

Play Synopsis:

The Alabama heat intensified in the late 1880's under Jim Crow in the Bonner family. Sophronia Bonner is determined to keep secret an awful truth about her family's history. The secret, however, is threatened when a letter is returned and their son, Willie George, returns home from seminary. Unfortunately, the undesired revelation of that secret may be the only thing able to save her son's life and keep her family together.

AN AMERICAN TREE

***A Dramatic Stage Play
by Di Shawn J. Gandy***

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

SQUIRE LEE BONNER:

(44 years old) A black man born as a slave. Husband, father, and pastor who loves his and carries the burden of his family's welfare and safety.

SOPHRONIA MAE BONNER:

(43 years old) A mulatto woman, born as a slave. Squire's wife and mother of Willie George. She lives with secrets, refusing to share with her son the things that has happened to their family during slavery. She only wants what's best for her family.

WILLIE GEORGE BONNER:

(20 yrs. old) A mulatto male and the only child of Squire & Sophronia. A student at a Black seminary in Atlanta. He is in love with Piety. And although their love is forbidden by family and society, he is willing to risk everything, even death for the woman he loves.

TOLBERT LEE TILLY:

(41 years old) A mulatto male born as a slave. He is the younger brother of Sophronia, And married with a family. He is full of life and a loving soul.

PIETY TILL:

(22 years old) A white female. Willie George is her soulmate. She is willing to defy her Grandfather, Ol' Man Lazerus Till, and risk her life to be with the man she loves.

OL' MAN LAZERUS TILL:

(Late 80's) A white man. Former slave owner. Grandfather of Piety. He is a man With power and influence, and with a family history that is filled with dark secrets.

SCENE

Jim Crow, the Deep South, in a rural town in Alabama.

The Stage is split. One side is at the home of the Bonner family. The other side is the back stock room of Ol' Man Lazerus Till's General Store.

TIME

The late 1880's.

ACT 1
Scene 1

SETTING: (MONDAY MORNING)
At the Bonner Home

(SOPHRONIA is sitting in her rocking chair with a letter. She stares at the envelope. Her lips are moving but her words are silent. She does not know how to read or write, although her husband SQUIRE has been teaching her. She opens the letter and then tries to read it, fumbling through the words)

SOPHRONIA

(She struggles with the words)

My Dear...est...Wil...lee...George. I do miss and love...why...you...P...puh...Pi...ety... I love
Hmph. Willie George? Piety? Love?

(SQUIRE enters stage and stands on the porch listening)

SQUIRE

I sees you workin' on your readin', Phronie, dat's good.
(He sits on a chair and begins to take off his shoes)
Goin' let me hear it.

SOPHRONIA

Squire, I ain't be knowin' what dis be meanin'?

SQUIRE

You needs to sound it out first, Phronie.

SOPHRONIA

You need to read dis—

SQUIRE

No, no, no. You 'posed to be learnin'. Go on now and keep at it.

SOPHRONIA

Squire, I think dis here letter is important. It be talkin' 'bout Willie George and—

SQUIRE

See, you already readin' Willie George's name—

SOPHRONIA

And I think it be talkin' 'bout Piety and love, too.

SQUIRE

(SQUIRE walks over to SOPHRONIA)

What you mean?

SOPHRONIA

(SOPHRONIA offers SQUIRE the letter)

Here. See fo yourself.

(SQUIRE takes the letter and reads it, pacing)

Is dat what it be sayin', Squire?

SQUIRE

I ain't sho. Where dis here letter come from?

(SOPHRONIA hands him the envelope)

Dis say it from you, Phronie. See, that's your name right dere as the sender, like you wrote dis here letter to yourself.

SOPHRONIA

You know good-n-well I can't write.

SQUIRE

Where it come from, den?

SOPHRONIA

I was on my way to Ol' Man Till's store today and I saw Luberta and her daughter, Bessie Lee and—

SQUIRE

What dey say?

SOPHRONIA

You know Luberta ain't said nothin' less her words be all tied and tangled up in her mouth. But Bessie Lee said dere be a letter for me at Ol' Man Till's store.

SQUIRE

Did she say how it got dere?

SOPHRONIA

Said it must done got returned.

(SQUIRE stares at the letter again and reads it to himself)

Goin' and read it to me, Squire, I wants to know what it be sayin', too.

SQUIRE

It don't be sayin' nothin'.

SOPHRONIA

You sayin' it ain't impotent?

SQUIRE

It's just some ol' stupid letter, is all.

SOPHRONIA

Den why you lookin' like dat?

SQUIRE

(SQUIRE loosely crumbles up the letter and puts it in his pocket)
I ain't lookin' like nothin', Phronie. Dis ain't no real—.

SOPHRONIA

You ain't goin' read it to me?

SQUIRE

Ah, Phronie, it ain't nothin' you need to concern yoself wit.

SOPHRONIA

Sayin' I don't need to concern myself wit it sho don't make me feel no better.

SQUIRE

We got someone else's letter is all. Dey got it all mixed up.

SOPHRONIA

Someone else's letter? Den why you say my name was on it?

SQUIRE

Oh Phronie, stop it.

(SOPHRONIA crosses to SQUIRE and kisses him)

SOPHRONIA

Squire, what dat letter say? You gots to tell me.

SQUIRE

Phronie Mae? I said it ain't nothin'. Now let it lone.

SOPHRONIA

Don't tell me let it lone. I barely slept last night...just a fidgetin' all night long, I was.

SQUIRE

And what dat got to do wit anything? You—

SOPHRONIA

I was troubled through da night.

SQUIRE

Oh woman, dat was just my snorin'.

SOPHRONIA

Not dis time.

SQUIRE

(Trying to change the subject)

I done told you now, if you can't sleep, wake me up. No sense in you just lyin' in bed doin' nothin' if you ain't goin' sleep. We can always make good use of da night, pretty lady.

SOPHRONIA

Oh hush up now, Squire. You hidin' somethin'. Dat dere letter ain't good. I feels it in my bones...it ain't good. What it sayin'?

SQUIRE

It ain't good. Okay?

SOPHRONIA

Read it to me.

SQUIRE

Phronie, for da last time let it lone—

SOPHRONIA

Read it to me, Squire...I ain't takin' no for no answer.

SQUIRE

You pickin' da wrong time to be stubborn, woman.

(They share a moment between them)

What? Why you lookin' at me like dat?

SOPHRONIA

I had an awful dream last night. It wasn't good.

SQUIRE

Phronie, you goin' stop wit all dis here now—

SOPHRONIA

You ain't goin' even ask me what I was dreamin' 'bout?

SQUIRE

Why? I reckon it wasn't good, I reckon it was awful. Cause you done told me dat much. What else I need to know—?

SOPHRONIA

It was 'bout our son.

SQUIRE

Willie George?

SOPHRONIA

We ain't got no other son, Squire.

SQUIRE

What you dream 'bout him?

SOPHRONIA

I saw me a tree. Den, dat tree turnt into Willie George. You was in my dream too. And you was just a runnin' t'wards dat tree that became Will George and—

SQUIRE

And what's all dat 'pose to be meanin', woman?

SOPHRONIA

I ain't be knowin' what it be meanin'. But I'm thinkin' we should be scared 'cause I was scared in my dream last night.

SQUIRE

C'mon now, you just worryin' cause Willie George comin' home today. Look, I don't need you bein' scared.

SOPHRONIA

Willie George comin' home today, you gotta letter in your hand 'posed to be from me, and we both know I ain't wrote it, so for heaven's sake, Squire, tell me what dat letter say.

SQUIRE

It's from Piety...to our boy.

SOPHRONIA

Sayin' what?

(SQUIRE doesn't answer)

What it say, Squire?

SQUIRE

She in love wit him and he in love wit her. Dey desirin' to be married.

SOPHRONIA

Oh God kill me now! Kill me now, Dear Lawd.

SQUIRE

Stop it Phronie!

(SOPHRONIA becomes woozy. SQUIRE rushes over to her as she faints in his arms. He sits her down, and elevates her legs)

SQUIRE

(Talking aloud to himself)

Dis why I ain't wanna tell you...you know yous sick, Phronie...always faintin'. You get all worked up for nothin'. I'm goin' have me a talk with dat Willie George when he get here.

SOPHRONIA

(SOPHRONIA starts to come to)

Dey goin' kill our boy or throw him in that jailhouse.

SQUIRE

Don't be talkin' like dat?

SOPHRONIA

Squire, you done read da letter. How you goin' spect me not to talk like dat? I'm scared!

SQUIRE

Ain't no need—

SOPHRONIA

Colords and whites ain't 'posed to be mixin'.

SQUIRE

Don't be talkin' like dat up in here.

SOPHRONIA

(SOPHRONIA starts to get up)

I can't help it now, Squire.

SQUIRE

Don't get up.

(SQUIRE goes to her and takes her hands)

As long as da good Lawd be my help, I ain't goin' let nothin' bad happen to our boy.

SOPHRONIA

Is what you tellin' me spiritual? Da good Lawd done told you everything goin' be alright?

SQUIRE

Not sho.

SOPHRONIA

Den how I 'posed to think trouble ain't a comin'? You think dis why Willie George comin' home...to see Piety?

SQUIRE

I ain't sho, but we goin' find out soon enough.

SOPHRONIA

Ol' Man Till and dat white congregation of his ain't had demselves a good ol' nigga-lynchin' in a long time. Dey goin' be needin' demselves one soon enough over dis here.

SQUIRE

Phronie Mae—

SOPHRONIA

Weze been through too much, Squire; slavin' and now dis Jim Crowin'. I'm figurin' Alabama ain't da place fo us no more.

SQUIRE

You ain't spectin' us to move up North, is ya? Dis here is home, Phronie.

SOPHRONIA

Come church-time dese white folk down here gets demselves all worked up on holiness and purity, just da sight of a Colored man wit a white woman is enough for dem to go a lynchin'. Dey figurin' it be dey Christian duty to keeps us Colored folks in our place.

