

The Emancipation of
Alabaster McGill

by
Jeff Goode

"If you ain't offended,
I ain't doin' it right."

The Emancipation of Alabaster McGill

by Jeff Goode © 2009

[May14, 2009]

ACT ONE

The front porch of Avner Pillicock's house on Main Street, his front yard, and the road that runs by it.

*Enter **ETHAN TOWNLEY** and **EVAN NEWCOMB**.*

ETHAN

See, we jumped that switchback by the ol' tanning shed, and now we come out on Main Street.

EVAN

Now I think you got my head all spun 'round, Ethan. Which way's north?

ETHAN

Look'ee down thataway's the general store by the river bridge where you come across't.

ETHAN points offstage and up.

ETHAN

And up yonder's ol' Deacon Chickory's shack on top o' Mud Hill.

EVAN

Looks awful steep.

ETHAN

He don't get out much. Over there's the ol' bingo church and gambling hall.

EVAN

You do know your way around, I'll give you that.

ETHAN

I reckon it comes o' growin' up in a place and bein' stuck here your whole life an' no way out. If we'd met across the river in Collard's Green, I betcha you'd be the one knowin' your hometown like the back o' your mama's ass.

EVAN

He's a donkey. And are you sure he's gonna be okay tied up out back o' the general store?

ETHAN

Ain't nobody 'round here gonna mess with any ol' ass they picked up in a alley. It ain't that kinda town.

EVAN

He's a donkey, I told ya. And are you sayin' Collard's Green is that kinda town?

ETHAN

Course not. How would I know? I never been there. I mean, how do I know it ain't?

EVAN

It ain't.

ETHAN

See? You could be right.

EVAN

I am right.

ETHAN

If you say so.

EVAN

I do say so.

ETHAN

An' you're entitled to your opinion.

EVAN

It's not an opinion. I been there.

ETHAN

An' I looked across the river at it. So we're even.

EVAN

Yeah, I reckon.

Awkward silence. EVAN turns to the porch behind them.

EVAN

And what's this place? Got a real purty portico.

ETHAN

That's Avner Pillicock's spread. You ever heard o' the Underground Railroad?

EVAN

Heck, yes. Everybody's heard o' that. Just ain't nobody talks about it.

ETHAN

Well, what they don't say is that 'round these parts, it runs right through Avner Pillicock's back fruit cellar.

EVAN

Y'don't say?

ETHAN

No, I do not. And you ain't heard it from me neither, if'n anybody asks.

EVAN

So that's what a Underground Rail depot looks like. I hear tell we got one over in Collard's Green, only ain't nobody admits to knowing where it is.

ETHAN

Well, I don't reckon ol' Avner rightly cares what anybody thinks of him. He's what you call excentric.

EVAN

How do you mean?

ETHAN

For one thing, he's a bona fide boat captain. Only ain't no one ever seen him set foot on the sea.

EVAN

Well, they wouldn't 'round here. This whole county's landlocked, ain't it?

ETHAN

'Cept for the river and it don't go nowhere worth
bein'.

EVAN

How come he ain't a captain in the war?

ETHAN

Avner ain't that kinda captain.

EVAN

What other kind is there?

ETHAN

Merchant marine.

EVAN

So he likes to shop?

ETHAN

That's about the size of it. They say he got
boatloads o' seamen down around N'Orleans. Makes his
fortune shippin' frilly fabrics to and fro. What
with the blockades and all, he's right popular with
the Southern ladies.

EVAN

He should be. Just thinkin' about all that fabric's
got me wishin' I had a boatload o' seamen.

ETHAN

You wanna meet Cap'n Avner? They say he's always
takin' in new recruits.

EVAN

Nah, I reckon I oughta get on my ass and ride it
home, before dark.

ETHAN

Donkey.

EVAN

Daggit! Now you got me sayin' it.

ETHAN

Aw, don't go so soon. We got the whole day ahead of
us and there's still plenty fun to be had.

EVAN

I reckon, but I'll catch a whuppin' if my momma finds
out I crossed over without tellin' her.

ETHAN

Your momma don't let you come across the river
bridge?

EVAN

Sure, she does. But she's like to expect me to bring
her back a sack o' flour when I do.

ETHAN

Your ma's a baker?

EVAN

And a right good one if she coulda been. But she's
got the rheumatism in her fingers now, and can't
knead the dough like she used to.

ETHAN

That's a cryin' shame.

EVAN

My daddy used to say she had a pair o' hands could
bring a stevedore to tears. And sometimes just one
hand, if she had a mind to.
Whatever that means.

*They think about that. They don't know
what it means.*

EVAN

Well, thank'ee for showin' me the town.

ETHAN

You think that's somethin'. You oughta come see it
at night.

EVAN

Why? Is it all lit up like a Christmas tree?

ETHAN

No, but it's a good sight darker. And folks is less
apt to mind a coupla young fellas strollin' down the
Main Street holdin' hands.

EVAN

Would we be doin' that? Holdin' hands if it was
night?

ETHAN

Stick around to sunset and maybe you'll come to find
out.

EVAN

Well, I suppose if y' gonna go twist my arm.

ETHAN twists his arm.

EVAN

Ow! Ow! Leggo! That hurt.

ETHAN

Oh, you love it, and don't fib.

EVAN

See how you like it!

He twists ETHAN's arm.

ETHAN

Ow! Ow!

ETHAN and EVAN fall to rasslin'.

ETHAN

I'll show you what I like!

EVAN

You better not! I ain't dressed for it.

*They rattle. Eventually, they tucker
each other out and collapse in one
another's arms.*

ETHAN

You know what we got here, Evan?

EVAN

What's that, Ethan?

ETHAN

A love that dare not speak its name.

EVAN

I like the sound o' that.

ETHAN

But you didn't hear it from me.

EVAN

No, ma'am.

ETHAN

So you gonna stay to nightfall?

