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Fateville
By Gary Blackwood

MEN

EZRA BANKS, 30s, a dirt-poor Arkansas ferry operator
ARLY BANKS, 10, his son
HECK HECKART, 40s, a traveling book salesman
BARLET, 30s, a horse trader
RUSSELL TOLLIVER, 20s, a deputy sheriff
C. C. LIVINGSTON, 20s, a magazine writer
(Livingston or Tolliver may be played by the same actor as Barlet)

WOMEN

VERDIE BANKS, 30s, Ezra's wife
BONNIE BANKS, 16, their daughter

FOLK/BLUEGRASS GROUP

Set requirements

A single interior set; a shabby house in Northern Arkansas, c. 1900

Plot Summary

After Arly Banks, sick of living in poverty, runs off with a traveling book seller, his parents are determined not to let the same thing happen again. In an attempt to make life better for their daughter, Bonnie, they take to murdering travelers for their money and keep the girl a virtual prisoner in the house. But then a handsome young stranger from St. Louis, stranded there in a storm, threatens to steal her away. The parents do him in, only to discover that he was their long-lost son. The story is based on an Ozark folk tale.

NOTE: All the songs mentioned in the script are in the public domain. The sheet music for them is available on request.

ACT I

(Lights up on a small folk/bluegrass group seated on or near the stage. They perform traditional Ozarks folk songs as a commentary on the action of the play. They open with THE ARKANSAS BOYS.)

(Lights down on them and up on the interior of a shabby frame house on the White River in Northern Arkansas, circa 1900. At Stage Left is a small guest room, tacked on to the main room of the house; it contains only a bed and a set of shelves with a kerosene lantern atop them. On the wall of the room that faces Offstage is a small, shuttered window. The entire house is scrupulously clean, but the decor is strictly from poverty-flour sack curtains, no wallpaper. A small cast iron stove heats the place and cooks the food. In the main room, VERDIE BANKS is darning some piece of clothing by the light from the sole window. A large woman of about thirty, she was once handsome but a habitual bitter scowl has spoiled her features. Her husband, EZRA BANKS, is a scrawny, bearded man of about forty. He is cleaning a rifle that dates from the Civil War era. In the guest room, ARLY BANKS, a precocious boy of about ten, barefoot and dressed in hand-me-down overalls, lies on the bed avidly reading a book. After a long silence:)

EZRA:

B'lieve I'll go a-huntin' tomorrow.

VERDIE:

How's that?

EZRA:

I say, I b'lieve I'll go a-huntin'. Maybe bring us home a turkey, or a coon.

VERDIE:

(stares at him, as though considering whether or not to object) Well. We could use the meat, God knows. But ifn you go traipsin' off in the woods, who's goin' see to runnin' the ferry?

EZRA:

The boy.

VERDIE:

(laughs humorlessly) Might as well ask that hound dog out there. That boy's lazier than you are, and that takes some doin'. Be lucky to even find him when the time comes.

EZRA:

Well, 'taint likely to come, though, is it? When's the last time we carted anybody across the river?

VERDIE:

Last week. Them fellers from Fateville [the Ozarks pronunciation of Fayetteville], remember? Ifn you had you a gun like the ones them fellers had, you might could bring home something better than a scroungy little coon, or a turkey. Might be you could shoot you a deer or a painter.

EZRA:

Painter's ain't fittin' to eat.

VERDIE:

And I guess coons are?

EZRA:

The way you cook 'em, they are.

VERDIE:

(uncertain whether or not to be pleased with the compliment. Finally she makes a scoffing noise) You better see if you cain't shoot you some potatoes and carrots while you're at it. We sure cain't manage to grow none. Can't grow nothin' in solid rock. My daddy warn't no great shakes in most respects, but at least we always had food on the table. (Crying of a year-old child from the bed. Verdie goes over to comfort it. Her manner has changed abruptly; she is suddenly loving and solicitous)

EZRA:

(under cover of the crying) I guess you shoulda stayed there, then.

VERDIE:

How's that?

EZRA:

I say, you seemed anxious enough to leave.

VERDIE:

Did I? Well, a pig's always anxious to get loose from the pen, too, ain't it?

EZRA:

What does that mean, exactly?

VERDIE:

It means that sometimes a body don't know when they're well off.

EZRA:

We do all right.

VERDIE:

All right? Ifn you call never having one nickel to rub agin another all right. I wouldn't even mind it so much being poor; I was used to that. But I always figured that, oncet I got out of them woods and closer to Fateville, it'd be more . . . civilized. I figured they'd at least be folks around to talk to.

EZRA:

I ain't never noticed no particular shortage of talk.

(Verdie either doesn't hear him, or ignores him. Accompanied by the musicians, she sings, to the tune of ALL THE PRETTY HORSES)

VERDIE:

Hush-a-bye, don't you cry
Go to sleepy, little baby.
When you wake you shall have cake
And lots and lots of pretty presents:
Pearls on strings, gold and silver rings,
A coach and six snow-white horses.
Gowns to wear, ribbons for your hair,
A coach and six snow-white horses.

I hate that song. It feels jest like I'm a-tellin' lies to her. We'll be lucky to ever have enough money to buy her a hair ribbon, never mind pearls, or rings, or a coach. I thought oncet we begun taking in travelers, things'd get better. Maybe we oughter ask more money to put folks up and feed them.

EZRA:

Cain't ask too much; they'll jest go on a couple more hours and put up in Fateville.

(Verdie goes to the sink, begins cutting up vegetables to make a stew)

VERDIE:

You ever think maybe that's what we oughter do?

EZRA:

What's that?

VERDIE:

Pick up and move to the city. We could have us a reg'lar boardin' house.

EZRA:

And jest where do you reckon we'd get the money to buy it with? B'sides, you wouldn't like it in the city. You might think you would, but that's b'cause you ain't never lived there.

VERDIE:

Well, you ain't, neither, that I'm aware of.

EZRA:

No, but I been there enough times to know that I wouldn't want to. Why, the noise alone is enough to make your head hurt. And all them people . . . I seen a prairie dog town oncet. Them prairie dogs put me in mind of city folks, the way they keep on a-runnin' here and a-runnin' there, and never really gettin' no place, or doin' nothin' much.

VERDIE:

Still and all, it might be nice, for a while, anyway. I know Arly'd enjoy havin' some other boys his age to pal around with.

EZRA:

Now, that's jest what we need, ain't it? Somethin' more to take his mind offn his work. Where is he, anyway? I told him three hours ago to weed them beans.

VERDIE:

Most likely holed up somewhere with a book, like always. (In the distance, a BELL CLANGS. In the guest room, Arly lifts his head, startled. Ezra and Verdie look at one another) There's the bell for the ferry. You'd best get out there.

EZRA:

It's about time the boy learnt how to run that ferry. (goes to the window, hollers out) Arly! Arly! He ain't in the garden. Arly!

VERDIE:

Shut up, now! You'll wake Bonnie!

EZRA:

Well, dammit, where is that boy? (He strides to the guest room. Arly hides under the bed) Arly! Gol-damn it!

VERDIE:

Just go on yourself. Hurry, now, afore the man changes his mind!

(Arly listens at the door until he's sure Ezra is gone. Then he musses his hair and comes shuffling out of the room, rubbing his eyes and generally looking as sick as it is possible for a perfectly healthy person to do)

ARLY:

What's all the fuss about?

VERDIE:

(not buying his sick act, but not altogether sure he's faking it, either) Your daddy was looking high and low for you. Where was you?

ARLY:

Why, right there in my room. Guess I fell asleep. I been feeling kinder poorly. (coughs a little)

VERDIE:

(skeptical) Uh-huh. Let's have a feel of that forehead. (grabs him and clamps one hand to his forehead) Looks to me like the only thing you got, Arly Banks, is a bad case of the do-nothings.

ARLY:

You allus say that! I might be purely wastin' away from consumption or leprosy, and you wouldn't even care! Alls *she* has to do is give a little sniff and you carry on like it's a great calamity. I could cut my leg off, and you'd jest say, "Well, don't stand there on one leg, drippin' blood on my floor; get you a rag and bandage it up!"

VERDIE:

(waving the knife at him) There's gonna be some blood drippin' all right, ifn you persist in speakin' to me that-a-way. Now you get back in there and redd up that room some, in case this feller that's comin' wants to stay the night. And ifn you got any belongings in there, you get 'em out, hear?

ARLY:

(in the small room) Belongings? What belongings did I ever have? (searches his pockets) A tore-down old pocket knife? A piece of fishin' line? A speckled rock I picked up down to the river? I wisht this here book was mine, and not just borried from Revern' Hinson. Heck, even these overhauls was somebody else's afore; even the patches on the knees was part of somebody else's britches oncet. They ain't nothin' here that rightly belongs to me, not even this here room. Ever' time a traveler comes along and wants a place to stay, I got to clear out and make me a bed out in the barn with all the other animals. I wouldn't be surprised ifn, one of these days, they jest hitch me up to the plow and be done with it.

(The musicians play THE STATE OF ARKANSAS. Ezra reenters, along with HECK HECKART, a rather portly traveling salesman carrying a valise full of books. Heckart is

in his forties and tired of being on the road, but he still makes an effort to be upbeat and cheerful even when there's little hope of making a sale. His manner and speech are flamboyant, but have a touch of Ozarks and, when it's called for, he knows how to sound like "just folks." Arly hears them enter; he quickly makes up the bed, covering up the book in his haste, and, eager to see the stranger, returns to the main room)

HECKART:

A pleasant afternoon to you, ma'am. Young man. (He shakes hands with both of them, to their puzzlement) As I've been telling Ezra, here, my name is Heck Heckart, and I come from Fayetteville. Not just now, of course. I'm returning there, in point of fact, after a long and most unprofitable odyssey through the heart of the Ozarks. My given name is Humphrey, by the way, but everyone calls me Heck. I imagine folks call me a lot of other things, under their breath, such as garrulous-- (to Arly) that means I talk too much--or maybe gluttonous--that means I eat too much (pats his belly)-- or perhaps grandiloquent-- that also means I talk too much--but they don't generally say it to my face. (He looks around) This is quite a . . . clean and . . . homey place you have here, Miz Banks.

