and reports what he sees, without judgment and with minimal comment, I was able to keep the narrations simple, clear, and fast-paced. The last quality was important, as I intend the monologues to be read in a series, and I want to ensure that readers not feel bogged down by the repetitive nature of the voice and content. With this in mind, I employed a form using short, staccato lines with frequent enjambment. I allowed Bony to employ imagery, figurative language, and consonance and assonance in his descriptions of people and events, though I otherwise kept his syntax basic and colloquial. Rarely did I allow him to come up with revelations and insights into human behavior, including his own. Rather, I attempted to convey my insights about the effect of Bony’s experiences on his consciousness and growth primarily through his choice of actions.

Each of the monologues also contains images whose symbolic meanings transcend Bony’s limited awareness. For example, in “superfreak,” broken glass is strewn throughout the poem and is used to inflict physical injury on the revelers at a raucous fraternity party. However, Bony himself remains uncut. Yet I wanted to imply that the psychological damage caused by his initial exposure to bacchanalian revelry and sexuality is much greater to him than to the others. At the poem’s end, he imagines that grass,

normally a symbol of softness and comfort, is cutting through his boots and into his feet, implying that he will hereafter view the world as sharp and hazardous.

One of the strengths of this series is the authenticity of the various human voices that color each poem. Given my interest in writing dialogue, as well as my desire to create personas who reveal important aspects of character through their speech and behavior, I determined that my ideas and insights might be well suited to writing for the stage. At the same time, I had begun concentrating on taking courses in dramatic literature and thus was learning the elements of dramatic structure. In one of my courses, English 832, a seminar in the plays of Tennessee Williams taught by Professor Arthur Athanason, we studied plays as blueprints for performance and not simply as literary texts. Thus, despite my relative inexperience in working with theatrical productions, I learned important techniques for making dramatic scripts stageworthy. What I now needed was an opportunity to write and receive feedback on a sustained series of dramatic scenes. Again, Professor Skeen offered to guide me in an independent study project working with herself and several other graduate student writers.

My intention at the beginning of the project was to write a series of scenes and possibly one-act plays based on my experiences as middle school teacher at a private school in Selma, Alabama. However, it soon became clear that a single storyline was dominating my thoughts, and, encouraged by my group, I determined to write a full-length play. I completed the play, entitled A Roof of Flame, over the course of a semester, though it has undergone several major revisions since then. In addition to clarifying the plot, strengthening character development, and tightening the dialogue, I have strived to make

the play more of a performance and less of a literary text. Currently, I am enrolled in Professor Athanason's playwriting workshop and am learning practical skills that will aid in future revisions of the play.

The most important character in the play is Ronnie Staples, the daughter of the founder of a private Southern academy created in the 1960's to circumvent mandatory racial integration in public schools. Unmarried and believing that she is in the "last days" of her youth, she falls in love with a younger male teacher, Joe Monroe, who, despite growing up in the South, is considered an outsider for his anti-segregationalist views. Ronnie does everything she can, including defying those patriarchal and racist forces that have shaped her beliefs and character, to ensure that Joe will remain teaching at the school. In the end, however, she is unable to accept Joe's utopian vision of a miscegenetic society, and Joe decides to leave the South and return to New York as a playwright.

Throughout writing the play, I struggled over whether to make Ronnie or Joe the protagonist. Each character has a strong goal: Joe wants to achieve a sense of personal and professional accomplishment by forcing the academy to integrate, and Ronnie wants to establish a meaningful romantic relationship with someone who will appreciate her intelligence, wit, and strength of character, i.e., those qualities that a patriarchal society largely ignores in women. In the end, I determined that Ronnie is willing to act in ways that incur greater risks and require greater fortitude. Thus, I consider her to be the protagonist, and her journey towards personal growth and transformation to be of greater dramatic significance. I have and will continue to work on strengthening her presence in the play without relegating Joe to the status of a minor character.

I will be enrolling in a doctoral program at the University of Kansas in the Fall semester of 1999. The University's Department of English has its own theater company, the English Alternative Theatre, that seeks to produce student-written dramatic scripts, and I am already discussing with the theater's director, Paul Lim, the possibility of producing A Roof of Flame next year. I am anxious to see how well the written text is transformed on the stage, and to begin working on revisions that will make the play's stageworthy qualities as strong as its current literary qualities.

My thesis consists of work that is representative of all phases of my writing career as a graduate student at Michigan State University. The first section contains selected poems, mostly dramatic monologues set in the voices of various Southern characters, written during the first year of my program. Some of these poems, such as "Canvas," are written in my own voice and pertain directly to my experiences. The second section contains several of the "Bony" monologues (the whole series is entitled "Chevron, USA"). I have chosen monologues whose events are representative of the various types of experiences Bony encounters and that include most of the major characters that populate the series. Finally, the last section contains the entire text of A Roof of Flame.

SECTION ONE: SELECTED POEMS

Canvas

When I was a child we lived in Mexico,
and memory lays a collage:
fat, brown boys named Luis,
dogs peeing in crinkly fountain shade,
hunks of octopi at outdoor markets,
my sister's sneakers skipping down Chapultepec.
Once we drove in green mountain drizzle,
passing an aftermath
when Mother whimpered, hovered,
covered our eyes with her hands.
"It was a donkey," she told us,
killed by the headlong vanity
of a macho bus driver
on a deadly curve.
My sister cried, but donkeys
dead or live to me were funny.

Last year mother came to visit,
saw on my wall Picasso's *Guernica*;
strangely, she turned her eyes.
I pointed out
the famous bull, its hairpin craning,
the equine carnage sprawled across canvas,
the forlorn woman hovering over
dead children,
braying not just for loss
but for her frailty as shelter.
After coffee, inexplicably,
mother wept.

Today my sister and I
talked of Mexico,
of her souvenir dolls and
my collage,
and she betrayed
what mother keeps from me
still: that the donkey

cut in two by a fender,
tossed in a cotton field
was really a child,
loosely shrouded,
likely buried and
long forgotten.

***Learning To Hunt
(For My Uncle)***

You left my brother behind
on the bank of a creek
that rushed steel
beneath a clipped December moon.
I see him,
a rawboned boy of eight,
stumbling beside sharp water.
His breaths tear
at the air around him
as you and your fellow hunters
ford the creek that nicks only
your knees,
then disappear.
No one looks back
and he never cries out.
He does not grasp the danger.

Somehow he is learning to swim,
learning to pull his patched knees
up the opposite side.
Black twigs and leaves cling
to his heaving face
as he stares at the woods
you've become.
He follows,
learning to grasp for your scent
of snuff and muffled sweat,
learning the blood of indifference,
learning to hunt.

Miles de Milo

Greenville's drive-in
hid its screen
like a bedroom window.
The summer I lost my last tooth,
the screen swelled up
with naked bodies,
shows like *Silicone Sirens*.
My dad's friend Miles moonlit
as the drive-in scarecrow,
roamed the sumac thicket
behind the parking lot
to ward off eyes
without tickets.
Dad called him Miles de Milo:
his right forearm
plus a brand-new tattoo
lost in Da Lat.

Friday nights with Miles
de Milo I'd dine
on whole cans of spaghetti-o's,
dizzy my hands just stroking
bottles of Blue Ribbon beer
he'd line in rows
on card tables, salute,
send crashing to the floor.
Cloaked by a poncho I'd ride
past lines of cars
unseen—"Mostly men," Miles told,
"or kids in vans."
Left sunk in his El Dorado
parked in shadow,
my head in the mirror
small as a nut,
I'd strain to rise
like bodies on the screen.

The woods clean,
he'd stand beside me,
lay his stub on the car window
like a broken speaker.

"Don't you fret,"
once he bent to whisper,
while I chafed in vain
at my sprig of flesh,
"It's a beautiful thing,
a thing beginning."

One night, caught
stealing Dad's beer,
I told him all.
Dad swears
he broke nothing but
a tooth or two,
that Miles withdrew
from other wounds.
But something deep,
some bluster of outrage
blew through town that night,
blew till fall.
By September,
the drive-in's shell lay
strewn with sumac leaves
on fallow concrete.
Skulking across
the clutter,
I'd stomp hard,
imagine the crunch
was somebody's tooth,
somebody's bone.

Last Snake in Pikeville

Today in front of Kroger
a dude in a pick-up with Texas plates
pulled next to my ex-best friend Josey
while she gnawed cantaloupe
and smoked my Virginia Slims.
He asked her something like
"How sweet's your melon?"
cause she spit laughter
and passed him the rind.
Store front glass had just been
scrubbed and scraped
by this boy I like
Bill Shepherd
who props Josie in a cart
wheels her over speed bumps
while she squeals and kicks
sunlight off her feet.
I was standing by the glass
smelling lemons for signs of rot
and saw old Texas tempt her
with a cold bottle of Lone Star
saw her slink across his lap
her cigarette flicked out
the open window and
its orange sputter.

Last week I let Josey
blacken my eyes with her liner
and I got asked out
by a blonde-bearded man with hands
wide and hard as bar stools.
His car bumped mine backing out
in the Dairy Queen parking lot.
He said "Why didn't you pat
your horn, Cleopatra?"
and Josey called back
"Cause she ain't horny!"
I yelled "Damn you *Josey Dove*!"
pinched her tit
and a glob of chocolate blizzard
tumbled down her sweat shirt.

Before he could flirt back
she had licked up the mess
and burst out of my car
into a pack of high school boys
whose hair was all black
and wet from football practice.
The man watched Josie
not me—
his blue eyes trailed her like
hounds on a sweat sock.
But it was me he asked to meet
back at Dairy Queen Sunday.

We drove through Pike county:
corn and tobacco,
lawn jockeys,
shacks of shade tree mechanics.
I'd seen it all before
so I bummed a Winston Light
and just held it
just let time inhale
while he asked about school
which I called prison
then felt the fool when he owned up
he'd been jailed ten years
for running dope
across Lake Pontchartrain.
We stopped at a railroad track—
his hand shifted from fifth gear
to my cold knee.
I figured if I'd been Josie
his fingers would've nibbled
more at my hem or
bit at my buttons.

He grew quiet and drove
down a road without signs
parked back of a small brick house
black shutters and deck chairs
he said was his mama's.
"Why are we here?" I asked
loosening my belt.
He said, "Tell me bout

the blonde from Dairy Queen."
All I could picture right then
was me in a Ferris Wheel bucket
cutting summer air
only the wheel never stops
cause Bill Shepherd's paid
to stop it
and he's busy watching Josey
in a bumper car....
"Tell me bout Josey Dove"
he said
and I hissed "She'd kiss a snake
for a bottle of beer
and if you ain't kissed her yet
you're the last snake in Pikeville. . ."

Josie asked me how I fared
I lied "He kissed me head to toe."
But if she ever makes me mad
bragging bout all her thrills
I might just own up
that I rode through Pike county
with a man who claimed
he's the one man she don't know:
her own blood father.

Morning News

husband Bob says "hallelujah!
nother jailbird went and hanged hisself
at Kilby"

I ask "what'd he use for rope?"

Bob grins "pure white Dixie cotton
ginned and tailored
into pin striped prison britches"

I say "prison pants aren't striped
that's just in Elvis Presley pictures
today they're orange as this Tang
and from a distance
make the road gangs
look like wind tossed birds-of-paradise
in weeds"

Bob says "I'd just liked to seen him
swinging cold and black and bare-assed
Mr. Harvey James Dowdell
whoever you were"
then he sees me blanch I reckon
hears my breath snap
like a cracker
and snuffs his grin

I say "Bob help me remember
wasn't there a Harvey James
in our fourth grade?"
Bob says "Christ a' God
you're right
first little spook I ever saw
at Stonewall School"
still my memory's scant and faceless
so Bob fills it with a story
"once they led us to the dungeon
me and him
for chucking dirt clods
up at blue jays
after school
me they swatted on the jeans
but Harvey James they dropped his pants
into a puddle at his feet
and when I left he's crying snot

all down his neck"
I say "Robert Lee Wright
that is *not* what I was looking
to recall"
and I'm tempted here and now
to storm outside
and read the funnies
but the sun's baked my whole yard
hot and hard
as cinder blocks

"something's gotta kill those buzzards"
Bob replies
"and he chose cotton
like his great granddaddy picked
beneath the bullwhip
ain't it funny
how God swings this world
in circles?"

Cheated

Bill's in Biloxi, you guess,
in his new blue Mazda truck
to play black jack.
You bet he's pawned his ring—
he's staked everything on luck
that eight Coronas said was his
to ride till dawn.
You cried in my phone last week
how you'd been cheated:
Goddamn skunk and his stinkin' blue truck!
You'd wanted a white one,
an off-road, a Ford.

I'm in Bill's house, on Bill's couch,
stroking his tabby cat Jack
who burrows claws in my jeans
like they were Black Belt dirt.
Jack's been alone here two days
while we shacked up
in my double wide—
cat shit screams in every corner,
Jack just purrs.
From the kitchen you sing country,
old Hank Williams, *Cheating Heart*,
till your words drown in blender whirl.
"Bill's probably in Memphis,"
you tell me, "fat as Elvis,
tucking tips in some stripper's
hungry garter."
Your fingers poke Jack to the floor,
then climb through my zipper's
broken fence.

After sex I spill my plan:
we steal to Vegas
in a white Ford Bronco.
You toss your ring
in a fool's gold fountain,
wish for luck in love and slots.
We wed at the
Chapel of Cheated Hearts,

honeymoon sun-blocked,
bare-hearted,
by Caesar's pool.

You wake me at dawn:
Bill phoned from Tupelo,
broke, sober, limping home.
"Dirty cheat," you say,
"I oughta change the locks,"
as you rush about scooping cat shit
and I pull on socks.

Jesus James

My dad gave me the name
from spite,
then died a week later,
slipped and cracked
his head on ice.
He's been gone thirty years,
and some say
I keep him alive
by growing hair long
as willow whips,
sporting a beard,
bearing the name
like a limp.

Sundays I skate roller rinks:
children pay half-price
and I pay whole.
Mothers congregate
over snack cakes and Cokes,
cursing my name,
my pick of domain.
For I am quick and lean
as soft rain
when it slips between needles,
pinches the pond.
If I make children fall,
it's not from bumping arms
or clipping heels.
It's from touching no one,
never lifting my eyes
from the boards;
it's my moon-perfect
circles, my ripples
through their play.

Salvation

The marquee in front of
George Tilley's
T.V. repair shop read
JESUS SAVES AND
GEORGE SAVES TOO
so I brought him my 1973
13" black-and-white
with a busted tube
on Tuesday morning
and said "Can you save her
by Saturday afternoon?"
George winked cause he knows
bowling's on Wide World of Sports
followed by Hee Haw
and Wheel of Fortune.
My wife Marilyn's blind and
Saturday's the one day
that fills her with vision.

Marilyn still has Betty
fix her hair, freshen her make-up
but she wears her burden
with a man's dull hush.
She says faith is both
a hard suit of armor
and a white felt glove,
and when Christ comes back
He'll put the faithful first
in line so she better look nice.
When I still hadn't heard
from George Saturday morning
she said don't fret him,
but by God she loves
the crack of pins bowled over,
the shiver of steel guitars,
Vanna's clap and
the Wheel's lucky spin.

Later that day
George told an amazing
tale: how lightning struck

First Baptist Thursday night,
blew out all electronics
in the Annex,
how Brother Lewis sorely
needed his four color sets
to teach a Sunday School lesson
on the evils of T.V.,
how the Church beckoned.
I reckoned aloud
that he best fix my set by 3:00
or he'd find a devil
in his workshop.
George got hot, threw my box
on the counter and said
take my troubles elsewhere.

We caught the last ten minutes
of Wheel of Fortune at my sister's—
watching Vanna hatched my plan.
I coaxed my nephew
Willie to pay George Tilley's
marquee a midnight visit,
shift a couple letters,
scatter a few in weeds,
so Sunday morning
all passerby's read
JESUS SAVE
GEORGES ASS
cause George is gonna need it.

SECTION TWO:
SELECTED DRAMATIC MONOLOGUES FROM "CHEVRON, USA"

why I pump gas

my first job
down at Dino's
I couldn't slap
or toss the dough
or sauce or cheese
but I could scrub
a deep-dash pan
till it was
black as onyx
Steve the boss
said take my boom
box by the sink
to keep you company
just don't let ole
Harry touch it
no Jesus music
Christ he'll play
that goddamn gospel
till his God spills
out your ears

Harry told me
he was on parole
used to get wasted
punched a cop
now humbled he
hovered by the
Baker's Pride oven
talked nothing
but getting sober
and saved

nothing made
Steve's day like
baiting Harry
he'd say

don't tell *me*
bout the devil
I met him myself
at Camp LeJune
in the shape of
two drunk grunts
who cut little
pink sixes
all over my buttocks
just for farting
in my sleep
Harry'd say the devil
cuts the heart
and he's got deeper
souls to scar
than your fat ass

Sunday evenings
Steve bowled
so I'd let Harry
play his tapes
his sweat-soaked
hallelujahs
hour on hour
but only a few lines
stick to recollection:
Satan rolls
them stones my way
Jesus rolls
them stones away
see there he'd say
they know

one Sunday Steve
dropped by
too broke to bowl
marched straight
back to the sink
and killed the
boom box juice
cried christ Bony
I told you
no holy rollin

Harry said don't you
blaspheme at him
Steve said who's
the boss goddammit?
Harry said only
one boss I bow to
and it ain't you
I'd heard this fuss
before so I moved
front to clean ovens
only this time
voices fevered
the shuffle of feet
mixed with threats
and shoves
so I peeked back
to see Harry
raise the boom
box over his head
shout thou shalt not
take his name in vain!
hurl it down
like a thunderbolt
Steve dashed
either at Harry
or the box
I ain't sure
but Harry grabbed
an unwashed pan
swung it hard
met Steve's charge
square in the ear
and blood spilled

I went to see
Harry once in prison
he said sorry Bony
I know you got stuck
mopping up the mess
I said that's okay
I now pump gas
and how's jail
treating you?

he just shrugged
but from his pale
unshaved face
his nails bitten
clean to flesh
I could tell it was
hot hard blackness

superfreak

somewhere glass cracks
splatters on a floor
breaks off sleep and
pokes me to my feet
that look thin and freakish
without boots
I stumble to the front
room see a hand
washed in blood pass
through the window's gash
unlatch open the door
there's Ben licking his hand
laughing wild and loud
like a god come down
he says Bony I ain't
never seen you barefoot
it don't look right
I get hot for a second
say till you learn how to
knock on my door right
I reckon I best
sleep in boots
he says Bony I ain't
never heard you fuss
it don't sound right
so I grab a dish rag
rush it out to him
almost cut my heel
on the glass
I forgot about

blood on the rag
on his hand spreads
like sunrise but it's
midnight when we arrive
at the Deke House
the song Superfreak blasts
through windows open
though its cold as hell
Ben limps through
a dozen hellos with

drunk Dekes who
don't recall
he'd been there all night
don't notice
the rag sopped red
I trail Ben to the keg
where he drinks straight
from the tap then
unwraps his hand
drenches the gash
to cut pain and says
god damn if I was god
I'd make glass out of
something soft like grass
I say let's go upstairs
find a clean rag
he slumps to the floor
says how bout you
bring one down here
and I'll owe you a beer
so I climb the stairs
crack bedroom doors
see Dekes and girls
taking bong hits staring
out at me singing
superfreak superfreak
finally I find
an empty room
with a bathroom in back
open the door catch
Johnny buck naked
fucking April
whose butt's on the sink
she throws back her head
from shock cracks
it on the mirror screams
oh my god as Johnny
cries I'm gonna cum
I haul ass
and my boots break
an empty bottle but
I do think to grab
a dirty sock for

Ben's hand and he's still
slumped by the keg
sucking his cut
I kneel beside him tie
the sock in a knot
while he pours beer
on my scalp says
I baptize you Bony
in the name of Rick James
and it hits me I never
even thanked him
for coming to get me
a wail runs down
stairs followed by
April in Nikes and a robe
her head's dark in the crown
Ben says who does
she think she is
the queen of France?
two girls pick at her head
pull her outside
while her cries
fill up the break between
songs and I pray
I'm not seen
as Johnny comes limping
down the stairs his bare
foot bleeding I reckon
from the bottle I broke
Ben says what's wrong
with you? Johnny says
April took my shoes
my robe screaming
bout her goddamn head
and by the way
was that you Bony?
I say I didn't mean to
he says that's okay
just next time knock
and shit my foot's
bout to bleed clean off
so I pull off my boots
then pull off a sock

and say soak up your cut
then pull off the other
and hand it to Ben
I say use this when
that one's sopped through
cause I gotta go
Johnny says thanks Bony
Ben says I owes you
a beer and goddamn
Superfreak plays again
as I run home
through grass so cold
it cuts clean through
my boots

homecoming

main thing scares me
bout the parade
is not being seen
by Bryan's girl Lynn
a twirler with one eye
stuck on her silver stick
one eye on the street
maybe free for a wink
to sweep the crowd
spot the one thing
she ain't specting
I been ducking her
since June
when she caught me
as Ben calls it
playing fetch
with my own bare bone
Christ I dug
myself a hole
can't be raised
till she sees me
stand beside Tony
Ben and Johnny
who crack the air
with knuckles of jokes
and grins and lies
and lay their eyes
like hands on women
passing by

high school band's
a block away
carries with it
an air chock full of
blare and cymbal splash
and silver sticks
like stars above heads
of bare-armed twirlers
Tony says look at
all those hoes!
I shout rows and rows

and rows of hoes!
and Johnny says
Bony's drunk
Ben says Bony's
bout to have a stroke
Tony says Bony's
gonna be *strokin*
all this jail bait's
swelled his hopes
I shout hot damn
here's the band!
the flags the flutes
the saxophones
a twirler flanks each
bone-straight row
and Bryan said Lynn's
back by the bass drum
back by the pulse
of the whole parade
then a voice
a breath infects me
it's Stickman drunk
snuck up from behind
he says your boyfriend's
waving Bony
best wave back