EVAN

Depends on what all you got to do around here in broad daylight.

They look around. There's nothing to do.

ETHAN

You ever done any whittlin'?

EVAN

Is that how you pass the time?

ETHAN

It's one o' life's simple pleasures. A coupla fellas can spend hours and hours whittlin' the time away. If you do it right.

EVAN

How do you do it?

ETHAN pulls out a large pocketknife. EVAN's eyes widen. ETHAN whittles seductively.

ETHAN

Slow an' easy strokes. You don't wanna go too fast. You want your twig to last, don'tcha? But not too slow, neither. You don't want your twig to lose interest. Here, you wanna try your hand?

EVAN

I think I got the hang of it.

EVAN pulls out an even larger pocketknife. ETHAN's eyes widen.

ETHAN

Holy Mother Goliath! Would you look at the girth o' that thing! How'd you come by such a thick whittler?

EVAN

Oh this? Runs in the family. It's whatcha call a hairloom.

ETHAN

You must have pretty good jeans. Otherwise a tool that size is like to wear a hole in your front pocket.

EVAN

I reckon good jeans runs in the family, too. My daddy was a seamstress before he died.

ETHAN

Oh. Did he pass in the war?

EVAN

No, in a bar fight. My ma caught him caddin' around on her and knocked him upside the head with that sour mash appletini he was drinkin'.

ETHAN

Sorry for your loss.

EVAN

It's all right. He left me this pocketknife. And a hope chest full o' dress patterns.

ETHAN

Can I have a look at it?

EVAN

You can have a touch, if you lemme see your'n.

They trade pocket knives. They heft them appreciatively.

ETHAN

It's still kinda warm.

EVAN

Nobody likes a chilly whittler. That's why I always carry it up front.

ETHAN

Here, pull up a stump, I wanna show you a thing or two.

EVAN

Not if I show you first...

They sit and whittle flirtatiously.

Enter AVNER PILLICOCK up on his porch.

AVNER

What in hellnation do you boys think you're doing whittlin' in the street? You wanna get arrested?

ETHAN

Mornin', Cap'n Avner!

EVAN

Can they do that here? Arrest you for whittlin'?

ETHAN

It's a free country. I reckon they can arrest you for anything they got a mind to.

AVNER

Except what you do in the privacy of your own home. Now come on up here on the porch, before you make monkeys o' yourselves.

EVAN

Oh, we wasn't monkey-makin', honest.

ETHAN

Not yet.

AVNER

Well, get on up here anyways and have a cushion seat. Those stumps gotta be hard on your hindquarters.

And you don't want a tender backside if you're gonna be ridin' ass later.

EVAN

(to *ETHAN*)

How'd he know 'bout my donkey?

ETHAN

Thank'ee for the hospitality, Cap'n Avner.

AVNER

Don't you mention it. You boys care for some sweet tea? I was just about to go have Alabaster make us a batch.

EVAN

Thank you kindly, Mr. Avner.

AVNER

Alabaster!

AVNER exits into the house.

EVAN

That Mr. Avner's awful friendly for a hardened criminal.

ETHAN

What makes you think he's hardened?

EVAN

Well, smugglin' slaves has gotta be a pretty serious infraction, ain't it?

ETHAN

Oh, I don't know fractions. I was home schooled. But I reckon it depends on whether you're for the North or South.

EVAN

Oh. Which one are we?

ETHAN

Well, that's kinda complicated. There's a war on, so it depends on the day of the week, the time o' the month, the prevailing winds, and who's drawin' the map. Not to mention, the river's the county line, so you and me could go to bed friends one night and wake up in the mornin' on the wrong side o' public opinion.

EVAN

I hadn't thought of it that way.

ETHAN

Like I said, it's complicated.

EVAN

But I reckon everything's complicated when you really think about it.

They think about it.

ETHAN

Not whittlin'. Whittlin's been the same since the good Lord invented it. That's why it's one o' life's simple pleasures.

The things you can do with a stiff bit o' hardwood and an hour to kill is about the same as it was in the Garden of Eden. And it ain't gonna change no time soon.

EVAN

I dunno, Ethan. If they can change a person's nationality with a few lines on a map, I reckon somebody's gonna find a way to mess up whittlin'.

ETHAN

Then we better enjoy it while we can.

They whittle more passionately.

EVAN

Look'ee there. Who's that comin' up the road? Is that the Sheriff?

ETHAN

No, it's Deputy Lynch.

He's a nice enough fella, for a Klansman.

You getter gimme that back, though.

They swap knives and whittle innocently.

Enter DEPUTY JUDD LYNCH.

LYNCH

Hello there!

ETHAN

Afternoon, Deputy Lynch.

LYNCH

What are you boys doin' up on that porch?

EVAN

Whittlin'.

LYNCH

Shuckadillies! You mind if I join you?

LYNCH runs up on the porch and sits down between them.

ETHAN

Not at all, Deputy Lynch.

LYNCH

I got me a brand new pocketknife, and I been itchin' to get her some action.

LYNCH pulls out a very small pocketknife. He whittles like he's compensating for something.

ETHAN

Take it easy, Deputy Lynch. You wanna make it last.

LYNCH

Don't tell me how to whittle, boy.

LYNCH's twig snaps.

LYNCH

Aw, dagnabbit! That's the third time this week. I gotta look to my diet.

Enter AVNER, carrying a serving tray with sweet tea for everyone.

AVNER

Now, Judd, what did I tell you about invitin' yourself up on my porch uninvited?

LYNCH

(sheepishly)

Not to go do it.

AVNER

Well, then?

LYNCH

These fellas said it was all right by them.

AVNER

Well, it ain't their porch now, is it?

LYNCH

No, I guess not.

ETHAN

Sorry, Mr. Avner. We didn't think you'd mind.

LYNCH

How come you don't never like me on your porch, anyways, Avner?

AVNER

It's not that I don't like you, Lynch. That's a whole 'nother issue.