VERDIE:

Thank you. (hopefully) Will you--will you be wantin' to stay the night, Mr. Heckart?

HECKART:

Call me Heck. It's very kind of you to offer, ma'am. I am anxious to get home. (Verdie is crestfallen) But I must confess that, as the bard says, I 'gin to be awearry of the sun. I suppose my missus won't perish altogether if she's deprived of my company for one more day.

VERDIE:

Does . . . that mean yes?

HECKART:

It does. Now, naturally I wouldn't dream of insulting you by offering to pay for my lodging. I made that mistake early on in my travels and was roundly rebuffed. I understand that country folk such as yourselves take great pride in showing hospitality to strangers.

VERDIE:

Well, that ain't exactly--

HECKART:

I do hope, though, that you'll allow me to make you a present of one of these fine volumes-- (indicates one of the kitchen chairs) May I? (sits down) --these fine volumes, which represent no less than seventeen centuries of the most profound philosophy and the finest creative efforts of the world's greatest minds (holds up each volume in turn) from Mr. Homer to Mr. Shakespeare to Mr. Clemens.

VERDIE:

Well, now, I really don't . . .

(Arly moves forward, fascinated by the books)

HECKART:

Now here's a fellow who really appreciates lit'rachoor. I can always tell the lean and hungry look of a man who thirsts for knowledge. Am I right? What will it be, sir? Jonathan Swift? Daniel *Defoe*? No, wait, I know . . . Robert Louis Stevenson! (He makes the titles sound irresistible) *Kidnapped! The Black Arrow! Treasure Island!* (Arly takes the book reverently) Ha! I thought so! A boy with a lust for adventure. Danger and daring deeds, faraway lands, riches beyond the dreams of avarice! (Verdie looks meaningfully at Ezra, who reluctantly intercedes)

EZRA:

See here, mister, I don't like to--

HECKART:

No, no, I insist, sir. It's the least I can do, after you-all have so generously offered to share your table and your shelter with me. Heaven knows, I may as well give them away; I've had dismal enough luck trying to sell them. You would think, wouldn't you, that folks would jump at the chance to have in their homes a shelf filled with the most significant thoughts and the most beautiful sentiments ever expressed by man, and all for a mere two dollars per volume, payable bi-monthly. That's a mere dollar a month, friends. Tell me, Ezra, how much do you spend in a month on whisky and tobacco alone? Two bits? Four bits?

EZRA;

No, sir.

HECKART:

(reproachfully) Don't tell me that you don't indulge, sir, that you're one of them teetotalers?

EZRA:

Oh, I indulge, right enough. It's jest that I make my own likker and grow my own baccy.

HECKART:

Oh. (sighs) Now, this is what I'm up against, you see. This is why I can't manage to sell these-- (regards the books rather resentfully) --outstanding volumes. Doesn't anyone in the Ozarks have any cash money?

EZRA:

Not a soul I know of, 'cept the storekeeper . . . and the lawyers, o' course.

HECKART:

I guess I ought to be selling law books, not lit'rachoor. I did make a very satisfactory trade, over Jonesboro way. A silversmith gave me this necklace, in exchange for a volume of Keats, Shelley, and Byron. (sees that these names mean nothing to them) Those gentlemen are English poets, you know. (He holds up the necklace. Verdie is as covetous of it as Arly is of the books) I like to bring the missus home something from every trip. It helps to make up to her, for all the lonesome hours.

(The baby cries, Verdie goes to comfort it)

EZRA:

I take it you got no young'uns, else your wife wouldn't have too many "lonesome hours".

HECKART:

No. Sadly, though we both desired it, we haven't yet been blessed with progeny--and it doesn't seem likely now that we ever will. (more cheerfully) But, in all other respects, our life is very satisfactory. There's always something to do in Fayetteville, somewhere to go: social gatherings, lectures, concerts, vaudeville, moving pictures--

(Verdie and Ezra look at him as though he's speaking in tongues; Arly is spellbound)

ARLY:

Moving pictures?

HECKART:

That's right. Don't tell me you've never been to a moving picture show.

ARLY:

Nosir.

HECKART:

How old is this boy?

EZRA:

How old? (looks to Verdie)

VERDIE:

Well, let's see, he was born that summer of the big drouth, so that'd be. . .

ARLY:

I'm ten years old.

HECKART:

Ten years old, and he's never once seen a moving picture show? My stars. Well, son, the moving pictures, they're . . . they're kind of like a book come to life, you might say. Have you ever been to a play party where they did a shadow play, using a lamp to cast shadows on a sheet? Well, it's a bit like that, except it's not merely shadows, it's full-fledged

pictures, just like a tintype, only they move. I've seen pictures of a horse race so real you'd swear those cayuses were going to gallop off the screen and trample you; I've seen pictures of a boxing match where you felt just as if you were up there in the ring, taking the punches; I've seen ladies in grass skirts--and not much else--dancing the hula; every so often they show a whole story, like a stage play. The missus and me went to a picture they called *The Great Train Robbery*, where a fellow points his revolver right at the audience and fires. It made me jump, I can tell you, but then I looked down, and saw that my wife had flung herself down on the floor altogether, trying to get out of the way of that bullet.

ARLY:

I'd surely like to see somethin' like that.

HECKART:

Well, son, I'll tell you what; the next time you come to the city, you look me up--Heck Heckart, 201 Elm Street--and the missus and I will take you to see a moving picture. Is it a deal?

ARLY:

Yes, sir!

EZRA:

(disapprovingly) We ain't likely to get to Fateville anytime soon, Mr. Heckart. Don't give the boy no ideas. He's got his head turned around bad enough as it is. From reading too many books, I expect. Been better ifn we'd never let him go off to school to begin with. Seems like ever since he did, he's been afraid to get his hands dirty.

HECKART:

Where do you get your education, son?

ARLY:

I don't; not no more. They run the teacher off, 'cause he took up with one of the gal pupils.

VERDIE:

Now, that warn't the reason. It was b'cause there warn't no money to pay his wages.

ARLY;

All the same, he did take up with Carrie Spurlock. I seen 'em kissin' oncet, behind the outhouse.

VERDIE:

Is that true?

ARLY:

Cross my heart.

VERDIE:

I swear, half the time I cain't tell whether to b'lieve you or not.

EZRA:

I did hear that, though, about the Spurlock gal and the teacher, and she did have her a woods colt.

HECKART:

A woods colt?

EZRA:

(confidentially) That there's the perlite term fer a bastard. I guess you don't call 'em that in Fateville.

HECKART:

No. We generally say "out of wedlock." (Arly snickers)

EZRA:

What's eatin' you, boy?

ARLY:

I was just picturin' you out there, a-whackin' that stubborn mule of ours and a-hollerin' "Giddup, you on'ry *out-o-wedlock*."

(Heckart guffaws appreciatively. Ezra and Verdie, being of the "children should be seen and not heard" school, are not amused)

VERDIE:

Speakin' o' mules, ain't it about time you tended to them animals?

ARLY:

(distressed) *Now?*

VERDIE:

Yes, *nooowwww*.

ARLY:

(to Heckart) Will you tell me more about them movin' pitchers later on?

HECKART:

Cross my heart.

(Hoping to catch a bit more of the conversation, Arly dawdles. He lifts the lid of the stewpot and peers in. Verdie waves him away)

VERDIE:

Get on out o' there. I expect you'll be wantin' to have you a rest afore supper time, Mr. Heckart.

HECKART:

No, no, thank you. I'm quite comfortable here.

VERDIE:

Well, the thing is . . . (embarrassed) You see, it's about time I give the baby *her* supper.

HECKART:

Oh? Oh! Of course! I apologize, ma'am for not taking your meaning. As I said, the missus and I haven't had the opportunity to experience the pleasures and the duties incumbent upon the parents of a small child. (rises, goes to the bed) It won't startle her if I have a peek, will it?

VERDIE:

I reckon not.

HECKART:

What a beautiful child. (Makes the usual sappy sounds. Disgusted and resentful, Arly storms out. Heckart notices, but the others don't) What's her name?

VERDIE:

Bonnie.

HECKART:

(amused) No! Bonnie *Banks*?

VERDIE:

Is they somethin' wrong with that?

HECKART:

(realizing that she doesn't get it) No. Not at all. It's a lovely name. It's just-- No, nothing. (glances toward the door) There's quite an age difference between her and the boy, isn't there? (Verdie gives him a stare that says "So?") I mean, he'll be too old to be much of a playmate for her, won't he? But no doubt there'll be other siblings to come . . .

VERDIE:

No. They won't.

HECKART:

Oh. Well. Ah . . . if you'll just show me to where I'll be lodging, I'll . . .

EZRA:

Through here. (He escorts Heckart into the adjoining room)

HECKART:

(a bit dubiously) This is . . . very . . . homey. Listen, if I upset your wife just now, I apologize. I didn't mean to pry. I was only trying to make conversation. As I said, sometimes I talk too much. I'm sorry.

EZRA:

It warn't your fault. She's a bit tetchy about it, is all. You see, when the baby come due, we . . . we couldn't afford no doctor, so the neighbor woman from down the road come in. They was "complications" o' some sort, and fer a while, it was touch and go whether or not either of 'em would make it. Finally I had to go and fetch the doc. He fixed her up, but he says she cain't have no more babies, or it'll be the death of her.