SQUIRE

I'm goin' put a stop to whatever Willie George and dat Piety girl got goin' on. Now don't say nothin'. Let me take care of dis. I mean it, Phronie Mae.

SOPHRONIA

Okay. And may da good Lawd be wit you.

SQUIRE

May da good Lawd be wit *us*, 'cause I think soon you goin' be needin' to tell Willie George da truth.

(Lights faded to dark)

End of Scene

ACT 1
Scene 2

SETTING: (LATE MONDAY AFTERNOON)
At the Bonner Home

(WILLIE GEORGE enters the front yard)

WILLIE GEORGE
Mama, Daddy...you all here? I'm home!

SOPHRONIA
(SQUIRE & SOPHRONINA enter onto the porch from front door)
My baby boy is home! Come give me some shuga!

(WILLIE GEORGE kisses and embraces his mom)

SOPHRONIA
Lemme get one good look at you. Dey feedin' you up dere in Atlanta?

WILLIE GEORGE
Yes they are feeding me, Mama.

SOPHRONIA
Squire, I don't think dey feedin' our boy. You lookin' mighty thin, Willie George.

WILLIE GEORGE
Mama, they are. And the food's good too.

SOPHRONIA
You ain't wantin' your mama's cookin' no more?

WILLIE GEORGE
I never said that, Mama.

SOPHRONIA
I'm goin' in here and prepare you a plate. You just be rememberin' your mama's cookin' is da best.
C'mon give me 'nother shuga.

(WILLIE GEORGE kisses his mom again)
And yous still lookin' thin. Now goin' and let yo daddy have some words wit ya.

(SQUIRE and SOPHRONIA exchange looks.
SOPHRONIA exits stage back into the house)

SQUIRE
Your mama sho do miss you. She more happier dan she lettin' on.

WILLIE GEORGE
I miss her too, Daddy. And I miss you.

SQUIRE

Now let me get a good look at you, boy...my son...all grown up.

(WILLIE GEORGE stands at attention)

Hmm. I don't see it.

WILLIE GEORGE

(He lets out a chuckle)

Don't see what, Daddy?

SQUIRE

Wheres you thinnin'. You lookin' strong as ever to me, son.

(SQUIRE grabs WILLIE GEORGE and they embrace and both start to laugh)

Good to see ya growin' ya body and mind at seminary. Sit down, son. I'm glad you home.

WILLIE GEORGE

Me too.

SQUIRE

You ain't had no trouble getting' here, did ya?

WILLIE GEORGE

No sir. I stayed to myself and minded my own.

SQUIRE

Good.

(SQUIRE stares at WILLIE GEORGE)

Why is you home, son?

WILLIE GEORGE

(WILLIE GEORGE looking confused)

Just wanted to come home...see my family. I wrote you and told you we were going on break. So—

SQUIRE

You be graduatin' in a few months...I thought you done found work at seminary.

WILLIE GEORGE

I did.

SQUIRE

Dey gave you break from work too?

WILLIE GEORGE

Well, yes...when seminary closes for break my job gives me a choice to come home if I want to...just until break is over.

SQUIRE

And den you headin' back to Atlanta...to graduate and—

WILLIE GEORGE

I won't be staying long, Daddy. I'm kind of feeling like I'm not wanted here.

(SQUIRE laughs. WILLIE GEORGE joins in. The moment is awkward.)

SQUIRE

Son, yous always welcome here. Dis here your home.

WILLIE GEORGE

I know.

SQUIRE

What I needs to be knowing is—

WILLIE GEORGE

Daddy, I still love the Lord...just as much as you. Being away from home hasn't changed that.

SQUIRE

You sho 'bout dat, son?

WILLIE GEORGE

I miss hearing you preach the gospel on Sunday mornings.

(WILLIE GEORGE sees his dad isn't buying it so he gives it a beat as his dad stares at him)

Okay. What is it really, Daddy?

SQUIRE

(SQUIRE reaches into his pocket and holds up the letter)

I got dis letter today sayin' your mama done wrote it to you.

WILLIE GEORGE

Mama can't write.

SQUIRE

I done read the letter too.

WILLIE GEORGE

So, who is it from?

SQUIRE

I'm mighty proud of you. You a good son, a great man too. And you goin' be a greater man still. But...I needs you to stay away from dat girl, Piety.

WILLIE GEORGE

Daddy—

SQUIRE

Ain't no need to deny it. I'ze done read the whole letter.

WILLIE GEORGE

You read a letter meant for me?

SQUIRE

I sho did. And is that all you have to say?

WILLIE GEORGE

This is not the way I wanted to tell you about this.

SQUIRE

Dere ain't no way to be tellin' me 'bout dis, cause ain't nothin' good 'bout dis to be tellin'. It's over, son.

WILLIE GEORGE

Daddy, I mean you no disrespect. But—

SQUIRE

None takin'.

WILLIE GEORGE

But I love Piety and she loves me.

SQUIRE

Son, dis can't never be.

WILLIE GEORGE

Are you scared for me, Daddy?

SQUIRE

Boy, you act like just cause y'all in love everything goin' be alright.

WILLIE GEORGE

I didn't say—

SQUIRE

Well, it ain't! And what? You thinkin' Ol' Man Till just goin' let you two be together?

WILLIE GEORGE

I'm not scared of her Granddaddy.

SQUIRE

You ought to be. Lemme tell you somethin' 'bout dis here country—

WILLIE GEORGE

I already know enough of what this grand country of ours think.

SQUIRE

It ain't no thinkin', boy. It's da law. Ain't no mixin' 'tween da whites and us colords. And dere ain't no 'scapin' dat law either.

(A BEAT)

WILLIE GEORGE

We're going to run away together.

SQUIRE

Ya'll goin' do what? Wheres you goin' go, Willie George? Huh?

WILLIE GEORGE

Up North. I made some friends—

SQUIRE

Dem white Northerners don't wants no parts of our kind up dere either.

WILLIE GEORGE

Daddy, I am not going to sit around here and wait for someone to give me permission to be with the woman I love.

SQUIRE

You talkin' like you done lost your mind.

WILLIE GEROGE

Well, maybe I have. Maybe that's what love does to you. You don't think you lost your mind when—

SQUIRE

You watch dat mouth wit me, boy.

WILLIE GOERGE

When you fell in love with Mama? All I'm saying is, maybe we've both lost our mind, Daddy. Being in love just makes you do crazy things.

SQUIRE

Boy, dis kind of love you be wantin' goin' get you killed. We livin' under Jim Crow laws.

WILLIE GEORGE

Well, then maybe it's this Jim Crow business that has turned everybody crazy.

(WILLIE GEORGE makes to leave)

SQUIRE

Where is you goin', son?

WILLIE GEROGE

I just need to take a walk.

SQUIRE

We're ain't done talkin' here—

WILLIE GEORGE

Daddy, I did not come here to seek your permission on who I can love. I came home to tell you and Mama... Good-bye.

(WILLIE GEORGE exits)

(Lights fade to dark)

End of Scene

ACT 1
Scene 3

SETTING: (MONDAY MORNING)
At the Bonner Home on the front porch

(WILLIE GEORGE retrieves PIETY's last letter to him from his pocket)

Lights go up on stage right of the split stage

(PIETY is seen and heard secretly writing the letter to WILLIE GEORGE)

PIETY

My Dearest Willie George,

WILLIE GEORGE

My Dearest Love Piety,

PIETY

I wake up every morning hoping you have written me from Atlanta, wishing that we could be free to love each other in spite of this horrible game we must play. I close my eyes and I hear your voice; in the wind, in the sound of the bubbling brook where we first held hands as little children, even in the birds' song as they sing right outside my bedroom window. This evening I have watched the sun set in a cloudless sky and I heard you whispering your love to me.

WILLIE GEORGE

When I saw the sun rise this morning, I too heard your voice whispering your love for me.

PIETY

I wait with baited breath until you return to me. Devotedly yours, Piety.

WILLIE GEORGE

I cannot wait to see you again my Dearest Piety. I am yours always.

(WILLIE GEORGE exits stage)

(Entire Stage goes dark)

End of Scene

ACT 1
Scene 4

SETTING:

(TUESDAY)

At the Bonner Home on the front porch

(SOPHRONIA is sitting in her rocking chair with a small basket of socks, yarn, and needles)

(Off Stage)

TOLBERT

Hey Baby Sis.

(TOLBERT enters stage and walks onto porch and stares at SOPHRONIA)

What's wrong?

SOPHRONIA

Ain't nothin' wrong.

TOLBERT

You always knittin' when you thinkin' or feelin' troubles a comin'. You done had one of dem dreams again?

SOPHRONIA

I ain't knittin'. I'm sewin'.

TOLBERT

Same difference. You just gettin' home, Baby Sis?

SOPHRONIA

Been home long 'nough now to finish dinner.

TOLBERT

Why you still workin' for dat man? Goin' and quit fo you die.

SOPHRONIA

I'ma be workin' for Ol' Man Till as long as I be needin' to.

(A beat)

Did I tell you the Doc done came to Ol' Man Till's house the other day to see him? He told him his heart is bad, real bad.

TOLBERT

Argh! Dat Ol' man goin' be here forever. But you ain't gettin' no younga.

SOPHRONIA

(Laughing)

He goin' out live all of us.

TOLBERT

But you ain't gettin' no younga, Baby Sis.

SOPHRONIA

And neither is you.

TOLBERT

In case you fogotten, you da oldest.

SOPHRONIA

You don't think I know dat? Don't make no sense why you calls me Baby Sis, anyway.

TOLBERT

'Cause I promised our Grannie I'd take care of you and protect you like you was my Baby Sista, even doe you always bossin' me.

SOPHRONIA

Tolbert Lee, you crazy. I ain't never boss you.

TOLBERT

You bossin' me now. You worse than Ol' Man Till, you know dat?

SOPHRONIA

You watch dat mouth now, talkin' like dat. God goin' take dat for blasphemy... 'parin' me to Ol' Man Till.

(TOLBERT laughs)

Stop your laughin' 'cause nothin' I just said be funny.