LYNCH

Then what is it?

AVNER

I told you a hunnert times, it's a matter o' life, liberty and private property. I don't mean nothin' personal by it, but you bein' a deputy and all, it amounts to unlawful search and seizure. What if I was doin' some illegal activity up in here and you secretly discovered it?

LYNCH

Aw, coon-swallow, Avner. Everybody knows what kinda illegal activity you got goin' on, it ain't no secret. And it ain't on the porch.

AVNER

No, but you got no proof of that. Or you prob'ly would've arrested me for it by now.

LYNCH

I surely would. You know I don't stand for that kinda thing.

AVNER

There you go. And how's that gonna look?

LYNCH

I guess you're right. It's like my momma always said. I ain't nothin' but trouble. And a smidgen o' hot sauce.

AVNER

Now what do you got to say for yourself?

LYNCH

(abashed)

I'm sorry. It won't happen again.

AVNER

All right then. And...?

LYNCH

And do you mind if I come set up on your porch and whittle awhile?

AVNER

Go right ahead. You care for some sweet tea?

LYNCH

Thought you'd never ask.

AVNER gives LYNCH a glass of sweet tea.

LYNCH looks around nervously.

EVAN and ETHAN whittle.

LYNCH takes his glass and chugs it all down at one swallow.

LYNCH

You mind if I use your outhouse?

AVNER

Lynch, when are you gonna learn to smoke on the porch like a real man?

LYNCH

Are you callin' me not a real man?

AVNER

I'm sayin' I don't want you smokin' up my outhouse. Smoke on the porch.

LYNCH

I can't do that. What if my dead momma saw me? You know she's watchin' over.

AVNER

That's only cuz you she don't trust you.

LYNCH

You're lucky my momma didn't hear you say that.

ETHAN

You gonna whittle with us, Cap'n Avner?

AVNER

What kinda host would I be if I wasn't up to swappin' splinters with my guests?

AVNER pulls out a very ornate scrimshaw-handle knife and whittles elaborately.

EVAN

Gee golly Clementine! That's a right handsome handgrip you got, Cap'n Avner.

AVNER

You like it? That's whatcha call a scrimshaw blade.

ETHAN

You mean that's a real live whale bone??

LYNCH

Kinda dinky for a whale.

AVNER

It ain't the whole bone, Judd.

LYNCH

Just the tip?

EVAN

Where'd you come by somethin' like that?

AVNER

I got it in the merchant marine.

LYNCH

Ol' Avner's a sailor man.

EVAN

I heard tell. So why come you ain't in the war,
Cap'n Avner?

AVNER

Never much cared for fightin'. No good ever come of
it.

LYNCH

What about make up sex? I hear that's pretty good.

AVNER

Well, you get made up some time and let me know,
Judd. but the way I see it, when folks are of two
minds about somethin', it's always best to turn the
other cheek and leave well enough alone and let 'em
have it both ways.

LYNCH

Not me, I like a good scrap. My uncle runs a
regiment, an' I'd be in the war right now if I didn't
have to be here keepin' the peace.

EVAN

Would you be fightin' for the North or the South,
Deputy Lynch?

LYNCH

It don't matter none. Long as I'm killin' bad guys,
I don't care what side I'm on.

AVNER

Well, the Army's loss is our loss, too.

EVAN

I don't care for fightin', neither, but I'm joinin'
the Navy first chance I get old enough.

ETHAN

Are you a strong swimmer?

EVAN

Don't know. I never tried. But I do like the idea
o' bein' up on deck of a sailin' ship, clingin' to
the mainmast, with a salty taste in my mouth and a
face full o' seabreeze.

AVNER

Who's your friend, Ethan?

ETHAN

This here's Evan. Evan, Cap'n Avner Pillicock. And that's Deputy Lynch.

LYNCH

You can call me "sir".

EVAN

Pleasure to meet you both.

LYNCH

You know, now you mention it, you don't look like you're from around here, Evan.

EVAN

No, sir. It's my first time.

LYNCH

First time whittlin'?

EVAN

No sir, first time in town.

LYNCH

Well, word of advice, we don't get many strangers around here. Except them what comes across the bridge from Collard's Green to use the general store. And most o' them never make it this far inland.

EVAN

Why not?

LYNCH

Cuz if they's smart, which they never ain't, they know they's unwelcome.

AVNER

Now, Judd, there's no call to be unsociable.

LYNCH

I'm just lettin' him know he oughta watch his backside. Not everybody around here is as tolerant o' foreigners as I am.

AVNER

You? Tolerant?

LYNCH

Matter of fact, I was just about to invite these boys up to a lynching we got goin' on later on tonight, if you're still around come sundown. Me and some o' the youth group are gonna dress up like wild Injuns and sneak across the river to Collard's Green and see if we can't beat us some Greenies. Meet up by the ol' bingo church at moonrise, if you wanna tag along. And bring feathers.

EVAN

Greenies?

LYNCH

I plum forgot you're not from around here. You fit right in. Folks from Collard's Green. That's what we call 'em. Greenies. Collards. Donkey-doers.

EVAN

What?

LYNCH

They got a lot a donkeys. Most of 'em can't afford a horse.

EVAN

What??

LYNCH

Donkey straddlers. Donka-diddlers. Donka-donk-donks. Mama-did-a-donkey.

EVAN

That's enough!

LYNCH

Well, you get the idea. The list goes on and on. Ass pirates.

EVAN

I don't think I like the sound o' some o' those names.

LYNCH

Well, you ain't supposed to. Wouldn't be name-callin' if we made 'em out to sound purty.

EVAN

Y'know, Deputy Lynch, I only just met you, so I hope I'm not outta line...

ETHAN

Not yet, you ain't. But maybe if you don't keep your mouth shut...

LYNCH

Let the boy speak. It's a free country, ain't it? Why you think I got a gun? Go on, boy. What's on your mind?