Stick points to a man
in a rust-colored sweater
leaning curbside
on a cane
curling gnarled
fingers at me
Mr. Louis Cecil Lance
ran the dance school
till he crippled
taught the twirlers
how to twirl
as little girls
and every boy
in town at some time
phoned old Louis
screamed *Lucy*

loves to dance!
and hung up squealing
a friend of Mama's
he'd stop by
Sunday evenings
they'd drink wine
play Elvis Presley
Mama'd lift me
from my playpen
and I'd dance
in underpants
to *Don't Be Cruel*

Stick says Bony
wants to twirl
but he needs
hissself a baa-ton
Ben says Stick
let's watch the girls
Stick shouts hey there
Lucy Lance
Bony wants
to twirl your pole!
Tony flicks him
on the shoulder
says you're spoiling
this parade
Stick just grins
says hey man
throws a punch

it's all over
in a blink
Tony ducked
bullied forward
drove Stick down
against my knees
now I'm lying cheek
to concrete
bleeding thick
from nose and lip
I jump up dash
inside the wash bay

not to clean my face
but hide it
Stickman's cussing
Tony's laughing
Ben and Johnny
fast between em
and the rows of
marchers wrinkle
the fight song
breaks to flutters
cause the bass drum
lost its heartbeat
to the ruckus
on the curbside
and I can't spot Lynn
but see the air above
her row is bare

crying shame

in comes Ben
caught drinking
a red-wrapped
bottle of brandy
from his brother Ted
his mama'd said
it's your booze
but not your birthday
and if you can't wait
get out
Ben says why ain't *you*
home hanging stockings?
I say my family's
gone to granny's
truth is Bryan brought
home his girlfriend
Lynn the one who
caught me last June
jacking off
on a damp white
sock she'd left in the
bathroom and I forgot
to lock the knob
cause finding those clothes
knocked me senseless

Ben totes in
a case of Stroh's Light
Jack Bailey sold him
half price
his Christmas bonus
then he calls friends
of his from school
whose folks are
dead or gone
or kicked em out
Bart Deere, Kent Spright
boys I hardly know
bring beer and wine
then the three of em
run down to K Mart

while I clean up a bit
and place a call
they bring back
a half-priced string
of lights a small
silver tree they set
beside my tv then
in struts Stickman
they'd seen him
at the deli
eating deviled eggs
Ben whispers don't fret
I'll keep him in line
then kills half
a bottle of wine
in a single swig
I say Ben I called
Tony cause Shirley's
gone to Boston
Ben says Bony
that could be trouble
but Stickman helps me
string lights speaks
softer than ever before
says I spected
to spend tonight alone
thanks Bony for
having us over
and you need a beer?
I've drunk four by now
and visions of
even the devil
alone at the K Mart
deli on Christmas eve
make my eyes
thin as tissue
and now I gotta take
a leak but damn sure
lock the knob
and a good thing cause
pee turns to tears
first time in
five years I've cried

and all cause of
Stickman Jesus Christ

we get drunker
than hell sing
all the words to Jingle
Bells and Rudolph
we can recall
then Ben passes out
Bart starts cussing
his family calls
his sister a slut
and I forget
about Tony till he
knocks comes in
sees Stickman stops
Stickman says woo woo woo
it's Redman
Tony says woo woo woo
merry Christmas
he's carrying a sack of
slim jims and tire gauges
he passes out
to everyone but Ben
still dead on the couch
I'm worried sick about
Stickman till he says
I preciate that Tony
and merry Christmas
then I gotta piss
again cry again
run the water so
nobody'll hear but
forget the lock
and after a minute
or two Stickman
busts through the door
stares hard at my eyes
says what in hell
you crying for
the fight's out *here*
so I rush out to see
Bart and Kent rolling

on the floor like they're
playing being on fire
knock over the tree
the blinking lights
spill Ben's bottle of wine
till finally Kent breaks
free jumps up runs out
and Bart goes with him
Ben raises his head
says what in hell?
Stickman says Kent
confessed he'd fucked
Bart's sister and Bart
got pissed
Ben picks up the empty bottle
says crying shame
then the clock
strikes midnight
merry Christmas

Jack's white Lincoln

Tony moped about the
wash bay spit a fist
sized chaw of bacca
on Jack's white Lincoln
got hisself canned
so he packed up his Buick
took off for New York
New York for good
didn't even say bye
Ben and me swapped off
cleaning cars
Jack came out to help
pump gas scrape glass
kiss all the full serves
full white asses and
wink at his Lincoln
like it and him
were having a fling
I asked Ben
how many times a week
we gotta clean that thing?
Ben said Bony
how many pennies
you got in your pocket?
I said I dunno a bunch
he winked said flip ya
for who goes first

soon Jack's wife Kitty
said it ain't right
white boys in the wash bay
that's for colored
Jack said then find me
a color I can count on
showing up
she said you know Gladys
King works at the cleaners?
her man Ben needs work
used to drink but now
he's sober cause
Gladys cleans his pockets

keeps him broke
Jack said one Ben
down here's plenty
she said this Ben's black
it ain't the same

next day Ben King
showed up on foot
Jack said I'm Jack
he's Bony
Ben's Ben
we'll call you B.B.
and B.B. King
first thing each morning
is clean my Lincoln
B.B. sulked dragged
his boots like they were
soaked from just
the notion of a day
lost in the wash bay
but he could scour 2-3
cars an hour also
2-3 times a day
his wife stopped by
to clean his pockets
bring him a coke

one day Ben said
B.B. King
I heard your song
down at the pool hall
the thrill is gone
the thrill is gone
B.B. said yep and
Gladys took it
cause the thrill
done tried to kill me
Ben said brother don't
I know it still we need
to shoot some pool
get your wife
my mom together
you'd be free

B.B. said damn
I wish I could
but I stay broke
as a bucket with holes
Ben said fuck it
I'm broke myself but
I got Bony

B.B. never got free
till one Sunday afternoon
Jack closed up early
said boys
you've worked like hell
I'm gonna treat you
to a case and left us
drinking in the wash bay
B.B. said kill em quick
before Gladys comes
and kills me
then he made up
a song and sang
the thrill was gone
but now it's back
and if I can't shoot pool
I can drink like a fool
and the name of this tune
is the shiny white
motherfuckin Lincoln
washing blues
I never drunk
so much so fast
words started slipping
past my lips I said
goddamn Black Ben
sing that song
about the Lincoln
B.B. frowned said
Ben who?
what you call me?
I said Jack's the one
who said it
Jack said what? he asked
Black Ben I said

that's what B.B. means
Jack told me

we didn't speak much
after that and Ben said
Bony don't you worry
we were drunk
next day B.B. started
bitching bout the way
Jack yelled and
worked him like hell
one day just walked off
so now Ben and me
clean cars cept
when Jack takes mercy
or the sky gives rain
and it rained
unmercifully last Friday
and B.B. was drunk
on balming fluid
in the middle of the road
Miss Kitty told us
got hisself killed

Ben said it's hard
to picture a black dude
dead and gray
I try not to
picture him at all
still I can't shut up
that song
it seems to flow
from out the hose
seems to slosh
around the bucket
while I'm shining
Jack's white Lincoln
with the blues

the train

she was there
when I moved in
I swear
the blow-up love
doll found
boxed untouched
in the bedroom closet
I slept with
unblown between
my knees
landlord said
the man before me
died right sudden
in a wreck

my neighbor said
I heard he crossed
the tracks
into blacktown
got cold cocked
robbed by a hooker
laid on the rails
till a train came
and flattened him
bad break for a fat
bald white man
who oughta died
of a heart attack
in that bed of yours
my neighbor loves
to tell tall tales
still his story
left me spooked
scared to give
the doll breath
for fear she'd
tempt me into
crossing those tracks

Thursday night asleep
I heard fists too drunk

to stay balled
break to flats
and backs of hand
against my door
I heaped sheets
on the doll
let in Ben and Johnny
three Dekes
and a dumpy girl
holding Johnny's hand
a twin
I learned later
whose sister got
all the clear skin
the curves
Ben pulled me aside
said Bony
if things go right
this girl might pull
a train I asked
a what? he laughed
just get yourself in line

I killed two beers
while the Dekes
took turns dancing
with Johnny's date
I asked again
what's a train?
Ben pulled me out
to his truck
to shoot whiskey
said you ain't
gotta do it
but the boys
and me are drunk
then the door
gaped open the girl
burst out like a scream
with Johnny trailing
she cried christ
just take me home
Johnny laughed

it's midnight Cinderella
better scoot!
then said shoot Bony
when we climbed
into your covers
your girlfriend
bit us in the feet

the Dekes half
laughed half cussed
at me while I tried
to explain
she was just cushion
for bony knees
so I curled up
on the couch
till Ben unfurled her
said don't worry boys
she left her twin
who's fifty times
better lookin
started to blow
till he dizzied
then Johnny blew
the Dekes too and
finally me till she
grew plump as
a pumpkin

Ben laid her back
on my bed
smoothed the sheets
pillowed her head
said I came here
to ride and ride
I will
then climbed on top
bucked his hips
a dozen times
said first to board
now takes the tickets
and Johnny's next
so Johnny climbed on

bucked his hips
sung I think I can!
I think I can!
then one by one
Dekes followed
finished
laid their eyes
on me and even Ben
called Bony! Bony!
till I was on her

by now she was
almost flat
out of breath
and trying to recall
what I'd seen
I bucked my hips
a couple times
Johnny sung
he thinks he can!
he thinks he can!
and next day
when my neighbor asked
what was all that
racket? I said
just mind your
business please
course he probably
spread the word we'd
humped and killed
a girl
dumped her
in the dumpster
truth is the Dekes
took her with em
so now I sleep
with bony knee
on bony knee

PART THREE: A ROOF OF FLAME

The sunset caught me, turned the brush to copper,
set the clouds
to one great roof of flame. . . .

—Elizabeth Coatsworth
“On the Hills”

Characters (in order of appearance):

Joe Monroe: high school teacher, age 36, kind face, cheap shoes and dirty ties, a man whose natural slinness and sharpness of posture is beginning to soften.

Ronnie Staples: elementary school teacher, age 43, tall and thin, nicely dressed, a woman whose constant expression of fussy surprise has begun to exhaust her face of its abundant store of vitality.

Cecil Jenkins: high school Latin teacher, age 60, unexceptional in his appearance save a head of thick silver hair that calls to mind an elderly Robert Frost, and who fancies himself to be the voice of his community.

Susan Monroe: lawyer, age 37, sharp faced, graying hair, appears to spend hours on an exercise bike and who is seldom seen publically when she isn't reading.

Bob Hargrove: truck driver, age 50, blue collar dress and hardness of expression, easily provoked.

Dr. Jeanette Turner: private school headmistress, age 48, appears in every way appropriate to her position, articulate and patient.

Setting: The scenes alternate between school rooms at Wilcox Academy, a private, segregated school in Alma, a small town in the Deep South, and the front room of Joe's one-bedroom apartment on the upper floor of a large, older home. The school rooms should contain a black board, a teacher's desk, and several student desks; any additional props should be appropriate to the setting. As the school room setting will be used to represent two different rooms, it should be as nondescript as possible.

Joe's apartment room should contain a couch, an arm chair, small bookshelves filled with paperbacks, and a small card table with a couple of metal folding chairs. Other decor and its general upkeep should be appropriate to his circumstances. The front door of this room is understood to open to a small porch and outside stairs leading up to the apartment. There should be a window on the wall beside the door. A door on the back wall is understood to lead to both the kitchen and a back bedroom.

The time is late-1990's.

ACT ONE

Scene 1

Scene: Joe's classroom. Joe is erasing and sponging his black board throughout part of the following scene. Ronnie sticks her head through the door but doesn't enter.

RONNIE: Four more days!

JOE: (*Mimics her sing-song tone*) Four more days.

RONNIE: Can you *believe* it?

JOE: It's hard to believe.

RONNIE: Well I'm a believer, Mr. Monroe!

JOE: Time flies.

RONNIE: (*Now standing in the doorway*) Can I tell you a secret?

JOE: (*Slight hesitation*) Sure.

RONNIE: (*Moves quickly into the room*) I used to hear old folks saying how *time flies* and I never believed them. Plus my mama always said that the older you get, the *quicker* it flies. I used to think it was just a bunch of old gray-heads making noise, but the secret, Mr. Monroe, is that it's *true*. Time does fly. (*Moves one hand towards her and one hand away*) I'm growing older and time's growing shorter and pretty soon—(*Brings hands together in a clap, then throws them out*)—why am I telling you all this? Young man like you's got *years* to splurge!

JOE: Thanks for the warning.

RONNIE: It doesn't seem fair, does it? But if it was fair then it wouldn't be a secret, and I wouldn't have had any reason to come in here and talk to you! To tell the truth I was looking for a reason.

JOE: I'm glad you found one.

RONNIE: I'll tell you something else while I'm here. My mother—who taught thirty-seven years—used to say the school year was nothing but one long *ring of a bell*.

JOE: (*Impressed, nodding*) Thirty-seven years.

RONNIE: Thirty-seven years. The last day of school, every year, she'd sit at her desk and cry like a girl!

JOE: Wow.

RONNIE: I never understood my mother till I got old.

JOE: Miss Staples, you're not *old*.

RONNIE: You sound just like one of my babies! They all think I'm young as their mamas—they all think I'm *beautiful*. They don't see the lines on my face—just the blues and the reds!

JOE: (*Goes back to erasing*) You teach third grade? Is that right?

RONNIE: That's right! (*Suddenly moves towards his window*) Hey, your room looks out at the playground. Lucky you!

JOE: It can get pretty noisy—

RONNIE: Well I'm jealous! (*Calls out to the children*) Hey, that looks like fun! Can I join you? (*Indistinct sounds*) Darlin', I couldn't climb that thing if it had an elevator! (*Moves back in the room*) Course if the school year goes by fast, then the summer's just a blink.

JOE: I need a nice long summer.

RONNIE: You and me both! Are you gonna stay here in town?

JOE: Yes I am.

RONNIE: I thought you might have big plans for the summer.

JOE: No ma'am.

RONNIE: I thought you might be planning to go—hike a mountain trail!

JOE: Not me. To be honest, I don't have any plans past June.

RONNIE: (*Excitedly, like it's a secret*) Ooo, what's in June?

JOE: I'm just gonna sleep the entire month.

RONNIE: That sounds *nice*.

JOE: Nothing else.

RONNIE: Mmm, I might just join you!

JOE: (*Not sure how to respond, hesitates for a moment*) What about you? What are your plans for the summer?

RONNIE: I'm almost embarrassed to say. It'll show how *dull* I've become.

(*A third grade girl walks by, stops in the doorway*)

CHILD: Hey Miss Staples.

RONNIE: Hey there darlin'! (*Hugs the girl*) Where'd you come from?

CHILD: I'm still waiting for Mama.

RONNIE: You are?

CHILD: She's late.

RONNIE: And you stopped by just to give me a hug! (*The girl eagerly hugs her again*) This is the sweetest little girl I know, Mr. Monroe.

JOE: Hello there.

RONNIE: Ashley, tell Mr. Monroe what I'm gonna do this summer. He was just asking.

CHILD: She's gonna *read 'n read 'n read!*

RONNIE: That's right, I'm gonna *read 'n read* till my eyes cry ink! (*To the girl*) Just like you are, right? (*The girl nods vigorously*) Well all right! You better go check on your ride, honey. Tell your mama I said hey!

CHILD: Bye Miss Staples!

RONNIE: Bye sugar loaf! (*Girl exits*) Lord, that poor child. Her mama is a mess.

JOE: Hmm.

RONNIE: Different man every week—but we don't talk about that.

JOE: (*Pause, unsure how to respond*) So what do you read?

RONNIE: (*Seems unprepared for his question*) Hmm?

JOE: What books do you plan to read?

RONNIE: I don't know, Mr. Monroe. What do you recommend?

JOE: What do you like?

RONNIE: Oh, I don't know—books about the South.

JOE: John Grisham, maybe?

RONNIE: Whatever you say!

JOE: I remember you saying how much you liked *The Firm*.

RONNIE: Did I say that?

JOE: I think so, one day at lunch.

RONNIE: And you remember that? (*Joe nods*) I start them all, but I don't think I've finished a one. I was probably just showing off.

JOE: I've just seen the movies.

RONNIE: I don't get out much to movies.

JOE: You're not missing much.

RONNIE: Daddy says movies set in the South make us all look like we grew up on plantations. Goodness sakes! Do I look like—what's her name?—Melanie Wilkes?

JOE: Well, no—

RONNIE: Don't get the wrong picture Mr. Monroe. (*Moves back toward window, looks out*) Just cause there's a statue of my daddy out there in the courtyard—my spoons were made of tin. Folks think Daddy got rich off this school, but if he did, I never spent a dime of it. (*Suddenly embarrassed by these admissions*) Anyway, I don't get out much to the movies, never have time. (*Lowers her voice*) And I've heard if you go on Saturday, there's not a white face in the house.

JOE: Hmm.

RONNIE: I mean I'm not prejudiced, I just—

JOE: I just like the popcorn.

RONNIE: (*Rubs her belly*) Mmm!

JOE: And the Junior Mints—

RONNIE: Now I'm jealous! I'm stuck home reading while you're off at the movies.

JOE: Well I admire you Miss Staples—

RONNIE: (*Teasingly*) You *better* start calling me Ronnie.

JOE: Okay, Ronnie.

RONNIE: We've worked together for almost a year now! Even if this is our first real conversation.

JOE: Well, Ronnie, I admire your plan.

RONNIE: What plan?

JOE: To read till your eyes cry ink.

RONNIE: Oh, I's just being silly. I probably won't read two books!

JOE: Me neither.

RONNIE: I don't like to read, Mr. Monroe! I like to *do*. (*Almost provocative*) So what are you gonna *do* all summer?

JOE: I don't know. I'd like to get outdoors as much as I can.

RONNIE: There you go!

JOE: I'm not sure what I'll *do* though, once I'm out there.

RONNIE: You could take a walk around town!

JOE: I could.

RONNIE: I'd go with you if I had the energy!

(Slight pause; Joe has finished the board, puts away the supplies)

JOE: My sister's big on fitness. She's got all these machines—

RONNIE: Goodness!

JOE: She's down visiting me from New York, and I'm sure she has plans to revive my physique.

RONNIE: *(Moves closer towards him)* I don't think you need much revival.

JOE: I like your idea—just taking walks.

RONNIE: Those don't need machines!

JOE: No they don't.

RONNIE: All they need is—*company*. That's all I ever lacked.

JOE: I suppose it would help.

RONNIE: Well Mr. Monroe, I accept. You've found yourself a partner!

JOE: Are you sure?

RONNIE: Course I'm sure!

JOE: I'd hate to be a burden—

RONNIE: *(Touches his hand)* Honey, *no*, you'd be doing me a favor! I ain't tended to my fitness in years. Listen to me—*ain't* tended. *(Laughs)* You'd think I taught P.E.!

JOE: Don't apologize—

RONNIE: Just don't tell my father!

JENKINS: *(Pokes his head in the door)* Excuse me—

RONNIE: *(Pretends to be whispering)* Don't tell him neither.

JENKINS: Don't tell me what?

RONNIE: Are you spying on us?

JENKINS: What is it you can't tell me?

RONNIE: Oh, lots of things Cecil. Like that what you're teaching ain't breathing.

JENKINS: (*Chuckles*) *Isn't* breathing.

RONNIE: That old *Latin*. Dead as a fan with a burnt-up motor.

JENKINS: She likes her language to breathe. (*Joe nods pleasantly*) Say Joe, you got a minute?

JOE: Oh, sure.

RONNIE: You're not gonna greet me proper, Cecil Jenkins?

JENKINS: Hello Miss Veronica.

RONNIE: *Miss* Veronica, like I'm a girl.

JENKINS: I need to talk with Mr. Monroe for a minute, if I can take him away from you.

RONNIE: Well you can borrow him. But I'm not letting him go!

JENKINS: I just need to ask him a couple of questions. Won't take but a minute.

RONNIE: Long as you talk in English, Cecil. You start talking in Latin and you'll *kill* this young man. (*Starts to leave*)

JENKINS: I think he can take care of himself.

RONNIE: You remember to call me now Mr. Monroe, remember our plans.

JOE: I will.

RONNIE: (*Exiting*) Four more days!

JENKINS: You all have big plans for the summer?

JOE: Oh no. (*Laughs nervously*) We're gonna walk sometimes, for exercise.

JENKINS: That right? She's got a lot of drive!

JOE: She does.

JENKINS: She was one of my students once. My very first year.

JOE: I didn't know that.

JENKINS: (*Grins*) She never cared much for Latin.

JOE: I guess not.

JENKINS: Over thirty years ago. (*Looks around the room*) Never dreamed then I'd still be here now.

JOE: I can't imagine.

JENKINS: This your first year here?

JOE: Yes sir.

JENKINS: How'd you like it?

JOE: I liked it fine sir. It's been—(*Groping for words—he's nervous—wants to say the right thing*)—challenging but—good.

JENKINS: That's good to hear. How's life in Alma?

JOE: Oh, fine.

JENKINS: I'm glad to hear that, Joe. I was afraid you were going to say it was a curse.

JOE: Oh no—

JENKINS: That's the hardest thing for most of our new teachers—small town life.

JOE: (*Feeling he's said something wrong*) Oh I like it. I grew up in a small town.

JENKINS: Is that right? I thought you were from Baltimore.

JOE: I've been living there, but I'm originally from Skyler, little town about seventy miles south of here.

JENKINS: Is that right? You don't *sound* like a Southerner.

JOE: I went to college in New York City.