TOLBERT

I member you sayin' you were goin' stop workin' for the Ol' Man when Willie George graduates. Well, he be graduatin' in a few months.

SOPHRONIA

I ain't quittin'.

TOLBERT

You done changed dat ol' tired mind of yours, Baby Sis?

SOPHRONIA

Dat boy is my life. And Squire and I want better things for him.

TOLBERT

Well, in dis here world, he goin' have to fight and struggle fo what he wants. I think he up to it. It's in our blood.

SOPHRONIA

Don't be talkin' 'bout what's in our blood.

(SOPHRONIA chuckles to herself)

TOLBERT

What's funny?

SOPHRONIA

Ain't nothin' funny.

TOLBERT

Why you chuckle den?

SOPHRONIA

Ol' Man Till be tellin me he be missin' our Mama workin' 'round his house...dat my bein' dere is like havin' a daughter in da house.

TOLBERT

Ewww... Dat man plum outta his mind. I can't wait 'til you quit workin' for him. I *swears* it, Baby Sis.

SOPHRONIA

No swearin' in dis here house, Tolbert Lee.

TOLBERT

Oh hush.

SOPHRONIA

Dis my house.

TOLBERT

I'm just sayin' ... we out here on the porch.

SOPHRONIA

Stop talkin' nonsense. Yesterday, on my way home from work, I stopped by your house.

TOLBERT

You saw Fannie Lou?

SOPHRONIA

Where else she goin' be? She ain't havin' no easy pregnancy. You keep givin' her children at y'all's age.

TOLBERT

'Cause I can. And Dey some beautiful babies we make.

SOPHRONIA

Well, you ain't lyin' dere. I loves me my nieces and nephews.

TOLBERT

And dat's da other reason I keep givin' Fannie Lou children.

SOPHRONIA

Why's dat?

TOLBERT

Dat kind of love you sho my children. Dat's the kind of love I know Grannie and Ma-Sis woulda shown dem.

SOPHRONIA

Oh Tolbert Lee, stop talkin' so much 'bout Grannie and Ma-Sis. I can't deal wit it today.

TOLBERT

Ah, Baby Sis, ain't nobody studin' you.

(They share a laugh before they go pensive)

(A Beat)

SOPHRONIA

Squire holdin' a letter dat got my name on it, like it be from me to me. But it ain't.

TOLBERT

Who's it from?

SOPHRONIA

Piety. She done write Willie George sayin' she love him. And he love her.

TOLBERT

You lyin, Baby Sis.

SOPHRONIA

I ain't lyin. I'm scared! Dey goin' lynch my boy.

TOLBERT

Where's Squire and Willie George now?

SOPHRONIA

Squire out visitin' da sick right now. And Willie George said he was goin' go see Ol' Man Till.

TOLBERT

Squire let him go?

SOPHRONIA

He begged him not to. But Willie George say he just be askin' for his old job back...just while he home on break.

TOLBERT

So what you want me do 'bout it?

SOPHRONIA

I ain't want you to be doin' nothin' 'bout it.

TOLBERT

Did Squire talk to Willie George, tell him dat he can't be wit dat girl?

SOPHRONIA

Her name is Piety.

TOLBERT

I don't care what her name be. There ain't no mixin' wit da white folks less the white man is doin' the mixin'. Just let Grannie tell it.

SOPHRONIA

Now you goin' stop bringin' up Grannie. God rest her soul.

TOLBERT

She probably done turnt over in her grave wit dis here.

SOPHRONIA

Stop it now, Tolbert Lee. You hear me? Stop dat talk.

TOLBERT

Dem Tills some evil people. Ma-Sis always said—

SOPHRONIA

Ain't no needin' you bringin' up da dead and all dat craziness dat happen durin' slavery. You leave Ma-Sis right where she be, wit all dose things dat happen buried in da past.

TOLBERT

But if it ain't all dead yet, den it ain't all buried yet.

SOPHRONIA

Well, leave things dat are *dead* well 'nuff alone.

TOLBERT

C'mon now, Baby Sis. You can't let dat bother you dat way. You see me? I gots a whole 'nother way I'm goin' deal wit it if I ever get da chance.

SOPHRONIA

You don't need no chance. Squire said he goin' take care of everything.

TOLBERT

What you need to do is tell dat boy da truth 'bout dis here family.

SOPHRONIA

I ain't never speakin' of those things as long as I live.

TOLBERT

Oh you plannin' on takin' it to the grave wit you, huh?

SOPHRONIA

Sho do.

TOLBERT

Well, what 'bout Willie George? Tellin' him da truth, dat'll make him leave dat Till girl lone.

SOPHRONIA

Her name is Piety. And he don't need to be knowin' no truth to be knowin' he ain't got no business lovin' Piety. She white and he ain't.

TOLBERT

You mighty stubborn, Baby Sis. And dat ain't good.

SOPHRONIA

I do what I gots to do to keep my family safe.

TOLBERT

Not tellin' Willie George da truth is da same as lyin' to him.

SOPHRONIA

You ain't told your children. So I guess you a lyin' to dem too.

TOLBERT

Well, I'm goin' tell 'em when da time comes.

(WILLIE GEORGE enters from yard and walks onto the porch)

WILLIE GEORGE

Tell who what, Uncle Tolbert?

SOPHRONIA

You mind your manners now, Willie George. Dis here grown folk talkin'.

WILLIE GEORGE

Mama...you forget, I'm grown now too. How are you, Uncle Tolbert?

(WILLIE GEORGE & TOLBERT embrace)

TOLBERT

I'm doin' better now dat I see my finest nephew.

WILLIE GEORGE

Your only nephew.

TOLBERT

Stop smart mouthin' me boy, and go give your Mama some shuga.

(WILLIE GEORGE goes and kisses his mother)

WILLIE GEORGE

How is Aunt Fannie Lou and my cousins doing?

SOPHRONIA

Don't say nothin', Tolbert Lee. Dey all live right down da road. Just goin and pay dem a visit, son. You ain't forgot whos your family is now, have you?

TOLBERT

Ma-Sis would have loved herself some you, Willie George.

SOPHRONIA

You go on now, Tolbert Lee, leave. You always causin' trouble.

TOLBERT

Den I guess I'm just like your daddy.

(SOPHRONIA gasps and throws a sock at TOLBERT. TOLBERT ducks, laughs and exits)

SOPHRONIA

Your Uncle makes me twice glad. Glad he come—

WILLIE GEORGE

And glad he go.

(They share a laugh, then a beat)

How are you just like your daddy, Mama?

(SOPHRONIA grabs her sewing things and exits)

End of Scene

ACT 1
Scene 5

SETTING:

(TUESDAY)

At the Bonner Home on the front porch

(WILLIE GEORGE is sitting on the front porch whittling a stick. SOPHRONIA enters with her sewing materials and a small basket of clothes. She sits in her rocking chair and starts to hum and sew)

WILLIE GEORGE

Mama, you and Uncle Tolbert don't talk much about Ma-Sis. And I've never heard you say anything about my granddaddy.

SOPHRONIA

I done told you...he died when your Uncle and I was very little.

WILLIE GEORGE

But you never talk about him. Ma-Sis had to tell you stories about him. The man was her husband.

SOPHRONIA

Well, she ain't told none. She ain't talk much 'bout nothin'. And don't be thinkin' you know what you talkin' 'bout either.

WILLIE GEORGE

I don't, Mama, that's why I'm asking about Ma-Sis and my granddaddy.

(A Beat)

Daddy always says "the elders of the community are the voice of God." Said he used to hear his daddy say it...said it's an old African proverb his granddaddy brought with him from the motherland. Daddy says it's honorable to sit at the feet of the elders and learn their wisdom. He said that's how our people have survived and will survive. I just want to know the wisdom Ma-Sis passed down to you and Uncle Tolbert. Wouldn't she want me to know?

SOPHRONIA

You mind dat tongue of yours. Don't be talkin' 'bout da dead when you ain't be knowin' how dey done lived.

WILLIE GEORGE

I'm sorry, Mama. I didn't mean any disrespect—

SOPHRONIA

Don't ever speak 'bout your grandmother dat way. You hear me?

WILLIE GEORGE

Yes, Mama, I hear you. I said I am sorry—

SOPHRONIA

She done seen too much...been through too much of slavin'.

WILLIE GEORGE

What happened to her? And to Granddaddy?

SOPHRONIA

I done told you we ain't talkin' 'bout dis, Willie George.

WILLIE GEORGE

Well...at least I know some things about Daddy's folks.

SOPHRONIA

Ain't much to talk 'bout from dem days.

WILLIE GEORGE

I get that Mama. Slavery was—

SOPHRONIA

You don't know nothin' 'bout slavin'. Hearin' folk talkin' 'bout it ain't da same as livin' it.

WILLIE GEORGE

You, Daddy, Uncle Tolbert...Aunt Fannie Lou, you all lived—

SOPHRONIA

We experienced 'nuff of slavin' for a life time!

(She talks aloud to herself)

Lawd, dis just won't die easy...

WILLIE GEORGE

What won't die easy?

SOPHRONIA

(Still talking to herself)

It just festers like a sore in dis 'Bama heat. Maybe after all these Ol' slave masters die den we can bury da past for good.

WILLIE GEORGE

(WILLIE GEORGE takes SOPHRONIA's hand)

They can't hurt us anymore, Mama. You hear me? I won't let them.

SOPHRONIA

Dey done caused 'nuff hurt to last us a lifetime. Dis here conversation is over.

(SOPHRONIA exits)

(Lights fade to dark)

End of Scene

ACT 1
Scene 6

SETTING: (WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON)
At the Bonner Home on the front porch

(SOPHRONIA is sweeping the front porch. WILLIE GEORGE enters and kisses his mother on the cheek and takes the broom from her)

WILLIE GEORGE
Good morning, Mama. I got some breakfast set for you.

SOPHRONIA
I smell it...been smellin' it for a while now.

WILLIE GEORGE
Why didn't you come inside to see who's been cooking what you're smelling?

SOPHRONIA
I knew it was you, 'cause your daddy never cook.