EVAN

And that's another thing, I don't like it you callin' me "boy".

LYNCH

Well, if I knew it bothered you, I wouldn't have brought it up. We'll come up with a new word. How does "manling" suit you?

EVAN

If it's all the same, I'd rather you didn't call me nothin' of the sort.

LYNCH

We gotta call you somethin' or how're you gonna know the difference?

EVAN

What difference?

LYNCH

Difference between you and whatever you are and the rest of everybody else and what's normal.

AVNER

I don't think we need a name for folks just bein' themselves, Judd.

LYNCH

Course we do. If there ain't a name for it, how's he gonna know his place?

(to EVAN)

What about "pup"? Do you like "pup"?

EVAN

Oh, for cryin' out loud!

They are startled by the sound of a loooooonng, descending scream, a thump, and a grunt.

EVAN

What was that?

AVNER

Old Deacon Chickory's at it again. I better see if we got any smelling salts. Alabaster!

AVNER exits into the house.

EVAN

Deacon Chickory? Ain't that the fella you said lives in the big shack up on Mud Hill?

ETHAN

Sure enough. Looks like he took a tumble off the front stoop and slid all the way down to Main Street.

LYNCH

(shouting toward the street)

Get up, daggit!

EVAN

Ain't somebody gonna help him?

LYNCH

What do you think I'm trying to do?

(shouting toward the street)

Get up, y' dang fool! There's a carriage comin'! You wanna get yourself run over? Quit lyin' in the street!

Sound of a carriage approaching.

ETHAN

Look out!

EVAN

Whoa!!

Sound of horses whinnying. They all recoil in horror.

ETHAN

Holy Saint Moses!

EVAN

That was close!

LYNCH

It's a miracle he's still in one piece. No, two pieces. No, that's his hat.

Enter AVNER with a bottle of smelling salts.

AVNER

Here you go, Judd, why don't you go help him up?

LYNCH

Why do I gotta do it?

AVNER

Because you're a public servant.

LYNCH

I don't know what you mean by that, but I don't think I like the sound o' what you're implicatin'.

AVNER

It means you're the only one here with a badge.

LYNCH

Sure it does. Next you'll be havin' me snake out your outhouse cuz I'm the only one got a decent crowbar.

AVNER

God love it, Lynch. Go help the man.

LYNCH

I'm a 'thority figure. You don't tell me what to do. I tell you. And I say Ethan should help him up. Ethan, go on resuscitate the man.

EVAN

I think he's comin' around on his own.

ETHAN

Yeah, look, here he comes limpin' over.

LYNCH

Now, see there, Avner? You 'bout caused a ruckus over nothing. Why you always gotta be so controversial? The fella's fine.

AVNER

No thanks to you.

LYNCH

You're welcome. Mornin', Deacon Chickory!

Enter DEACON CHICKORY, hobbling.

AVNER

You all right there?

CHICKORY

I 'bout threw out my hip again comin' down Mud Hill.

ETHAN

We saw.

CHICKORY

Think I twisted my ankle, too. Nothin' a shot o' rye whiskey won't mend.

AVNER

All I got is sweet tea and smellin' salts.

CHICKORY

Ooh! Gimme some o' that!

CHICKORY grabs the jar of the smelling salts and takes a big snort, then dumps the rest of it into his sweet tea and drinks.

LYNCH

You fall off your door stoop again, Deacon?

CHICKORY

No, I come down on purpose, this time. The Missus was gettin' on me to go down to the general store and fetch her some canned goods.

And I was tired o' hearin' her caterwaulin' about it, so I stepped out for a smoke. Anybody got a cigarette?

LYNCH looks around furtively.

LYNCH

(sotto voce)

Not in front o' my mamma.

AVNER

You know, if you let us know what to get you, one o' these young bucks'd be more'n happy to bring it on up to you.

CHICKORY

And have strangers on my property? No, thank you!

AVNER

Well, they wouldn't be strangers once you got to know 'em.

CHICKORY

In my experience, the only good injun is a dead injun.

AVNER

We're not talkin' about injuns.

CHICKORY

Well, whatever we're talkin' about, it's only good when it's dead.

LYNCH

We're talkin' 'bout a young pup from out of town. And your half sister Mallory's boy.

ETHAN

Mornin', Uncle Chickory.

CHICKORY

Don't tell me what's good about it! You're not the one took a wrong step comin' out the front door and slid all the way down to Main Street. I 'bout got run over flat by that horse and carriage come around the corner too fast.

EVAN

We saw that.

CHICKORY

There oughta be a law.

AVNER

What do you want? A speed limit?

CHICKORY

That's a grand idea! A limit on speed. We oughta put out a law on gravity, too, 'fore it gets outta hand.

LYNCH

What have you got agin speed?

CHICKORY

I got nothin' agin goin' too fast in general. Didn't I run the church brothel before that Sheriff tried to shut us down.

LYNCH

Well, if you'd give the man a discount. That's all he wants.

CHICKORY

No discounts!! And no racin' down Main Street. It's one thing you wanna go tearin' 'round the countryside. But you come into town, there's women and children. They're slow to react. You gotta keep it under a gallop.

LYNCH

Maybe it's women and children we oughta teach to stay outta the streets.

CHICKORY

They're not the one's causin' the problem.

LYNCH

They're the one's gettin' hurt. Same thing.

AVNER

You wouldn't be takin' the side o' the horses on account o' you just bought that new buggy, wouldja, Judd?

LYNCH

Ain't nobody supposed to know about that yet, Avner. I want it to be a surprise.

AVNER

It's gonna be a surprise, all right, the first time you come careenin' 'round the corner onto Main Street.

ETHAN

You got a new buggy, Judd?

LYNCH

Bought it off the black market.

AVNER

Oh, tailwhiskers! You did not buy it off the black market. You got it used off o' me.

LYNCH

Yeah, and I betcha you used it to smuggle runaway slaves. And if there's a blacker market than that, I don't wanna know about it.