JENKINS: New York City, I visited there once. All those fast yellow cabs'll scare the tongue out of anybody!

JOE: (*Smiling*) Yes sir.

JENKINS: Look Joe, I'm just here on a errand—

RONNIE: (*Poking her head through the door*) Are you still here? Your time is up!

JENKINS: Good lord—

RONNIE: I'm gonna charge you a fine!

JENKINS: You want him back already, huh?

RONNIE: No, I just wanted to say bye, and thank Mr. Monroe for the talk.

JOE: Oh, thank *you*.

RONNIE: (*To Joe*) I bet I know what he's here for. He wants you put more Latin in your lesson plans. He wants everybody to speak Latin, even the P.E. teachers!

JENKINS: *Mens sana in corpore sano*. Tell him what that means, Miss Staples.

RONNIE: I don't hold conversations with *corpses*, Mr. Jenkins.

JENKINS: She means her memory's getting bad.

RONNIE: Not mine! It's the one thing I've got that's getting better. (*Laughs and exits*)
Four more days!

JENKINS: Don't let her fool you Joe. She'll spend every day this summer counting down till fall.

JOE: Yes sir. You said you had an errand?

JENKINS: Oh, that's right. Dr. Turner asked me to come around and see that everybody got copies of their new contract.

JOE: I got it this morning, and I plan to read over it tonight.

JENKINS: Fine, fine. If you don't mind my asking, are you planning on signing it?

JOE: I am sir. I'll drop it off in the morning.

JENKINS: Excellent. Glad to hear it. (*Writes on his clipboard*) I'm delighted we haven't scared you away.

JOE: No sir, I'm very content.

JENKINS: Fine, fine. Well, that's all I had to say. (*Starts to exit*)

JOE: Thank you.

JENKINS: (*Stops at the door, turns back*) Oh, one more thing, Joe. Are things are going okay for you here in the classroom?

JOE: Everything's fine sir.

JENKINS: No problems with the students?

JOE: Nothing out of the ordinary.

JENKINS: Parents?

JOE: Not yet.

JENKINS: Good, good. (*Lingers, appears to be lost in thought*)

JOE: Is something the matter, sir?

JENKINS: Not if you say there's not. I just ran into somebody yesterday, and from what he was saying, I thought there might be something you'd like to talk about.

JOE: I'm not sure I know what you mean.

JENKINS: Well, you know Bob Hargrove, Will's daddy. He tells me you and he have a meeting coming up.

JOE: That's right. I just sent him a note.

JENKINS: That's what he said. Said Will was having problems, which doesn't surprise me a lick.

JOE: Yes sir. Will's in danger of failing my civics class.

JENKINS: I see. (*Moves back into the room*) I'm gonna speak frankly Joe—you're not the first teacher that boy's had trouble with. I'm not sure he belongs here at Wilcox, though I don't know where else we could send him. Not back to the public schools, no sirree.

JOE: Will's plenty capable. He just needs to finish what he starts.

JENKINS: Is that what your meeting's about? If you don't mind my asking.

JOE: Pretty much sir, that's right.

JENKINS: That's good to know, because old Bob had me a little bit worried. Something seemed to be troubling him immensely, but he wouldn't say what. Said he was sure he could work it out with you.

JOE: I expect we can.

JENKINS: Good, good. That's just what I wanted to hear. (*Begins to leave, then turns back*) Not that any of this is any of my business. I've just been around here longer than anybody Joe, I'm quickly approaching the point of petrification. One of the ladies in the office was saying how, when I retire, there are plans to put a statue of me out in the courtyard next to my friend Grover Staples. And I replied that they could save a whole heap of money by just dragging out my body—as is—and setting it up on a couple of cinder blocks! And yet I believe that experience is worth a little something, don't you? I was hoping Bob would tell me what was bothering him so I could help you all work it out, and maybe he wouldn't even need to come here. I don't think a man like Bob Hargrove is gonna be comfortable talking to an educated man like yourself.

JOE: I'll do my best to be respectful.

JENKINS: I know you will. Now listen, if old Bob starts to get belligerent, you won't hesitate to call on me, will you?

(*Joe doesn't answer right away*)

RONNIE: (*Enters*) Are you still here?! It thought you'd be home watering your monkey grass!

JENKINS: I thought you'd be home helping your daddy cheat his crossword. You just can't leave.

RONNIE: Not without my purse I can't. Did I leave it in here?

JOE: (*Looking around*) I don't think so.

RONNIE: (*To Jenkins*) I bet you took it, and turned it inside out! (*To Joe*) He likes knowing all my secrets.

JENKINS: I know this much—she likes your company Mr. Monroe.

RONNIE: Well that's not a secret, is it?

JENKINS: I'm gonna leave you two to make your plans. I've got monkey grass to water.

RONNIE: That's all you can grow. *Monkey grass*. It's cause you teach that old *dead* language! (*Looks around*) Maybe I threw it in the back seat. I better go check.

JENKINS: (*Stops at the door*) Well come on, I'll walk you out there. (*To Joe*) I'll make sure she drives off this time.

RONNIE: He likes to follow me home.

JOE: Goodbye.

(*Blackout*)

Act I, Scene 2

Setting: Joe's apartment, about 8:00 at night. Susan is sitting in an arm chair and busily poring over Joe's school contract, while Joe sits on the couch grading papers. These two siblings squabble throughout the scene, tossing barbs at each other that, at times, seemed aimed at breaking the skin. Yet this simply is the nature of their relationship—they communicate best through sarcasm and deprecation (self and otherwise), and there should never be any doubt about their affection and deep concern for each other's well-being.

SUSAN: (*Suddenly stops, then reads aloud with drama*) "Teachers are expected to conduct their private lives in a manner that conforms to community standards." What the hell does that mean?

JOE: (*Still grading papers, not looking up*) It means I can't get caught screwing students.

SUSAN: Do you screw students?

JOE: I don't get caught.

SUSAN: That's good.

JOE: So I don't need a lawyer.

SUSAN: I'm not your lawyer, I'm your sister. (*Crumples the paper a bit*)

JOE: (*Looks up*) You're crumpling it.

SUSAN: If you'd just let me finish. (*Crumples it some more; Joe sighs, resumes grading*) You know—there's something here they're not telling you.

JOE: About what?

SUSAN: About what's gonna happen if you sign this thing.

JOE: (*Looks up*) What's gonna happen?

SUSAN: You're not planning to sign it?

JOE: If I ever get it back.

SUSAN: You're not gonna want it back. Look. (*Turns the document over and holds it out, pointing to the blank side*) See right there.

JOE: Yeah?

SUSAN: What does it say?

JOE: Nothing.

SUSAN: Of course not! You think they'd admit what they're gonna do to you?

JOE: What are they gonna do?

SUSAN: They're gonna cut out your brain!

JOE: Really?

SUSAN: For every year you stay, they take out a portion.

JOE: Wow.

SUSAN: Like eating an orange. You've eaten oranges, right?

JOE: They *eat* my brain?

SUSAN: I don't know what they do with it.

JOE: (*Laughing*) How do you know any of this?

SUSAN: I know these little cracker towns.

JOE: You've been here all of three hours!

SUSAN: Haven't you noticed how all the old men around here have sticky fingers?

JOE: Hadn't noticed.

SUSAN: (*Shivers*) Well—wait till you get patted on the ass at the Welcome Center.

JOE: (*Starts to resume grading, then stops*) Why'd you stop at the Welcome Center?

SUSAN: I don't know—it looked—homey. There was this little old man out on the porch—he looked like Grandpa Walton. I thought he'd give me a key chain or something. But he was lecherous old Southern *coot*, and soon as he touched me, I knew you were screwed. (*Crumples the paper*)

JOE: Would you please quit crumpling it?

SUSAN: I'm not hurting it.

JOE: You're crushing it.

SUSAN: If you'd just let me finish.

JOE: Okay. (*Joe puts away his papers, goes over and rummages through her bag which lies on the floor, then pulls out a copy of a paperback she's been reading*)

RONNIE: What are you doing—hey, hey, *stop*.

JOE: I knew it. (*Brandishes the book*)

SUSAN: Put it back!

JOE: Goddamn Tennessee Williams.

SUSAN: Leave him out of this!

JOE: This stuff makes you paranoid.

SUSAN: It makes me vigilant.

JOE: Everytime you come home you're reading this!

SUSAN: It's my travel guide—put it back!

JOE: Give me back my contract.

SUSAN: I'll give it back when I'm finished.

JOE: I'll put it back when I'm finished. (*Opens the book, as if to read it*)

SUSAN: Well be careful. It's old.

JOE: (*They both read for a moment, then Joe speaks, disparagingly*) Is this the play where the woman gets lobotomized?

SUSAN: No. But you should read that one.

JOE: I have. I've read them all.

SUSAN: Read them again.

JOE: (*Closes book*) I've had my fill of Southern hysterics.

SUSAN: Hey. (*Lays down the contract*) I remember something little brother. You wrote a play once and signed it "Boll Weevil Joe." And my boyfriend called you a Tennessee Williams wannabe and you got mad and called him a Yankee snob. A Yankee—you actually said *Yankee*! (*She laughs*) I think I dumped the poor guy because of that, for which you never said thanks.

JOE: Thanks.

SUSAN: He *was* a snob, actually.

JOE: It was Joe Boll Weevil. And I was a child.

SUSAN: Yeah, well, I say they're after your brain. And your soul is next. (*Goes back to reading the document*)

JOE: I'd like it back now please—

SUSAN: A-ha! I found it. It's in really tiny print. (*Holds the document close to her eyes*)

JOE: (*Grabs for it*) Let me see.

SUSAN: (*Snatches it back*) Trust your attorney.

JOE: All right. If you wanna play, let's play. (*Grabs her Tennessee Williams book, makes like he's going to tear it down the spine*) Say goodbye.

SUSAN: Hey!

JOE: I'll do it—

SUSAN: Don't you touch him.

JOE: (*With relish*) I'll tear him in two—

SUSAN: (*Jumps up, holds out the document*) Here—take it. (*Joe hands her the book, then takes the document, which he immediately smooths and lays on a table; she kisses the book*) Poor sweetheart.

JOE: You've smudged it nicely.

SUSAN: Good. Now I want you to burn that damn thing.

JOE: Why? Are you cold?

SUSAN: No. Because you're coming back to New York with me.

JOE: It's cold as Russia in New York.

SUSAN: It's hot as *hell* here.

JOE: (*Goes over and parts the curtains, then opens the door*) It's cool outside.

SUSAN: Leave the door open.

JOE: (*Closing door*) There's no screen.

SUSAN: (*Fanning herself, speaks in an exaggerated Southern accent*) Well I am starting

to *suh-woon*.

JOE: There's A/C in the bedroom.

SUSAN: Lotta good that does the rest of us.

JOE: (*Doubles over as if hit in the gut*) Oooohhh, a reminder. Joe sleeps alone.

SUSAN: Yes he does, and it's a shame.

JOE: He's no less happy than when his bed was full.

SUSAN: His bed was never full for long.

JOE: His point exactly.

SUSAN: (*Feigning indignation*) Well, the whole thing's embarrassing for his sister. Her friends ask what he's up to, and not only does she have to say he's teaching at a private school in Alma, but that he wakes up there alone.

JOE: (*Sits*) Sorry for the burden. You want a beer? (*Rises*)

SUSAN: No thanks. (*Sits*) I thought you quit drinking?

JOE: I did. I just bought a couple for my last day of school celebration.

SUSAN: A-ha! The end of school is cause for celebration.

JOE: It's *always* a cause for celebration—

SUSAN: Bullshit—

JOE: It is—

SUSAN: *Bullshit!* I've got a friend who teaches in Harlem and she's sad as hell when the *day* comes to an end. Every sunset she weeps.

JOE: Sorry. I'm not apt to weep.

SUSAN: Well I'll do it for you, Joey. It's pretty damn sad.

JOE: (*Genuinely hurt*) I'm sorry I embarrass you.

SUSAN: That's not what I meant.

JOE: That's what you said.

SUSAN: I didn't mean it was your fault. I'm absolutely certain you're teaching the little bigots a billion times more than they're worth.

JOE: Gee, thanks.

SUSAN: But the fact is, you teach at a school that was founded to keep out black kids. (*Shrugs, as if challenging him to dispute her*) It bugs you.

JOE: Not half as much as it bugs you.

SUSAN: For *six months* you lied to me about where you were teaching.

JOE: All I lied about was the name of the school.

SUSAN: (*Grunts a laugh*) That was a pretty huge lie!

JOE: I knew I'd have to hear a bunch of self-righteous crap.

SUSAN: I'm only self-righteous when I'm right.

JOE: Fine. Go back to Harlem and tell them all about my sell-out. I'm teaching at a school without metal detectors or drug dogs—which are of course essential for a *meaningful experience*. But we do have a dress code: every kid has to wear a clean sheet, or we send them home. Instead of the Key Club, we have the Key Key Key Club. At pep rallies we burn bonfires *and* crosses. In fact, I might burn a cross in here right now. It's what I usually do for entertainment, that and carving swastikas in my flesh. And I'd do it too if it weren't so goddamn hot in here. I don't know if it's the weather or the righteousness, but it's starting to give me a headache. (*Goes over and opens the door, fans the room with the door, closes it, then he sits on the couch*)

SUSAN: (*Rises and sits beside him on the couch*) The Key Key Key Club. That was pretty good. (*Begins rubbing his knee*)

JOE: You sure you don't want a beer?

SUSAN: (*Shakes her head*) I wouldn't last a goddamn week here.

JOE: You just gotta have a plan. (*Slight pause*) I've got one.

SUSAN: Do tell.

JOE: You'll just growl at it. (*Susan growls*) You have to be nice and self-deprecating.

SUSAN: Robert told me once that I probably was born growling. He thinks it was my first word. He doesn't believe that I wasn't always like this. He doesn't believe that I used to have a Southern accent.

JOE: I remember. You used to say *mama 'n diddy*.

SUSAN: I think it all started in ninth grade. *Roots* was on—you remember *Roots*? Kunte Kinte? (*Joe nods*) I was sitting in home room before school—just me, this really skinny black kid named Reginald Edwards, and these two Good-Ole-Boys named Tracey and Jarred. Actually I don't remember their names, but that sounds about right. Anyway, the G-O-B's started whispering—*Cunt-uh Kinte, Cunt-uh Kinte*—and snickering, and poor Reggie was sitting there thinking they were race baiting when I *knew* it was aimed at me. I was the *cunt*—that was the G-O-B word of the week. And a part of me wanted to lean over and tell Reggie that it was me, not him, but I have to admit—and this sucks—that I was glad he was there. (*Slight pause*) I let him squirm.

JOE: I think I teach Tracey and Jarred.

SUSAN: Anyway, in the middle of this pimply purgatory, Reggie turned around and just growled. And for a second, they froze. It wasn't long, but I figured, if needed, it would've given us a chance to escape. And that's how I escaped. I growled at Mama and Daddy for a whole year till they finally froze long enough for me to slip away. (*Slight pause*) So have I earned it?

JOE: You're getting there.

SUSAN: Hey, I know how to make you like me. I brought you a present. (*Goes to her bag, takes out a package of photographs*)

JOE: Looks like a letter bomb.

SUSAN: It's not really a present. They're yours—I got them from one of your boxes. (*Hands them to him*)

JOE: (*Opens the package, removes a few of the photographs*) Oh my god. I haven't seen these in ages.

SUSAN: They're cute. There's some of you in there too.

JOE: (*Looking through the photos*) Jesus Christ. That's not me—it's Boll Weevil Joe! God, whatever happened to these people? I haven't heard from a soul since I left New York.

SUSAN: There's more. (*Retrieves a couple more packages, gives them to him*)

JOE: (*Opening a second package*) Have you looked at these?

SUSAN: Why? (*Cranes her neck to look*) Any good stuff?

JOE: We had a deal—you wouldn't go through my things.

SUSAN: I didn't look at them, I swear. I saw them in a box, thought you might like to see them.

JOE: (*Looking through the second package*) They are pretty funny.

SUSAN: I'll be honest—they're bait.

JOE: To lure me back? (*She nods vigorously*) No thanks.

SUSAN: I know tons of women! I'll take you out to lunch every Friday! I'll find you a job—

JOE: (*Opens third package, seems stunned by its contents*) Jesus Christ.

SUSAN: (*Looking*) What?

JOE: My production. My play.

SUSAN: Your *Eden* play? (*Joe nods*) Lemme see! (*He hands her a few photos*) I didn't know you had any pictures!

JOE: Yeah. The last show. You never saw them?

SUSAN: (*Looking through them with him*) These are so cool! God, the actors were *babies*. I didn't remember them being that young. That was such a great play!

JOE: (*Rolls his eyes*) Please.

SUSAN: It *was*. It was beautiful.

JOE: Kids taking their clothes off. (*Keeps looking*) Granted, they were damn good

looking.

SUSAN: (*Holds up a couple of photos*) This was the highlight of your life, Joey! You got a production in New York City—

JOE: In a bookstore! With a bunch of amateur actors whose artistic vision was to not get erections on stage.

SUSAN: So? It was a highly symbolic piece. It deserved better.

JOE: Genitals aren't symbols, dear. You ever touched one?

SUSAN: You're just pissed off cause nobody liked it.

JOE: Are you kidding? They loved it. They just didn't get it.

SUSAN: *I* got it. And I think you were crazy to stop writing.

JOE: I was crazy for not burning these.

SUSAN: (*Tries to grab the package from him*) No you don't. I'll take them back.

JOE: (*Holding onto them*) I'm not gonna burn them. (*Begins putting the other photos back in the package*) I'm gonna put them in my *baby* book, where they belong.

SUSAN: The play was great, Joey. *You* were great. You wanted to change the world.

JOE: (*Rises and puts the photos on the bookshelf*) You don't change the world with naked actors. (*Winks playfully*) Besides, I've got a better plan.

SUSAN: For god sakes tell me.

JOE: You'll just scoff.

SUSAN: I won't scoff, I promise. (*Holds up several fingers, as if she's giving a scout's pledge*)

JOE: All right, you promised. (*Slight pause*) I'm gonna start a revolution, but it's gonna start so quiet and small that nobody'll hardly notice. In fact it's already started. I think I may have fired the first shot, and it's a small one, I admit, but still I did it—

SUSAN: What are you talking about?

JOE: What do you think I'm talking about? Wilcox Academy. Jim Crow's last hideout, and I'm gonna kill him. It may take me five, ten years, but when I'm done—when I leave this place—it'll be integrated. One kid, a hundred kids, it doesn't matter. My job is just to get it going.

SUSAN: Doing what?

JOE: Little things. Hang a portrait of Martin Luther King beneath the flag. Make them read *The Invisible Man*. I've gotta start small, because I've gotta be trusted. A few years down the road, when I'm well-known and liked, I start having private conversations with influential parents, fat cat boosters, board of trustees. I get them to see that it's the twenty-first century, that it's a goddamn *disgrace* to be living in a social cesspool. Then somebody, one of the big wigs, decides the time is right, and brings in a black kid for a sort of trial run. The old-timers will all raise hell, and a lot of the students will too, and that kid's gonna need somebody on the inside watching out for him. That's gonna be me.

SUSAN: I don't know—

JOE: You don't know *what*?

SUSAN: It's a nice—vision—Joey, it's beautiful. It's exactly the kind of thing you should write a play about! But back in New York.

JOE: Oh—I should write about it and not do it.

SUSAN: You *can't* do it. That's why it's a vision.

JOE: (*Offended*) Of course I can do it.

SUSAN: You can *try*. These people down here are mean, and you're tender, Joey. I love you for it, but it scares me.

JOE: Thanks for your vote of confidence. (*Turns his back to her*)

SUSAN: Hey—(*Puts her hand on his shoulder*)—I'm just jealous. I still occasionally have dreams, but then I go to work and realize that most of the people I deal with would be better off living alone. Sorry. (*He turns back around*) But that's great, Joey, really, I say fuck those racists where it hurts. You think you can pull it off?

JOE: I gotta try. (*Shrugs*) I always thought, if I could just have been born twenty or thirty years earlier, I could've been a freedom rider and gotten shot. I could've marched to Montgomery and gotten a beer bottle cracked across my head! When I was working on the docks, I was terrified that I was gonna get knocked into the water and drowned. And

it wasn't dying I was afraid of—it was dying for six dollars an hour. (*Shrugs*) At least now I've got a vision. Never had one before. (*Slightly shivers*)

SUSAN: Just don't get too comfortable here.

JOE: (*Grins*) Without central air? Shoot.

SUSAN: For god sakes don't get married.

JOE: Don't worry. I'm keeping my love life amply miserable.

SUSAN: How miserable?

JOE: I'm pretty damn lonely.

SUSAN: And what's this shot you fired?

JOE: Just an assignment I gave.

SUSAN: About what?

JOE: You ever heard of Frank T. Welch?

SUSAN: Who?

JOE: Frank—

(*Knock at the door*)

SUSAN: Company?

JOE: It's usually a Jehovah's Witness. (*Opens the door; steps back with surprise*) Miss Staples—hello—come in—

RONNIE: (*Teasingly*) I'm not coming in till you say *Rahn-nee*.

JOE: I'm sorry Ronnie, I was just surprised—very surprised—

RONNIE: (*Enters*) You sound just like ole what's-his-name!

JOE: Ma'am?

RONNIE: Sur-prize! sur-prize! sur-prize! Oh what's his name? (*Slight pause*)

SUSAN: (*Amused*) Gomer Pyle—

RONNIE: Yes—Gomer Pyle! *Gomer Pyle*. That's not his name—what's his real name?

SUSAN: Jim Nabors.

RONNIE: Yes—Jim Nabors! Grew up not twenty miles down the road, and here I forgot his name!

JOE: Susan, this is Miss Staples, from school.

RONNIE: (*To Susan*) Please call me Ronnie. (*Extends her hand, they shake*) I don't know why your brother's so afraid to!