(They share a laugh)

WILLIE GEORGE
Where is Daddy?

SOPHRONIA
He got up earlier dis morning' dan usual to get some coal and wood for the stove. Got it burnin', den left.

WILLIE GEORGE
Is he coming back to eat breakfast?

SOPHRONIA
Lawd knows da only time dat man misses himself a meal is when he fastin' for da Lawd.

WILLIE GEORGE
Is he fasting today?

SOPHRONIA
No. He out runnin' some early mornin' errands for Ol' Man Till...asked me to wrap his breakfast up and have you bring it. I saw him off. I was goin' back inside to cook but den I heard you cookin' and decided to sweep up out here.

WILLIE GEORGE
I made some grits. Cooked up some of that hickory smoked sausage we all love so much. I warmed up the rest of those biscuits you made last night too. And I drizzled honey on them.

SOPHRONIA
You pologizin' for somethin'?

WILLIE GEORGE

Just showing my mama how much I love and appreciate her.

SOPHRONIA

Willie George, ain't no need for dat to be why you done cook me breakfast. I 'preciate it. But I know you love and 'preciate me...you better.

(SOPHRONIA goes to sit in her rocking chair)

WILLIE GEORGE

Come and get it while it's still hot. No need for both you and Daddy to have a cold breakfast today.

SOPHRONIA

You goin' make a fine husband to dat pretty Bessie Lee Small. You cookin' like dat and all. Did I tell you I saw her—

WILLIE GEORGE

Mama, I don't know about—

SOPHRONIA

She was wit her mama. You should go call on Bessie Lee today. Better yet, I'ma 'vite Bessie Lee and her folks over here and make dem a nice dinner.

WILLIE GEORGE

No need to do that. I don't know how much time I'll have today or this week to call on Bessie Lee.

SOPHRONIA

You ain't dat busy. You better make time fo her fo someone else does.

WILLIE GEORGE

Mama, I have to tell you something—

SOPHRONIA

Since you two was knee high to a pig's eye everyone's been sayin' how cute you two is together. I think Bessie Lee is mighty right fo you, and Willie George, you mighty right fo her. Now what you gotta tell me?

WILLIE GEORGE

I don't love Bessie Lee.

SOPHRONIA

I ain't said nothin' 'bout love. And whys not? She's a fine girl and she ain't never done nothin' wrong to you. And dem Smalls good Christian folk.

WILLIE GEORGE

Mama, you know what I mean. I'm not marrying her.

SOPHRONIA

Why ain't you? Ain't nothin' wrong with Bessie Lee. She a good ... black woman.

WILLIE GEORGE

I don't love her.

SOPHRONIA

Who you love? Ain't it 'bout time you be findin' yourself—

WILLIE GEORGE

I know you know about the letter. You know I love Piety.

SOPHRONIA

Your Daddy ain't talk no sense into dat head of yours?

WILLIE GEORGE

I don't need anyone talking any sense into me. I love her and that's all.

SOPHRONIA

Yous a stubborn fool, Willie George.

WILLIE GEORGE

Mama, why?

SOPHRONIA

'Cause lovin' Piety is goin' get us all killed. Is dat what you want, huh?

WILLIE GEORGE

Mama, you've heard Daddy and I speak about Frederick Douglass. Well, he just married a white woman...Helen Pitts Douglass. He was once a slave, Mama. What I'm trying to say is, I, the son of a former slave, can marry a white woman too, and just like Frederick Douglass, I can show everyone that Piety and our love is a symbol of a better world...that times are changing.

SOPHRONIA

Ain't nothin' changin' 'round here. Dem white folks 'in dese here parts done already made it plain. Dey don't want us mixin' up dey color line. Dat's why Luberta, be walkin' 'round here like she mute. Dem white folk said her son just looked at some white woman too long for dey likin' and dey beat him half to death before dey lynched him. I don't want dat fo you, baby.

WILLIE GEORGE

Breakfast is probably cold by now. You should eat, Mama, because I'm not going to stop loving Piety. I'm going to marry her.

SOPHRONIA

You know how much dis family done sacrificed? And you goin' stand here, and tell me you marryin' Piety?

WILLIE GEORGE

We'll move up North where we can marry and be together as husband and wife.

SOPHRONIA

You tryin' to break my heart and mess up Piety's life, too? You tryin' to get the two of you killed?

WILLIE GEORGE

No, Mama, I'm not trying—

SOPHRONIA

You figurin' Ol' Man Till just goin' let you walk away wit his granddaughter? Dem white folk will hunt you down like a runaway slave, and kill you. And den Piety's life be ruined too. Da two of ya is bein' foolish and selfish.

WILLIE GEORGE

We've planned it out, Mama. We know how to do it and when. I've made some friends—

SOPHRONIA

I ain't goin' let you destroy dis family...yourself...or Piety's life.

(SOPHRONIA heads towards the kitchen. WILLIE GEORGE exits stage)

(Lights fade to dark)

End of Scene

ACT 1
Scene 7

SETTING: (WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON)
The back stock room of Till's General Store

(PIETY is standing in the doorway)

PIETY

Willie George, will you stop fussin' with them boxes and come here. I didn't get the chance to speak with you at all yesterday.

WILLIE GEORGE

Ms. Piety, you know I want to, but I can't.

PIETY

Stop calling me, Ms. Piety.

(PIETY moves into the room)

WILLIE GEORGE

We are in public view and we don't need any trouble. You know that's the only reason why.

PIETY

You're right, Willie George. Then can you bring the boxes closer to the door for me?

(WILLIE GEORGE begins moving boxes)

You can put them down right here. Good, now we are able to talk freely.

WILLIE GEORGE

Being in your Granddaddy's store isn't what I call being able to talk freely.

PIETY

He won't be back for at least an hour. And no one is in the store at the moment.

WILLIE GEORGE

We can't stay back here together. Someone's going to come into the store.

PIETY

We'll hear the front doorbell jingle.

WILLIE GEORGE

And then they will wonder where you are and what we're doing back here?

PIETY

You are doing your job.

WILLIE GEORGE

But with you here, we're taking a risk. And again, we don't need any trouble, Piety.

PIETY

Fine. So then I am supervising you.

WILLIE GEORGE

Really? You never supervise me, so who's going to believe that?

PIETY

Remember when we played together as children? Your mother always had me supervise you.

WILLI W GEORGE

That's only because you're two years older than me. You were just asked to—

PIETY

Make sure you didn't get into any trouble. You were always misbehaving, Willie George.

(They share a laugh, and then become silent and gaze at each other)

WILLIE GEORGE

Uh...Piety, uh...we still shouldn't be back here alone.

PIETY

This may seem foolish to you, but I love you.

(PIETY pouts, turns and starts for the front of the store)

I'm going back upfront.

WILLIE GEORGE

You make me laugh, my Love. I like to see you pout. It's so cute. It's hard for me to explain the way you make me feel in just one sentence.

PIETY

Then speak in paragraphs, my Dearest.

WILLIE GEORGE

Being away at seminary these past few years have made me miss you so much. I realize just how much I don't want to live without you.

PIETY

Oh, Willie George, in just three more days we'll be leaving this place and on our way up North. Then we will be Mr. and Mrs. *Willie George Bonner*.

WILLIE GEORGE

Are you going to miss your Granddaddy?

PIETY

Of course I will as I know you will miss your family. But I want to be with you.

WILLIE GEORGE

And so we'll be together.

PIETY

Forever.

WILLIE GEORGE

And our love will be more than just a forbidden idea.

PIETY

I need you to read my heart.

WILLIE GEORGE

And you mine.

(They stand face to face, close enough to kiss. WILLIE GEORGE suddenly moves away)

PIETY

Willie George, whatever is good in me, you have found it. I never knew I could love someone so much.

WILLIE GEORGE

Your letters to me allowed me to touch you, kiss you, in spite of the distance we've spent apart.

PIETY

I was hoping you received them all.

WILLIE GEORGE

I did...except one.

PIETY

What? How do you know that?

WILLIE GEORGE

I didn't want to upset you, your letter somehow got returned and my parents read it.

PIETY

Oh my God! How? What are—

WILLIE GEORGE

It doesn't matter. We have our plans. We'll be married soon enough.

PIETY

Sorry I had to write your mama's name as the sender.

WILLIE GEORGE

You're so cute. Your letters refreshed me like the morning dew.

PIETY

I wish you could have written to me too.

WILLIE GEORGE

I wished it even more. But I could not take the risk of my letters being intercepted by your Granddaddy...by anyone.

PIETY

I know. I'll be the happiest with you at my side—

WILLIE GEORGE

(WILLIE GEORGE presses his finger to her lips)

Speak no more, my Love. Close your eyes. I have a surprise for you.

(WILLIE GEORGE reaches inside his jacket pocket, pulls out a small stack of letters loosely tied together with a pink bow, and puts them behind his back)

PIETY

Oh Willie George, my heart is beating faster and faster. Kiss me already. The suspense is making me feel as though I will faint.

WILLIE GEORGE

Please don't faint. Not here, with just you and me.

(PIETY begins to faint. WILLIE GEORGE drops the letters and grabs PIETY)

WILLIE GEORGE

Piety! Piety!

(WILLIE GEORGE finds a place for PIETY to sit and props her feet up on a crate. He speaks aloud to himself)

Okay...we have to raise your legs...just a little...

(A beat)

PIETY

What are you staring at?

WILLIE GEORGE

Are you okay?

PIETY

Yes...I am now.

WILLIE GEORGE

You really fainted. I thought—

PIETY

It's okay. I'm fine. I've been experiencing these fainting spells for over a year now.

WILLIE GEORGE

Really? Why didn't you write and tell me about them?

PIETY

I didn't want to cause you any concern. Anyway, the doctor said it's likely hereditary. So I hope you'll always be there to catch me.

(PIETY sees the letters on the floor, picks one up, looks at it and then picks up more, counting them. Finally she opens one and reads it to herself)
All of these are for me, Willie George? Thirteen love letters? You're the sweetest.