CHICKORY

You sold him your buggy, Avner?

AVNER

I'm gettin' too old to go galavantin' around town in a sports-carriage. Thinkin' about gettin' one o' them new horseless models, though. Better for the environment. Less of it to step in.

CHICKORY

Well, if that boy's gonna have a buggy, I wanna put it to a vote at the next election whether we have a "no gallop" zone in front o' my house.

AVNER

All right, we'll get up a petition.

LYNCH

That ain't fair! What if he wins?

AVNER

Well, Judd, that's what elections are partly all about. Everybody gets a vote, and we settle things fair and square.

ETHAN

Sounds fair to me.

EVAN

Yeah, that sounds fair.

CHICKORY

I'm for it.

AVNER

It's unanimous. We'll start a petition.

LYNCH

No, it ain't! I wanna demand a recount.

AVNER

I suppose that's your right. Ethan?

ETHAN

It still sounds fair to me.

EVAN

Yeah, that's fair.

CHICKORY

I'm for it.

AVNER

Unanimous again.

LYNCH

Dammit! But wait! That Evan boy ain't from around here. He don't get a vote. Let's count 'em again.

AVNER

It's still gonna come out the same, Judd.

LYNCH

How is that possible?

LYNCH counts on his fingers.

EVAN

All due respect, deputy. You keep forgettin' to count yourself.

LYNCH

Dammit! All right, one more recount.

AVNER

That's enough o' that. The majority has spoken.

LYNCH

Well, what if the majority don't know it's ass from a teakettle?

AVNER

Then you might wanna think about switchin' to coffee. Now, you gonna be all right, Deacon Chickory?

CHICKORY

Yeah, threw out my hip a little. Mighta ruptured a disk. I'll be fine. But I'm not lookin' forward to climbin' back up that hill with a sack o' potatoes.

AVNER

Well, why don't you come on up on the porch and set a spell.

CHICKORY

Much obliged.

EVAN

If you don't mind my askin', Deacon Chickory, why don't you build yourself a staircase up the front hill? Make for an easier climb of it.

CHICKORY

No, thank you! That's a slippery slope.

AVNER

It sure is. And you wouldn't go slidin' onto Main Street every time you leave the house if you'd built some stairs up it ten years ago when you broke your ankle the first time.

CHICKORY

I'm not talkin' 'bout Mud Hill. You think I don't know that thing's slicker than a pig's vagina?

EVAN

Then what's the slippery slope?

CHICKORY

Building a staircase.

LYNCH

How you reckon?

CHICKORY

Because you build one step, next thing you know you gotta build another one. Once you build two steps, you're gonna want a third. Before you know it, you got half a staircase goin' up the hill to the house.

ETHAN

You're not gonna get too far on half a staircase.

CHICKORY

Don't I know it! You build half a staircase, you might as well build the other half, or the whole town's gonna think you're a jackass for just building half a staircase up half a hill.

EVAN

So why don't you do that?

CHICKORY

Oh, no! I know where that leads. Right up to my front door. And once my wife sees it, she's gonna want handrails and a porch and a proper doorframe on the windward side so people don't get splinters climbin' in the windows all the time.

LYNCH

And what's wrong with that?

CHICKORY

It's a slippery slope, I tell ya!

LYNCH

Well, you make a good point.

AVNER

Oh, for the love o' Saint Christ. What's slippery about having a nice sturdy staircase leads right up to your front porch?

It ain't a slope, it's just common sense.

LYNCH

Common sense is what killed the cat.

AVNER

No, that's curiosity killed it.

LYNCH

Not my cat.

ETHAN

You've got a cat?

LYNCH

Used to. But he kept outsmartin' me. So I shot him.
I don't want nothin' in my kitchen with more'n half a
brain.

CHICKORY

Sound like you need a wife.

AVNER

And you need a staircase.

CHICKORY

Like I need another hole in my head.

AVNER

You wouldn't have the first hole if you hadn't slid
clean through that picket fence last spring.

CHICKORY

I'm not gettin' stairs and that's the final straw!

AVNER

Well, why not?

CHICKORY

Because once you build yourself some front steps,
it's only a matter of time before you got visitors
come a-callin'. Neighbor ladies bringin' pies.
Church groups comin' by to check on ya, see if your
hip's healin' proper.

AVNER

And what's wrong with that?!

CHICKORY

It's a clear and present threat to my freedom of
religion, ain't it?

EVAN

Church groups?

CHICKORY

No. Neighbor ladies. It's like the good book says,
"Love thy neighbor." But what if I don't feel like
lovin' my neighbor? What if I wanna hate my neighbor
and be left alone?

LYNCH

Well, that's understandable.

CHICKORY

And if I do love my neighbor, why, that's adultery!
So I'm goin' to blazes either which way.

EVAN

So bein' neighborly is a slippery slope?

CHICKORY

You don't have to tell me! Next thing you know, it
ain't just neighbors. You got vagrants and
undesireable's come a-knockin', too.

Hangin' out on your porch. Drinkin' up all your sweet tea.

(to AVNER)

I'll have some more o' that, by the by.

LYNCH

Oh, hog waller! We ain't got all that many undesirables 'round these parts to begin with. I oughta know, I been tryin' to catch one for years.

CHICKORY

Trust me, give 'em half a chance, they'll find you. Just you wait.

AVNER

Chickory, I got my front door right off o' Main Street, and I don't got undesirables hangin' out on my porch.

CHICKORY squints suspiciously at each of them.

CHICKORY

Then maybe it's the desirables you gotta watch out for. My wife's a red-blooded America woman o' half my age. You think she wouldn't leave me in a heartbeat if a better man come a-courtin' on Valentine's Day?

AVNER

You think your wife is gonna leave you for a box o' chocolates and a bouquet of flowers?

CHICKORY

My wife'd leave me if I untied her from the wall sconce.