SUSAN: Are you a teacher?

RONNIE: I better be. School's got my name on it.

JOE: Her father founded it.

SUSAN: Wow.

RONNIE: (*Talks directly to Susan like she knows her already*) Wilcox is my middle name—my mother's maiden name—though sometimes I wish it was something else. You cannot imagine the size of your shadow when a whole *building* bears your name!

SUSAN: I'm Joe's sister Susan.

RONNIE: Of course you are! I saw a car outside with New York tags, and I just had to come say hello.

SUSAN: Pleased to meet you.

RONNIE: We had a nice, long talk about you today.

SUSAN: (*Looks at Joe*) Really?

JOE: I was telling Ronnie today about your exercise routine.

SUSAN: Oh, yeah. (*To Ronnie*) Sweating to the oldies.

RONNIE: (*Trying to catch her breath*) Speaking of oldies—I just about lost my breath

walking up those stairs.

JOE: Would you like something to drink?

RONNIE: Yes I would, thank you. Water's fine.

JOE: Susan?

SUSAN: Nah.

JOE: I'll be right back. (*Exits back to kitchen*)

RONNIE: Didn't know walking up stairs could be such an *event*.

SUSAN: So what exactly did Joey say about me?

RONNIE: Oh, nothing much. He said you're a regular—oh, what's her name? Who'm I thinking of?—the woman with the exercise tapes?—the movie star?—

SUSAN: Jane Fonda.

RONNIE: Yes! Yes—Jane Fonda. I can't remember anything tonight!

SUSAN: (*Playfully*) Can I tell you a secret? About Joe?

RONNIE: Good heavens yes.

SUSAN: I figure I owe him that much.

RONNIE: I love secrets.

SUSAN: Joe's a big fan of Jane Fonda.

RONNIE: Oh?

SUSAN: I think he's half in love with her.

RONNIE: (*Disappointed*) Goodness. She is a handsome woman.

SUSAN: It's her attitude. Joe likes women who cause trouble.

RONNIE: Goodness.

SUSAN: He also was crazy for Maud Gonne.

RONNIE: I don't keep up much with movie stars.

SUSAN: When he was a teenager, all his friends had Farrah Fawcett on their walls—Joe had Maud Gonne and Zelda Fitzgerald! Worried Mother to death. In fact, she went out and *bought* him a Farrah Fawcett poster, which he refused to even unroll—they had a terrible squabble. I shouldn't be telling you all this. (*Joe enters empty-handed*) Should I, Joey?

JOE: Should you what?

SUSAN: Tell Ronnie about all your old flames.

JOE: If you want a quick conversation.

SUSAN: He's being modest.

RONNIE: He's just shy around me—I don't know why.

JOE: (*To Ronnie*) You have to be careful around her. She's a lawyer.

SUSAN: You forgot the water.

JOE: I'm out of bottled water. And the tap water here's brown.

RONNIE: Don't worry about it.

JOE: No, listen, I'm gonna run downstairs and ask my landlady. I do it all the time.

RONNIE: Really, I'm fine!

JOE: I'll be right back, I promise. (*Exits*)

SUSAN: I've never seem him so polite. What's got into him?

RONNIE: May I ask you something? Who's Farrah Fawcett?

SUSAN: She was one of Charlie's Angels.

RONNIE: Oh. You must think I'm the most ignorant Southern woman you've ever seen.

SUSAN: Not at all.

RONNIE: I just don't know anything about movie stars. I do know Jane Fonda. I bought one of her exercise tapes once, but my daddy hollered, *Get that slut off my TV!* (Suddenly embarrassed) I told him, "Daddy, it's my TV—I paid for it." By then I'd lost my energy.

SUSAN: I used to bug Joey about his health, but lately I've been pretty lazy myself. I haven't done anything much but roller blade in Central Park.

RONNIE: Ooo, Cental Park. Is it safe there?

SUSAN: Oh, sure. It's like any other city park.

RONNIE: I don't know much about big cities.

SUSAN: Come up and see for yourself sometime. And bring Joey with you.

RONNIE: Lord, my daddy'd have a fit! If I told him I's going to New York City—he'd die.

SUSAN: Bring him too.

RONNIE: My daddy? Honey, you don't know my daddy. He'd rather go to *Siberia*.

JOE: (*Enters shrugging*) She's out too.

RONNIE: That's okay.

JOE: Why don't I run to the store real quick.

RONNIE: Goodness no! Talking to Susan's freshened me up.

JOE: Still talking about me?

RONNIE: We've been talking about New York City.

SUSAN: Joe's not a big New York fan. Though I'm trying to change his mind.

JOE: She's been trying all night.

RONNIE: This oughta be fun to watch!

SUSAN: He's worn me out, too. I should be thinking about heading back to the hotel.

RONNIE: (*With drama*) Oh no.

SUSAN: I'm suddenly exhausted.

RONNIE: I hope I'm not intruding.

SUSAN: No, no, I'm just tired. Joey, thanks for the talk. (*To Ronnie*) Maybe we'll meet again later.

RONNIE: I 'spect we will!

JOE: Call me when you get back.

SUSAN: I will. (*To Ronnie*) I hope you understand.

RONNIE: Course I do.

SUSAN: Good night. (*Exits*)

JOE: Drive safe. (*Door closes*)

RONNIE: Well. I hope I didn't run her off.

JOE: Oh no. She's driving down tomorrow to see Mother.

RONNIE: Still, I probably should have called first.

JOE: No, I'm glad you stopped by. I'm sorry I acted so surprised.

RONNIE: Well—(*Sits*)—I know I'm the *last* person you expected to come knocking on your door.

JOE: Well, yes—

RONNIE: Who'd you think it was? Tell the truth.

JOE: To be honest—I thought you might be a Jehovah's Witness.

RONNIE: A Jehovah's Witness?

JOE: They've come before.

RONNIE: You thought I was a *Witness*.

JOE: For a moment, yes—

RONNIE: I'd make a *good* one, too. You know why?

JOE: Why?

RONNIE: (*Reaches over and touches his knee on the word 'love'*) Because I love knocking on doors. I think that might've been my calling!

JOE: You'd be a good one.

RONNIE: That's what we oughta do this summer. Become Witnesses!

JOE: I don't know—

RONNIE: We'd get our exercise, every day!

JOE: I—I think I'd rather run laps. I'm not much for churches.

RONNIE: Oh Mr. Monroe, I'm just playing. (*Lowers voice*) You gotta be *black* to join the Kingdom Hall, and unless my eyes deceive me—(*Winks and grins; Joey grins back, perfunctorily*). Look at us, acting like a couple of teenagers. Next thing you know we'll be playing footsie. (*Taps his shin with her foot; he smiles uncomfortably*) I apologize Mr. Monroe. My daddy says I'm much too silly.

JOE: That's okay.

RONNIE: (*Rises*) I shouldn't have come barging in like this. I do apologize.

JOE: Please don't.

RONNIE: I was just in the neighborhood, and—I don't know what got into me, really.

JOE: Don't apologize—

RONNIE: Well, no, I *do* know what got into me. It was the talk we had this afternoon. That was the best talk I've had in a long, long time.

JOE: I enjoyed it myself.

RONNIE: If I'd known what good company you are, I'd have stopped by sooner.

JOE: You should have.

RONNIE: To tell you the truth Mr. Monroe, I'm always a little leery of being too friendly

with first-year teachers, till I know they're gonna stay. And when I heard you were coming back next year, I thought, I better run over there and get to know this young man! We were all quite nervous you'd be leaving.

JOE: I'm not leaving.

RONNIE: Then you signed your contract?

JOE: I'm going to sign it right now, before I forget. (*Retrieves the document and a pen, signs it*)

RONNIE: And I'm gonna be your witness! (*Slight pause*) I ought not tell you this, but I had this *silly* idea when I saw you with Cecil Jenkins that maybe something was the matter.

JOE: Not at all.

RONNIE: Nothing's wrong?—I mean it's not my business.

JOE: He was just running an errand.

RONNIE: Mr. Monroe, that's music to my ears.

JOE: Please call me Joe. It's only fair.

RONNIE: (*Shyly, despite herself*) All right. Joe.

(*A moment's silence*)

JOE: I'm out of water but I do have soft drinks. I know it's hot in here.

RONNIE: Oh. A glass of Coke would be nice.

JOE: All right.

RONNIE: I sure got thirsty walking up your stairs!

JOE: (*Exiting to the kitchen*) Those stairs are like a moat. I've gotten to where I don't even lock my door.

RONNIE: (*Calls to him*) I forget to lock mine too sometimes, and Daddy throws a fit! (*She rises and walks a bit around the room, stops at the bookshelf, sees the package of photographs; she starts to pick it up, but then moves away when she hears Joe returning*)

JOE: *(Returning with a glass of Coke and a beer)* I decided to have myself a beer. I hope you don't mind. *(Hands her the water)*

RONNIE: Aren't you a man of the world!

JOE: I'm not much of a beer drinker anymore. I bought a couple for the last day of school—I don't know why. I was so worried about students seeing me that I drove fifteen miles to Gaston to buy them!

RONNIE: Don't you *hate* that! I used to feel like the most watched woman in Alma! And I *was*. Men from church used to ask me to the movies, and I'd say, "Only if you'll take me to Gaston. I don't want to feel like I'm being chaperoned by half of my home room!"

JOE: It's awful.

RONNIE: Then I switched to third grade, and that all disappeared. I *love* to see my babies, and they don't spy. They just wanna give you sugar—*(Hugs herself tightly)*. Course by then all my suitors had found women who, well, didn't mind being watched. So I just married myself to Wilcox.

(Joe smiles at this admission, but he doesn't respond with the kind of jocularly she had hoped for, and she's confronted with implications of her statement; then an awkwardness besets them both, and she drinks her Coke in a single gulp)

RONNIE: I didn't know just how thirsty I was.

JOE: Listen, would you like?—I'm not sure if I should ask this.

RONNIE: I trust your judgment. *(He swigs from his beer)*

JOE: I was just going to ask if you'd like some wine. I don't know if you drink.

RONNIE: *(Pause)* Well I can't say that I do.

JOE: I understand.

RONNIE: But then I'm not quite ready to say that I *don't*.

JOE: Great. I'll get some wine. *(Rises, moves toward kitchen)*

RONNIE: Joe? Would you mind if I tried a beer? I've always wanted to.

JOE: Of course not. I'll get you a beer. *(Moves toward the kitchen)*

RONNIE: I feel bad, though, taking your last one.

JOE: Don't. If I want more I can drive to Gaston.

RONNIE: Yes you can! And maybe I'll go with you.

(Joe exits; Ronnie rises and moves about with nervous energy—she grins, breathes heavily, puts her hand to her mouth, then looks back at the open window with parted curtains; she goes to the window, touches the curtain, looks back toward the kitchen, then quickly pulls the curtain shut and returns to her seat)

JOE: *(Returns, hands her the beer)* I took the liberty of opening it for you.

RONNIE: Then I guess that makes me liberated!

JOE: *(Sits, drinks from his beer, watching Ronnie who's holding her can like it was a baby)* I hope you don't think Susan was rude for leaving so quickly.

RONNIE: Of course not. And I just love that name—Susan. *(Sips at her beer)* My mother used to plant black-eyed Susans out by the flagpole, but they'd always get trampled.

JOE: *(Chuckles)* That's what they called her in law school: *black-eyed Susan*.

RONNIE: Oh?

JOE: Because she was always picking fights with her professors.

RONNIE: Goodness. *(Sips grow bigger)* Listen Joe, I took the liberty of drawing your curtains. You know—those eyes.

JOE: Well—now I'm liberated. *(Drinks, and she joins him)* How's the beer?

RONNIE: Oh, it's fine. Tastes just like I always thought it would—a little thick, a little wicked. *(Winks)*

JOE: It's been a while since I had beer.

RONNIE: This ain't gonna get me tipsy, is it? *(Sips)*

JOE: I doubt it.

RONNIE: I don't mind if it does. In fact it might already be doing it!

JOE: (*Concerned*) Do you feel all right?

RONNIE: (*Sips*) I feel different.

JOE: Different how?

RONNIE: (*Sips*) Well—right now I feel about fourteen years old.

JOE: (*Laughs*) Don't say that!

RONNIE: (*A little hurt*) Why not?

JOE: Because you'll remind me of one of my students, and then I'll think you're here to spy on me.

RONNIE: (*Laughs*) Maybe I *am* here to spy on you!

JOE: Oh no!

RONNIE: Maybe I'm in *disguise*!

JOE: I'm in trouble!

RONNIE: That's right, I'm fourteen disguised as forty-three! I've been fourteen years old my whole life, and each year my disguise gets better! (*Rises*) Look at me Joe—do I look fourteen years old?

JOE: No, but—

RONNIE: Well I *am*.

JOE: But you don't look forty-three either.

RONNIE: (*Suddenly puts her hand to her mouth*) My god, I told you my age, without you even asking. (*Sits*)

JOE: Age never mattered much to me.

RONNIE: I want to pay you for this beer—I know I'm not gonna finish it.

JOE: Don't be silly. Drink as much as you want.

RONNIE: I sure enjoyed what I had. Don't tell my daddy though. He really *does* think

I'm fourteen.

JOE: Listen, if you don't feel up to driving, I'll be happy to take you home.

RONNIE: Oh, I don't have my car Joe, I walked.

JOE: Really? Do you live near here?

RONNIE: I live down by the river.

JOE: Wow. That's a ways.

RONNIE: I told you I'm a walker. Or I can be.

JOE: I'm impressed.

RONNIE: I don't know what got into me tonight. I finished my dinner, and without even putting away the dishes, I had a sudden itch to go out walking—and I followed it! Beautiful night for it, bright and breezy. Still, it was a strange thing for me to do, just to take off without a plan. Luckily Daddy was asleep. Still I did think to leave him a note. I hope he doesn't wake up though—he won't understand it. He'll think I've gone off and left him. *(Slight pause, seems to consider the implications of her words)* It took me ten minutes to find these old sneakers. They turned out pretty comfortable, even though I'd never done much walking in them. Know what I used to use them for? *(Joey shakes his head)* Working in the yard. Gardening. Isn't that something?

JOE: You're all set for summer.

RONNIE: I told you Joe, I could be young with some encouragement.

JOE: How did you know where I lived?

RONNIE: *(Rises)* Honey, I know *everything* in Alma. *(Seems a bit lightheaded, steadies herself, sits)*

JOE: I really don't mind taking you home.

RONNIE: *(Rises again slowly, moves for the door)* I appreciate it Joe, but I'm gonna take advantage of my enthusiasm. I'm gonna go look for shooting stars. *(Opens door)*

JOE: *(Steps in the doorstep, looks out)* It is cool outside. Much cooler than in here.

RONNIE: You're welcome to walk with me a ways. It's not that I don't want your

company.

JOE: (*Moves back into the room*) Thanks, but I've got to get ready for tomorrow.

RONNIE: (*Closes the door*) Big day tomorrow?

JOE: Well—maybe.

RONNIE: (*Moves back into the room*) You look spooked Joe. You all right?

JOE: I've got a parent conference tomorrow, and it's been worrying me a little.

RONNIE: Oh?

JOE: The boy's sort of a problem.

RONNIE: Anybody I know?

JOE: I probably shouldn't say.

RONNIE: Well. (*Touches his arm*) You'll be fine. I know it.

JOE: Thanks.

RONNIE: (*Starts to exit and stumbles a bit; Joe helps to steady her*) You must think I'm a child, getting dizzy from a sip of beer.

JOE: Don't apologize.

RONNIE: That's all we've done tonight, Joe. Tell each other to stop apologizing. (*Looks at her watch*) Maybe I will let you take me home. I might not oughta be out alone this late.

JOE: Great. Let me find my keys. (*Begins searching*)

RONNIE: What if your sister calls? Won't she worry?

JOE: (*Still searching*) She'll figure I went out with my company. I'm allowed to do that.

RONNIE: (*Goes over to the window, parts the curtains, looks out*) It's been a long time since I've been called company. I like it. And I *do* want you to tell me all about what's bothering you. I'm not gonna tell anybody, I promise. I know lots of folks around Alma, and if it's somebody I know, maybe I can help.

JOE: (*Still searching*) I appreciate that.

RONNIE: Look Joe! Was that a shooting star?

JOE: I'm sorry, I wasn't looking.

RONNIE: Of course you weren't looking! Aren't I silly? It was probably just a moth that flew by my eyes! (*Slight pause; during this speech, Joe leaves the room to continue his search, though she doesn't see him and keeps talking*) You must think I'm crazy, mixing up a moth with a shooting star. The thing is, when I get hopeful about something, my whole *body* gets hopeful, including my eyes, and then they want that moth to be a star as bad as *I* do. I do Joe, I believe what my eyes tell me. That's the nature of my faith, that I'm hopeful.

JOE: (*Returning*) I found them.

RONNIE: I was almost hoping you wouldn't. Then you'd be forced to walk me home. Would that be too much trouble?

JOE: I wouldn't mind.

RONNIE: I'll have to try that sometime—causing trouble.

JOE: My sister would approve.

RONNIE: Would you?

JOE: Would you rather walk? I know it's late, but—

RONNIE: I'd *love* to. I'd love to take a walk.

JOE: Let's walk then. (*Opens the door*) It is gorgeous out here, and—I don't know. I suddenly feel like walking.

RONNIE: (*Gently pushes her arm between his arm and side*) You're gonna like it here Joe. You're gonna stay here a long, long time.

(*Blackout*)

ACT TWO

Scene 1

The next day, in Cecil Jenkins's classroom. Bob Hargrove sits brooding in a student desk. Jenkins stands before his desk. School recently has let out for the day.

HARGROVE: What are we waiting on?

JENKINS: I've asked someone to join us Bob. I think she can help.

HARGROVE: It ain't that woman with the hair on her chin?

JENKINS: (*Grins*) No, not Dr. Turner. It's Veronica Staples.

HARGROVE: All right. (*Nodding*) She oughta know about this. She oughta go straight home and tell her daddy—'cept it might kill him.

JENKINS: That's what I'm hoping she'll do.

HARGROVE: Kill him? (*Winks and grins maliciously*) Or just tell him?

JENKINS: Bob, I have nothing but respect for Grover Staples.

HARGROVE: I know you do. I also know you can't stand the sonuvabitch.

JENKINS: Is that the word on the street?

HARGROVE: (*Shrugs*) Only street I know is I-85.

JENKINS: Anyway, I called Veronica on account of her friendship with Mr. Monroe.

HARGROVE: What kind of friendship?

JENKINS: (*Waves his hand*) Oh, it's nothing. She fusses over every man teacher who's not married.

HARGROVE: I figured he wasn't married. He looks queer.

JENKINS: I'm hoping she can put some sense into him.

HARGROVE: I'd like to put my foot in his ass.

JENKINS: Bob, we're gonna try to work this out—

HARGROVE: Yeah, well, you'll get your shot.

JENKINS: Don't misunderstand. (*Begins walking toward door*) If what you've said is true, I'd love nothing better than to see him get the boot. (*Looks out the door, turns back*)

HARGROVE: Then go do it.

JENKINS: I don't make those decisions Bob. I don't.

HARGROVE: You don't make 'em, but you get 'em made.

JENKINS: He's got a following. There's a group of parents that sing his praises all over town.

HARGROVE: Go fire the sonuvabitch, let them sing about *that*.

JENKINS: It's not like that anymore.

HARGROVE: You sound like him Cecil. I told him *how dare you* write that on the black board—in *this school*. And then he said it's the twenty-first century, it's time to shed the past. That's when I shed my coat and almost hit him.

JENKINS: He wrote what on the black board?

HARGROVE: *Frank T. Welch*. In big fat letters.

JENKINS: Good lord.

HARGROVE: (*Leaps up*) I'll show you.

JENKINS: I believe you Bob.

HARGROVE: I want you to see what *I* had to see. (*Writes 'Frank T. Welch' in large letters on the board*)

JENKINS: Good lord.

HARGROVE: Don't it burn?

JENKINS: What's the *T.* stand for?

HARGROVE: That's what I asked him. He said that's how it was listed in the phone book.

JENKINS: Why was he looking in the phone book?

HARGROVE: That's how this bullshit all started! He gave Will Frank Welch's phone number, told Will to call him!

JENKINS: I didn't know all that.

HARGROVE: Hell yes! Call him and then go over to his house! Ask him questions! Interview the bastard.

JENKINS: Oh my god.

HARGROVE: If that ain't grounds for firing him, I don't know what it is. Course my opinion don't pack much punch around here.

JENKINS: Don't start that, Bob.

HARGROVE: We ain't country club.

JENKINS: I'm not either.

HARGROVE: But we're all paid up. And I don't send him here for his education. Will's not bright.

JENKINS: Will's a good boy.

HARGROVE: Good and dumb. I send him here for one reason only: so neither him or me would *ever* have to see that sight. (*Glares back at the board*) I made Monroe write it down. I had to see it like Will had seen it.

JENKINS: Poor boy.

HARGROVE: It shocked him Cecil. Shocked me when he told me about it. I got so hot I wanted to kill the sonuvabitch.

JENKINS: I wish you'd told me all this before.

HARGROVE: I didn't know if it was true. Will bullshits sometime. And if it was true I thought I could handle it.

JENKINS: I'm glad you came to me today.

HARGROVE: We don't want him failing that class. Not over this.

RONNIE: (*Knocks, doesn't wait for and answer, enters*) Hello Mr. Bob! I don't think I've seen you since the time you bumped my car!

HARGROVE: That's been a good five years.

RONNIE: Has it been that long?

HARGROVE: I's hoping you didn't remember that.

RONNIE: How could I forget! (*Turns to Cecil*) He bumped me when I was backing out of Dairy Queen one Sunday. I had a chocolate blizzard on the dash and it spilled all down my snow-white sweater!