WILLIE GEORGE

Yes, thirteen, as in first Corinthians chapter thirteen, the chapter on love. Love, it 'beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things—

(She goes to Willie George and kisses him. The bells on the rear door of the store jingle. PIETY steps away. WILLIE GEORGE gathers the letters and returns them to his inside shirt pocket, all except one, which he doesn't notice)

(OL' MAN TILL and SQUIRE enters)

TILL

Piety, is Squire's boy back here?

PIETY

Hello Granddad. Yes. He's over there stacking boxes.

TILL

Boy, your daddy's pulled the wagon up to the back. You two fetch dem boxes and get dem unloaded. C'mon now...move. And dat'll be all for the day.

SQUIRE

Yes Sir, Mr. Till. Right away.

(SQUIRE walks over to WILLIE GEORGE)

SQUIRE

What's wrong wit you, son? You look like you just saw a ghost.

TILL

Boy?

(WILLIE GEORGE ignores him)

Boy?

WILLIE GEORGE

(WILLIE GEORGE stops moving towards the back door, hesitates before answering)
Yes?

TILL

Are you deaf, boy?

WILLIE GEORGE

No.

TILL

Den answer me when I call you. You gettin' yourself an education...ain't dat right?

WILLIE GEORGE

Yes, I am.

TILL

Fine. But don't let dat education get you in trouble. I don't mind you doin' well for yourself. But remember your place. You still a Colored. Now go fetch dem boxes.

(TILL turns and goes to the front of the store)

PIETY

Willie George...

(WILLIE GEORGE doesn't respond to her. PIETY exits to front of the store)

SQUIRE

Willie George—

WILLIE GEORGE

Don't, Daddy. He knows my name. He can't keep calling me boy. I'm a man and I'm not his property...slavery is over! I am a free man.

SQUIRE

You know he'll have you jailed or kilt before you ever leave dis here town.

WILLIE GEORGE

Then I will die trying!

(WILLIE GEORGE and SQUIRE exits. OL' MAN TILL enters and walks over to the shelf. He stands right over the letter left behind by WILLIE GEORGE. As he starts to look down the light fades to dark)

(Lights fade to dark)

End of scene.

End of ACT 1

ACT 2
Scene 1

SETTING: (LATE WEDNESDAY EVENING)
At the Bonner Home on the front porch

(SQUIRE is sitting in his chair with his Bible, praying. The sound of insects breaks through the still of the night. WILLIE GEORGE enters from the yard)

SQUIRE

I was just prayin' you made it home safely.

WILLIE GEORGE

Thanks Daddy. I stopped by Uncle Tolbert's house on the way home.

SQUIRE

Your Auntie done had dat baby yet?

WILLIE GEORGE

No, Sir. Not yet.

SQUIRE

I'm thinkin' she carryin' dis one longer so your Uncle can't get her pregnant no more.
(WILLIE GEORGE lets out a brief chuckle)
Dey gettin' too old fo dis.

WILLIE GEORGE

They're perfect for each other...they love each other so they're blessed to have each other.

SQUIRE

I agree. Your mama told me 'bout da conversation you two done had.

WILLIE GEORGE

Is she okay?

SQUIRE

It really upset her. You talkin' 'bout marryin' dat white girl is tearin' her up inside.

WILLIE GEORGE

I didn't mean for it—

SQUIRE

She knows. And no one's denying you love dat girl.

WILLIE GEORGE

Her name is Piety. All I said was I wasn't marrying Bessie Lee.

SQUIRE

Dat ain't all you said, son. Ya asked ya Mama about her parents.

WILLIE GEORGE

Oh...yes, that. I did. I just wanted—

SQUIRE

You know your mama don't like talkin' 'bout dat—

WILLIE GEORGE

Why not?

SQUIRE

Bad things done went on back den...things dat could destroy a soul. People hurt you badly 'cause you was dey property.

WILLIE GEORGE

I know, Daddy. But—

SQUIRE

No, son, you don't know. We don't talk 'bout it. Nobody talks 'bout it.

WILLIE GEORGE

Maybe we should. Maybe if we talked about it then we can deal with it.

SQUIRE

Deal wit what? How White folk see Colored folk?

WILLIE GEORGE

Maybe if we talked about these...horrors of slavery—

SQUIRE

Wit who?

WILLIE GEORGE

Then we can—

SQUIRE

Dese white folk knows what happened durin' slavery.

WILLIE GEORGE

But not all of them agree with what happened.

SQUIRE

A lot of dem who was right dere in it are still livin'.

WILLIE GEORGE

So we just don't talk about it?

SQUIRE

Dey don't wanna talk 'bout it da way we wanna talk 'bout it. And a lot of dem teachin' their children to think and feel 'bout us da way dey do.

WILLIE GEORGE

How do you know that?

SQUIRE

‘Cause we livin' under Jim Crow, boy. Heck! It's in da blood of this country.

WILLIE GEORGE

Why do we keep walking around these white folk like we scared of them? You should see how you all sound. ‘Yes sir, Mista so-and-so’, ‘No sir, Mista so-and-so’. Aren't we supposed to be free?

SQUIRE

Free? What dat mean?

WILLIE GEORGE

Are we ever going to get along with white folk...ever? Okay, maybe not down here in the South. But in the North—

SQUIRE

You keep talkin' ‘bout da North like it's different up there?

WILLIE GEORGE

It is.

SQUIRE

You goin' find trouble anywhere dere's white folk in dis country.

WILLIE GEORGE

I refuse to believe that. I've met them up in Atlanta at seminary.

SQUIRE

Well, ain't none ‘round here I done seen.

WILLIE GEORGE

So then what do we do?

SQUIRE

We keep prayin'.

WILLIE GEORGE

Praying? Haven't we prayed enough?

SQUIRE

You sayin' prayin' don't work?

WILLIE GEORGE

I'm not saying that, Daddy. But maybe we need to be doing something else...something more—

SQUIRE

What dey teachin' you up there in dat seminary? When da prophet Elijah prayed and believed dere was no rain fo three years—

WILLIE GEORGE

I know—

SQUIRE

I ain't done, Willie George. Elijah prayed again and da rain fell. He wasn't doin' nothin' else but prayin' and believin'. It's not 'bout what else we can do. It's 'bout our prayin' and believin'. Dat's what da Bible say.

WILLIE GEORGE

They know our names, but they're either calling us 'boy' or 'nigga'. We get educated and they still disrespect us.

SQUIRE

So forcin' your Mama to talk 'bout her life in slavery, a life she wanna forget is goin' stop dat?

WILLIE GEORGE

I just wanted to know about Ma-Sis and my granddaddy.

(A beat)

Why we still working for them anyway? We think as long as they're paying us we *ain't slavin'*.

SQUIRE

Dat's da only work some of our peoples can get to provide fo dey families.

WILLIE GEORGE

Our people can barely survive off the wages they're being paid.

SQUIRE

It's better than not workin' at all. Da Bible says—

WILLIE GEORGE

I am sick and tired of—

SQUIRE

You better step lightly, boy, 'cause you ain't no more sicker and tired of dis than da next Colored man who done lived much longer and done seen way more dan you.

WILLIE GEORGE

I just want to be treated like I am free! And to love who I want to love.

SQUIRE

You can't help who you love. But you sho can help who you marry.

WILLE GEORGE

You can't tell me who to marry. It's not your right or Mama's right, or any white person's right to tell me that.

SQUIRE

What you gotta *right* to do and what you is *able* to do are two different things.

WILLIE GEORGE

Answer me this, Daddy. Why can't we talk about my grandparents?

SQUIRE

What?

WILLIE GEORGE

Why do you act the way you do around Ol' Man Till?

SQUIRE

What you askin', son?

WILLIE GEORGE

He ain't special. He may run this town, half the county, but he sure doesn't run this family. He doesn't own us.

SQUIRE

Ain't no one sayin' he does.

WILLIE GEORGE

Well sometimes you, Mamma and Uncle Tolbert sure act that way.

SQUIRE

You thinkin' you understandin' slavery, da scars...da ones left on our body and da ones left on our mind? You thinkin' you know what it's like to see da women in your family taken away from you in da middle of da night 'cause da massa or one of his sons or brothers done got dem an itchin' down dere dat dey done figured only a Colored woman can scratch? You thinkin' you done got it all figured out, huh? Da terror of when da creditors came-a-callin' so da massa ripped a slave wife from her slave husband, a slave son from his slave father, a slave baby from da breast of its slave mother...and you can only hope you goin' see dem again in dis here life.

WILLIE GEORGE

What does that have to do with how you all let Ol' Man Till treat you?

SQUIRE

You ain't gettin' it, boy. Life done happened and all its evils. White folk is use to ownin' us, dat's how dey reckon it. And dey'd rather be damned to hell before dey let it be any other way.

WILLIE GEORGE

Then heaven help us all because everyone's afraid of change.

SQUIRE

It ain't fear you lookin' at when you lookin' at me, Willie George. It's da wisdom and sacrifice to do all you can do to save your family at all cost.

WILLE GEORGE

Not if it means losing your dignity and self-worth, Daddy. What about our freedom...freedom to love and to live?

SQUIRE

Dat's da sacrifice, boy. Dat's why family mean so much. I get my dignity and self-worth from da love and protection I give my family and da love y'all give me.

(A beat)

We gotta lot to be figurin' out still, son. Dat's why you gotta graduate...we gotta figure dis out as we keep livin' and breathin', laughin' and cryin', lovin' and hurtin', prayin' and believin'.

WILLIE GEORGE

And not being forced into this cage of keeping secrets.

SQUIRE

What do you want to know, Willie George?

WILLIE GEORGE

What's Ma-Sis' real name? Who was Ma-Sis' husband...Mama and Uncle Tolbert's father? It seems not talking about this as a family is keeping us from moving forward.

SQUIRE

Whats dat 'posed to mean?

WILLIE GEORGE

All these secrets are going to destroy this family.

SQUIRE

Da Almighty keeps dis here family together.

WILLIE GEORGE

Ol' Man Till's why we don't talk about Ma-Sis and granddaddy. Tell me I'm wrong, Daddy.