HECKART:

I see. I *am* sorry.

EZRA:

She fusses over that little 'n like a miser over his gold, as if she's afeard somebody's gonna take it away.

HECKART:

That's perfectly understandable. I'll wager that Arly isn't very happy about it, though.

EZRA:

About what?

HECKART:

Why, about the fact that baby Bonnie gets the lion's share of the attention.

EZRA:

(shrugs) It ain't our job to keep him happy. Our job's to see that he's raised right.

HECKART:

Raised right . . .

EZRA:

Yessir. Feller wants to get along in this world, he needs to know how to work. Dreamin' don't get you nowheres.

HECKART:

Perhaps not. But without dreamers, it wouldn't *be* much of a world, would it?

EZRA:

I don't foller you.

HECKART:

Never mind. I was just waxing grandiloquent. Thank you. I'm sure I'll be very . . . comfortable here. (pushes on the bed, which is clearly hard as stone. Ezra exits. Heckart turns down the quilt and discovers Arly's book) Dickens? (He turns a few pages) *Great Expectations*? Somehow I expected *Bleak House* (looks around) or perhaps *Hard Times*. (sighs, stretches out on the bed. Sits up, wincing, pounds the mattress, lies down again. Verdie is nursing the baby. Ezra heads for the front door)

EZRA:

Guess I'd better see what that boy's up to.

VERDIE:

I know well enough what he's up to.

EZRA:

How's that?

VERDIE:

(nods at where Arly was sitting) He tuck that there book with him.

EZRA:

(nods grimly) Then I reckon I better take *this* with *me*. (He takes down the razor strop from the wall and exits. Verdie smiles at the baby and makes cooing noises. Lights down as musicians play MY PARENTS RAISED ME TENDERLY)

(Lights up on the small room at Left; the main room stays in darkness. Heckart is lying in bed, reading from one of his "outstanding volumes." We hear a rap at the window. Heckart sits up, puzzled, then goes to the window and opens the shutters)

HECKART:

Arly! Where have you been, son? You missed supper.

ARLY:

(climbs in through the window. He nods toward the main room) He give me a whuppin', and I didn't do nothin' *atall* to deserve it, so I run off. But then it come to me that I din't have no place to run to, nor no money, nor no food, so I come back, to reconsider. Did they wonder where I'd got to?

HECKART:

Of course they did. They were . . . extremely concerned. They're your folks.

ARLY:

Is that what they told you?

HECKART:

Well, no, not in so many words. I just assumed that . . .

ARLY:

They ain't no relations of mine. I'm a orphant. Don't rightly know what become of my real mama and daddy; they won't tell me nothin'. I expect they died of the cholera or some such. Them two took me in when I was jest a little 'n--just so's they'd have somebody to boss around and give all the dirty jobs to, far as I can tell. They surely ain't never treated me like their son; more like a slave. They don't even let me sleep here in the house with 'em; I got to make me a bed out in the barn, in a pile of straw.

HECKART:

Have you told anyone else about this, about how they treat you?

ARLY:

Who'd I tell? Ever'body in these parts b'lieves they're my folks, jest like you did.

HECKART:

Surely there must be someone around who knew your real parents.

ARLY:

Nosir, they ain't. At the time when them two took me in, they was a-livin' some other place, I ain't jest sure where. They won't never tell me. I guess they're afeared I might try to go there and look up some of my kinfolk.

HECKART:

I wish there were some way I could help you, son. Suppose I were to go to the county seat and tell the sheriff what you've told me?

ARLY:

Who you reckon they're likely to listen to? The boy's own folks, or some outsider, some stranger from the city? No offense.

HECKART:

You have a point. But there must be some way . . .

ARLY:

I don't know. Alls I know is, I cain't keep on a-livin' here, the way things are. I'd clear out of here tonight, right now, ifn I just had someplace to go to, someplace where they'd treat me halfway decent, and not always be a-hollerin' at me, and a-beatin' on me. I swear, sometimes I'm skeered that-- that--

HECKART:

What, son? Tell me.

ARLY:

I'm skeered that one or the other of 'em is gonna lose their temper over some little thing and . . . and do for me.

HECKART:

Do for you? You mean . . . ? No, no, I can't believe that. I'm certain they'd never do you any harm.

ARLY:

Well, I ain't. I ain't *atall* sartin. (He sits down, wincing painfully)

HECKART:

What did he beat you with, Arly?

ARLY:

A stick. (He indicates the diameter with his hands) About like so.

HECKART:

May I see? (Arly reluctantly unbuckles one overall strap and lets it drop, revealing a couple of welts. It's Heckart's turn to wince) Good Lord. I've half a mind to give *him* a good thrashing, and see how he likes it.

ARLY:

I wouldn't try it, ifn I was you. He ain't as puny as he looks. B'sides, ifn you was to begin a-beatin' on him, *she'd* be liable to brain you from behint with a skillet or some such. No, it's best ifn you stay out of it, I reckon. It ain't your lookout.

HECKART:

Perhaps it is, though. If things are as bad as you say, I can't in good conscience leave you here, at their mercy. If they were your real family, I suppose there wouldn't be much to be done about it, but under the circumstances . . . (He paces about the little room, stares out the window)

ARLY:

What are you a-thinkin', Mr. Heckart?

HECKART:

I'm thinking that . . . that you need to be somewhere where you'll be safe, and since you've got no place else to go . . . What would you think about coming to Fayetteville with me? I know my missus wouldn't mind. She'd welcome a child in the house.

ARLY:

(hopefully) With you? You mean it? (Heckart nods. Then Arly's expression turns to despair) Aw, they'd never let me go, not in a hunnert years. They'd be nobody to do all the work around here.

HECKART:

We wouldn't have to ask them.

ARLY:

You mean . . . me sneak off and meet up with you somewheres, like that?

HECKART:

You think you could do that?

ARLY:

I reckon I could do jest about anything, ifn it meant gettin' out of *this* place.

HECKART:

All right. I'll be on the road heading west first thing in the morning. Where shall I look for you?

ARLY:

Let's see. They's a stand of cottonwoods maybe half a mile up the road that-a-way. One of the trees is all tore up, from bein' lightning-struck. You cain't mistake it. I'll wait there fer you. (In the next room, the baby wakes and fusses. Arly frowns, sick of the baby's crying) I better get, now, afore they hear us. I'm obliged to you, Mr. Heckart. (climbs out the window)

HECKART:

Arly! (Arly pokes his head back in) You're certain you want to do this?

ARLY:

I ain't never been more sartin of anything. See you in the mornin'.

(Heckart closes the shutters, sits on the bed, puts a hand to his head. It's clear that he's not nearly as certain about it as Arly is. Lights down as the musicians play I'M A MAN THAT DONE WRONG TO HIS PARENTS)

(Lights up. Verdie is on the bed, singing softly to the baby. Seeing that she's asleep, Verdie rises, sighs wearily. She goes to a small, cracked mirror and examines herself critically, pushes back a few wayward strands of hair. Then she takes down a tin from a shelf, digs into it, and comes up with the necklace that Heckart was taking home to his wife. She holds it up to her neck, smiling slightly. We hear the SOUND of a horse approaching O.S. She guiltily slips the necklace into her apron pocket. Ezra enters, looking downcast)

VERDIE:

What'd you find out? (no reply) Did you speak to the Shairf?

EZRA:

I spoke to him.

VERDIE:

Well?

EZRA:

He says he talked to som folks along the road to Fateville. One lady, she recalled seein' a feller that fit the description I give him of Heckart. He was a-drivin' the same kind of horse and rig, too, and . . .

VERDIE:

And *what*?

EZRA:

She remembers he had a boy ridin' on the seat alongside of him.

VERDIE:

Oh, Lord. Arly. Did she say-- Was he all right? He wasn't hurt, or nothin'?

EZRA:

I reckon not. She says that he . . . that he appeared to be laughin'.

VERDIE:

Laughin'? That miserable, misbegotten Heckart! I'll lay you money he filled the boy's head with nonsense about pitcher shows and such like, to get him to come along with him. Arly must've thought it was all jest a lark, that he'd jest take him a little holiday for a couple of days. But it's been two weeks, Ezry! The boy's been gone for two *weeks* now. Did the Shairf go to Fateville and look up that address? 201 Elum Street?

EZRA:

(nods) The neighbors told him that a man and a woman name of Heckart did live there, but that they up and moved out a while back, without no word.

VERDIE:

What are we gonna *do*, Ezry?

EZRA:

Don't look to me like there's much we *can* do. Ain't no tellin' where he's got to. (shakes his head) What I cain't figure is why. Why would he want to take our boy?

VERDIE:

You heard him. He said him and his missus allus wanted young'uns and couldn't have none. That's reason enough.

EZRA:

May be. But-- Well, it seems to me he coulda done a sight better than Arly.

VERDIE:

How can you say that? He's your son!

EZRA:

I ain't sayin' I'm glad he's gone. I wisht it hadn't happened, same as you. I'm just sayin' he could be a trial. Wouldn't surprise me none ifn that Heckart feller up and brought him back in another week or two.

VERDIE:

Well, ifn he does, he better jest drop the boy off somewheres, b'cause ifn he shows his face here, I swear I'll blow a hole through it with this here rifle. (picks it up) My daddy always said, Never trust a traveling salesman no fu'ther than you can spit. Looks like he was right. And to think I was feeling bad for a while over what *I* done.

EZRA:

What *you* done?

VERDIE:

(a little pleased with herself) Whilist he was a-sleeping, I snuck into that there room and I tuck this out o' his satchel. (Holds up the necklace)

EZRA:

You *stole* it?