LYNCH

Well, maybe if you kept your lady satisfied, she wouldn't have to worry about runnin' off with the first eligible stranger comes along.

CHICKORY

Aha! So it's you I gotta keep an eye on! I knew it was one o' you. You better watch your back, Deputy Lynch. I know where you live. Or I can find out. The town ain't that big.

LYNCH

I ain't after your wife.

CHICKORY

Well, she's after you. You think I ain't seen the look in her eye when she stands at the kitchen window, starin' out at all the other fish in the sea?

EVAN

You can see the sea from your house?

CHICKORY

That's what I asked her! But it turns out she wasn't just lookin' at fish...

CHICKORY glares at LYNCH.

LYNCH

I ain't even met your wife.

CHICKORY

And you ain't gonna get the chance, if I get through with you!

CHICKORY whips out an old pocketknife.

LYNCH

Whoa! Take it easy there, Deacon.

CHICKORY

You can have my wife when you pry her from my cold dead fingers!

LYNCH

I ain't got no designs on your lady-bride. I'll swear it on a stack o' church Bibles.

CHICKORY

Hell, those ain't nothin' but old dime novels, we painted black to decorate the pews.

LYNCH

I'll swear it on my favorite shotgun then!

CHICKORY

Well, why didn't you say so, Lynch, goddammit? I wouldn'ta suspected you if I knowed you was a church-goin' man.

LYNCH

Jesus Criminently! How many crosses does a man have to burn in people's yards before they get it through their heads he's a devoted Christian?

CHICKORY puts his pocketknife away.

EVAN

You wanna sit and whittle with us, Deacon Chickory?

CHICKORY

Nah, my blade is rusted shut. I'll just watch.

LYNCH

You went and threatened me with a rusty knife, you ol' coot?

CHICKORY

You watch your mouth! I'll still give you a nasty case o' lockjaw.

LYNCH

I oughta run off with your wife just to teach you a lesson.

CHICKORY

Y'see? This is what I'm talkin' about.

AVNER

Don't listen to him, Deacon, he's all hot air.

(smells something)

And you're some other kinda air. Sweet wind o' mercy! You gotta let us know before you pass gas on the porch.

CHICKORY

Now you're gonna infringe my freedom o' speech??

This is exactly what I tried to warn you about!

AVNER

And that's all I'm askin' for is a little warning!

CHICKORY

All I'm sayin' is: This is how it happens! One thing leads to another. The minute you let a stranger into your home. Or outside your home. Or the same city block as your home. That's a slippery slope. And it all goes downhill from there. Next thing you know, you lose your wife, you're passin' gas, your friends've got lockjaw, and quicker'n you can say "Cockamamie doctor's got a lock on Mamie's clock"...

ALL FOUR: ETHAN / EVAN / AVNER / LYNCH

CockamamiedoctorsgotalockonMamie'sclock--

CHICKORY

...BLAM! You're makin' love to a donkey in a Tijuana sex show. And all cuz you couldn't leave well enough alone.

LYNCH

Are you talkin' about beastuality?

AVNER

How do you get from building one step at the bottom of a slick hill to doin' a burro burlesque in Mexico?

CHICKORY

I thought I explained that. Weren't you listenin'?

AVNER

There ain't no slippery slope leads a man to makin' sweet love to his livestock.

LYNCH

And it's a damn shame, if you ask me.

CHICKORY

Do I gotta explain everything like it's Sund'y school? All right, come sit on my lap, boy.

EVAN sits on CHICKORY's lap.

CHICKORY

All right, look. Y'got your slippery slope.

EVAN

Right.

CHICKORY

And next thing y'know...

EVAN

Uh huh.

CHICKORY

One thing leads to another...

EVAN

Yeah?

CHICKORY

Come to find out...

EVAN

Okay?

CHICKORY

Bestuality is legal!

LYNCH

'bout time!

EVAN

I think I have to go home.

AVNER

What did you just do to that boy?

CHICKORY

One little step in the right direction, and that's it! It's all over! You're makin' love to a dog. Or a horse. Or worse yet, you're the dog, and the horse is makin' love to you. And then, just when you think things can't get no worse...

EVAN

Uh oh.

CHICKORY

You up and move down to Mexico.

LYNCH

Now hold on! There ain't no team o' wild horses gonna drag me kickin' and screamin' over my dead body to go live in Mexico.

CHICKORY

You say that now. But you ain't seen a Tijuana donkey show.

LYNCH

I'd sooner live like a donkey in Collard's Green with a dirty Greenie wife and ten little Collard children as move to Mexico.

EVAN

Are you sayin' living in Collard's Green ain't no better than living in Mexico?

LYNCH

I'm sayin' Collard's Green ain't no better than livin' in God's own Hell. But it's a helluva lot better than livin' in Mexico.

EVAN

I'm from Collard's Green.

LYNCH

What did you call me?!

EVAN

I'm one o' your dirty Collards.

CHICKORY

Watch your mouth, boy!

ETHAN

Evan...

LYNCH

You told me you was from out o' town!

EVAN

Collard's Green is out o' town!

LYNCH

Don't you split hares with me, boy. You lied to us! Avner, you got any rope?

AVNER

Now calm down Judd. Evan's a guest in my house. You be civil.

LYNCH

Oh, I'll be civil. Word of advice, manling. From one civilian to another. You may think it's okay to be a Collard over in Collard's Green.

But I wouldn't go blurtin' it around over this side o' the bridge. We're at war, in case you forgot.

AVNER

We ain't at war with Collard's Green.

LYNCH

How do we know that for sure? War changes things. It changes everything. It even changes things that don't particularly need changin', but now's as good a time as any. If we're at war, how do we really know who's with us and who's against us?

EVAN

I dunno. Which one are you?

LYNCH

You ask a lot o' questions, boy...

AVNER

Now, fellas, this ain't doin' nobody no good. You know what they say about a porch divided against itself?