SQUIRE

Son, leave well nuff alone.

WILLIE GEORGE

I know what went on during slavery. I see how yaller Mama and Uncle Tolbert are.

SQUIRE

You just need to be knowin' Ol' Man Till is da reason why you ain't goin' be marryin' his Granddaughter.

WILLIE GEORGE

If what I think is true... then...Piety is my kin. I...I hate this world!

(WILLIE GEORGE screams out to the night sky)

SQUIRE

What's da matter wit you, boy,?

WILLIE GEORGE

I hate this world!

SQUIRE

Boy! Keep your voice down 'fo you wake up—

WILLIE GEORGE

(Still talking loud)

There's no one out here! Uncle Tolbert lives half a mile away! There's no one who can hear me, because no one is listening. You understand, Daddy. Not even God is listening.

SQUIRE

You goin' wake your Mama! She can't know dat you know.

WILLIE GEORGE

(Exhausted and exasperated, WILLIE GEORGE throws up his hands in defeat and heads into the house)

This family and its secrets. I'm going to bed.

(Lights fade to dark)

End of Scene

ACT 2
Scene 2

SETTING: (THURSDAY AFTERNOON)
The back stock room of Till's General Store

(SOPHRONIA enters through rear door. PIETY is present)

PIETY
Hello, Mrs. Sophronia. How are you today?

SOPHRONIA
Hello Ms. Sweet little Piety. I'm fine. And how are you?

PIETY
Oh, just great. So what brings you in today?

SOPHRONIA
I was workin' at your house today and well...uh...Mr. Till wasn't 'round. I be hopin' he's here, my child.

PIETY
He sure is. He's in the front of the store.

SOPHRONIA
I'd be needin' to talk wit him, please.

PIETY
Sure. I'll get him for you.

SOPHRONIA
Oh thank you kindly, my child. You're such a lovely little lady.

PIETY
Why thank you, Mrs. Sophronia. You're mighty kind.

SOPHRONIA
Oh...uh...Ms. Piety? Is Squire or Willie George 'round? I hate to be a botherin' dem.

PIETY
No. They went to make a delivery. I'll go get my Granddad.

(PIETY exits to the front of the store. A few seconds later OL' MAN TILL enters)

TILL
What you want, Sophronia?

SOPHRONIA
Mr. Till. I be lookin' to have a few words wit you 'bout somethin' very important.

TILL

What?

SOPHRONIA

I needs to ask you a favor and I ain't knowin' how to ask it?

TILL

It's 'bout your boy?

SOPHRONIA

Well...no, Sir. It's 'bout Piety.

TILL

Well, it ought to be 'bout your boy. We got ourselves a real big problem. Your nigga boy can be a bit disrespectful.

SOPHRONIA

Ain't no needin' worryin' 'bout dat, Sir. Squire and I goin' see to it dat he minds his manners.

TILL

And I don't like the way your boy be lookin' at my Piety. You know I'll see your boy hanged before—

SOPHRONIA

Oh no, Mr. Till, please have mercy. I don't know how it done come to dis.

TILL

Come to what? Come to what? Ahhh....you ain't never told your boy who I am. But dat's okay. We have ourselves an agreement. And you just tryin' to keep your end of it, is all. Dat's what you doin' here.

SOPHRONIA

Mr. Till, I am...I am —

TILL

It seems to me, though, you might be messing it up.

SOPHRONIA

No sir. I want what's best fo my family.

TILL

Den handle your boy or I will.

SOPHRONIA

I begs you, Mr. Till. I know how we can both be keepin' and getting' what we want.

TILL

Do tell.

SOPHRONIA

Why don't you send Piety to England...fo just a year?

TILL

What you know 'bout England?

SOPHRONIA

I knows dats what da white folks be doin' fo dey women folk...to learn demselves dem good manners and all.

TILL

You think I'm goin' let my granddaughter go abroad 'cause of your boy?

SOPHRONIA

But it's your family secret, Mr. Till, I'm tryin' to protect.

TILL

Don't tell me what you tryin' to protect. It's your secret too.

SOPHRONIA

Den we both be losin' what we love.

TILL

I ain't goin' be losin' nothin'.

SOPHRONIA

I knows you care, Sir. Dat's why it's hard fo you to send Piety away. But it's what's best.

TILL

Don't be tellin' me what you think is best—

SOPHRONIA

Sir...fo dem both, and if it matters any, Sir...fo da both of us too.

TILL

And if I don't?

SOPHRONIA

I be figurin' you will, Mr. Till.

TILL

You threatening me, woman?

SOPHRONIA

Now Sir...I ain't. You knows I knows better dan dat. I'm just lookin' out fo your best interest.

TILL

You mean yours. Get out of my sight, Sophronia.

SOPHRONIA

So you be doin' da right thing, Mr. Till? Ain't no harm goin' be comin' to Willie George? Or Piety?

TILL

Leave!

SOPHRONIA

Thank you, Mr. Till, fo listenin' to me. Thank you, kindly.

(SOPHRONIA exits stage)

End of Scene

ACT 2
Scene 3

SETTING: (THURSDAY AFTERNOON)

The back stock room of Till's General Store

(WILLIE GEORGE is moving boxes and stocking shelves. He thinks about Piety's last letter to him)

PIETY'S VOICE OVER

My Dearest Willie George,

I wake up every morning hoping you have written me from Atlanta, wishing that we could be free to love each other in spite of this horrible game we must play. In spite of this horrible game we must play...this horrible game we must play...we must play...

(WILLIE GEORGE pulls out the letters and thumbs through them. He notices something is off...a letter is missing)

WILLIE GEORGE

I lost a letter, but when, and where? I have to find it.

(WILLIE GEORGE searches frantically)

(PIETY enters from the front of store)

PIETY

I have to talk to you Willie George.

WILLIE GEORGE

Not now, Piety,...I'm busy.

PIETY

This is very important.

WILLIE GEORGE

It can't be as important as this.

PIETY

What are you looking for?

WILLIE GEORGE

Did I accidentally leave one of my letters here?

PIETY

Ohhh, I hope so.

WILLIE GEORGE

What does that mean?

PIETY

For me to read.

WILLIE GEORGE

Did you see it? Did you find it?

PIETY

No.

WILLIE GEORGE

But you said—

PIETY

No, I didn't find it.

WILLIE GEORGE

Wait...where is it then? Who found it?

PIETY

Well I haven't. Wait. You think my Granddad may have—

WILLIE GEORGE

No! No, Piety, I don't want to think that.

PIETY

Well...I don't know.

WILLIE-GEORGE

So we could be in big trouble?

PIETY

No, Willie George, don't say that. I wouldn't let anything happen.

WILLIE GEORGE

You wouldn't be able to stop it. A mob of angry white folk would demand it.

PIETY

So if my Granddad did find it then what are we going to do?

WILLIE GEORGE

(WILLIE GEORGE grabs PIETY'S hand)

We'd have to leave as soon as possible.

PIETY

Wait. I have to tell you something. Your mother came by the store today.

WILLIE GEORGE

Here? For what?

PIETY

She asked to see my Granddad.

WILLIE GEORGE

About what?

PIETY

I tried to hear what they were saying but I couldn't hear everything.

WILLIE GEORGE

My Mama? Why would she...what did you hear?

PIETY

I think I heard your mother say something about an agreement...I don't know, and maybe something about my Granddad's family secret. And then he said something about it being her secret too...but I can't be sure, Willie George.

WILLIE GEORGE

Damn it, Piety! What did you hear about my Mama's family secret?

PIETY

I don't know.

WILLIE GEORGE

You don't know? Piety, what do you mean you don't know?

PIETY

I could barely—

WILLIE GEORGE

What did you hear them say?

PIETY

Why are you badgering me, Willie George?

WILLIE GEORGE

Because we have to know! We have to know! What did you hear?

PIETY

What do you want me to say? I couldn't hear everything.

WILLIE GEORGE

You couldn't hear everything or you don't want to tell me?

PIETY

Willie George, what is that supposed to mean?

WILLIE GEORGE

I'm sorry, Piety. I'm sorry. (A beat) Can you think of anything else you may have heard?

PIETY

I think my Granddad is going to send me away. Your mother said something about England...I think.

WILLIE GEORGE

What does my Mama know about England? God, I'm so confused right now.

PIETY

About us?

WILLIE GEORGE

Yes...well, no...uh...not about us...not about me...loving...I have to leave.

PIETY

Take me with you.

WILLIE GEORGE

No.

PIETY

No?

WILLIE GEORGE

I have to go to my Uncle Tolbert's house and then home.

PIETY

Are you coming back for me...for us?

(WILLIE GEORGE looks confused. He says nothing, then slowly nods his head)

PIETY

What if there's no time?

(WILLIE GEORGE just stares at PIETY)

Promise me you'll come back for me. If you don't I can only assume the worst has happened.

(Again WILLIE GEORGE says nothing, but just stares at PIETY.

PIETY steps closer to WILLIE GEORGE as if she going to kiss him.

WILLIE GEORGE imperceptibly moves away from her approach)

PIETY

Please, my Love, promise me.

WILLIE GEORGE

I make this promise to you...I'll come back here to get you...we will—

PIETY

Good, because I can't live without you.

WILLIE GEORGE

Piety, you need to know that I can't—

PIETY

Oh Willie George, I love you...be safe. I don't know what I'll do if anything happens to you.

WILLIE GEORGE

Then pray.

(WILLIE GEORGE exits stage)

End of Scene

ACT 2
Scene 4

SETTING: (THURSDAY AFTERNOON)
Back stock room of Till's General Store

(PIETY paces and begins to pray)

PIETY
Dear Lawd, please protect Willie George and—

TILL
(TILL is standing in the doorway of the stock room)

And what?

PIETY
(PIETY lets out a quick startled scream)

Oh, Granddad...you frightened me. I didn't know you were standing there.

TILL

I don't like you prayin' to the Good Lawd to protect Squire's boy?

PIETY

Oh Granddad...it's nothing, believe me.