VERDIE:

Now, don't you get all righteous-like. It ain't *nothin'* compared to what he stole from us, Ezry! He can buy his wife another damn necklace. How do you figure I ought to go about gettin' me another *son*? (Her shouting wakes the baby. She goes to comfort it) Sssh, it's all right, darlin'. Ever'thing's all right. Nothin's gonna happen to you. Mama's a-watchin' over you. Nothin's ever gonna happen to you. (The baby coughs) Did you bring that cough mixture I told you to get?

EZRA:

'Course I did. (pulls it from his pocket, hands it to her) It tuck my last dime, too.

VERDIE:

(spoons some into the baby's mouth) There you are, honey. That'll help. (SOUND of the ferry bell ringing O.S. Verdie looks up, startled, hopeful) See who that is!

EZRA:

(goes to the door, peers out, then turns back) It ain't them. It's some other feller in a fancy rig, with another horse tied on behind. (He starts out the door)

VERDIE:

Wait jest a secont. Now listen. Ifn he says ary thing about wantin' to stay the night, you tell him no. I'll fix him a meal ifn he's hungry, but I ain't puttin' up no more strangers in this house, ever agin. You understand?

EZRA:

Now, Verdie, we cain't hardly afford to pass up cash money that-a-way—

VERDIE:

Cain't *afford*? What we cain't *afford* is to lose no more *children*! Now you do like I say! (Ezra exits. Verdie gives the necklace another look, then drops it back into the tin. Lights down. Musicians play THE HORSE TRADER SONG, then POSSUM SOP AND POLECAT JELLY)

(Lights up. Verdie is clearing off the table. BARLET, a well-dressed, well-heeled horse trader, sits at the table, with a valise on the floor next to him. He pushes back his chair and sighs contentedly)

BARLET:

Now that was a satisfying meal, Miz Banks. You don't get cooking like that in Hot Springs. It's all steaks and chops, half burned on the outside and raw on the inside. If you don't mind my asking, what sort of meat was in that pot pie? It tasted a bit like lamb.

EZRA:

Why, it warn't nothin' but a fat ole-- (he's about to say coon)

VERDIE:

Deer. That there was deer meat.

BARLET:

You don't say. Well, it was very tasty. Very tasty.

VERDIE:

(none too cordially) Sorry we cain't offer you no dessert. The apples won't be ripe for another couple weeks. (She goes to the bed to check on the baby, as if afraid Bonnie has somehow been spirited away)

BARLET:

No matter. I wouldn't have room for another bite, anyway. (stands) I wonder if you folks might know of anyone in these parts who has any good horseflesh for sale.

EZRA:

Horseflesh!? You eat that?

BARLET:

No, no, not to eat. To race. You see, I raise racing horses, and I'm up here looking to buy some good breeding stock.

EZRA:

Oh. Well, most of the horses hereabouts is draft animals. You might could find something over to Fateville. Folks there seem to have more money to spend on rigs and horses and such.

BARLET:

I'll do that. How much do I owe you for the meal, ma'am? (She ignores him)

EZRA:

Two bits should about cover it.

(Barlet lifts his vest to reveal a money belt. When he opens it, we see a fat bunch of bills. Verdie and Ezra clearly see it, too, and glance at one another in astonishment).

BARLET:

I trust you can make change for a dollar.

EZRA:

Nosir, I cain't say as I can. I done spent our last cent this morning, on cough mixture for the babe, there.

BARLET:

I'm sorry. I hope it's nothing serious. I'll tell you what; you take the whole dollar. Go ahead. I can spare it.

EZRA:

I'm obliged to you.

BARLET:

Well, I'd better be on my way, if I hope to make Fayetteville before dark. Just one other thing-- (He takes Ezra aside) Could you direct me to the facilities?

EZRA:

Come agin?

BARLET:

The backhouse.

EZRA:

(embarrassingly loud) Oh, the privy, you mean? Sartinly. (He opens the door, points) Just head back that-a-way and turn right at the barn. You cain't miss it.

BARLET:

Thank you.

EZRA:

They's a Sears and Roebuck catalog right inside the door.

VERDIE:

Ezry! (Beckons him urgently) Did you see that great passel of money he had?

EZRA:

I seen it. Must be a hunnert dollars.

VERDIE:

And I bet you they's more in that there satchel. Stands to reason; ifn he's out to buy horses, he's got to have money to buy 'em with, don't he?

EZRA:

I reckon. But--

VERDIE:

Take a look in there. Go on. A few dollars one way or the other won't make no difference at all to him, but it'd make a whole lot of difference to us. We could take little Bonnie to the doctor, for one. Go ahead. Jest take a look. I'll keep an eye out fer him.

(Reluctantly, Ezra kneels next to the bag, opens it, and roots through the papers inside. Verdie is less interested in keeping an eye out than she is in seeing what he finds, and she turns away from the door)

EZRA:

Ain't nothin' but papers, fur as I can tell . . .

VERDIE:

Keep a-lookin'. He's most likely got it tucked away somewheres.

(Barlet appears in the doorway and see what's going on. He pushes Verdie out of the way, seizes Ezra by the back of his shirt and hauls him to his feet)

BARLET:

(furious) Here, what are you up to? Is this the way you treat your guests in these parts?

EZRA:

I was jest-- (His words are cut off as Barlet's hand closes on his throat)

BARLET:

Well, I'll see to it, by God, that the next time you decide to rob a stranger, you think twice about it. (Ezra struggles, gasps for air)

VERDIE:

You turn him loose, mister! You hear me? I said turn him loose!

BARLET:

I'll let him go, as soon as I've taught him a lesson!

(Desperate, Verdie snatches up the rifle, fires. The sound starts the baby crying. Barlet's face registers shock. He lets Ezra fall and, clutching his back, turns toward Verdie. His knees buckle and he slumps to the floor. Ezra rises unsteadily, massaging his throat. They both stare at the body. Then Verdie turns away to comfort the baby. Ezra kneels next to Barlet and puts a hand to his neck)

EZRA:

You done for him, Verdie.

VERDIE:

I had to. It was him or you.

EZRA:

You might coulda jest hit him a whack.

VERDIE:

Well, ain't *you* grateful. I saved your life, you fool. Anyways, there ain't no profit in sayin' what I shoulda done or coulda done. What's done is done. The thing we need to be thinking about now is what are we gonna do with him.

EZRA:

Burry him, I reckon.

VERDIE:

What's burried can be dug up. Let me think a minute. All right. Here's what we'll do. You drag him outside and you tie that there old millstone to his ankles. Then you take him out on the ferry and dump him off in the deepest part of the river.

EZRA:

And what are *you* gonna do?

VERDIE:

Clean up the blood.

EZRA:

There's the horse and rig to consider, too. I don't b'lieve we'd be wise to keep 'em.

VERDIE:

You'll take 'em into Fateville and sell 'em off. Wait 'til late tonight to do it, so folks along the road won't see you pass.

EZRA:

I guess that'll be all right. Ifn this feller hails from Hot Springs, won't nobody in Fateville reco'nize his rig.

VERDIE:

Whilest you're in Fateville, you see ifn you can't find out somethin' more about where that Heckart feller might have tuck Arly. I reckon the Shairf's done about all he's likely to do. Anyways, we'd better have as little truck with the law as possible from now on. You and me know it was self-defense, but the law might not see it that way. (Ezra starts to drag the body outside) Jest a secont, now. Take that there money belt offn him first.

EZRA:

(bends and takes it off) What do you reckon we ought to do with the money?

VERDIE:

(She takes it from him) I don't know jest yet. But we sure as sin ain't gonna dump it in the river. Go on, now. (Lights down. Musicians play ONLY REMEMBERED)

ACT II

(Lights up on musicians, who play I'M DYING FOR SOMEONE TO LOVE ME. Lights up on set. Fifteen years have passed. Ezra and Verdie are well-to-do these days, and it shows. There are real curtains on the windows, a real cookstove, good furniture, and a stairway leading to a loft room occupied by BONNIE, who is now sixteen, very pretty, very sheltered, and very spoiled. She sits by the window, reading *Great Expectations*. We hear the SOUND of a horse approaching O.S., but Bonnie is too engrossed in the book to notice. Then RUSSELL TOLLIVER, a good-looking sheriff's deputy in his early twenties, appears at Right and knocks firmly on the door, startling Bonnie. She is clearly flustered, uncertain whether or not to answer the door. The knocking becomes more insistent)

RUSSELL:

Miss Banks? It's Russell Tolliver, from town. Could you open the door? I'd like to talk with you. It won't take but a minute or two. Miss Banks? I know you're in there. I ain't goin' away 'til you open this door.

BONNIE:

I ain't supposed to talk to strangers, and I especially ain't supposed to let none into the house.

RUSSELL:

Now, I ain't no stranger, Miss Banks. Don't I wave to you ever' time I ride by, and tip my hat and say "Good mornin'", or "Good afternoon," dependin'? And I seen you wave back more'n onced, when your folks warn't a-lookin'.

BONNIE:

(a bit coy) So? That don't mean I *know* you.

RUSSELL:

Well, how do you ever expect to *get* to know me, ifn you don't open the door?

BONNIE:

I cain't! Honestly! My mama and daddy would have a fit and fall in it. Cain't you wait 'til they get home from Fateville?

RUSSELL:

No. I need to talk to *you*. Miss Banks? (getting impatient) Now, see here. I'm the deputy shairf. You got to open up for the law, or I'll hold you in contempt for obstructin' justice.

BONNIE:

What does that mean?

RUSSELL:

It means I can arrest you and th'ow you in the county jail ifn you don't cooperate. Now open the door. (Bonnie is naive enough to believe this. Reluctantly she lifts the bar and

opens the door a bit. Russell takes off his hat) Good mornin'. I'm sorry to be so hard-nosed, but I am here on official business.