JENKINS: A parking lot's too small for a man like Bob.

HARGROVE: It wasn't hardly a bump. Didn't do no damage.

RONNIE: (*Teasingly*) That's not what my dry cleaner said!

HARGROVE: If I recall Miss Staples, you owned up to bumping *me*.

RONNIE: Did I really?

HARGROVE: If I recall you talked me outa calling it in.

RONNIE: Is that right?

JENKINS: Miss Staples's memory tends to wander.

RONNIE: Oh hush Cecil. You weren't there. (*Turns to Hargrove*) Mr. Bob, I have nothing but fond memories of that afternoon. I didn't like that old sweater anyway. And that bump—that ice-cold blizzard tumbling down into my lap—was the most excitement I'd had in years! My lord, to have you jump out of your car to see if I was okay—

HARGROVE: It coulda been my fault, I don't remember.

RONNIE: Well, I do. I remember every second. (*Slight pause*) Goodness, now you all know how dull *my* life can be! Sundays at Dairy Queen, good heavens. I think I'll just sit down. (*Sits in a student desk*)

JENKINS: This isn't gonna take long

RONNIE: What isn't?

JENKINS: Just need your advice on a teaching matter.

RONNIE: Your note said it was a personal matter.

JENKINS: It's a little of both, I guess.

RONNIE: Don't see how it could be.

JENKINS: It's about Mr. Monroe. He's a teacher but he's also your friend.

RONNIE: Yes he is.

JENKINS: I was hoping you could talk to him about something. Bob's boy Will's having problems in Mr. Monroe's civics class.

RONNIE: What's that got to do with me?

HARGROVE: She ain't got to talk to him. I 'spect we can handle this.

RONNIE: Handle what? *(Turns to Cecil)* Well for heaven's sake tell me. You all got me so nervous now I'm starting to perspire. *(Sits, fans herself)*

HARGROVE: I'm sorry ma'am.

JENKINS: She's okay, Bob. She's fine.

RONNIE: *(Showing real irritation, for the first time in the play)* Would please tell me what this is about?

JENKINS: *(Looks to Bob, to give him the opportunity to tell her; Bob shakes his head)* Mr. Monroe gave Will an assignment. The whole class was supposed to go interview somebody—someone in the community.

RONNIE: I know all about that assignment. I think it sounds fine.

JENKINS: Who told you about it?

RONNIE: *(Hesitates)* I heard it from folks in town. They all liked it.

JENKINS: They don't know the whole story.

RONNIE: (*To Hargrove*) He's just jealous 'cause nobody came to interview him.

JENKINS: (*Laughs lightly*) Who'd want to interview me?

RONNIE: Nobody living, that's for sure!

HARGROVE: What I wanna know is who'd want to interview Frank Welch.

RONNIE: (*Clearly feigning innocence*) Frank Welch? Who's that?

JENKINS: Go home and ask your daddy who he is.

RONNIE: My daddy's taking a nap.

HARGROVE: I'll tell you who he is. He's the goddamn nigger who—

RONNIE: (*With enough force to stop him*) Goodness.

JENKINS: She knows who he is Bob. She's knows good and well.

RONNIE: I might have once. Aren't I allowed to forget?

JENKINS: You're not gonna forget who made your daddy famous.

RONNIE: (*With irritation*) How did Frank Welch make my daddy famous?

JENKINS: If it wasn't for Frank Welch there'd be no Wilcox Academy. Ask Grover. I'm not saying anything against him. I'm personally thankful he had the vision to look ahead. That vision became my livelihood Veronica, yours too. But the fact is, if Frank Welch hadn't done what he did, we likely wouldn't be in this room. There'd be no room. Your friend Mr. Monroe wouldn't have a job. He'd be back up in Baltimore, I bet, doing whatever he did up there.

RONNIE: My daddy founded this school on Christian principles. (*Turns to Hargrove*) He said it was his calling.

JENKINS: Maybe so, but it was Frank Welch who called him.

RONNIE: What's this got to do with Mr. Monroe?

HARGROVE: He told Will to go see him. Go out to his house and talk to him.

RONNIE: Whose house?

HARGROVE: Frank Welch.

RONNIE: Oh.

JENKINS: (*Mocking her*) Oh.

RONNIE: I bet Mr. Monroe doesn't even know who Frank Welch is. He just picked his name out of the phone book!

HARGROVE: He knows all right.

JENKINS: Maybe he doesn't know the seriousness of it. I'm willing to grant him that.

RONNIE: I'm sure he doesn't Cecil! How could he?

JENKINS: You're gonna tell him, that's how.

RONNIE: You tell him Cecil. You're his boss.

JENKINS: Dr. Turner is his boss.

RONNIE: Well let her tell him.

JENKINS: I don't think she'd sympathize with our position. She'd sympathize—but she'd say it was between Mr. Monroe and Will.

HARGROVE: I don't want Will failing. Personally I don't give a damn, but his mama does.

RONNIE: (*To Hargrove*) Why didn't Will say something to him? I'm sure Mr. Monroe would've listened.

JENKINS: I wondered about that myself, Bob. Seems like Will could've said something.

HARGROVE: (*Hesitates*) Turn around and look at that name. (*They do*) It don't burn, does it? Well it burns me. It burned Will. I got nothing but hate for Frank Welch. My daddy was a friend of Deke Bledsoe—a *good* friend—and he saw that man get crucified on account of Frank Welch's little stunt. Y'all must not feel the same way as me and Will. Hell, y'all just got through thanking the bastard—he brought you this school.

JENKINS: I was just pointing out a reality Bob. I've got no affection for Frank Welch.

HARGROVE: Then you should understand. Here Will is, sitting in a class he already hates, when this sonuvabitch teacher starts writing names up on the board of people they're supposed to go talk to. They're all supposed to choose somebody to go bother. What the hell is that? In my day you read books and took tests. It was always hard for me, but at least I knew what to expect. With that *Monroe* you never know what he's gonna pull! But the *last* thing Will expected to see was *Frank T. Welch* sitting up on the board. Course none of the others hardly know that name, but Will does—it's all he can see. Everybody's making their choices, while Will's just sitting there feeling like he just got whacked on the head with a skillet. So he gets stuck with *Frank T. Welch*. Of course he didn't say nothing Cecil. His throat was too swoled up to talk.

JENKINS: (*Walks over and puts his hand on Bob's shoulder*) I'm not blaming Will for anything. I just want to work this out, so everybody's satisfied. (*Turns back to Ronnie*) Mr. Monroe told Bob that it was important for Will to finish what he started. Normally I agree with that—but this case isn't normal.

RONNIE: He doesn't know it's not normal.

JENKINS: But you're going to explain it to him, right?

RONNIE: I'll talk to him, yes.

JENKINS: The other thing that occurs to me is that Will never started anything. So there's nothing for him to finish.

HARGROVE: I told him that myself, but the sonuvabitch said—

JENKINS: Hold on Bob, hear me out. The problem is that Will never started—that's Mr. Monroe's point. So if we can find somebody proper for Will to interview, and he does it, then I don't why he can't pass the class.

HARGROVE: I don't neither.

JENKINS: You tell Mr. Monroe that Will Hargrove's gonna interview me.

RONNIE: *You?*

JENKINS: I've been around longer than anybody. He's gonna do it tomorrow morning before school, and he'll bring Mr. Monroe the results the next day. Is that okay Bob?

HARGROVE: I'll send him over early.

JENKINS: You send him over with a notebook and a package of pens. I'll talk his ear

off! *(To Ronnie)* Tell Mr. Monroe to call me if he has any questions. Will's gonna do the assignment, he's gonna pass the class, and Mr. Monroe's gonna teach his lesson. Everybody's satisfied. Right Bob?

HARGROVE: I won't say satisfied, but I'll say tided over. I appreciate your help, Cecil. You too, Miss Staples. *(Ronnie doesn't seem to hear him)*

JENKINS: Glad to help Bob, anytime. *(Hargrove exits)* You know where Monroe lives? I 'spect it's gonna take more than a phone call.

RONNIE: Course I know where he lives.

JENKINS: And you'll call me tonight? Let me know what he said? I should be home all evening.

RONNIE: Course you'll be home. Where do you have to go? *(Jenkins grins)* Why'd you call me here Cecil? This isn't none of my business.

JENKINS: You're his friend. I'm not.

RONNIE: That doesn't mean he'll listen to me. Not about this.

JENKINS: Then you make him listen. You better, or you just might lose your newfound companion.

(Blackout)

Act 2, Scene 2

Joe's apartment. Eight PM of the same day. Joe is sitting nervously on the couch. Ronnie picks up the phone on a stand by the door and slowly dials numbers, breathing heavily.

RONNIE: Hello, Cecil? *(Slight pause; Ronnie speaks teasingly at first)* You know good and well who it is! Who else would it be? Your secret admirer? *(Laughs nervously)* I couldn't if I wanted to Cecil, you know that! I never could keep secrets! I just wanted you to know that I talked—with—Mr. Monroe—and—*(Gropes for words, Cecil speaks)*—no, I can't just blurt it out. It's not a one-worded answer. It's complicated, Cecil, like most things. *(Slight pause)* Well, the short of it is that Mr. Monroe thinks this whole situation is an—*opportunity*—to teach Bob's boy a lesson that's got nothing to do with civics class. *(Slight pause)* That he's got to play by the rules. To let him change now wouldn't be fair to the other students! They all did their work on time. That's all he

wants Cecil, to be fair to the other students! (*Pause; Ronnie grows increasingly less confident throughout the remainder of the conversation*) Of course I know that. I—I wish so too—so does Mr. Monroe—but it can't be undone. Not now. That's what he said. That's what he said to tell you. (*Pause*) You'll have to talk to him yourself then. (*Slight pause*) I don't know Cecil. (*Slight pause*) Where am I? I'm where I'm supposed to be, if it's any of your business. (*Slight pause*) No you can not. Daddy's asleep. Don't you bother him tonight—I mean it. (*Slight pause*) Listen Cecil, you and I can talk about this later. When school's out, and we have time, we'll straighten this out, okay? (*Slight pause*) Goodnight Cecil. (*Hangs up*) Well, that's that!

JOE: What did he say?

RONNIE: Oh, nothing much. When are we gonna take that drive? (*Walks toward the window*)

JOE: Is he going to call me?

RONNIE: I don't see why he would. (*Opens the curtains, looks out*) It's dark enough now that nobody would see us. (*Turns back to Joe*) I say we go right this minute!

JOE: I'd like to wait a few minutes, in case he calls.

RONNIE: Don't want to wait *too* long—else it'll be too late. (*Looks at her watch*) It is getting late.

JOE: Maybe you should go home and check on your father.

RONNIE: (*Puts her hand to her mouth*) My god. I haven't been home since this morning. When's the last time that happened? (*Sits in the arm chair*)

JOE: We can go to Gaston any time.

RONNIE: Oh no, Daddy's fine! I called Rosa from school and told her we'd had a crisis. She'll stay with him all night, if need be.

JOE: I know, but still—

RONNIE: I want to take that trip to Gaston. And I'm gonna buy that beer myself! You wait and see.

JOE: I wonder if he'll come by to see me.

RONNIE: Cecil? You mean *here*?

JOE: Maybe you shouldn't be here—for your sake.

RONNIE: Cecil won't come here—he won't do nothing for a while. Besides, even if he did, we'll be gone to Gaston!

JOE: He might see your car.

RONNIE: That's why I parked over there behind the bank! (*Ronnie again walks to the window and looks out*) You can't see it from here.

JOE: I'm gonna have to see him sometime.

RONNIE: I 'spect this whole thing's gonna blow over soon as school lets out.

JOE: Ronnie, I feel I've put you in a bad position. Your father's bound to hear about all this.

RONNIE: Oh, don't worry about Daddy. Cecil might go to see him, but not tonight. I'll talk to Daddy first.

JOE: Why would he go see your father?

RONNIE: Because he knows he can't do *nothing* without Daddy's blessing.

JOE: (*Concerned*) What's he planning to do?

RONNIE: Oh, probably just fuss a bit. I wouldn't worry. (*Again looks out the window*)

JOE: How's your father gonna feel about all this?

RONNIE: He'll be a little confused. But I'll set him straight! He won't give Cecil his blessing for *nothing* without talking to me about it. He tolerates Cecil, but that's all. And Cecil can't stand Daddy. That's as well-known fact.

JOE: Still I feel bad.

RONNIE: About what?

JOE: About dragging you into something that might get complicated.

RONNIE: Honey, the day my daddy founded Wilcox Academy my life got complicated. For twenty-five years I was the headmaster's daughter, which meant I had the whole town's eyes stuck on me like mud! I was thirty-one years old before I felt free to look

around, and by then I discovered that nobody was looking back.

JOE: Now they're all gonna look at me.

RONNIE: Let them look! It didn't kill me. Besides, there's just a few more days of school. Over summer this whole thing'll be forgotten. Summer's like a big ole broom!

JOE: This thing may not end with summer.

RONNIE: (*Trying to sound nonchalant*) Oh? (*Sits in the arm chair*)

JOE: Will's not gonna interview Frank Welch. He'll just take his "F" and curse me for the rest of his life. But I will get an interview. If it takes ten years, I'll keep trying—

RONNIE: I don't think it'll last *that* long. I 'spect soon we'll get a stroke of luck!

JOE: Like what?

RONNIE: Well—like maybe Frank Welch will move.

JOE: (*Skeptically*) I doubt it. He's over seventy.

RONNIE: Maybe he'll die.

JOE: What?

RONNIE: They don't live as long as we do.

JOE: Let's not wish him dead for my sake!

RONNIE: I don't wish nobody dead honey! I'm just saying that sometimes nature takes care of our problems.

JOE: Frank Welch isn't my problem.

RONNIE: Oh?

JOE: Bob Hargrove is my problem. Cecil Jenkins is my problem.

RONNIE: But it's Frank Welch that started the whole thing.

JOE: (*Becoming visibly angry*) What *whole thing*?

RONNIE: I don't know—back in 1965—all that mess. It's not *you* that Cecil's mad at. It's all that mess from the past. I don't know much about it—I always shut my ears. But I do know that some folks believe it's the *worst* thing that ever happened to Alma.

JOE: Is that what you believe?

RONNIE: Me? I don't know much about it! I always shut my ears—that was Daddy's advice—said there was no way to know what the truth was. Shut your ears. . . .(*Seems lost in thought*)

JOE: I think you should know what I believe. I think—

RONNIE: (*Stands to tell her story*) I do remember this! Not long after all that mess happened, there was this photographer out by the playground at Alma Elementary taking pictures. Daddy was principal then, and he went out to ask him what he was doing. Then the man—he talked like a Yankee—said the strangest thing Daddy'd ever heard. He said, "I'm looking for Negro children. Where are they?" You can imagine what Daddy told him! But as he was walking away, the man turned back and said something even stranger. He said, "They're here all right. You just can't see them yet." And that very night Daddy started drafting his proposal for the school he'd name *not* for my mother, like people think, but for me. (*Slight pause*) I guess I am one of those folks.

JOE: What folks?

RONNIE: Whose life was changed by Frank Welch.

JOE: Do you blame him?

RONNIE: I don't blame nobody! I just wish this whole thing between you and Cecil would go away.

JOE: It's not going away.

RONNIE: It will if you let it. (*Sits*)

JOE: I can't.

RONNIE: But you won today Joe! Cecil tried to bully you, and you stood up to him. Bob's boy is gonna flunk your class. Ain't that enough? Yes, Cecil's gonna raise Cain, but I'll talk to Cecil. By the time next fall gets here this whole thing'll be forgotten.

JOE: Not by me.

RONNIE: Why, Joe? (*Slight pause*) I've been wanting to ask that all day.

JOE: (*Hesitates, realizes that is a crucial moment in their relationship, wants to say the right thing*) Have you ever seen those pictures in *Life* magazine? Of Frank Welch's legs?

RONNIE: I never wanted to.

JOE: You should. And you should read the story of what happened to him.

RONNIE: Whose story?

JOE: *His* story, told in his own words.

RONNIE: Everybody had a story!

JOE: That's right. And I imagine you heard Deke Bledsoe's version.

RONNIE: Who?

JOE: The sheriff.

RONNIE: I didn't hear any of it! I shut my ears.

JOE: Deke Bledsoe had a damn interesting version. Let me tell you about it.

RONNIE: I don't care to hear it, thank you.

JOE: And then I'm gonna tell you Frank Welch's version.

RONNIE: I sure don't care to hear *that*.

JOE: And then I'm gonna show you the pictures. (*Walks over to the bookshelf, retrieves a copy of an old Life magazine*) You decide who you believe.

RONNIE: I don't want to hear those stories, and I'm sure not gonna look at any pictures. I just want to drive to Gaston before it gets too late.

JOE: We can't drive to Gaston till I do this.

RONNIE: Do what?

JOE: Tell you what I believe.

RONNIE: (*Anguished*) I don't care what you believe. I don't care what Cecil or anybody else believes! I'm on your side because I believe in *you*, Joe. That's all that matters.

JOE: I'm not trying to be cruel.

RONNIE: I know that, honey.

JOE: This is important to me.

RONNIE: (*Hopeful*) Let's drive to Gaston. We can talk on the way.

JOE: We can't yet—

RONNIE: Why not?

JOE: You need to hear this.

RONNIE: I don't—

JOE: Or else we can't be friends.

RONNIE: *Oh*—don't say that! We can *always* be friends! We don't have to agree on everything. And I don't *disagree* Joe, I just don't know much about it. I never listen when folks are arguing—that way I never have to choose sides. But I'm on your side Joe, whatever you believe.

JOE: This is what I believe—

RONNIE: Joe—

JOE: (*Speaks forcefully enough that, for once, she is silenced*) I believe that Deke Bledsoe, with two of his deputies, went and hid in Frank Welch's home, and when he came in, they beat him to a pulp. They crippled him. They broke his legs in seven places. You know why? Everybody knows why. Somebody said he'd made a pass at Deke's wife, which meant he might have looked her in the eyes, or accidentally kicked a little dust on her shoes. Who knows? But it was known that Deke Bledsoe wasn't too secure about his marriage, and likely somebody told him just to torment him. His wife probably told him herself. But what Deke did was nothing compared to what the rest of the town did. They believed what he told them. You know his story, don't you?

RONNIE: (*Softly*) I don't—I never listened.

JOE: He said Frank Welch's *wife* had done it to him. She'd caught him drunk, and she'd

beaten him to a pulp. His wife. She weighed ninety-seven pounds.

RONNIE: Nobody believed that.

JOE: They pretended to. And the whole story would've been squelched if *Life* magazine hadn't had a reporter traveling across the state. (*Opens the magazine to the photographs, looks at it for a moment, then lays it on her lap*) That's why I'm doing this. That man's still alive and I'd like my students to know what he remembers.

(*Ronnie sits motionless for a moment. Slowly she lowers her eyes, flinches for a moment, then looks steadily at the pictures. She turns a couple of pages, then closes the magazine and keeps it in her lap.*)

JOE: It's not gonna go away over the summer.

RONNIE: No.

JOE: Maybe I could talk to Dr. Turner. I think she'll understand.

RONNIE: Maybe—but she can't help you by herself. You'll need a lot more than her.

JOE: I know. (*Goes over and takes the magazine from her, opens it again and looks at the pictures*) I was in a library one day last year, browsing through old magazines, and I came across this story. I couldn't believe I'd never heard about it, having grown up in this state. So I found out all I could—I even wrote the Alma Chamber of Commerce asking for information. And they sent me a whole packet of stuff, but none of it mentioned a single word about this incident. What it did mention was that Alma had a wonderful private school, complete with pictures of the happiest, most carefree kids I'd ever seen. I figured, those students have never heard of Frank Welch. Their parents and teachers must've all forgotten about it. So I thought, what a wonderful opportunity. I'll move there, talk my way into a job, and then do my best to teach those kids about all the things the town forgot. I have to admit, I moved pretty slow. It became clear real quick that nobody *wanted* to learn those things, and I waited all year for the right time to try something. I finally figured out that the right time was whenever I got up the nerve to *make* it the right time.

RONNIE: (*Looks up at him*) You'll be okay. I'll talk to Cecil.

JOE: I appreciate it. I do. (*Walks toward the door*) Thanks again for keeping me company all afternoon. I am sorry you got dragged into this.

RONNIE: (*Rising*) I needed to be dragged into something. It's been a long time.

JOE: (*Opens the door*) Again, I'm sorry.

RONNIE: We're not going to Gaston?

JOE: (*Closes door*) You still want to go?

RONNIE: We have to now. After all this.

JOE: I suppose so. (*Starts to move past her; she appears to start to reach out for him but hesitates; he stops for a moment, their hands almost touch, and he moves on*) I've got to find my keys.

RONNIE: I could drive Joe. (*Joe stops*) Course I probably shouldn't. I'm nervous myself.

JOE: I'm sorry I was so—headstrong back there.

RONNIE: I'm glad you were, I am. I survived it—I'm tougher than they thought. My daddy always kept those kind of things from me. No, that's not right—he taught me to keep them from myself. (*Increasingly angry*) I should go home right now and tell him I found out anyway—tell him all his tricks didn't work. I should tell him it was *me* that wrote *Frank Welch* on the black board! I know just what he'd say too—*what's your interest in old Frank Welch?* I'd just let him sit with that for a while. (*Turns to Joe*) I'd do it too, 'cept it might kill him. That's been my whole life's problem—anything I do could kill my father. Can't do *nothing* to call attention to myself—it's my name on that school—remember, it's *my* name—(*Puts her hand on her brow*)—I suddenly feel dizzy—

JOE: (*Moving to help her*) Here—sit down.

RONNIE: (*Sitting*) I'm all right. I was suddenly just *blinded* by a thought: why's my car hid over behind the bank? Am I gonna have it to hide it every time we're together? (*Joe sits beside on the couch, a distance from her*) It makes me so blankety-blank mad, I get—dizzy—

JOE: I don't think we should go anywhere till you get to feeling better.