TILL

Come here, Piety.

(PIETY goes to him. TILL places 2 chairs
before them and motions for PIETY to sit)

Your daddy, my son, Brinkley Till was a great man gone way too soon. Your mother...your daddy called her Tempy. Her name was Temperance. She named ya Piety. Temperance and Piety. She was from the old country. Had herself an English accent dat your daddy just fell in love with. Dey made me promise to take real good care of you 'fore dey died.

PIETY

And you have, Granddad. You have. And I love you for it.

TILL

Oh Piety. I know you really don't remember dem, how could you? You were still a baby. But dey had so much love for you. Dey died just months apart from each other. Your mother from pneumonia, and although your father escaped it when he was fighting in the war, he died of typhoid fever. Dat disease...

PIETY

Granddad, I don't want to hear about this.

TILL

You needs to, child.

PIETY

I've heard it too many times. It makes me sad. Why are you telling me this again?

TILL

I don't want your Daddy and Momma turnin' over in dem graves out there.

PIETY

What? Why—

TILL

Look me in my eyes and you tell me da truth. What's goin' on between you and Squire's boy?

PIETY

I won't lie to you, Granddad.

TILL

Dat don't sound like no answer.

PIETY

Willie George has never caused anyone any trouble.

TILL

Let me help you out here, Piety. What I am trying to say is—

PIETY

I know you found Willie George' letter to me. But, Granddad, please—

TILL

Has he laid a hand on you?

PIETY

You don't have to worry—

TILL

Answer me! Has Squire's boy laid his black hands on you?

PIETY

No! No Sir. As God is my witness.

TILL

Den I'd be needin' to make sho he never does.

PIETY

No Granddad. What are you going to do?

TILL

Don't you worry your pretty little self 'bout it. I should've made sho nothin' like dis happened a long time ago.

PIETY

Nothing's happened Granddad! Nothing!

TILL

I can't have you fallin' in love with no Nigga. And I sho can't have you fallin' for Squire's boy.

PIETY

What are you going to do? Send me to England to study? I heard you talking to Mrs. Sophronia.

TILL

What else you done hear?

PIETY

Enough to know you've made some agreement with her. Is that why you're sending me away?

TILL

Never you mind why?

PIETY

Then you need to know that I am not going. I refuse to go. You can't make me.

TILL

You thinkin' dis some kind a game here?

PIETY

Oh, Granddad, please listen to me. Please! Willie George hasn't done anything wrong. He's innocent in every way. He's never touched me, never laid a hand on me.

TILL

Stop it, Piety! Stop it! We Till's don't grovel over no Colored folks. We ain't never had and we ain't never will. Get yourself together and go on home.

(TILL stands and turns toward the front of store and heads for the door)

PIETY

Where are you going, Granddad?

(TILL stops, turns, and stares at PIETY)

TILL

I'm goin' see Squire if you don't mind. He and I got some unfinished business we need tendin' to.

PIETY

If you hurt Willie George, I'll never be able to forgive myself. I'll never be able to forgive you, Granddad.

TILL

What's done gotten into you, girl? You choosin' that Colored boy over—

PIETY

I...I...just don't want to—

TILL

Listen closely to me. What you need to know is dat you and Squire's son will never—

PIETY

Because he's a Colored?

TILL

Danm it! Yes! 'Cause he's Colored...first and foremost. And 'cause he's Sophronia's boy—

PIETY

What is wrong with this country? Slavery is over. Why can't a White and a Colored be together? God made us all.

TILL

But the good Lawd ain't never 'tended for the races to mix.

PIETY

How do you know that, Granddad?

TILL

'Cause ain't nothin' good ever come out of it but payin' for our transgressions. I ain't havin' dis conversation with you, child. You just do as I say and go home.

PIETY

I'm so sorry Granddad, but I want to marry Willie George! And I will.

TILL

You can never marry dat boy. You hear me?

PIETY

If I have to run away with him to another world then I will.

TILL

I'll have him lynched before I lose you...lynched right on Main Street so all the Coloreds can see.

PIETY

And have me miserable? I'll hate you for it. You might as well have me lynched too. I'll never—

TILL

Squire's boy is done here! We goin' have ourselves a lynchin'!

(Lights fade to dark)

End of Scene

ACT 2
Scene 5

SETTING: (THURSDAY AFTERNOON)
At the Bonner Home on the front porch

(SOPHRONIA is folding clothes. SQUIRE enters, sneaks up behind her and steals a kiss)

SOPHRONIA

Whew! Squire Lee Bonner, you liked to done scare da very life out of me.

SQUIRE
(SQUIRE is kissing all over SOPHRONIA)

Who you spectin'?

SOPHRONIA

I wasn't spectin' no one, but I specially wasn't spectin' you...leese not dis time of da day. What you doin' home so early fo? Ol' Man Till knows you left work?

SQUIRE

Ol' Man Till don't need to be knowin' my where 'bouts.
(SQUIRE grabs SOPHRONIA by the hips)

SOPHRONIA

Quit bein' so fresh, Squire, I gots work to do. Dese clothes ain't goin' fold demselves, you know.

SQUIRE

You quit tusslin' wit dem clothes. I promise I take care of dem later.

SOPHRONIA

You ain't goin take care of nothin'. Where's Willie George?

SQUIRE

He at Till's workin'. Dat boy as stubborn as a mule. How he ever start likin' dat girl, anyway? You had dem spendin' too much time together as children. I knew I should've kept him wit me dan lettin' you always take him to work wit you.

SOPHRONIA

You blamin' me fo dis now?

SQUIRE

Oh woman, I ain't blamin' no one.

SOPHRONIA

It sho sounds like it to me.

SQUIRE

You want me to blame you?

SOPHRONIA

Dat's a silly question, Squire Lee.

SQUIRE

Not now, Phronie. Not now. I just need to talk some sense into dat boy, is all.

(A beat)

SOPHRONIA

Well...we ain't needin' be worrin 'bout it no more.

SQUIRE

Why you sayin' dat, Phronie?

SOPHRONIA

Ol' Man Till goin' send Piety away to England.

(SQUIRE stares at SOPHRONIA)

SOPHRONIA

What's wrong, Squire? You lookin' like you just saw death.

(SQUIRE says nothing, still staring at her)

Well, what is it? What's wrong?

SQUIRE

Why he goin' do dat?

SOPHRONIA

Alls I knows is dat he is. I heard him say it.

SQUIRE

When? Who he done say it to?

SOPHRONIA

It don't matter—

SQUIRE

It sho do matter.

(TOLBERT and WILLIE GEORGE run onto the porch from the yard)

SQUIRE

What's da matter wit ya'll runnin' up here like dis?

TOLBERT

Squire, we need to talk. All of us...you too, Baby Sis.

SQUIRE

What's wrong?

TOLBERT

Ol' Man Till knows 'bout Willie George and his Granddaughter.

(SQUIRE & SOPHRONIA look at each other)

SQUIRE

Hows you know?

TOLBERT

He found a letter at the store your boy done wrote to his Granddaughter.

SQUIRE

Why did you write a letter to Ol' Man Till's granddaughter? Is you crazy?

WILLIE GEORGE

Why would you ask if I'm crazy? I never even mailed them off, Daddy.

SQUIRE

Whys you writin' letters to a white girl fo anyway, Willie George?

WILLIE GEORGE

Daddy...I'm not allowed to write letters—

SQUIRE

You know deys lynchin' us all over the South fo lookin' at a white woman.

WILLIE GEORGE

There isn't going to be anything to worry about, Daddy. The Ol' man is sending Piety away to England.

(WILLIE GEORGE looks at SOPHRONIA. SQUIRE turns to look at SOPHRONIA, & the TOLBERT looks at her)

SQUIRE

What you done do, woman?

SOPHRONIA

I did what I done had to do. I told him to send her away.

WILLIE GEORGE

How can you tell him to do that, Mama?

SOPHRONIA

I did it to save you, boy! 'Specially now since you said he done found da letter.

SQUIRE

No, Ol' Man Till didn't find the letter, Phronie. I found it.

(SQUIRE pulls the letter from his pocket)

I found it dis morning when I went to work.

(SOPHRONIA looks stunned)

WILLIE GEORGE

Why didn't you say something, Daddy? And why would you tell Ol' Man Till that anyway, Mama?

TOLBERT

(TOLBERT grabs WILLIE GEORGE by the arm and tries to pull him away)

So dere ain't nothin' to be worryin' 'bout den. Let's take a walk, nephew.

WILLIE GEORGE

Why? Why would he even listen to you, Mama? You two got some kind of agreement?

SQUIRE

Let it lone, boy!

TOLBERT

You need to tell Willie George, Baby Sis. It's time he be knowin'.

SOPHRONIA

No! Dere ain't nothin' to tell—

WILLIE GEORGE

Time I knew what? Mama? Uncle Tolbert? Somebody say something.

SQUIRE

I'm sorry, Phronie Mae. If he ever be needin' to know it's now.

SOPHRONIA

Please don't! Don't tell him, Squire. I took care of everything. Ol' Man Till goin' send Piety away! He goin' send her away and everything goin' be alright! I promise.

WILLIE GEORGE

No Mama, it's not! Everything will never be alright, even if he sends Piety away!

TOLBERT

I'm goin' tell him if you don't, Baby Sis.

SOPHRONIA

Don't Tolbert Lee. For da love of Ma-Sis.

SQUIRE

Sit down, son.

WILLIE GEORGE

No thank you. I have to go!

SOPHRONIA

Go where?

SQUIRE

You ain't goin' nowhere. Sit, stand, but you goin' listen. Phronie, Tolbert, he already knows enough. He done figured most of it out. Now y'all go on and tell him the rest.

WILLIE GEORGE

The rest of what?

SOPHRONIA

Why you doing dis, Squire. We said—

(TOLBERT grabs SOPHRONIA. She tries to resist him)

SOPHRONIA

Oh God! Squire, Noooo!

(TOLBERT forces SOPHRONIA away. She beats at his chest as she sobs)

SQUIRE

Dere be a good reason dey don't talk about da family...why we alls decided not to talk 'bout dem.