BONNIE:

You sure?

RUSSELL:

Cross my heart. See, there's my badge, an' all. (She lets him enter) Your folks don't really have to know you let me in.

BONNIE:

I cain't lie to them.

RUSSELL:

Well, just tell them I *made* you open up in the name of the law, then. Mind ifn I have a seat?

BONNIE:

No, go ahead. I'm sorry, I ain't used to havin' no company. Don't nobody hardly stop by here 'cept for a traveling salesman or somethin' oncet in a while, usin' the toll bridge Daddy built, or wantin' a meal. Most times when that happens they send me on up to my room.

RUSSELL:

They do? Why's that?

BONNIE:

I guess they're afraid somethin' might happen to me. Mama says, "Don't never trust a travelin' salesman no fu'ther than you can-- (breaks off, realizing this may sound unladylike) You know.

RUSSELL:

Spit?

BONNIE:

Yeah. (embarrassed) And I cain't spit very far

RUSSELL

Well, me neither. The Shairf, now, he's a world-class spitter. He can spit a gob of tobacco juice as fur as from here to that door. He don't even need no gun; he could just spit in the eye of any bank robber, and render him totally he'pless. 'Course it ain't like we get a lot of bank robbers in these parts, now that they locked up old Henry Starr.

BONNIE:

Henry Starr? Who's he?

RUSSELL:

Don't tell me you ain't never heard of Henry Starr, the greatest bank robber since Jesse James! You don't get out much, do you?

BONNIE:

(downcast) No.

RUSSELL:

I'm sorry. I wasn't tryin' to poke fun, or nothin'. I jest . . . You really don't go nowhere?
(She shakes her head) Never?

BONNIE:

My folks go in to Fateville oncet in a blue moon, but they don't never take me along.
They say you cain't trust city folks.

RUSSELL:

Well, they's some truth to that, but Fateville ain't exactly Sodom and Gomorrah. You heard of them places, I expect.

BONNIE:

(nods) That's how I learnt to read, from the Bible.

RUSSELL:

(indicates the book she's been reading) That there ain't the Bible, I'll bet.

BONNIE:

No. It's Charles Dickens. *Great Expectations*, it's called. I've read it four times already.

RUSSELL:

Where'd you come by that?

BONNIE:

Mama says my brother borried it from somebody or other, and never got the chancet to return it.

RUSSELL:

Your brother? I don't recall ever settin' eyes on *him*.

BONNIE:

He ain't here no more. My folks don't like to talk about it much, but as far as I can learn, he was . . . kidnapped, I guess you'd say--like in Robert Louis Stevenson's book--when I was just a baby.

RUSSELL:

Kidnapped? Wait a secont. I remember the Shairf sayin' somethin' about that one time. They think it was a traveling salesman done it. They never found him, after all these years? Shoot, it ain't no wonder your folks got such a distrustful attitude towards strangers.

BONNIE:

You said you wanted to ast me somethin'.

RUSSELL:

That's right, I do. And oddly enough it's about a travelin' salesman. Feller name of Carlson, works fer a dry goods company out o' Sant Louis, sellin' bolts o' cloth and needles and thread and such like. You ever recall seein' him come through here?

BONNIE:

I don't recall the name, but like I said, Mama and Daddy don't never let me talk to nobody for long. Mama did buy the cloth for this here dress, though, from a feller who come through maybe . . . two, three weeks ago. I ain't much good at keepin' track of what day it is. Around here, one day is pretty much the same as the next.

RUSSELL:

That's about the time this Carlson feller turned up missin'. I guess you didn't hear him say nothin' about where he was headed after he left here?

BONNIE:

No.

RUSSELL:

He called on a couple o' folks to the west of here, but nobody that lives in any other direction remembers seein' him. It's like as if, after he left here, he just disappeared. He *did* leave here, didn't he?

BONNIE:

Well, I didn't see him go. I was up in my room. But I guess he must of, since he ain't here--unless you think maybe he's a-hidin' out in the barn, or maybe in the root cellar?

RUSSELL:

No, I checked them places already. Your daddy's got him a couple o' fine-looking horses out there. You don't reckon he'd be willin' to trade me for mine, do you? On what a deputy makes, I cain't afford no better'n that old nag. Maybe ifn you was to put in a good word for me, he'd sell me one of his, real cheap.

BONNIE:

(laughs) You don't know my daddy. He's too fond o' money fer that. So's Mama, fer that matter. I don't mean to make them sound like misers, or nothin'. They've always give me about anything I asked for. I even got my own room upstairs, there, all fixed up jest the way I want it, with rugs and a vanity and all . . . Wisht I could show it to you, but I cain't. When it comes to business dealin', though, don't nobody get the best of 'em.

RUSSELL:

(looks around) I guess that's how they managed to do so well fer themselves. The Shairf says he remembers when they was as poor as dirt. No offense. Must be a sight of money in horse tradin'. Where's he get his stock from?

BONNIE:

I couldn't tell you. From all over, I guess. I don't pay it much mind, to tell the truth. Ever' oncet in a while a new horse jest sort of turns up, and a couple weeks later, Daddy sells it agin, for more'n he paid.

RUSSELL:

You reckon he ever gets a horse from one of them travelers that comes through?

BONNIE:

I couldn't say. Like I said, I jest don't pay no mind to them horses, especially since . . .

RUSSELL:

What? Since what?

BONNIE:

Well, ifn you have to know, ever since I took it into my head to ride one of 'em, and it run off.

RUSSELL:

With you on board, you mean?

BONNIE:

(nods, embarrassed) There I was, hangin' on to his mane for dear life, and him a-gallopin' headlong, straight towards the river.

RUSSELL:

What'd you do?

BONNIE:

I didn't do nothin'. *He* stopped short right on the river bank, and I went a-sailin' over his head and into the river. It would have been funny, I guess, except I ain't never learnt how to swim. I'd of been a goner if Daddy hadn't jumped in and pulled me out. (SOUND of the mantel clock chiming four) Oh, Lord. It's four o'clock. I never meant to let you stay this long. You got to go. Mama and Daddy might could get home any time.

RUSSELL:

All right, I'll go--under one condition. That you agree to let me come call on you another time.

BONNIE:

Call on me? How do you mean?

RUSSELL:

Don't it ever say nothin' in them books you read about courtin'? It's what a unattached feller--such as myself--does when he takes a fancy to a purty unattached gal--such as yourself. He comes a callin' on her regular-like.

BONNIE:

Well . . . what do they do?

RUSSELL:

Why, they sit around--under the eye of her folks, o'course--and they talk and maybe drink some lemonade and eat some cookies and jest generally get to know one another. Not so different from what we done just now.

BONNIE:

I b'lieve I'd like that. But I don't know that Mama and Daddy would.

RUSSELL:

Why not? It ain't like I'm a stranger. I ain't a traveling salesman. I ain't from the city. I'm a upstanding citizen, practically a pillar of the community. I got a reg'lar job, I'm a clean-livin' feller, I ain't atall bad-lookin"--

BONNIE:

(laughs) It ain't that. It jest seems like . . . like they don't want to have no truck with the law. I expect it has somethin' to do with the fact that the Shairf never did do much to try and find Arly after they tuck him.

RUSSELL:

Your brother? But I didn't have nothin' to do with that. Hell, I warn't no more'n six or eight years old at the time. Pardon my language.

BONNIE;

I know. But my folks, they . . . they got some queer ideas. Maybe ifn you didn't tell 'em you was a deputy shairf, until . . . later.

RUSSELL:

(upset) Thought you didn't want to lie to 'em

BONNIE:

I don't. But--

RUSSELL:

No, now listen. I mean to come a-callin' on you. Ifn your folks approve of me, why, that'll be fine. But ifn they don't, it ain't gonna stop me from comin'. You told me before that they give you pretty much everything you wanted, but it looks to me like the one thing you need the most, they ain't willin' to give you--some freedom, to come and go, and see things and do things, and meet up with folks, and make friends. It ain't right for them to keep you shut away here all the time, like you was one of them prize horses that they're afear'd somebody's gonna make off with. Jest tell me one thing. Do *you* want me to come a-callin' on you?

BONNIE:

(a pause, then softly) Yes.

RUSSELL:

Then I'll come.

BONNIE:

When?

RUSSELL;

On Saturday. That's four days from now. All right? All right? (She nods) All right. So long, then.

(She closes the door and bars it. We hear the SOUND of a horse's hooves retreating. As musicians play I COURTED A FAIR MAID, Bonnie sits and tries to read, but is too distracted and distraught. SOUND of another horse. She rushes to lift the bar and swing open the door, revealing Verdie dressed in fairly fashionable town clothes)

BONNIE:

Oh! You put a fright into me! I--I didn't expect you back so soon!

VERDIE:

Looks to me like maybe you warn't expectin' *us* atall.

BONNIE:

Well, now, who else would I be expectin'?

VERDIE:

That young feller on that tore-down old horse, maybe.

BONNIE:

(uncertain whether to lie or not; she settles on a half-truth) Young feller? Oh, oh, you must mean the deputy. I couldn't be sartin whether he was young or old or in between, since you told me never to open the door to no strangers.

VERDIE:

You did talk to him, though?

BONNIE:

I couldn't help it. He kept a-poundin' on the door, and said he wouldn't go away 'til I answered his questions.

VERDIE:

Questions? What sort o' questions was he astin'?

BONNIE:

Jest about some traveler that come up missin' a couple o' weeks ago. A dry goods salesman, he said it was.

VERDIE:

What'd you tell him?

BONNIE:

Wasn't much I *could* tell him. I said that a feller did come through, a-sellin' fabrics and such, and that you bought the cloth for this here dress from him, and then he left agin.