RONNIE: (*Rises, and Joe rises also*) We have to go!—I been looking forward to it all day. Haven't you?

JOE: Of course.

RONNIE: (*Moves towards him*) Don't you want to go?

JOE: Yes—

RONNIE: Aren't you lonely here each night? Don't you need company?

JOE: Of course—

RONNIE: What's making me dizzy is the thought of us *not* going—(*They're an arm's length apart*)—the thought of us each ending this night alone—(*Takes Joe's hands*)

JOE: (*Looks down*) I'm tired of being alone—more than I knew—

RONNIE: (*Moving backwards she begins pulling him slowly towards the door*) You let me drive—I'm in charge of this evening—we're gonna forget about Cecil—we're gonna forget about everything!—

JOE: (*Starts to pull away, though she holds him*) Maybe I should drive—

RONNIE: Why?

JOE: If he comes by, he'll see my car—he'll knock—he'll know I've gone out with someone—

RONNIE: I don't care if he knows—I don't care who knows—

JOE: All right—

RONNIE: I'm in charge now—this evening's mine, Joe—yours and mine—

She pulls him into an embrace as the lights slowly fade to black.

Act 2, Scene 3

It is Thursday afternoon, two days after the last scene. School has recently let out. Joe is sitting at his desk with his head lowered. He looks somber, nervous.

RONNIE: (*Enters, stops in the doorway*) One more day!

JOE: (*Rising*): Come in—

RONNIE: I can hear it! (*Moves in the room, past Joe, to the window*) Summer's scratching at the glass!

JOE: (*Moving away from the desk*) Did you get my note?

RONNIE: (*Still looking out the window, past the playground*) Look at Daddy's statue! He knows what's coming.

JOE: Did you get my note?

RONNIE: Three months of solitude!

JOE: (*Sighs with impatience*) This is important.

RONNIE: Course I got it. (*Turns to him, steps back from the window*) What exactly did she say to you?

JOE: That something urgent had come up.

RONNIE: Did she say *what*?

JOE: No. Just that she and Cecil would come by at three o'clock.

RONNIE: (*Looks at her watch*) Goodness. I'm just in time.

JOE: I asked if it was about a particular student and she said it concerned *all* my students. She looked distressed. I don't know if you should stay.

RONNIE: Cecil brought me in to this. I'll stay.

JOE: They may not see it like that.

RONNIE: Well I'm not budging.

JOE: You should probably go.

RONNIE: (*Shaking her head*) No no no—consider me nailed to the floor! (*Walks over and starts to pull on a desk for a dramatic representation of her steadfastness, only the desk isn't nailed and she goes flying backwards and falls*)

JOE: (*Rushing to help her up*) Are you okay?

RONNIE: (*Nervous laughter*) Lord have mercy! This kinda thing could only happen to an old maid schoolteacher! (*Joe picks up the desk while she brushes herself off*) See what time has reduced me to? *Predictable*.

JOE: You sure you're not hurt?

RONNIE: (*Moves the desk*) I thought these desks were nailed to the floor! What happened to the nails?

JOE: I had the janitor take them out.

RONNIE: (*Sits gingerly*) Well I can't go nowhere now. I'm broke!

JOE: Ronnie, are you hurt?

RONNIE: Just my pride, honey. And that's been broke for years.

JOE: I feel like—I don't know—

RONNIE: What?

JOE: I just cause trouble for you.

RONNIE: No—(*Touches his hand*). And if there's trouble I want to help.

JOE: I think I know what's gonna happen. (*Walks slowly to the door, looks out, then marches back with vigor*) They're gonna pressure me to quit.

RONNIE: Well I won't let you.

JOE: I've done nothing wrong.

RONNIE: Nothing at all!

JOE: They've got nothing on me.

RONNIE: Do you think?—do you suppose?—

JOE: That they know? (*Ronnie reaches over and gently squeezes his hand*) I don't see how they could.

RONNIE: They'd have to fire me too.

JOE: Would they try?

RONNIE: Shoot! My daddy's statue is right outside the window.

JOE: (*Moves back towards the door*) They're just gonna bully me.

RONNIE: Cecil does like a fight.

JOE: So do I. (*Hint of a smile*) I've wanted this fight for years. (*Turns to the door and crouches like a boxer, then turns back*) Susan would be thrilled.

RONNIE: It scares me, Joe.

JOE: That's why I think you should go.

RONNIE: But I'd die from worry. (*Stands up, moves away from him*) Course it's gonna kill me to watch.

JOE: What can he do? (*Slight pause*) I know what he'll do. He'll try to turn the town against me. What's the worst thing they can say?

RONNIE: Don't you know?

JOE: (*Hesitates*) Yes I know.

RONNIE: That's what they'll say.

JOE: Then I'll wear it like a medal. I'll go down to the goddamn court house and change my name—

(*Jenkins comes marching in with Dr. Turner, the headmistress, trailing*)

JENKINS: What are you doing here Miss Staples?

RONNIE: *Hello* would've been nicer.

JENKINS: We don't have time for niceties right now.

RONNIE: So much for Southern courtesy.

TURNER: Veronica I apologize. We've got something important to speak about with Mr. Monroe.

RONNIE: That's just what I been told.

JENKINS: By who?

RONNIE: Mr. Monroe of course. And when I heard *you* were involved I figured I needed to be here.

JENKINS: You figured wrong.

RONNIE: You brought me in before, Cecil. I'm involved.

TURNER: We just need to speak with Mr. Monroe for a minute.

JOE: (*To Ronnie, privately*) You don't need to stay—

RONNIE: I *want* to stay.

JENKINS: (*To Joe*) Why'd you bring her here?

RONNIE: I'm his friend Cecil, you know that.

TURNER: I think they're right, you don't need to hear this.

RONNIE: What could be so—*black* that I can't hear it?

JENKINS: You'd be surprised.

TURNER: Mr. Jenkins, I think—

RONNIE: (*Sharply*) Don't think I don't already know.

JENKINS: It's not what you think.

TURNER: I think we should—

JENKINS: You've got no idea why we're here. Neither does he.

TURNER: Mr. Jenkins, *please*. This is best discussed in private.

JOE: Miss Staples, I'll be fine.

JENKINS: No, let her stay. She should know just what we know.

RONNIE: Thank you Cecil.

JENKINS: But I want you to promise you'll just listen till you've heard all we have to say.

RONNIE: That sounds reasonable. (*Sits*)

JENKINS: None of your hysterics.

RONNIE: I'll just sit here like a schoolgirl.

TURNER: I'm not sure I'm comfortable with this.

JENKINS: Have a seat Mr. Monroe. (*Joe sits*) Go ahead Dr. Turner.

TURNER: I don't know how to talk about this. There's no easy way to start—

JENKINS: Then I will. I got an anonymous call early this morning, Mr. Monroe, from a parent of one your students. They told me their child had seen you opening one of your desk drawers, and that what he saw almost shocked him to death.

JOE: (*Confused*) One of my desk drawers?

JENKINS: That's what he said. So we had to investigate.

JOE: Isn't this about Frank Welch?

TURNER: Not as far as I know—

JOE: This is about Frank Welch! (*To Jenkins*) Isn't it?

JENKINS: Don't see how it could be.

TURNER: (*To Jenkins*) What about Frank Welch?

JENKINS: Oh, Joe and I had a little disagreement last week, but it was nothing. It's not my business to interfere.

JOE: That's crap—

JENKINS: Watch your tongue.

TURNER: This has nothing to do with Frank Welch. That's the first I've heard of it.

JOE: Then what are you here for?

JENKINS: We're here about what was found in your bottom desk drawer this morning.

JOE: What were you doing in my desk drawers?

JENKINS: (*Moves over to the desk, lays his hand on it*) Excuse me sir, but this is school property. We can look through it any time we please.

JOE: Well look through it then. There's nothing there that shouldn't be.

JENKINS: That's right. We removed it this morning.

JOE: What did you remove?

TURNER: I think Miss Staples ought to leave now.

RONNIE: I'm not a child.

JOE: *(To Jenkins)* If you took *anything* out of my desk, that's theft.

JENKINS: We had a legal—and a moral—obligation to remove that property, did we not, Dr. Turner?

TURNER: I believe so.

JENKINS: I even checked with Bill Brewer.

TURNER: You did?

JOE: *(To Ronnie)* Who's Bill Brewer?

RONNIE: The school's attorney.

TURNER: *(To Jenkins)* I thought we were going to keep this to ourselves.

JENKINS: I didn't say who was involved. I just told him we'd found some harmful materials, and he said we had every right to confiscate it.

JOE: *(Goes over and opens the bottom right drawer of his desk, lifting out its contents)*
All I keep in here are teacher's manuals. So anything you took isn't mine.

JENKINS: I think we can prove otherwise.

JOE: What did you find?

(Jenkins starts to speak but Turner motions for him to stop.)

TURNER: We found—lord this is hard—we found photographs, Mr. Monroe.

JENKINS: We found *pornography*.

JOE: *Pornography?*

TURNER: I wouldn't call it—*that*. Just photographs.

JOE: Of what?

TURNER: Snapshots—

JENKINS: Snapshots are what you hang on your refrigerator. These are of a different breed.

TURNER: Mr. Jenkins removed them before you got here this morning. I was with him.

JENKINS: (*Appears to be talking mainly to Ronnie*) Pictures so explicit, so profane—

JOE: Pictures of what?

JENKINS: Of *couples*—in various states of undress, committing various acts of profanity. And on top of that—

TURNER: Mr. Jenkins, we agreed not to discuss details.

JOE: They're not mine! Somebody planted them there, as a joke or something—

RONNIE: That's all it is!

JENKINS: You stay out of this.

TURNER: That's what I wanted to believe, but your name is printed on the package.

JENKINS: Your address too—*New York City*. We can always find out where they came from.

JOE: (*Suddenly realizes what they might be*) If—if it's true, if they're mine—then they're my private property.

JENKINS: They should've been.

JOE: They *are*. Someone took them from my home, and put them there.

JENKINS: Who's been in your home Mr. Monroe?

JOE: I don't know who's been in my home!

TURNER: (*Appears lightheaded*) Let's try to stay calm—

RONNIE: (*Rises, goes to Turner*) You need to sit down?

TURNER: (*To Ronnie*) I'm sorry about all this.

JOE: Someone broke into my home. Obviously. They took my private property, and they planted it in my desk!

TURNER: That did cross my mind.

JENKINS: Have you called the sheriff?

JOE: Of course not.

JENKINS: If someone burglarized your home, you should've called the sheriff.

JOE: I didn't know about any of this till now.

JENKINS: They broke into your home, and you didn't know it? No broken windows? No busted doors?

RONNIE: He leaves his door unlocked.

JENKINS: How do you know?

RONNIE: (*Defiantly*) Because he told me.

JENKINS: (*To Joe*) You tell anybody else?

JOE: I don't think so.

JENKINS: (*To Ronnie*) Was it you who broke in his house?

RONNIE: Ha ha.

JOE: That's absurd.

JENKINS: (*To Joe*) I'm just trying to find you an out. If we can't prove somebody did that, we've got a serious problem. Man teacher keeping dirty pictures in his desk—

JOE: They're not dirty pictures. (*Looks at Ronnie*) I'll explain it all later—

JENKINS: Why don't you tell us now? Tell us what they are.

TURNER: Mr. Monroe, you don't have to say anything right now.

JOE: (*Hesitates*) I'll tell you. If they're what I think they are, they're pictures from a play. Some friends of mine were in a play—I took pictures.

JENKINS: A *play*? What on earth kind of play was that?

JOE: It's not important.

JENKINS: You're right, it's not important. All that matters is that they're yours—you admit it—and that we found them in your desk.

RONNIE: Stolen out of his home.

TURNER: That's a possibility.

JENKINS: By who?

JOE: I have a good idea.

JENKINS: Tell us. By all means.

JOE: I can't prove it.

JENKINS: Give us your best guess.

JOE: I would guess it was Will Hargrove.

JENKINS: You better watch it.

TURNER: Why do you say that, Mr. Monroe?

JOE: I don't know—

JENKINS: First you fail him. Now he's a thief?

JOE: Forget it. I—I don't know.

RONNIE: I bet an investigation would turn up clues.

JENKINS: Clues to what?

RONNIE: Fingerprints! (*To Joe*) All over the door handle to your home!

JENKINS: Might not be a bad idea. Getting the sheriff involved.

JOE: I don't think it would help.

JENKINS: Something's gotta be done. We can't just sweep this under the rug.

TURNER: I think we've gone as far we can. If it's his private property—

JENKINS: That he brought to school! That he keeps in his desk near children!

JOE: I do not—

TURNER: He said he didn't, Mr. Jenkins. I think we have to believe him.

JENKINS: Oh, no ma'am, we don't.

RONNIE: Hush Cecil.

JENKINS: (*Ignores Ronnie, talks directly to Turner*) Either we've got a thief, who goes around breaking into teacher's homes, and then planting evidence. Or else we got a teacher who keeps dirty pictures in his desk.

JOE: They're not *dirty* pictures—

JENKINS: That's for folks to decide.

RONNIE: What folks, Cecil?

JENKINS: Board of trustees. I called an emergency meeting for tomorrow night to discuss this matter. They can decide who to believe.

JOE: Can he do that?

RONNIE: He's just talking big—

JENKINS: You better believe I can. I already have. Seven thirty, Mr. Monroe. I hope you'll come.

(*Joe is stunned, sits*)

TURNER: (*To Jenkins*) You didn't tell me about that.

JENKINS: I'm telling you now.

TURNER: (*Rising*) We should've discussed this. You should've told me.

JENKINS: I didn't have to tell you. You're not on the board. You work for us.

RONNIE: My daddy's on the board.

JENKINS: Yes he is—I plan to call him too, tell him he oughta come.

RONNIE: He knows all about Mr. Monroe.

JENKINS: (*Slight grin*) He doesn't know everything.

TURNER: I don't appreciate this Mr. Jenkins.

JENKINS: You're welcome to come. But don't try to stop it.

RONNIE: Why are you doing this Cecil?

TURNER: If I had known all this—

JENKINS: Am I the only one who thinks it's wrong for a teacher to have dirty pictures in his desk? In a room full of children?

TURNER: But he denied it.

JENKINS: He can deny it tomorrow night. If the board believes him, so be it. I will have done my duty, and that's all I can do.

RONNIE: (*Contemptuously*) Your *duty*.

JENKINS: (*To Joe*) If you've got any questions, you give me a call tonight. I'll be home. Good day. (*Exits*)

TURNER: I'm sorry Mr. Monroe. I don't have much say with the board. (*Joe tries to speak but can't*) This wasn't the best way to handle it—I am sorry.

JOE: Where are the pictures?

TURNER: Mr. Jenkins has them. I'm sorry. I just didn't want to keep them.

JOE: Can you get them back?

RONNIE: Cecil's seen them, Joe. They'll believe whatever he tells them.

TURNER: You might want to contact an attorney, Mr. Monroe. (*shakes her head*) This has turned into a mess.

JOE: (*To Ronnie*) I don't know what to do.

TURNER: Cecil took charge of this thing. I shouldn't have let him.

JOE: Not your fault.

TURNER: (*To Joe*) You might want to call the sheriff about your home. (*Starts to leave, turns back*) I'll see what I can do, Mr. Monroe. I'm sorry about all this.

JOE: Thank you.

(*Turner exits; Joe and Ronnie sit in silence for a moment*)

JOE: Those pictures were taken years ago. Susan brought them—

RONNIE: I don't wanna know nothing about them.

JOE: They're not pornographic. They're a little risqué, that's all—

RONNIE: (*Covers her ears*) Stop! I don't care about those pictures. It's not my business.

JOE: You know I didn't bring them to school.

RONNIE: (*Moves to him*) Of course I know that.

JOE: That little bastard Hargrove broke into my apartment. Probably last night.

RONNIE: You've got to say that at the meeting!

JOE: There's not gonna be a meeting.

RONNIE: What do you mean?

JOE: I'm gonna let him humiliate me—parade me in front of the board as a pervert—

RONNIE: You're not a pervert! You hush.

JOE: If I brought them to school, I am—and that's what they're gonna believe.

RONNIE: They won't! I won't let them—

JOE: This is—(*Seems at a loss for words*)—this is the last goddamn thing I ever expected. I'm not prepared for this—I don't know what to do. Where the pictures ended up doesn't matter. I could prove that Jenkins himself broke in and stole them, and it wouldn't matter. Everyone in town's gonna know about them—they'll be etched in their minds. They'll never look at me without seeing all those bodies—

RONNIE: I don't want to hear about those pictures! (*Almost in tears*) Don't you quit Joe, not yet. I want you to wait till the morning, okay? I'm gonna talk to Cecil.

JOE: It doesn't matter—

RONNIE: Of course it matters. You staying here is all that matters. Just promise me you'll wait.

JOE: I can't stay—

RONNIE: You *can*. Nobody's gonna see those pictures. I'm gonna go talk to Cecil. He's gonna drop the whole thing, I promise.

JOE: I wish you wouldn't—

RONNIE: Well I am. You just go on home, and I'll be over shortly. You wait for me, okay? And don't you do *a thing* till I come over. I mean it.

(*Blackout*)

Act 2, Scene 4

Quick curtain. Ronnie has remained in Joe's classroom. She's looking out at the playground when the child from Scene 1 comes running in the doorway.

CHILD: I found him Miss Staples! I found him!

RONNIE: You did?!

CHILD: He's coming! He's behind me.

RONNIE: Bless your heart!

CHILD: He's *slow*.

RONNIE: That's cause he's *old*! Come over here and get your reward. (*The girl eagerly moves to receive a long hug, then Ronnie gives her a piece of hard candy from her pocket*) Aren't you a lump of sugar. (*Sees Cecil appear at the doorway*) Going to fetch a scary old man.

JENKINS: You called?

RONNIE: (*To child*) You get plenty of sleep tonight, okay? You know what tomorrow is!

CHILD: A party!

RONNIE: That's right—a *party*. Last day of school.

CHILD: Bye Miss Staples! (*Exiting*)

RONNIE: Bye bye angel! Tell your mama I said hey!

JENKINS: She said you needed me?

RONNIE: (*Flirtatious*) Yes—I mean *no*—that's not what I told her.

JENKINS: That's what she said.

RONNIE: She must've misunderstood.

JENKINS: Must have.

RONNIE: I told her go get Mr. Jenkins because *he* needs *me*.

JENKINS: I do?

RONNIE: (*Rushes forward*) Yes you do. Come in.

JENKINS: (*Smiling*) I'm intrigued.

RONNIE: (*Motioning*) Come on in! I'm not gonna bite.

JENKINS: I'd like to know what I need.

RONNIE: It's simple. You need the opportunity to be a gentleman.

JENKINS: (*Moves in, grinning*) I do?

RONNIE: Yes you do!

JENKINS: I thought I was a gentleman.

RONNIE: You have to work at it Cecil. Like health.

JENKINS: Shall I walk you to your car?

RONNIE: It's easier than that!

JENKINS: Clean your black boards?

RONNIE: Goodness no!

JENKINS: Then what?

RONNIE: All you need to do—all you *have* to do—is give Mr. Monroe back his pictures. You've shamed him good, now end this mess. (*Cecil appears to be about to speak when she cuts him off*) Furthermore, I want you to find out who put those things in Mr. Monroe's desk, and tell him he's never to mention a word to *anybody*, or else he'll have Cecil Jenkins to deal with.

JENKINS: I know who put them there. (*Smugly*) I'm dealing with him.

RONNIE: You disappoint me Cecil.

JENKINS: (*Chuckling*) So what's new?

RONNIE: I thought you were decent.

JENKINS: (*Moves inside, suddenly forceful*) Why are you still in this room?

RONNIE: Because. (*Recovers*) I want to show you something Cecil. (*Standing beside the desk, she begins opening drawers as Cecil joins her*) Come look in these drawers. Workbooks and gem clips and low fat granola bars! He even keeps cough drops and aspirin for the kids. Mama used to do that, you remember? She even kept two separate boxes of tissues! One for colds, one for tears.

JENKINS: I do remember.

RONNIE: This is not the desk of a *bad man*.

JENKINS: (*Lifts out a hair brush from a drawer*) What's this for?

RONNIE: For doing what's natural. (*Snatches the brush from him and puts it back*) He's a normal, *decent* man.

JENKINS: (*Shrugs*) That's for the board to decide.

RONNIE: You're not gonna bring it to the board.

JENKINS: I surely am.

RONNIE: Cecil Jenkins, be a gentleman!

JENKINS: I have no choice in the matter.

RONNIE: What's the *matter* is your lack of manners. (*Turns her back to him*) Don't even know why I called you.

JENKINS: (*Shakes his head and chuckles, then starts to leave*) I've seen it all today.

RONNIE: (*Turns to him*) Cecil—if you bring it to the board I'm gonna stand up and say *I* stole those pictures and put them in his desk.

JENKINS: (*Stops in the doorway*) Are you that lonely?

RONNIE: Yes, and mixed-up too! And if the board wants to fire me for that, then they'll have to fire half the teachers in this school, most of the secretaries, *all* the lunch ladies. They'll have to fire you too, cause you're the worst of all.

JENKINS: I wouldn't mind some time off.

RONNIE: Why don't you just go on and retire.

JENKINS: It won't be long.

RONNIE: (*Looks at her watch*) I'm counting.

JENKINS: (*Moves back in a few steps*) By the way, what's Grover gonna say about all this? I bet he'll be there tomorrow.

RONNIE: Daddy ain't sat with the board in years.

JENKINS: This is a crisis.

RONNIE: Daddy does what I tell him. (*Slight pause*) But all this is just chit chat, because I'm confident you're gonna grant me a favor.