LYNCH

I don't rightly care, as long as I get half a porch out of it.

EVAN

I wouldn't wanna share a half a porch with you anyways.

LYNCH

I'll get my crowbar.

AVNER

Now, nobody's bustin' up my porch over one little war. If you wanna take sides, you best take it outside. Cuz if you're gonna stay here and talk politics, you ain't from nowhere.

CHICKORY

I'm not comfortable talkin' about this. And my hip is too sore to walk away. Can we go back to whittlin' in silence?

LYNCH

And I ain't comfortable whittlin' with no Collard.

AVNER

Well, you don't got a choice in the matter.

LYNCH

I got somethin' better. I got a vote!

AVNER

No more votin', Judd, I told ya.

LYNCH

This is a democracy, ain't it? We oughta be able to vote our troubles away. Now all in favor of lettin' Evan stay on our porch and ruin everything for everybody say "Aye."

EVAN

Aye!

ETHAN

Aye!

CHICKORY

Aye!

AVNER

It's not your porch.

LYNCH

All opposed?

Silence.

EVAN

That's you.

LYNCH

Oh. Nay!

ETHAN

Three to one.

LYNCH

All right, all in favor of stringin' up Evan to the nearest tree for bein' a dirty Collard?

ALL FOUR: ETHAN / EVAN / AVNER / CHICKORY

Nay!

LYNCH

All in favor o' just roughin' him up a little?

ALL THREE: ETHAN / EVAN / AVNER

Nay!

CHICKORY

Oh, I'd like to see that.

LYNCH

That's two ayes!

AVNER

And three nays. Now cut it out, Lynch. No more votin' on my porch. Till you calm down, this is a democracy-free zone.

LYNCH

Don't try to tell me how to vote! All right, all in favor of goin' over to Chickory's porch and holdin' more votes up there?

ETHAN

I think we're good here.

CHICKORY

You're not gettin' me up that hill.

LYNCH

Gawd, I hate democracy! It never works.

AVNER

Well, you better get used to it. Cuz that's one thing you can't just vote away.

LYNCH

We'll see about that.

EVAN

Ethan, who's that stormin' up the street?

ETHAN

Looks like Mr. Baggot the grocer. The way he's huffin' and puffin', he musta run all the way up from the general store.

GROCER BAGGOT storms in, waving a telegram.

AVNER

Mornin', Grocer Baggot!

BAGGOT

Pah! What's good about it?

LYNCH

Aha! Here's a man after my own temperament! We gotta have us a re-vote.

AVNER

We're not havin' a re-vote. Let it lie, Lynch.

LYNCH

Now, Avner, we gotta at least hear the man out. Come on up here, Neighbor Baggot. Now you'd vote a dirty Collard off o' this here porch, wouldn't you?

BAGGOT

What do I care about your goddamn Collards? We're about to be overrun.

AVNER

With what? What are you talkin' about?

BAGGOT

You don't mean to tell me none o' you all's heard the news?

ETHAN

No, we just been mindin' our own whittlin'.

LYNCH

What is it, Grocer Baggot? You sound like you gotta hornet in your bonnet.

BAGGOT

You'll wish it was hornets when you hear what just come over the wire.

AVNER

You been to the telegraph office? What's the news?

BAGGOT

You better brace your buckskins, it's about the worst news imaginable.

CHICKORY

Better not be another mudslide. I still ain't cleaned up from the last one.

BAGGOT

It's worse than a mudslide.

CHICKORY

A waterslide?

BAGGOT

No!

LYNCH

Well, what is it?

BAGGOT

This oughta make you at least happy, Avner. I just come from the telegraph office and word from Washington is they're sayin' it sounds like that there President o' yours is thinkin' about plannin' on freein' the slaves.

AVNER

What the--?

ETHAN

No...

EVAN

He wouldn't do that, would he?

LYNCH

That ain't funny, Baggot.

CHICKORY

You take it back!

BAGGOT

You think I'm joshin'? Well, you don't have to believe me. You can just read it yourself in this here telegram.

He shoves the telegram at them. ETHAN, EVAN and LYNCH exchange embarrassed glances. CHICKORY squints near-sightedly. BAGGOT, exasperated, takes the telegram back.

BAGGOT

All right, you just have to trust me. Now, what do you have to say for yourself, Avner Pillicock? I hope you're happy!

AVNER

Oh for the love o' salt peter! Why in God's green tarnation would you think that's the kinda news'd make me happy?

BAGGOT

I thought I heard tell you was one o' them abolitioners what's always goin' 'round belly-achin' about emancipation.

AVNER

The hell I am! I oughta knock you sideways for sayin' it.

EVAN

But don't you run a stop on the Underground Railroad?

AVNER

And so what if I do? I hope you ain't gonna hold that agin me, after you 'bout drunk up all my sweet tea.

EVAN

No, sir.

AVNER

And here I voted for you.

CHICKORY

It ain't nobody's business if a man's got a right to practice his freedom o' religion in the privacy of his own fruit cellar.

ETHAN

What's religion got to do with helpin' runaway slaves?

CHICKORY

Don't you read your Bible, Ethan?!

ETHAN

Well, when you put it that way, I guess I see your point.

LYNCH

They got slavery in the Bible? Where tell?

CHICKORY

Where in the Bible? Hell, I don't know. Why do you think I go to church? So I don't have to read it myself.

EVAN

What about the Old Testament?

CHICKORY

There ya go!

EVAN

What about the time God freed the slaves outta Israel?

CHICKORY

Amen!

ETHAN

I thought Moses freed the slaves outta Israel.

BAGGOT

Now, that is just plain blasphemy!

ETHAN

Sorry.

BAGGOT

God freed the slaves. Moses was just following orders. Moses was a slave himself. How's he gonna free anybody?

ETHAN

I said I was sorry.

AVNER

That's like saying Harriet Tubman runs the Underground Railroad when anybody knows she's a conductor at best.