VERDIE:

That seem to satisfy the deputy, did it?

BONNIE:

I guess.

VERDIE:

Did he ast you anything else?

BONNIE:

(getting more flustered) I--I don't know. Let me see. He said somethin' about Daddy's horses. Wanted to know where he got 'em from, and ifn he might be willin' to sell him one real cheap.

VERDIE:

What'd you tell him?

BONNIE:

I said I guessed he got 'em from all over, and I didn't think he was likely to sell one very cheap.

(Verdie spots something on the floor by the chair. She kneels to get a closer look)

VERDIE:

(coldly) You never did take no notice of when somethin' needed cleanin' up.

BONNIE:

What?

VERDIE:

They's quite a little pile of dirt here, red clay, jest as if somebody wearin' boots had put his feet up on the rung of this here chair. (she stands, shows Bonnie the dirt) Who do you reckon that could of been?

BONNIE:

I-- It must of been me. I-- I went out to check fer eggs, before, and--

VERDIE:

(slaps her face) Don't you *lie* to me, miss! It was that there deputy, warn't it? Warn't it? (Bonnie nods) You let him in here, after all I told you?

BONNIE:

I had to! He told me he was gonna arrest me and th'ow me in the county jail ifn I didn't!

VERDIE:

And you believed him?

BONNIE:

How'd I know? I don't know nothin' about nothin', Mama. Alls I know about is this place, and what's in them books!

VERDIE:

How long was he here?

BONNIE:

Not long. Ten, fifteen minutes, maybe.

VERDIE:

(as she sweeps up the dirt) It don't take no ten or fifteen minutes to ast a couple questions. You and him must of talked about other things.

BONNIE:

A few. Nothin' worth thinkin' about. He told me about some bank robber named Starr, and I told him about my brother Arly, what little I know about him.

VERDIE:

(sighs heavily, takes her hat off, sits) I guess I shoulda seen this a-comin'. Sooner or later a gal as purty as you are is gonna attract men, the same way a purty blossom attracts the bees.

BONNIE:

But . . . ain't that what's *supposed* to happen, Mama? I cain't stay here forever. I got to grow up, don't I, and fall in love, and have a home, and a life and a family of my own? Ain't that the way it's supposed to be?

VERDIE:

Your father and me, we always done our best to see to it that you had ever'thing you wanted.

BONNIE:

I know that.

VERDIE:

When you was a baby, I used to sing you this song about all the presents we was gonna buy for you--a string of pearls, gold and silver rings, a coach and horses. We never did get all them things for you, but we give you ever'thing we could . . . and we paid a price fer it. A high price. We didn't mind so much, though, b'cause we kept tellin' ourselves we was doin' it fer you.

BONNIE:

I'm grateful, Mama, truly I am. It's jest that . . .

VERDIE:

It's jest that you want more, the same as your brother did. I've come to think that maybe it warn't that Heckart feller's fault altogether; I expect Arly *wanted* to go with him. This place warn't good enough for him; he wanted the hull world. I thought maybe, ifn we had more, it'd be enough for you, but I see it ain't. You want the hull world, just like him.

BONNIE:

Not the hull world, Mama. Jest a bigger part of it.

VERDIE:

I s'pose he's comin' back here, ain't he? The deputy.

BONNIE:

He says he wants to come a-callin' on me.

VERDIE:

Maybe he does. And maybe he jest wants to ast some more questions. Either way, we don't want him comin' here no more. I hope you told him that. You *did* tell him that.

BONNIE:

He . . . he said he meant to come a-callin' whether you wanted him to or not.

VERDIE:

Did he. Well, we'll see.

BONNIE:

What do you figure to do, Mama?

VERDIE:

Right now, I figure to fix us some supper. Your father insisted on us eatin' at this here rest'rant in Fateville. Ever'thing they served was half raw. I tell you, you didn't miss much by not a-comin' with us. There was a time when I thought it might be nice, to live in the city--

BONNIE:

I always thought that, too--

VERDIE;

But now that I been there a time or two, I got no more use fer it. They's a lot o' strangers there, and a lot o' dirt, and a lot o' noisy automobiles, and that's about it.

BONNIE:

I don't b'lieve I want no supper. I b'lieve I'll jest go on up to my room and read fer a while.

VERDIE:

Now, you cain't stay healthy ifn you don't eat.

BONNIE:

I ain't hungry. Not fer food, anyways. (She starts upstairs just as Ezra enters, carrying his coat--he's been seeing to the horses)

EZRA:

How's my gal? Bonnie? (She exits) What's ailin' her?

VERDIE:

Somethin' she caught from a stranger that come by whilest we was gone.

EZRA:

The feller we seen a-ridin' off?

VERDIE:

The deputy shairf. I seen him before, oncet or twice, passin' by on the road, and I seen the way he looked at her, and the way she looked back at him. I had a feelin' it'd come to this, sooner or later. I jest didn't figure on it bein' this soon.

EZRA:

The deputy shairf . . . You think she let him in?

VERDIE:

I know she did. She says he ast a lot o' questions, about what become o' that Carlson feller, and about where them horses come from.

EZRA:

He cain't prove nothin'. And they sure ain't likely to ever find Carlson, where he is. Even if they was to, wouldn't nobody be able to tell it was him, not after the fish get through with him.

VERDIE:

They'd know it was *somebody*--somebody with a chunk o' cast arn tied to his feet. I b'lieve that might make them jest the slightest bit suspicious, don't you?

EZRA:

What do you figure we oughta do, then?

VERDIE:

I don't guess we have to be too worried about that Shairf. He's nothin' but a lazy old man. He never did do nothin' much to find Arly, and I don't expect he'll go lookin' fer this Carlson very hard, neither. It's that there young deputy we got to concern ourselves with. Bonnie said he meant to come out here agin, soon.

EZRA:

And you want to see to it that he don't.

VERDIE:

I want *you* to see to it. I tuck care of the others. Time you did your part. You're in this jest as deep as I am.

EZRA:

I reckon. But do we have to keep on gettin' deeper all the time?

VERDIE:

Well, seems to me it's like with that river out there. Oncet you're in, it don't matter how deep it is; you got to keep on a-fightin' agin it ifn you don't want to end up on the bottom, with them other three fellers.

EZRA:

Four. They was four.

VERDIE:

Was there? I guess after the first couple, I quit a-keepin' track.

EZRA:

(heading for the door) I don't reckon I'll be home in time for supper.

VERDIE:

Where you off to?

EZRA:

(picks up the rifle) I b'lieve I'll go a-huntin'. (Lights down. Musicians play WHERE ARE YOU GOING MY KIND OLD HUSBAND, then IF HE'S GONE, LET HIM GO)

(Lights up. It is a dark and stormy night several weeks later. SOUND of rain, thunder; outside the window, lightning flashes occasionally. Both rooms are lighted by ornate kerosene lanterns--electric power hasn't yet arrived in rural Arkansas. In Arly's old room Verdie is dusting and straightening. Bonnie sits at the window in the main room, looking out as though expecting company)

VERDIE:

You know, it wouldn't kill you to turn a hand around here ever' now and agin, Missy. In fact it might jest do you a hull lot o' good. Keep your mind occupied. It ain't healthy, the way you just set around a-sullin' and a-starin' out that window hour after hour. I don't even see you a-readin' books or magazines no more, hardly.

BONNIE:

I done read ever'thing in this house so many times I can say them all off by heart. "*The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, of a good family, though not of that country, my father bein' a foreigner--"

VERDIE:

Well, I guess we'll jest have to get you some new readin' material, next time we get to Fateville.

BONNIE:

I don't guess you'd consider lettin' me come along? (no answer) I didn't think so.

VERDIE:

Surely you could find somethin' more *useful* to do than to jest set there a-starin' I don't know what it is you expect to see out there, or who, but ever-who or ever-what it is, it ain't gonna be out there now, and ifn it is, it's done washed away.

BONNIE:

I'm a-watchin' the lightnin'. Seems to me like that's ever' bit as useful as what *you're* doin'.

VERDIE:

I'm a-reddin' up your brother's room. It needs it.

BONNIE:

What for? Arly ain't never comin' back, Mama, don't you know that by now?

VERDIE:

No, I don't know no such thing. (spitefully) What I do know is that he's a hull lot more likely to come back than that deputy shairf you're a-keepin' your eye out for.

BONNIE:

(laughs bitterly) You think it's Russell Tolliver I'm a-watching after? Well, you're wrong, Mama. You couldn't be more wrong. When he didn't come by after a week or two, I give up on him. I figure he jest didn't have the narve it would of took to come a-callin' when you and Daddy was around. I reckon he jest didn't figure I was worth all the trouble. B'sides, ifn I *was* a-watchin' and a -waitin' fer some feller to come around and call on me, I surely wouldn't waste my time wishin' for nobody from within a hunnert miles o' here. I'd want it to be somebody that come from someplace *away* off, someplace that ain't the least bit like here.

VERDIE:

Some stranger? Some city feller? And then what'd you do? Run off with him, I suppose, like your brother done? You got any idee at all, Miss, what becomes of girls that go off with strangers?

BONNIE:

You told me enough times. But ain't that what *you* did, Mama? Didn't you leave home and go off with Daddy?

VERDIE:

I warn't my family's only child. B'sides, we didn't go but about fifty miles. It ain't like he tuck me off to some unknown, unfamiliar place.

BONNIE:

But, Mama, tell the truth. Don't you wisht sometimes he had?