JENKINS: I'm afraid—

RONNIE: I'm *confident* Cecil! Rock solid.

JENKINS: I'm afraid your confidence is built on sand.

RONNIE: (*Overly dramatic—plays to an imagined audience*) Well so much for Southern courtesy! Just slipping through our hands.

JENKINS: (*Moves in a few steps more*) Isn't that what you want? The South to slip away?

RONNIE: I love my home.

JENKINS: That's what Mr. Monroe wants!

RONNIE: I can't say what he wants Cecil! All I know's I'm giving you a chance to be a gentleman, and you're declining.

JENKINS: I'm being a gentleman. (*Picks up the waist basket by the door and shakes it*) I'm taking out the *trash*. (*Puts it down*)

RONNIE: You hush your mouth.

JENKINS: If you'd seen those pictures, you'd agree this whole damn *room* oughta be burned—

RONNIE: I don't want to hear about those pictures.

JENKINS: You need to hear about those pictures—

RONNIE: No I don't! I don't snoop in other people's business. It makes me feel—dirty.

JENKINS: Only thing dirty is what I saw—

RONNIE: (*Putting her hands over her ears*) Stop it! You say one more thing, I'm ending this conversation.

JENKINS: (*Smiles, turns for the door*) Fine.

RONNIE: (*With force*) You don't want me to end this conversation.

JENKINS: (*He stops, grinning*) I don't?

RONNIE: Not till we're through.

JENKINS: When will I know?

RONNIE: You'll know.

JENKINS: Well get to it, lady. I'm busy.

RONNIE: Not one more word about those pictures.

JENKINS: All right. But you best stay away tomorrow evening. We're gonna see it all.

RONNIE: Nothing worth seeing.

JENKINS: Nothing decent, I admit.

RONNIE: He was young, Cecil. He left all that behind.

JENKINS: That's not where he left his pictures.

RONNIE: You know good and well he didn't bring those things to school!

JENKINS: I don't know that.

RONNIE: (*Moves to the desk, puts her hand on it*) I bet you stole them yourself!

JENKINS: I'm gonna be honest Veronica—

RONNIE: *You* put them here—

JENKINS: (*Joins her at the desk*) I don't give a damn *who* put them here. They ended up here because that's where they *belong*. (*Brings his hand down on the desk on 'belong'*)

RONNIE: (*Feigning laughter*) You're a silly man—

JENKINS: He's the only one who'd tolerate them *being* here!

RONNIE: So silly—

JENKINS: He'd say they have a *right* to be there because they're part of the great big world outside of Alma! And if we don't tolerate them then *we're* the deviants.

RONNIE: He'd say no such thing.

JENKINS: I thought you'd figured him out by now.

RONNIE: I guess I need more time.

JENKINS: Well, his time is up.

RONNIE: Maybe I need a whole summer—

JENKINS: Good lord—

RONNIE: —in his company—

JENKINS: Doing what?

RONNIE: We're gonna *walk*, every day. Walk and walk and walk.

JENKINS: Walk where?

RONNIE: Everywhere! If it's any of your business.

JENKINS: I know where you'd *like* to walk. Down the aisle.

(A moment's pause)

RONNIE: What if it is?

JENKINS: Frank Welch gonna be there? Joe's best man?

RONNIE: Might be.

JENKINS: What's Grover gonna say?

RONNIE: Daddy knows me fine.

JENKINS: He doesn't know everything.

RONNIE: He knows I'm forty-three years old! He knows it's his fault, too.

JENKINS: (*Genuinely surprised*) Are you forty-three?

RONNIE: Did you forget?

JENKINS: (*Slowly, calmly*) I forgot my own age I guess. Lord have mercy, I must be close to sixty.

RONNIE: You think I'm still fourteen.

JENKINS: I wish it sometimes. Back then I knew what to expect. Now I just get smacked with surprises, every day.

RONNIE: (*Puts her hands on Cecil's arms*) I know Joe's not perfect, but he's—I'm running out of time. And he's just trying to find his place here, Cecil. I can give him that, then he'll forget about old Frank Welch.

JENKINS: (*He grabs her wrists and holds them for a moment, staring at her intensely*) There was a time I would've done anything you asked.

RONNIE: Cecil, *please*. Give him back his pictures.

JENKINS: That time's past.

RONNIE: (*Breaks out of his hold*) Don't you mean *Mama*?

JENKINS: What?

RONNIE: It's *Mama* you would've done anything for, not me.

JENKINS: I was very fond of your mother, as was everyone.

RONNIE: Everybody else knew where to stop.

JENKINS: (*Steps back from her*) You may be more mixed-up than I imagined.

RONNIE: Don't forget lonely. That's why I'm standing here.

JENKINS: I offered you a cure for that many times.

RONNIE: It's more than just a headache, Cecil.

JENKINS: And I offered you more than just an aspirin. You ignored me, every time.

RONNIE: (*Quickly*) And you never asked why. You just smiled and shuffled off home.

JENKINS: I thought it was best.

RONNIE: I should've *made* you ask me, cause I had the need to tell you. Lord knows I had the need.

JENKINS: Well for god sake tell me now. I don't want you spilling your soul to strangers.

RONNIE: You don't want me talking to Joe.

JENKINS: It's none of his business!

RONNIE: You're right. I don't want him knowing anything about our past.

JENKINS: (*Goes over and closes the door, returns*) We have no past. Just my foolish proposals, your nervous giggles.

RONNIE: I was wrong about that. I should've explained myself.

JENKINS: I know you didn't love me.

RONNIE: You didn't love me either, so at least we would've been equals. (*slight pause*) I wouldn't marry you Cecil because it wouldn't have been fair to Mama, not while she was living. I couldn't marry the man she loved.

JENKINS: (*Appears stuck*) You don't know what you're saying—

RONNIE: Crying her eyes out on the last day of school, cause she wouldn't see you much for three whole months. You poking your head in her classroom six times a day. Course I knew.

JENKINS: I don't know what you're talking about.

RONNIE: You're the only one. You and Daddy, and he doesn't know cause he stayed cooped up in his office.

JENKINS: This is nonsense!—

RONNIE: I never told him Cecil. I knew someday I'd find love and you'd be happy for me. You'd do all you could to help me.

JENKINS: It's not love. Not with Joe Monroe.

RONNIE: It's close.

JENKINS: I don't believe that.

RONNIE: I don't need your blessing.

JENKINS: You need your father's.

RONNIE: If Joe goes away, I'm gonna feel spiteful. And in my loneliness and spite, I might tell Daddy the one thing he never knew, so he'll feel cheated. Because *I'll* feel cheated, and I'll need company in that big ole lonely house.

JENKINS: Veronica, are you threatening me? With *lies*?

RONNIE: I'm offering you the chance to be a gentleman.

JENKINS: You're willing to sully your mother's name—

RONNIE: Mama had love Cecil—I *don't*.

JENKINS: She had love because she was *decent*—

RONNIE: *I* was decent! I had to be decent, because my daddy said so! He said Yankee magazines had photographers hiding behind trees, waiting for white folks to act colored. He said *nothing* would please them more than to catch his daughter acting shameless! Said if I got caught fooling around in the bushes, then my naked behind was liable to end up on the cover of *Time* magazine! I believed him Cecil, till I was almost forty years old—I believed him. I couldn't risk doing *anything* to hurt my daddy. He had his school and he had to guard it with his life—and I had to help guard it with mine, and that's what I did! I gave my *life* to this school, and Mama did not. She didn't care what I knew, and neither did you Cecil, so don't you talk to me about decency.

JENKINS: I feel awful for you Veronica.

RONNIE: I feel awful for me too.

JENKINS: You're speaking from *pain*. It's got no more sense in it than—a baby's cry.

RONNIE: Mama cried all the time, and Daddy never knew why.

JENKINS: I cared for your mother deeply. I don't deny it. She was in pain herself—

RONNIE: And you convinced her it was love—

JENKINS: She convinced herself! I tried—I could not make her understand—I tried—

RONNIE: I'm not sure Daddy would feel much pity.

JENKINS: I won't deny there were feelings, but your mother and I never did anything indecent. That is the God's honest truth.

RONNIE: I suppose you could read it that way. I don't know how Daddy would read it. (*Slight pause*) I'd probably have to read it to him.

CECIL: Read what?

RONNIE: A letter I found, in Mama's desk, after she died. It had gotten wedged between drawers, fell out when I removed them. It doesn't say a whole lot, just tells her to hang on through the long, lonely months—I'm guessing summer months. It's signed "C" at the bottom—looks like your C.

CECIL: I can't write notes of encouragement?

RONNIE: There's also a poem, Cecil—looks like a poem. It's written in Latin. Mama started to translate it, in blue ink at the side. She didn't get too far. I do recall the word "love," in blue ink. I bet I could finish it, with Daddy's help. He may not always remember what day it is, but he remembers his Latin.

JENKINS: (*Suddenly moves towards her with fury*) You have no right to pry into my past.

RONNIE: You have no right to pry into my future!

JENKINS: (*Steps back, as if stunned by his own fury*) You would betray everything you were raised for—you would betray your home for a summer with—*him*.

RONNIE: My home betrayed *me*! I've been faithful for forty-three years—where's my gold star? If you bring Joe to the board, he's lost. Those pictures'll grow so big they'll swallow him.

JENKINS: Grover's an old man now. You show him whatever you want.

RONNIE: It's still his school.

JENKINS: This is nonsense. You're talking out of your head. (*Starts to exit*)

RONNIE: What should I tell him Cecil?

JENKINS: Tell who?

RONNIE: Joe.

JENKINS: There's no place for him here.

RONNIE: What can he expect, Cecil?

JENKINS: He can expect to pack his bags.

RONNIE: Then I'll pack mine too.

JENKINS: If that's what you want.

RONNIE: But before I leave, we're gonna translate that poem. Me and Daddy. He's liable to get so mad he'll call a meeting of his own.

JENKINS: I don't believe you'll do it.

RONNIE: You don't know me at all.

JENKINS: I've known you your whole life.

RONNIE: That's gone, Cecil.

JENKINS: It won't be the same for you here. It won't ever be the same.

RONNIE: Thank God. Thank *goodness* God.

(Cecil broods for a minute, and Ronnie knows that Joe is safe)

JENKINS: This ain't over—I'm not through—

RONNIE: We're done Cecil, go home. Go home.

(Slow fade to black)

ACT THREE

It's early evening of the next day. Susan is sitting in Joe's apartment, reading, when she hears a knock at the door. She rises and answers it to find Ronnie, who is holding a grocery sack full of items.

RONNIE: You're back! How was your trip?

SUSAN: Hot. Dull.

RONNIE: *(Moving inside, past Susan)* That is the South!

SUSAN: Joe's not here—

RONNIE: Mind if I take this back to the kitchen?

SUSAN: It's not my apartment.

RONNIE: *(Exiting)* I'm 'fraid this ice cream's going limp!

(Susan walks over and fans the room by swinging the door to and fro a few times, then shuts it. She appears hot and tired and annoyed, and looks at her watch.)

RONNIE: *(Pokes her head through the kitchen door)* How long's Joe been gone?

SUSAN: *(Shrugs)* I was taking a nap.

RONNIE: I'll be right back! *(Exits; Susan picks up the note Joe left and sits on the couch; Ronnie returns)* I 'spect he'll be back any minute. He had to go to school.

SUSAN: I know where he went.

RONNIE: He called me before he left.

SUSAN: He left a note.

RONNIE: He said to wait till he got back, but I was *bored*. Have you eaten?

SUSAN: I just got up.

RONNIE: We're gonna fry us a chicken!

SUSAN: I'm not hungry.

RONNIE: (*Hasn't heard her*) You like chicken fried?

SUSAN: I said I'm not hungry.

RONNIE: I'm sorry. Everything today's just slid past my ears! Had a little girl ask me if she could take off her shoes—I never let them do that—but without even hearing her I nodded yes. By the time I looked up I had a room full of barefooted babies!

SUSAN: Why can't they take off their shoes?

RONNIE: Well—there might be something sharp.

SUSAN: Like what?

RONNIE: Well—

SUSAN: Barbed wire?

RONNIE: (*Laughing*) Goodness no! Where would there be barbed wire?

SUSAN: Never mind. (*Picks up her book and resumes reading*)

RONNIE: Maybe thumb tacks—no barbed wire! (*Slight pause*) It was one of my mother's rules—no child could take off their shoes—she'd pitch a fit. She'd say, 'What if Mr. Staples happened to pop his head through the door? I wouldn't want him to find a bunch of wild barefooted savages!' Course Daddy never popped his head through her door. I think she just didn't like bare feet. (*Sees that Susan isn't listening, speaks directly to her*) That may be a rule I have to change!

SUSAN: Would you mind if I go back to the bedroom to read? (*Fans herself with the book*) I don't feel good.

RONNIE: I'm sorry.

SUSAN: I'm very tired.

RONNIE: You go right ahead. I'm gonna make myself useful. (*Begins picking up loose newspapers from the floor*)

SUSAN: You don't have to do that.

RONNIE: I can't start cooking till Joe gets here. He wants to help.

SUSAN: Joe wants to cook?

RONNIE: (*Winks*) He wants to *help*. (*Resumes picking up*)

SUSAN: You really shouldn't do that.

RONNIE: It'll be a surprise!

SUSAN: (*With growing annoyance*) It's his mess.

RONNIE: (*Hints of fighting back*) I'm not gonna *change* anything. Just straighten up.

SUSAN: It's not your stuff to straighten.

RONNIE: (*Ignoring her*) He's had so much on his mind.

(*Susan has left some books and magazines scattered beside one of her travel bags, which lies on the floor. Ronnie has been careful to avoid the bag, but not knowing they belong to Susan, she picks up the magazines and starts to pile them with Joe's.*)

SUSAN: (*Stepping back into the room*) Hey—put those down.

RONNIE: (*Lays the magazines on the stack*) I'm just trying to help.

SUSAN: (*Moves over and takes them from her*) These are *mine*, thank you. (*Putting them back in the same spot on the floor*) I'll take care of my stuff.

RONNIE: (*Hurt*) I was just trying to help.

SUSAN: You're not the maid.

RONNIE: Don't see why you had to snap.

SUSAN: I'll tell you why. Because I'm hot, and I'm tired, and I'm *pissed off* about what happened while I was gone. Joey told me the whole thing.

RONNIE: He did?

SUSAN: Then we got into a shouting match, and I had to go lie down because it hurt my head.

RONNIE: But everything turned out okay. Didn't he tell you?

SUSAN: Jesus Christ. It couldn't be fucking worse.

RONNIE: I'm not comfortable with that kind of language.

SUSAN: I'm not comfortable with this *heat*. (*Fans herself*) You get used to it.

RONNIE: Joe doesn't speak that way.

SUSAN: Really? You read any of the plays he wrote in college?

RONNIE: No.

SUSAN: Ask him about *The Man with the Hungry Cock*.

RONNIE: I don't believe it.

SUSAN: Believe what?

RONNIE: That he'd write something like that.

SUSAN: That's just the title. You should see the climax!

RONNIE: Not the Joe I know. He's decent.

SUSAN: (*Rolling her eyes*) Oh my god.

RONNIE: I don't care what he wrote back then. Today he's a gentleman. (*Begins straightening the pile of papers she's collected*)

SUSAN: It just dawned on me. You didn't see the pictures.

RONNIE: What pictures?

SUSAN: The ones from his play, that caused all the stink

RONNIE: *He* wrote that play?

SUSAN: Of course he wrote it!

RONNIE: I didn't know.

SUSAN: And you didn't see the pictures, did you?

RONNIE: Why are you being so hateful? You were nice to me before.

SUSAN: I thought you were noisily harmless.

RONNIE: I am!

SUSAN: Like a bird.

RONNIE: Didn't he tell you?—

SUSAN: Yes he told me—

RONNIE: I saved him! *They* tried to hurt him—I saved him.

SUSAN: What they did was sleazy, typical, Southern bullshit *crap*—but they were right.

RONNIE: They were cruel.

SUSAN: He doesn't belong here.

RONNIE: It doesn't matter now. I stood up to them. I saved his job.

SUSAN: That's what I mean! If it weren't for you he'd be packing his bags.

RONNIE: Well he's not. (*With an air of triumph*) He's over there right now talking to Dr. Turner. He's gonna stay.

SUSAN: Maybe he's telling her to go to hell.

RONNIE: Joe wouldn't do that. He's a gentleman.

SUSAN: He's not a *goddamn* gentleman.

RONNIE: I don't like that language—

SUSAN: Too bad.

RONNIE: Joe'd be ashamed of you right now—

SUSAN: Bullshit—

RONNIE: —treating me like dirt.

SUSAN: *Bullshit*. I treat everyone like dirt.

RONNIE: Well I'm different.

SUSAN: Why?

RONNIE: I just am—

SUSAN: *Why?*

RONNIE: *Because Joe's in love with me. (Slight pause)* He didn't tell you everything.

SUSAN: He didn't say love.

RONNIE: That's cause it's private.

SUSAN: That's when I started shouting.

RONNIE: You think I'm too *old*?

SUSAN: No.

RONNIE: I'm too *simple*? Cause I've never been to New York City?

SUSAN: Because you never *wanted* to go to New York City.

RONNIE: I never wanted to go to the moon! *(Slight pause)* I have been to Gaston. Did he tell you about that? We rolled down the windows and played rock music on the radio—I didn't know a single song. But I liked every one—I liked every song I heard. And I liked every bump in the road, I liked every time the car jostled, and I kept wishing that I was holding a hot dog full of chile so it would tumble down my blouse, and put a stain across my lap that would never come clean. I know, there's a *wildness* I've missed out on, that Joe's known and I haven't, but there's a quiet I've known that he hasn't.

SUSAN: Do you know what he wants to do here? Has he told you?

RONNIE: He just wants to find his place.

SUSAN: He wants to integrate your school, dear. Black feet in your classroom.

RONNIE: I don't care about that old school anymore.

SUSAN: Joey cares. If he stays, that's the reason.

RONNIE: He will stay. That's all that matters.

(Resumes picking up papers)

SUSAN: Are you moving in here? Is that why you're cleaning?

RONNIE: Of course not. I live with my daddy, and that's how it is till he dies.

SUSAN: Some of these old Southern patriarchs die slowly. They like to stretch it out, like a story.

RONNIE: Daddy's in his last days. I want them to be peaceful.

(Ronnie seems to finish her task, looks for something else to do)

SUSAN: You should read Joey's plays.

RONNIE: I don't like to read. I like to *do*.

SUSAN: Then make him show you those pictures.

RONNIE: Why?

SUSAN: You might bump into them some day. You don't want to live in fear.

RONNIE: You think I'm scared of a naked lady? Is that what they're of—naked ladies?

SUSAN: Is that what you think?

RONNIE: I don't know what to think! I just know Cecil got all ruffled, and that's what came to mind, naked ladies.

SUSAN: It's more than just naked ladies.

RONNIE: Then what is it?

SUSAN: Make him show you—

(Joe enters)

JOE: Ronnie—you're here—

RONNIE: Course I'm here! I got bored at home.

JOE: (*To Susan*) How long have you been up?

SUSAN: I never really went to sleep. I'm too tired.

RONNIE: I told her about our supper plans!

SUSAN: I think I'm gonna take a walk.

JOE: You sure?

RONNIE: Hope I haven't run you off!

SUSAN: It's cooler outside. I want to find a place to read.

JOE: Have you eaten anything? We're gonna cook.

SUSAN: So I heard.

JOE: Are you hungry?

SUSAN: (*Shaking her head*) You two go ahead.

JOE: It'll be dark soon.

SUSAN: I won't go far. (*To Joe*) Enjoy your lesson. (*Exits*)

JOE: (*Calling*) Be careful. (*Joe and Ronnie look at each other for a moment, then Ronnie moves toward him and they awkwardly embrace*)

RONNIE: Glad I'm here?

JOE: (*Moving away*) Well—I hoped you'd wait.

RONNIE: What happened at school?

JOE: Was Susan rude?

RONNIE: Why do you ask?

JOE: I know Susan.

RONNIE: She got a little upset.

JOE: She was very upset earlier.

RONNIE: Why'd you tell her, Joe?

JOE: (*Shrugs*) She's my sister. She'd figure it all out anyway.

RONNIE: She's sharp—

JOE: As a terrier.

RONNIE: She barks like one too.

JOE: Was she rude?

RONNIE: Can't say I care much for her language.

JOE: I'm sorry—

RONNIE: (*Quickly*) But I got used to it.

JOE: She means well. She thinks that to love me she has to protect me.

RONNIE: (*Moves towards him*) So do I. (*Joe doesn't respond immediately, she slowly retreats; he appears to be about to speak when she cuts him off*) What happened at school? What'd Jeanette have to say? (*Sits in the chair*)

JOE: She said I had every reason in the world to leave—

SUSAN: She's wrong—

JOE: —but hoped I wouldn't.

RONNIE: I hope so too!

JOE: I said I won this round, but Cecil's not gonna stop.

RONNIE: Oh, *Cecil*—Cecil's dead, Joe—he's slain.

JOE: It's not just Cecil. It's Bob Hargrove. It's the board of trustees. It's anyone who's gonna take offense when I bring Frank Welch to school.

RONNIE: Bring him to school?

JOE: Yep. If I stay, that's the first thing I'll do—invite him to speak to my class.

RONNIE: Did you tell Jeanette?

JOE: I told her.

RONNIE: What'd she say?

JOE: Not much at first.

RONNIE: Guess not.

JOE: But then she pulled down the shades, and we talked for an hour. Turns out she wants pretty much the same thing I do.

RONNIE: Really?

JOE: Not as *much* as I want, but enough. It was a good talk.

RONNIE: Daddy hired her you know! Made Cecil *furious*.

JOE: I know, and I—

RONNIE: Did it just get his *goat*—and got it.