SOPHRONIA

Squire, for da love of God, don't! Please!

SQUIRE

Ol' Man Lazerus Till—

SOPHRONIA

Don't you dare!

SQUIRE

Well...as you already know, he's your mama and Uncle Tolbert's father.

SOPHRONIA

No Squire! Why? Why you goin go and tell him dat lie?

(SOPHRONIA tries to wrestle herself away from TOLBERT)

WILLIE GEORGE

I knew it! I knew it! Why that man? I don't want him to be —

SQUIRE

Piety's daddy was your mama and your Uncle Tolbert's brother.

TOLBERT

Half-brother!

WILLIE GEORGE

No... I don't want that man to be my Granddaddy! I...I don't want to believe you. I don't want to hear anymore. Tell me they're lying to me, Mama?

(SOPHRONIA is too emotional to speak. She barely makes it to her rocking chair and collapses, exhausted)

TOLBERT

Ain't nobody lyin' to you, nephew.

WILLIE GEORGE

Why?

TOLBERT

I ask da same question every day of my life, nephew.

WILLIE GEORGE

No! Why are you telling me all this now? Why did you have to keep it all a big secret?

SQUIRE

I'm sorry, Willie George—

TOLBERT

I'll tell you why. The Ol' Man was our Massa. He raped my Mama...more than once...over and over again. She was his uh...what dey call em?

SQUIRE

The Bible calls 'em concubines.

TOLBERT

Uh-hm. She was his high yaller concubine.

SOPHRONIA

You shut your mouth, Tolbert Lee Tilly.

TOLBERT

When he raped Ma-Sis she was just at da age fo havin' babies... 'round leven when she done had your mama, thirteen when she done had me.

WILLIE GEORGE

Please! Stop!

TOLBERT

After dat, Ma-Sis done fixed herself good nuff so she ain't be havin' no mo of Massa Till's babies. But dat Ol' man ain't know or ain't care, 'cause he kept takin' Ma-Sis with him. Grannie raised Ma-Sis, your mama, and me as *her* children. That's why we call our mama Ma-Sis... 'cause we thought she was our older sister. One day Ma-Sis tried to run away, but Ol' Man Till done caught her and like to beat her half to death. Soon after she died, Grannie said Ma-Sis heart was broken and couldn't live in dis here world no mo. Dat's when Grannie told us Ma-Sis was our mother.

(SOPHRONIA lets out a loud sob and then groans. SQUIRE goes to console her)

WILLIE GEORGE

(WILLIE GEORGE falls into a chair and buries his head in his hands)

Ma-Sis was high yaller?

SOPHRONIA

Don't say nothin' more, Tolbert Lee.

SQUIRE

He needs to know since he askin', Phronie.

TOLBERT

Dat Mr. Till done raped Grannie too. Da Ol' rascal was Ma-Sis' father.

WILLIE GEORGE

I...I have to go see Piety.

SQUIRE

You heard what your Uncle Tolbert done told you?

WILLIE GEORGE

I still need to see her. I made her a promise.

(WILLIE GEORGE walks in the house. There's a sound of a rifle cocking inside the house and then the sound of a door opening)

SQUIRE

(SQUIRE runs into the house...then comes back)

My rifle is gone. Willie George done ran off with it.

(TOLBERT makes to leave)

SQUIRE

Where you goin' brother-in-law?

TOLBERT

I'm goin' home to get my gun. Ain't nobody fixin' to lay a hand on my family.

SQUIRE

Now you wait one minute, Tolbert. You got Fannie Lou and dem children at home and a new one on da way. You best be mindin' your own family.

TOLBERT

Y'all my family too. I'ma have a lil' talk with Ol' Man Till. He'll listen to me. Ain't I his son?

SQUIRE

Go on home now, Tolbert, and stay dere. I'm goin' handle dis.

(TOLBERT leaves, SQUIRES follows after him)

SOPHRONIA

Where you goin', Squire? Squire?

SQUIRE

I'm goin' get our boy.

SOPHRONIA

Don't let nothin' happen to my daughter, Nettie.

SQUIRE

What? Your daughter? Who's Nettie?

SOPHRONIA

She got a better life than me.

SQUIRE

Who?

SOPHRONIA

Oh God, I got somethin' I need to be tellin' you when you get back.

SQUIRE

What you need to tell me, Phronie? Spit it out, woman.

(A Beat)

I said spit it out, woman!

SOPHRONIA

Ol' Man Till gave me to his son, Mr. Brinkley Till, to be his slave...

SQUIRE

What you just say to me, Phronie Mae?

SOPHRONIA

Dis before you was sold here to Ol' Man Till.

SQUIRE

What you tellin' me, Phronie? Who's Nettie?

SOPHRONIA

She's me and Mr. Brinkley's daughter!

(A Beat)

SQUIRE

(SQUIRE lets out a loud guttural yell)

No!!!!

SOPHRONIA

I'm so sorry, Squire—

SQUIRE

But why is you asking me to save...Nettie? Where is she?

SOPHRONIA

She's Piety.

SQUIRE

But dat girl white...

SOPHRONIA

She passin' but she don't know it.

SQUIRE

She ain't no white girl?

SOPHRONIA

I'm her mama, Squire. Piety my child. She my daughter. I named her Nettie, after my grannie.

SQUIRE

I ain't understandin' any of this—

SOPHRONIA

Mr. Brinkley made me live wit him and his wife. I was dey mulatto house slave. He forbid me to leave his house whiles I was pregnant, den he and his wife took my baby from me da very day I done bring her into dis here world. Dey took her from me, Squire.

SQUIRE

Why?

SOPHRONIA

'Cause Mr. Brinkley and dat woman, his wife, couldn't have demselves no children and Piety looked as white as dem. Dat woman hated lookin' at me on account of how Mr. Brinkley was always lovin' on me...my half-brother.

SQUIRE

Why you ain't never said nothin', Phronie Mae? I would have killed him! I would have—

SOPHRONIA

Dey said if I say one word dey was gone kill me. Ol' Man Till knew too. And when Mr. Brinkley and his wife done died, Ol' Man Till brought me back here. He let me nurse my daughter. Once I weaned her, he took her from me...again. And then you was sold here. And I loved you. And after we was married I begged Ol' Man Till for my daughter back. She was just a little girl. And he done told me da same thing dey done told me, but dat he'd kill you too. So I ain't never said nothin' to you, Squire.

(A beat)

Say somethin', Squire.

SQUIRE

You dat girl's mama? (A Beat) And Mr. Brinkley...

(SQUIRE stares at SOPHRONIA)

SOPHRONIA

I love you, Squire. I ain't never tended to hurt you. Never!

(SQUIRES turns away and exits stage)

(Lights fade to dark)

End of Scene

ACT 2
Scene 6

SETTING:

(THURSDAY NIGHT)

At the Bonner Home on the front porch

(SOPHRONIA is sitting in her rocking chair crying, praying, and knitting)

(The sound of an angry mob and dogs barking is heard in the distance. The sound grows increasingly closer. SOPHRONIA intensifies her praying and her crying)

(The Stage goes dim and everything goes silent. There is a silhouette of a tree that appears up stage. A noose is seen being thrown over a branch of the tree. SOPHRONIA turns and watches in silence. Then the silhouette of a body is hoisted up in the noose. The body struggles...and then goes limp. SOPHRONIA lets out a guttural cry! She begins to wail for her son)

(TOLBERT enters. He stares at the silhouette of the limp body swaying in the dark of the night. He goes over to SOPHRONIA and holds her in his arms. She starts to cry and beats on TOLBERT's chest)

SOPHRONIA

My Baby...my baby! My baby!

TOLBERT

I'm so sorry, Baby-Sis. I tried to stop him. I really tried. I'm so sorry.

SOPHRONIA

(She starts to cry again)

Dey done killed my baby, my only son...my Willie George.

TOLBERT

Dat's...dat's not Willie George, Baby-Sis...

(A beat)

Dat's Squire.

SOPHRONIA

(She pulls away from him)

What! Tolbert Lee! My Squire? Why? What he do? What he do?

(TOLBERT doesn't answer her. He reaches for her hand)

SOPHRONIA

Don't you touch me! What he do, Tolbert Lee? What my Squire do?

TOLBERT

When I caught up to Willie George, Ol' Man Till was already dead.

SOPHRONIA

Willie George done kilt him?

TOLBERT

No. Willie George told Ol Man Till he knows everything and dat he was still goin' run away wit his granddaughter. Da ol' man started yellin' and threatenin' Willie George. He got himself all worked up and den started clutchin' his chest sayin' his heart. Den he fell down as good as dead.

SOPHRONIA

Den why is my Squire hangin' from a tree?

TOLBERT

Word done got out dat Willie George had a gun headin' for Ol' Man Till's. A mob formed...a lynch mob. Squire and I knew no one would believe or even care dat Willie George ain't kill Ol' Man Till. So Squire made me get Willie George away from dere, said he'd take care of everything.

SOPHRONIA

(SOPHRONIA hangs her head and starts to cry again. Between sobs she speaks)
Squire! Why? Why you leave him dere? Why, Tolbert Lee?

TOLBERT

He made me, Baby Sis. He did it fo you. He did it fo his son...fo his family.

(SOPHRONIA starts to cry again. TOLBERT holds her)

SOPHRONIA

Where's my baby boy? Where's my Willie George?

TOLBERT

He ain't here no more.

SOPHRONIA

What you mean?

TOLBERT

He goin' away.

SOPHRONIA

Away? Where?

TOLBERT

A long way from here, Lawd willin'...a very long way from here.

SOPHRONIA

And my daughter. Where is she?

TOLBERT

Baby Sis, you ain't got no daughter.

SOPHRONIA

I lost her too?

TOLBERT

You ain't never had no daughter.

(Someone enters the yard wearing a cloak. SOPHRONIA and TOLBERT stares at the cloaked individual as she reveals her face)

PIETY

Mama?

(Long Beat)

END OF SCENE

END OF PLAY!