(Verdie starts to answer, can't. She retreats into Arly's room, where she straightens the covers on the bed almost as though she's tucking in her son. Ezra enters in rain gear, dripping wet)

EZRA:

Whew! Lordy! It's a all-out, pure-dee gully-washer for sartin'! I just hope the river don't get so swole that it takes out the bridge. Night like this makes a feller thankful jest to have a good solid roof over his head, and a warm far to sit by. (takes off raincoat and hat) Where's your mother? (Bonnie nods toward the small room) Oh. She ain't never give up the idea that he's goin' to come back to us sometime.

BONNIE:

I wisht he would.

EZRA:

You don't remember nothin' at all about him, I guess.

BONNIE:

No. But ifn he was to come back, then maybe you and her wouldn't be so set on keepin' *me* here.

EZRA:

You make it sound like you was a prisoner.

BONNIE:

Ain't that what I am?

EZRA:

(uncomprehending) You're our *daughter*.

(SOUND of a vintage auto horn O.S., faintly. Excited, Bonnie turns and presses her face against the window)

BONNIE:

They's an automobile out there, at the bridge. I see its headlights.

EZRA:

Damn. I should of jest left the toll arm up. (Grudgingly dons the wet gear) Why anybody'd be out on a night like this is beyond me.

(He slams the door as he exits, startling Verdie, who reenters)

VERDIE:

Now, where's he gone to?

BONNIE:

The bridge. They's a traveler a-waitin' to get acrost.

VERDIE:

A traveler? In this weather? He must be soaked to the bone.

BONNIE:

He's in an automobile.

VERDIE:

Some city feller, most likely. Ifn I know your daddy, he'll be invitin' the man in fer a cup o' coffee about now. I better fix some. (She sets about doing so. SOUND of the car's engine laboring) You'd best get on up to your room, now.

BONNIE:

Let me jest set and listen, Mama. Please. I won't say ary word, or smile at him, or nothin'. Cross my heart. (Verdie sighs heavily; Bonnie takes this as a yes) I'll jest set back in the corner, here, quiet as a mouse. You won't hardly even know I'm here.

(Ezra opens the door and ushers in C.C. LIVINGSTON, a dapper "city feller" of twenty-five. He wears the duster and goggles common among drivers of the day. His speech is relatively correct and cultured, but there are traces of Ozark. He seems uncomfortable here, as though he feels he's intruding. Verdie looks at him as though he is, too)

LIVINGSTON:

Good evening.

VERDIE:

Ifn this is your idea of a *good* evenin', I'd purely hate to see what you consider a *bad* one.

(Livingston isn't listening. He's looking around at the interior of the house almost as though astonished by it. Then his gaze lights on Bonnie. He seems quite astonished by her, too. He nods, she hesitantly nods back)

VERDIE:

(watching all this) Somethin' wrong, Mister?

LIVINGSTON:

No! No. It's just that I didn't expect to find a . . . a *house* so well-decorated and so nicely furnished out here in the . . . *country*. (meaning the boondocks).

VERDIE:

(uncertain how to take this) I reckon you've seen a sight better, ifn you come from the city. Do you?

LIVINGSTON:

What?

VERDIE:

Do you come from the city?

LIVINGSTON:

Yes. I--ah--I live in St. Louis, in fact.

BONNIE:

(Can't help herself) Sant Louis? What's it like? (Verdie's look reminds her that she promised to be quiet)

LIVINGSTON:

Oh, it 's. . . big. And busy.

EZRA:

You might jest as well set down, mister, and dry yourself out some 'til the rain lets up.

LIVINGSTON:

Thank you. I'm afraid that may be a while, though. And even when it does let up, I'm going to have a devil of a time getting my automobile back on the road.

VERDIE:

(serving him coffee) What happened to it?

LIVINGSTON:

(regarding her warily) Thank you. It--it was raining so hard, I couldn't see properly, and drove right into your yard. The left rear wheel sank in up to the hub. I apologize. I'll pay for any damages, of course. (The mention of money intrigues Verdie)

EZRA:

We can pull 'er out easy enough with a team o' horses. Feller tried to sell me an automobile oncet, but I couldn't see no advantage to it. A horse don't never run off the road and get itself stuck.

VERDIE:

I don't reckon we could afford no automobile, anyways. How much does a vehicle like that there set you back . . . ifn you don't mind my astin'?

LIVINGSTON:

If you buy it new, somewhere around four thousand.

VERDIE:

Dollars? You must be one of them railroad tycoons.

LIVINGSTON:

I'm afraid not. I write stories for magazines.

BONNIE:

Stories for magazines? What's your name?

LIVINGSTON:

Well, I write under the name C. C. Livingston. It sounds more distinguished--

BONNIE:

C. C. Livingston! You never!

LIVINGSTON:

(smiling a bit guiltily, as though he's been found out) I hate to contradict a lady, but I assure you, Mr. Livingston and I are one and the same, just like Mr. Twain and Sam Clemens. I guess you've read one or two of my efforts, then?

BONNIE:

One or two? I've read dozens! They's one turns up practically ever' month, either in the *Collier's* or the *Saturday Evenin' Post*, or *McCall's*.

LIVINGSTON:

You read those magazines?

BONNIE:

Ever' word, three or four times over. But yours is the best, and I ain't just a-sayin' that b'cause you're a-sittin' there. The kind of folks you write about, they're always so . . . smart, and good-lookin', and rich. When I read them stories, it makes me feel like . . . like I'm one of 'em, almost. I guess that sounds silly.

LIVINGSTON:

No. Not at all. Unfortunately, I'm afraid that sort of story may be on its way out. All the magazines seem to want these days is stories about what they call *real* people. I believe the success of Harold Wright's book, *The Shepherd of the Hills*, has a lot to do with it. Have you read it?

BONNIE:

Nosir.

LIVINGSTON:

It's set here in the Ozarks. Since I live in Missouri, editors think I know all about the Ozarks. They keep asking me for a Harold Bell Wright type of story, so I thought I'd drive down this way and soak up a little local color.

EZRA:

Well, you got soaked, anyhow. You want another cup o' coffee?

LIVINGSTON:

Yes, thank you.

VERDIE:

Them stories of yours; they must fetch a pretty penny, then, do they?

BONNIE:

Mama . . . !

VERDIE:

It's late, Miss. You best get on up to your room. Go on, now. (Bonnie considers protesting, but, seeing the look in her mother's eye, she obeys, casting a longing glance back at Livingston as she goes up the stairs)

BONNIE:

G'night, Mr. Livingstone.

LIVINGSTON:

Good night, Bonnie. Maybe we'll get a chance to talk some more tomorrow.

VERDIE:

(taking Ezra aside) Did you ast him to stay the night?

EZRA:

Not exactly. But we cain't hardly th'ow him out in the storm, can we?

VERDIE:

(after a moment's thought) Where'd he sleep?

EZRA:

In Arly's room, I reckon.

VERDIE:

No.

EZRA:

Now, he don't necessarily have to sleep there the whole night. Does he?

LIVINGSTON:

If there's any problem, I can just . . .

EZRA:

No, no, they's no problem. I'd better jest go out and fetch your bags out o' the automobile.

LIVINGSTON:

I can do that.

EZRA:

No, I'll go. I reckon I'm about as wet already as I'm likely to get. (Exits)

VERDIE:

Let me freshen up that coffee fer you.

LIVINGSTON:

No. Thank you. If I have any more, I won't get to sleep at all.

VERDIE:

Well, we surely wouldn't want that. I b'lieve you might find the bed in there a mite hard, after what you're used to.

LIVINGSTONE:

(goes to the small room, looks at it critically) Is this where I'll be sleeping?

VERDIE:

That's it. It ain't no great shakes. We don't use it much.

LIVINGSTON:

Really? I would have thought there'd be no shortage of travelers coming through here on their way to Fateville.

VERDIE:

They's some, but we don't hardly ever put one up fer the night, not sinct--

LIVINGSTON:

What?

VERDIE:

(bitterly) Not sinct our son Arly went off with a traveler that was a-passin' through.

LIVINGSTON:

(after a pause) I'm sorry.

VERDIE:

So'm I.

LIVINGSTON:

(to break the awkward silence) Tell me, how do you manage to do so well for yourselves out here, if you don't cater to travelers?

VERDIE:

We got the toll bridge, and then my husband buys and sells a few horses.

LIVINGSTON:

Ah. I hope he didn't lose his way in that downpour. He's been gone quite a while.

VERDIE:

Probably thought of some chore needed doin', whilst he was out. (out of the blue) You a married man?

LIVINGSTON:

Me? No, no. I'm afraid I've been too busy pursuing my career to think about pursuing a wife. (He laughs a little; she doesn't)

VERDIE:

(accusingly) You seemed considerable taken with our Bonnie.

LIVINGSTON:

(guiltily) Did I? I . . . I only meant to be friendly.

VERDIE:

(goading him) She is a purty thing, though, ain't she?

LIVINGSTON:

Yes. She is. I'll bet she has a dozen suitors coming to call on her.

VERDIE:

No. She don't.

(Another awkward silence, broken by Ezra entering, carrying Livingston's bags)

EZRA:

They got a mite wet, but I reckon what's inside is all right.

LIVINGSTON:

Thank you. Well. I'm worn out from traveling. I believe I'll call it a night. Thank you for the coffee, and for letting me stay in . . . in your son's room. (He takes his bags into the room, shuts the door, and sits down on the bed. Through the following, he checks the contents of the bag, takes out some damp shirts and hangs them up, then takes out a book and lies down to read)

EZRA:

You told him about Arly?

VERDIE:

Somethin' wrong with that?

EZRA:

I reckon not. It's just that . . . you don't generally like to talk about it.

VERDIE:

It jest come out. That boy put me in mind of that Heckart feller, somehow. His bein' bookish, I guess.