JOE: Ronnie, I need to tell you something. What I said to her I should say to you. Everything.

RONNIE: (*Rises*) You don't have to say anything to me—

JOE: I do—

RONNIE: —because I already know. I know what you want.

JOE: (*Moves to the window, as if to draw the blinds, but they're already drawn*) I want to change your father's school.

RONNIE: I know.

JOE: I want to—

RONNIE: I *know*, Joe. I've known all the time.

JOE: I don't expect you to agree.

RONNIE: Why can't I agree? (*Starts to speak, hesitates, collects her thoughts*) My lord, after forty-three years of solitude, I fell in love in a single day! I'm not scared of change—I *crave* it.

JOE: What about your father? Don't imagine he wants his school messed with.

RONNIE: Don't worry about Daddy. He's on his last leg.

JOE: I don't mean I want him to die.

RONNIE: He needs to die Joe, he's old. Your plan's never gonna happen till he does.

JOE: It may never happen.

RONNIE: You gotta stay *hopeful*.

JOE: I was, till yesterday.

RONNIE: Yesterday's over.

JOE: Who knows what else they'll do. They broke in here once, why not again?

RONNIE: Cause I won't let them.

JOE: (*Instinctively goes to the window, again sees the blinds drawn*) Right now I've got all the resolve of a tossed coin. A part of me wants to just say to hell with it—go back to pumping gas. I can't live like this for five, ten more years—I'll have no stomach.

RONNIE: You're gonna be fine, Joe, cause I'm gonna help you. Every step of the way!

JOE: I appreciate it—

RONNIE: I have a prediction honey! I predict that coin's gonna drop real soon, and I know just what it's gonna say! It's gonna say *give it a summer Joe, at least one summer*. Rest up, take walks, go on slow drives to Gaston! Don't make any kind of plans till you've at least spent one summer here with me. Then I predict you'll change your mind. You may just wanna stay here forever! May wanna grow *fat and old* in Alma! Might even decide to run for mayor!

JOE: No I won't—

RONNIE: I bet you will! You're gonna take over this place, and I'm gonna help you.

JOE: I'd—I'd rather you didn't. Please.

RONNIE: *(Suddenly deflated)* Thought you wanted my help?

JOE: I don't want to be mayor.

RONNIE: Honey, I'm teasing you. *(Touches his arm)* But you will grow happy here, I know it.

JOE: I don't know. I'm not sure I want to stay another day.

RONNIE: I thought—

JOE: I'm not sure I have the nerve. Even with your help.

RONNIE: Course you have the nerve. *(Regaining her confidence)* You stood up to Cecil! You stood up to Bob Hargrove.

JOE: And I'm wiped out. *(Sits on the couch)* I'm exhausted.

RONNIE: I know, but we got the whole summer to revive!

JOE: Maybe—

RONNIE: Not *maybe*—positively! *(Playfully, to mask her concern)* What's got in to you?

JOE: I'm just tired. *(Ronnie moves behind him and begins rubbing his shoulders for a minute)*

RONNIE: I know you are. School year cleans a body out. Course, I always say that come June, and then a week later I'm ready for fall! Now—how's that? *(Joe seems lost in thought)* Joe?

JOE: Ronnie, if I do stay, it won't be forever.

RONNIE: *(Stops rubbing)* I know.

JOE: I don't want to grow old here. I'm sorry.

RONNIE: *(Moves around and sits beside him)* Neither do I honey. Neither do I.

(Pause)

JOE: Would you want to come with me?

RONNIE: Soon as Daddy's gone. Of course.

JOE: I don't know where I'd go.

RONNIE: I'd love to see Baltimore.

JOE: Maybe back to New York.

RONNIE: Oh—

JOE: Maybe go back to school.

RONNIE: New York City—

JOE: It doesn't have to be there.

RONNIE: I'd go to the moon with you Joe—if you loved me. *(Pause)* I just can't keep my hands off that word.

JOE: It's all right. *(Tentatively)* I owe you a response.

RONNIE: Not owed. Just wanted.

(Joe rises, moves away for a moment, then returns to the couch with resolve)

JOE: You've done wonderful things for me, without my even asking.

RONNIE: You don't have to ask—ever.

JOE: You saved my job—Jesus. You took on Cecil Jenkins. No one's ever taken that kind of risk for me—or me for anyone else. And I feel—I feel—as much as I've ever felt, I guess, as warm, as comfortable, as glad to see you—

RONNIE: *(Puts her hand on his mouth)* Hush. That's enough. *(Withdraws her hand)*

JOE: Is it?

RONNIE: I make my father glad to see me. I know he loves me, much as he loves anything. *(Ronnie touches his face; he takes her hand and holds it for a moment; then he*

moves over to kiss her cheek, but when he starts to draw away she pulls him back to her lips; she rises, stumbles a moment, as if tipsy) It's all come so quick—I can't hardly believe it. *(She starts to stumble and Joe rises to help steady her; she kisses him again, longer than before, then he sits)* It does seem impossible, doesn't it? Grover Staples's daughter and—

JOE: That degenerate from New York.

RONNIE: You hush. You've got all kind of talents Joe—you wrote plays!

JOE: Susan told you about my plays?

RONNIE: She surely did!

JOE: Oh God.

RONNIE: She said I should read them! I *want* to read them Joe.

JOE: Sorry, but—

RONNIE: I want to, I *do*.

JOE: I don't have them anymore.

RONNIE: Where are they?

JOE: I burned them one night, before I moved here. Please don't tell Susan.

RONNIE: You burned them?

JOE: Just like Hedda Gabler.

RONNIE: Why?

JOE: I had a trip to make. It lightened me.

RONNIE: Then I'm glad they're gone.

JOE: You wouldn't have liked them anyway.

RONNIE: But I would've read them.

JOE: I was pretty young when I wrote them.

RONNIE: I like things young!

JOE: They were obscene.

RONNIE: I'd learn to love them just the same.

JOE: I doubt it—

RONNIE: You think I'm still an old maid teacher. I can change Joe Monroe, I *have* changed.

JOE: I believe you.

RONNIE: I wish I could *prove* it.

JOE: You don't have to prove anything.

RONNIE: I wish I knew how. (*Speaks with a strength here that builds to its high point a few lines down*) Listen Joe—I want to see those pictures. Did you get them back?

JOE: Yes, but—

RONNIE: Are they in that package you brought in? (*Indicates a package he laid on the table*)

JOE: Yes, but—

RONNIE: Let me see them, before you burn those too!

JOE: Let's forget about those pictures—

RONNIE: Not till I've seen them! I can't.

JOE: I don't—I don't want you to get the wrong picture.

RONNIE: That's all they are—pictures from a play.

JOE: (*Hesitates*) It was my play.

RONNIE: I know.

JOE: You do?

RONNIE: You should've told me.

JOE: I didn't want Cecil to know.

RONNIE: I don't blame you.

(Slight pause)

JOE: My first and last production. I was twenty-two years old.

RONNIE: *(Recovering)* That's something though, Joe—your own play.

JOE: Staged in a bookstore stockroom. The audience was mostly my friends, and nosy customers who heard the commotion.

RONNIE: Still—that's *something*. People clapping for something *you* made up. Lord, I get goose bumps when my *babies* clap for me! And that's just when I make up a song about a bunny rabbit, or a goose—

JOE: Nobody clapped very loud. They were too surprised.

RONNIE: Surprised about what?

JOE: They were expecting something quiet, and polite.

RONNIE: Like you.

JOE: I mean they *liked* it—but they were shocked.

RONNIE: I bet they loved it.

JOE: They loved seeing actors take off their clothes. That's how I got it produced. The dialogue was pointless, but so what? The stage directions were great!

RONNIE: I figured that's what it was. I don't reckon Cecil's seen many naked ladies.

JOE: There wasn't much nudity till the end. A lot of underclothes, a lot of—simulation.

RONNIE: Well, *I've* taken baths before—I'm not scared of naked ladies.

JOE: It's not just a woman.

RONNIE: Oh.

JOE: It's a couple. The whole play was about couples.

RONNIE: Well—you can't have Eve without Adam! That wouldn't be no fun.

JOE: (*Looks surprised*) It's funny you say that.

RONNIE: Why?

JOE: The play was called *Eden and 105th Street*. The main couple were my Adam and Eve.

RONNIE: Really? And I figured that out?

JOE: Isn't that funny?

RONNIE: (*Proud of herself*) I should've written plays!

JOE: You could've written a better one than mine—

RONNIE: Adam and Eve! I might just write me a play about that!

JOE: You should—

RONNIE: I could, too, as much church as I had to sweat through! *Lord. . . (Appears lost in memory)*

JOE: The thing was, nobody understood it. Nobody got it.

RONNIE: I bet they did.

JOE: No—all they saw were some good-looking actors taking off their clothes.

RONNIE: How do you know that?

JOE: I watched their faces! Nobody got it. It broke my twenty-two year old heart.

RONNIE: I would've got it—I *do* get it. That's why I want to see those pictures.

JOE: Let's forget about those pictures.

RONNIE: Why'd you bring them home?

JOE: To give them back to Susan—

RONNIE: Not till I've seen them! I at least get to see what Cecil saw. Haven't I earned that much?

JOE: I suppose so.

RONNIE: Please?

JOE: (*Sighs*) All right.

RONNIE: Thank you, Joe.

JOE: But remember, it's just a play. And a bad one. (*Rises, retrieves the package, then starts looking through a few of the pictures himself and freezes*)

RONNIE: Don't reckon you *can* have a play about Adam and Eve without somebody getting naked. That's all you had to tell Cecil—it's just Adam and Eve! He teaches Sunday School—he knows. (*Notices that Joe isn't listening to her*) What's so interesting?

JOE: Just reminiscing.

RONNIE: You're gonna stare holes in them before I ever get the chance!

JOE: I'm sorry. (*Puts them back in the package*) I forgot how much power those kids had over me. I think I was in love with the entire cast.

RONNIE: In love?

JOE: In awe, in—worship. (*Sees she looks confused*) They had courage, Ronnie—to come to life, every night, in front of strangers. It took every nerve I had just to write down an idea.

RONNIE: (*Awkwardly playful*) In love with them. I'm scared to see them now—I might get jealous!

JOE: Then I'll put them away.

RONNIE: Don't, Joe—I need to see them.

JOE: Why?

RONNIE: So you'll know *I* have courage.

JOE: I know that already.

RONNIE: Cause I stood up to Cecil? I was mad, not brave. Listen Joe, I've *got* to see your play. Unless you plan on writing more—

JOE: (*Moves slowly toward her*) I don't plan on writing more. At least not like this one.

Joe sits beside her, opens the package, hands it to her. After looking at each photo she hands it to Joe. At this point slides should begin to appear on a screen at the center of the stage, perhaps attached on the back of the portable white board used in the schoolroom set. Each slide should represent the picture that Ronnie is viewing at that moment. The first few photos should show various young couples, in various types of embrace.

RONNIE: So this is Eden—

JOE: And 105th Street.

RONNIE: These are some beautiful faces—lord. Look at all that young, thick hair—that clear, pink skin. (*Abruptly stops*) This is making me feel plain—and *old*.

JOE: You're not old.

RONNIE: It's hard to look at young folks in love—

JOE: They were just actors.

RONNIE: They're *good* actors, I can tell.

JOE: It's all a pose.

RONNIE: I wouldn't mind posing for that.

JOE: (*Awkwardly*) I'll take your picture sometime.

RONNIE: No you won't. (*Slight pause*) When I was young enough to pose, I was scared for men to look at me. Now I'm not scared, I'm just—old.

JOE: You're not old at all.

RONNIE: You're sweet Joe—but I am—I'm old—(*Resumes looking at the photos, more couples*)

JOE: Well, don't envy *them*. They're all about to meet the devil.

RONNIE: Where's the devil?

JOE: You never see him. The devil was—history. He was the past.

RONNIE: I don't think I know what that means.

JOE: *(Smiling)* It didn't make much sense.

RONNIE: Is there a snake?

(The next few photos show gestapo-like thugs beating a couple of the young people.)

JOE: *There*—lots of snakes!

RONNIE: The police?—

JOE: The gestapo—sent to wipe us all out.

RONNIE: *(Frustrated)* I'm more confused than ever.

JOE: It was a fantasy play. The devil was the past, and the past was trying to destroy the future. So he sent his goons to kill all the young people, all the lovers. By day the kids would hide down in the subways, and when it was dark they'd sneak out and meet in this tiny, hidden little park on 105th Street. *(Photos show more couples, looking more passionate and desperate, simulating various types of sexual relations)*

RONNIE: Lord.

JOE: Are you all right?

RONNIE: *(Slowly nods)* Just keep talking.

JOE: All night they'd make wild, desperate love—that's how they thought they'd save the world.

RONNIE: They do look *wild*—

JOE: Do you want to stop?

RONNIE: Not till it's done. *(Resumes looking at the photos)*

JOE: It may get worse.

RONNIE: What's happening now?

JOE: Well—the kids grew more desperate, loving indiscriminately, until there was no longer any love, just—lust.

RONNIE: Oh my lord—

JOE: We can stop.

RONNIE: (*Breathes deeply*) No, I'm fine.

(*Pictures now show bodies strewn across the stage.*)

JOE: And that made them vulnerable, and more and more of them got caught, or lost hope and threw themselves in front of trains. In the end only one young couple survived, and they were the only ones who had managed to stay in love. Everybody else got old and died, or were destroyed, except for this one couple.

RONNIE: Adam and Eve—

JOE: Adam and Eve. (*Final slides show the couple—a black man and a white woman; there should be a considerable pause here, and Joe notices that Ronnie is not looking at the photo, but is nervously rubbing her eyes*) And as it ends, they take their clothes off and begin to make love—and history starts over— (*Slide starts to change when Ronnie suddenly dumps the package in Joe's lap—the screen goes black*)

RONNIE: (*Rises and walks toward the door*) It's too much—(*Breathless*)—we should've stopped—

JOE: You said you were fine—

RONNIE: (*Snaps*) Well I'm not fine now.

JOE: Is it this? (*Rises, holds up the last photo*)

RONNIE: It's *all* too much.

JOE: (*Moves toward her*) It's not just this one?

RONNIE: It's all of them, I'm sure.

JOE: (*Holds it out to her*) Look at it again.

RONNIE: Why?

JOE: I want to know.

RONNIE: (*Turns her head from it, continually*) I told you I was sure.

JOE: I just want you to look at it—

RONNIE: Why are you being hateful?

JOE: (*Continues hold it out to her*) I'm just asking you to look at a picture.

RONNIE: And I told you I don't want to. I don't feel good. I wish you'd put that thing away.

(*They stand apart for a moment. Both actors should appear to grow ill, as if their energy were literally bleeding out of them.*)

JOE: All right. (*Pulls it away*) I'll put it away. (*Moves to Susan's bag and tucks the package in it; he keeps the last photo though, and studies it; there should be a considerable pause here*)

RONNIE: My eyes feel like they're—*bleeding*. My whole face feels like it's bleeding. I might need to lie down. (*Joe remains crouched beside the bag, staring at the photo*) You don't have to ignore me.

JOE: I just realized the end was wrong. (*Rises*) This couple never would have made it. They would've been the first to go.

RONNIE: I thought you were gonna put it away.

JOE: That's why nobody took it seriously. It was too fantastic.

RONNIE: Is there *nothing* else we can talk about?

JOE: They could survive history, sure, if history was just a bunch of goons. But it's not. It's people you know, and live with.

RONNIE: I don't know what any of that means. I just know my head aches.

JOE: (*Holds up the photo*) Why does this hurt you so badly?

RONNIE: It's not that—(*Fans herself*)—it's the *heat* in this place.

JOE: You can't even look at them.

RONNIE: (*Sharply*) And you can't take your eyes off them.

JOE: (*Speaks with as much animation and force as at any point in the play*) They're in love! I *never* wrote about people in love! It was a crappy play—almost everything I wrote was *crap*—but *this*—(*Holds out the photo*)—this was my best moment. Maybe Susan's right—I was dumb to stop writing. Maybe I could start over. (*Looks hard at the photo*) I never knew how powerful this stuff can be, till right now. It doesn't matter who gets it. What matters is that I wrote it.

RONNIE: I *get* it—I just don't think it seems very *real*.

JOE: It's not real.

RONNIE: I believe in Adam and Eve—I always have. That's just not how I pictured them.

JOE: (*With malice*) Of course it's not. This could never happen here. You wouldn't let it.

RONNIE: I'm not ignorant, Joe—

JOE: I never said you were ignorant.

RONNIE: That's how you're looking at me.

JOE: I can't help how I look.

RONNIE: I'm not a fool. I knew girls who did that—ran away up north, starting running around with black men—I went to school with them, I taught a couple. And I'd see them come back from time to time. They always looked hungry and unloved, and they'd look at me like I was ignorant Southern trash for being well-fed and clean and teaching at my daddy's *pitiful* little school! And for some of them—I'm not saying all—but for some, kissing a black man on the mouth would make them feel like they were *that much* farther on top of me.

JOE: It's not possible they might be in love?

RONNIE: I'm not saying that. All I'm trying to tell you is that I know these kind of women. They'll kiss a black man to prove how much smarter they are. And once they've proved it, you think they stay with them? I know these kind of people. They use blacks or Mexicans or anybody like that to prove how *ashamed* they are for being white, when

really they're just trying to prove how much *whiter* they are than the rest of us! I'm sorry, it just makes me—mad. (*Joe moves slowly to the bag, puts the photo in the package with the others*) I know you think I'm *awful*, but it's the truth. And you were looking at me like they used to, like I was ignorant for having spent my whole life here in Alma.

JOE: I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. (*Sits*)

RONNIE: I know you didn't. (*Long pause*) I don't know what got into me. I guess this week has worn me out. I know I sounded awful—don't be mad.

JOE: I'm not mad. I'm tired too—I'm exhausted.

RONNIE: What we need to do is *eat*. Let's forget about cooking tonight. (*Moves toward the door, as if to open it*) Why don't we drive to Gaston?

JOE: I've made up my mind about something.

RONNIE: (*Turns back*) I know the sweetest little diner.

JOE: I'm not up to anything right now.

RONNIE: No?

JOE: I've decided something though—I need to tell you.

RONNIE: Tell me, honey.

JOE: I'm leaving Alma.

RONNIE: When?

JOE: As soon as I can. I don't have the strength to stay.

RONNIE: Course you do, Joe. Are you mad at me?

JOE: I'm not mad. I'm just—

RONNIE: Joe—

JOE: You all don't need me here.

RONNIE: Course we do—*Joe*. Why do you say that?

JOE: It was dumb to come down here. I made a mistake.

RONNIE: (*Growing urgent*) But I'm not ready to go yet. I can't leave my father.

JOE: You shouldn't.

RONNIE: You're mad at me Joe—

JOE: I'm not mad—

RONNIE: I didn't mean those things—I just got upset for a minute. I couldn't help it, Joe. Don't you believe me? I couldn't help it.

JOE: I know you couldn't. But—I can't stay—I don't want to stay.

RONNIE: I thought that—

JOE: If I knew—I don't—I'm sick with doubt—I'm *scared*—I'm suddenly terrified here. I don't want to be here another hour.

RONNIE: But I can't leave yet.

JOE: You shouldn't.

RONNIE: I will though—

JOE: No—

RONNIE: *Yes I will*—if you want me too. Don't you want me too?

JOE: I don't know what I'm going back to. I'll probably stay with Susan—

RONNIE: Susan?

JOE: Maybe I could write full time.

RONNIE: You can write *here* Joe—you don't need Susan!

JOE: I couldn't write here—

RONNIE: Of course you can!

JOE: I can't do anything here—

RONNIE: *Joe*, listen to me. I couldn't stop how that picture made me feel, any more than I can stop blood rushing to my face—if I looked at it again, I'd feel the same way, but—I *will*—I'll look at it again, and keep looking at it till the blood goes down—but I need you with me Joe—I can't do it alone—

JOE: What you said—(*Covers his eyes with his hands*)

RONNIE: I couldn't help it—

JOE: (*Uncovers his eyes*) I don't blame you, but it happened. There's suddenly this—*wall*—and I don't know that I can ever look past it.

RONNIE: Then we gotta get rid of it! We gotta knock it down! Go someplace new—

JOE: (*Shaking his head*) You'd be miserable in New York—

RONNIE: I don't care! I'll grow used to it, with time—

JOE: I don't have time. I can't throw my life into anything doubtful. I'm sorry—I can't stay—I don't want to—I won't.

RONNIE: (*Sits very still for a moment, not crying, then bursts forth with anger*) You want to change the world, but you're not willing to help *one person*!—you're not willing to help *me*, and I've done *everything* to help you! It's *selfish* Joe, and I don't understand it—I've done all I can do—I can't do any more—I *don't know what else to do*—

JOE: I'm sorry—

RONNIE: Tell me what to do—(*Sits*)

(*Phone rings, startles them both; Joe answers it, only because the ringing seems unbearable.*)

JOE: Hello. . . .what?. . . .no, it's all right. . . .where are you? (*Pause*) I know where it is. . . .no, stay where you are, I'll come. . . .all right. (*Hangs up; long pause*) Susan got lost. She was reading while she walked. I should go get her.

RONNIE: (*Calm*) Don't go yet. I don't want to be alone.

JOE: You can come.

RONNIE: I don't want her seeing me like this.

JOE: She's not very far. I won't be long.

RONNIE: Stay just a little bit longer. I don't want to be here by myself.

JOE: She's lost. I don't want her out there alone.

RONNIE: *I'm lost, Joe. . . .*

JOE: We'll talk later. (*Makes sure he has his keys*) I won't be long. I have to go. I'm sorry. (*Exits*)

Ronnie covers her face for a moment, perhaps crying softly, then rises and goes slowly to Susan's bag, takes out the package, holds it for a moment, breathes heavily, then begins to open it as the lights fade to black.

THE END