EZRA:

Well, apparently he does a sight better with it than Heckart did. (draws her nearer) I tuck me a look in them bags of his. He must have a thousand dollars in there, maybe more. I couldn't see too well, only when the lightnin' lit things up fer a secont.

VERDIE:

(looks toward the small room) I don't guess you're up to it.

EZRA:

(shakes his head) I'll take keer o' things after, like always.

VERDIE:

You best fetch me your razor, then. I don't want to be a-fumblin' around fer it in the dark.

(He fetches a straight razor, hands it to her. She blows out the light, and they lie down on the bed to wait. In the small room, Livingston is still reading. Musicians play RAISE THE WINDOW, MOTHER DARLING. We hear a rap at the shutters. Livingston sits up, puzzled. A louder rap. He springs up, opens the shutters)

LIVINGSTON:

Bonnie! What are you doing?

BONNIE:

(Soaked and shivering) Kin I come in?

LIVINGSTON:

Well, I . . . all right. You certainly can't stay out there. (She climbs through the window. He pulls the blanket off the bed and drapes it over her) What in the world were you doing out in the rain, in your nightgown?

BONNIE:

I had to talk to you. I didn't want to wake Mama and Daddy.

LIVINGSTON:

Couldn't it have waited until morning?

BONNIE:

No. Alls I ever do is wait. I'm sick to death of waitin'!

LIVINGSTON:

All right. You'd better keep your voice down. What is it? Bonnie?

BONNIE:

Now that I'm here, I don't know where to start. I ain't used to talkin' to no strangers. I guess maybe the easiest thing would be to jest come right out and say it. (takes a deep breath) I got to get away from here. I was a-hopin' you might could see your way clear to . . . to let me come with you. (He stares at her) I wouldn't be no bother. And I could pay you. (She pulls out a drawstring purse) I been a-savin' up fer years, a dime here, a dollar there. I never get no chanct to spend none of it.

LIVINGSTON:

(Tries to keep her from emptying the purse) I don't want your money, Bonnie. As a matter of fact, I was planning to give *you* some.

BONNIE:

Give me some? Why would you want to do that? Oh. I guess it's like what Mama said about girls that go off to the city. You don't have to give me no money. Jest take me with you to Sant Louis, and I'll . . . I'll do whatever you want, I promise.

LIVINGSTON:

(dismayed) No, no! You misunderstand me! I don't have any . . . any sort of designs on you. I'd never even think of such a thing.

BONNIE:

Why not? Folks say I'm pretty. But I guess I ain't as pretty as them girls in Sant Louis.

LIVINGSTON:

You are. Every bit as pretty, I swear. It's just that . . . (He gets up and paces around the room) You don't know who I am, do you?

BONNIE:

'Course I do. You told me, remember? C. C. Livingston, the magazine writer.

LIVINGSTON:

I was trying to say, that's only the name I write under. My given name is . . . Charles. Charles *Banks*.

BONNIE:

(uncomprehending) Charles . . . ? (then she realizes) Arly? Oh, Lord! Arly! It is you, ain't it? (He nods hesitantly. She jumps up and throws her arms around him) You come back, jest the way Mama said you would! Have you told them?

LIVINGSTON:

No.

BONNIE:

Why ever not?

LIVINGSTON:

I--I didn't know how they'd be likely to take it. Mama seems so . . . so bitter about me leaving. I was afraid she might not want to see me. I thought it would be best not to say anything until I saw how things stood.

BONNIE:

Well, of course she'll want to see you! She knows it warn't your fault; it was that salesman feller talked you into comin' with him.

LIVINGSTON:

No. It was my idea. I even lied to Mr. Heckart, to get him to take me along. I told him that Mama and Daddy weren't my real parents, and that they mistreated me. I said they worked me like a slave, and beat me regularly.

BONNIE:

They didn't, did they?

LIVINGSTON:

Oh, Daddy thrashed me once in while, but I usually deserved it; I refused to my chores most of the time. I was a lazy little cuss.

BONNIE:

(laughs a little) I got to admit, I don't do no more'n I have to around here, either.

LIVINGSTON:

I hope they don't thrash you for it.

BONNIE:

No. They don't ast much of me, and about anything I ast *them* for, they give me--I guess so I won't want to run off, the way you done.

LIVINGSTON:

And yet you're desperate to get away--so desperate that you'd . . .

BONNIE:

They don't let me talk to nobody, Arly. They don't let me go nowhere, or do nothin'. I feel all the time like I'm a-sulterin'.

LIVINGSTON:

Sultering? Oh, I remember. It means suffocating. Yes. I remember the feeling, too. The thing I hated the most, I think, was the fact that we were so poor. I thought perhaps that, if all else failed, I could buy my way back into their good graces (He shows her the money in the bag) Before I left, they were so destitute, I thought I could make things a little easier for them--and for you. But it seems that their fortunes have changed; you don't need my help.

BONNIE:

No, we ain't never wanted for money, for as long as I can remember. I suppose I ought to be thankful to be so well off. But I ain't. I'm miserable, Arly. (She lays her head against him. He comforts her)

LIVINGSTON:

I know. I'll tell you what. Tomorrow morning, first thing, you and I will sit down and have a talk with them. I'll reveal my true identity, like Magwitch in *Great Expectations*. Then, once they've gotten over the shock from that, I'll tell them I want you to come to Saint Louis with me--just for a visit. They can't object to that. And then, once you've gotten a taste of what life in the big city is like, we'll see how you feel. All right?

BONNIE:

I don't know. I ain't sure ifn they'll let me go or not, even with you.

LIVINGSTON:

Well, then, they can come along, too. There's room for all us in my auto. Surely they'll jump at the chance to spend a week or so in Saint Louis.

BONNIE:

They don't like cities much.

LIVINGSTON:

Don't worry. I'll talk them into it. I make my living with words, remember.

BONNIE:

(more hopeful) I truly do like your stories, Arly. Where'd you learn how to do that?

LIVINGSTON:

Writing stories is just a form of lying, and I always was a good liar. You go on back to your room, now, and get into something dry, before you catch your death. (She starts for the window) No, no, go this way. They're bound to be asleep by now.

(Through the following, the musicians play several verses of EDMOND DELL. Livingston turns down the light and opens the door. Bonnie creeps across the room and up the stairs. As Livingston closes his door, we see Verdie rise from the bed, silhouetted by the occasional flash of lightning. She looks toward the stairs, then toward the small

room, and then, tapping the razor in one palm, lies down again. Livingston blows out his light, lies down. He has left the shutters open, so the lightning flashes illuminate the room every few seconds. After a moment, Verdie rises and crosses the room silently, opens his door. She stands looking down at him a moment, as if undecided whether or not it's necessary to kill him. She bends and opens his bag. She can't find the money. Frustrated, she dumps the contents out; something falls noisily from the bag onto the floor. Livingston sits up, startled. Music stops)

LIVINGSTON:

What-- Who's there?

(In a single motion, Verdie rises, flicks open the razor, and swipes it across his throat. He puts a hand to his throat and slumps sideways, releasing a container of stage blood onto the floor. Verdie rolls him onto the floor so he won't bleed on the bed Then she closes the shutters, lights the lamp, and gathers up the money. Ezra enters the room)

VERDIE:

(quietly) Put him in the river.

(Another passage of EDMOND DELL. Ezra drags the body out the front door, pausing only to put on his slicker. He leaves the door open. Verdie takes the money out and stuffs it under their mattress, then gets a mop and a bucket of water. In the process, she knocks something off the counter and it clatters to the floor. Verdie tenses and listens for any sound from Bonnie's room. Hearing nothing, she goes into the small room, closes the door, and prepares to mop up the blood. Bonnie appears on the stairs, looks around sleepily, notices that her parents are gone. She sees the light under the door of the small room, and opens the door a crack)

BONNIE:

Arly? (sees her mother, opens the door all the way)

VERDIE:

Get back upstairs!

BONNIE:

What's goin' on, Mama? Where's Arly?

VERDIE:

Arly ain't here. You must of been dreamin'. Go on, now.

BONNIE:

(sees the blood) Mama? What'd--what'd you do?

VERDIE:

What I had to. (Bonnie picks up the bloody razor)

BONNIE:

Oh, God, Mama! What'd you *do*? It was Arly, Mama. It was *Arly*!

(She drops the razor and runs from the room. She looks around frantically, sees the open door, runs out into the storm. Verdie has sunk down onto the bed, stunned. Finally she shakes her head, goes out into the main room and up the stairs)

VERDIE:

Bonnie? Bonnie? (She runs back down, just as Ezra enters) Where'd she go? (He looks bewildered, she shakes him) Where's Bonnie?

EZRA:

I--I don't know. Ain't she upstairs?

VERDIE:

She must of run outside. Didn't you see her?

EZRA:

It's black as pitch.

VERDIE:

She seen in there. (Indicates the small room) She knows. We got to find her, Ezry. She's liable to . . . to hurt herself.

(She rushes out, without even putting on a raincoat. Ezra follows. Musicians play ALL GOOD TIMES ARE PAST AND GONE. After a few moments, the lights come up slowly, like dawn breaking. Verdie returns, dirty and dishevelled and numb with shock. Ezra enters, carrying Bonnie's limp form)

VERDIE:

Put her down on the bed.

(Ezra does so, then slumps into a chair. Verdie sits next to Bonnie and fusses over her, as she did when Bonnie was a baby)

EZRA:

A couple o' them other bodies was washed up, too, a little ways downstream from where we found her. The water must of pulled 'em loose from the weights I tied on 'em. What do you reckon we ought to do with 'em?

VERDIE:

Might jest as well leave 'em there. What does it matter? Don't nothin' matter no more. Nothin'. (She begins singing ALL THE PRETTY HORSES, as before. Musicians join in, then segue into ONLY REMEMBERED. Lights down)

End

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