BAGGOT

More of a baggage handler, ain't she?

LYNCH

Maybe a caboosineer.

CHICKORY

So when it come to pass that God decided it was high time to free the slaves, he turns to Moses and says, "Egyptian, free thyself." And Moses does. And that's the story o' the Old Testament.

ETHAN

But what's that got to do with our current state of current affairs?

CHICKORY

Because it means that God is agin slavery. Right there in black and white. And sometimes red.

LYNCH

Yeah, but them was Jewish slaves. Everybody knows Jews make the worst slaves.

BAGGOT

Why you gotta be so close-minded, Lynch? Have you ever enslaved a Hebrew?

LYNCH

What? No, of course not. I never been outta Kentucky.

BAGGOT

They might make mighty fine slaves, for all you know.

AVNER

Who do you think built the pyramids?

EVAN

It was the Egyptians, wasn't it?

AVNER

Egyptian slaves built the pyramids. And that was the Hebrews.

ETHAN

But they was just following orders, like he said, so really it was the Pharaoh built the pyramids, seein' as it was all his idea.

BAGGOT

That's the trouble with you abolitioners, Avner. Always trying to give slaves credit for something they didn't do. Next you'll be sayin' it's slaves pick all the cotton and take it to market and make all the money that keeps the southern half of our economy going strong.

AVNER

Now you're puttin' words in my mouth. I never said slaves was good for nothin'. Leastways the economy.

EVAN

But isn't that what all the fussin' and fightin's about? All o' them plantations down south need slaves to keep makin' the cotton to survive.

BAGGOT

You see what you've gone and done, Avner?

(to EVAN)

God makes the cotton, boy. The plantation owns the cotton. Slaves is just the middleman. The South don't need no slaves to survive. If they freed every last one of 'em tomorrow, the cotton'd still get itself picked the day after.

ETHAN

How?

LYNCH

I hear Hebrews is mighty fine slaves.

CHICKORY

Now you're just talkin' foolish.

BAGGOT

Southern ingenuity, that's how.

LYNCH

Are you sayin' white folks'd pick the cotton?

CHICKORY

That seems a mite far-fetched.

BAGGOT

Course not. Why would they wanna go and do what they already got plenty enough black folks want to do for 'em?

EVAN

But not if the President gets his way, they won't. Will they?

BAGGOT

Well, think about it. Put yourselves in their shoes a minute.

LYNCH

No, thank you. I got enough trouble stringin' up my own bootlaces.

BAGGOT

Supposin' you was a slave. And you spent your whole life bein' a slave. Well, you'd be pretty good at it by now, don't you think?

ETHAN

Not me, I'm all thumbs.

BAGGOT

You got a career. You got job security. One day you're fat and happy singin' show tunes in the cottonfields, and next day you get the bad news: You're free. Now you got no job, no prospects. And no work experience. You want to go back to Africa, of course, but you can't afford the passage. And to top it all off, you got family to feed.

EVAN

When you put it that way, they was better off workin' the plantation.

BAGGOT

That's right. So what happens when your old boss comes 'round a coupla days later, says, "I'll tell you what: How about you come on back home and pick us some cotton and I'll give you each a dollar a month?"

ETHAN

A dollar a month?! Why, that's highway robbery!

CHICKORY

It's worse than that, it's horse thievery!

LYNCH

Horse theft?! That's a hangin' offense. I'll go get some rope!

BAGGOT

Now calm down. Get back here, Lynch. They pay 'em a dollar to work, sure enough. But they charge 'em two for room and board and it all evens out.

EVAN

Well, that sounds like it works out better for everybody.

BAGGOT

Course, it does. Emancipation'll be better for the slaves because they still get to be slaves, but they'll get paid for it.

And the plantations'll be makin' an extra dollar a head every month. And that's what I mean by southern ingenuity.

EVAN

Well, then, so why don't we want that?

CHICKORY

Haven't you been paying attention, boy? It changes the way we're used to doing things.

EVAN

But it changes things for the better, right?

CHICKORY

Oh for criminy's sakes. What's better about being different?

EVAN

But he said--

CHICKORY

Look, it's like this: First you change things for the better. And maybe that seems like a good idea at the time. But if that works out, God forbid, then folks are gonna want to change a few more things for the better. And a few more. Pretty soon everything's changed for the better and nothing's the same, and that's a change for the worse!

BAGGOT

And once everything's all new and different, you got nothing to fall back on. And then where will you be?

EVAN

Somewhere else?

BAGGOT

That's right! Somewhere else. Hell, for example. That's somewhere else.

AVNER

Or San Francisco. That's sure as hell somewhere else.

LYNCH

It sure as hell ain't here.

CHICKORY

Or how 'bout Hell's Kitchen, Manhattan City, New York. How'd you like to live there?

LYNCH

No, thank you.

BAGGOT

But that's where we're gonna end up if this keeps up. First stop New York. Then San Francisco. Then to hell in a handbasket. And all because the goddamn President--God love him--

ALL

God love him.

BAGGOT

Couldn't leave well enough alone!

AVNER

It's like the time they built that bridge over from Collard's Green.

After they had that big fire burnt up their downtown. Wasn't it good for the local economy, at first?

LYNCH

Sure, 'cause we had all them Collards comin' over here buyin' up our goods and shopping at the general store.

AVNER

But you build a bridge, it's a slippery slope, isn't that right, Deacon?

CHICKORY

Yup.

AVNER

(to BAGGOT)

You own the general store. How was business before they put in that footbridge?

BAGGOT

Bad. Purt near bankrupt.

AVNER

But now we got a bridge, and you're about the richest man in two counties.

BAGGOT

That's right.

AVNER

And now you couldn't get rid o' them Collards if you wanted to.

BAGGOT

Y'got that right. Their goddamn kids is runnin' in and out o' my store all the live long day, buyin' up candy and cigarettes. Runnin' errands for their parents. Gettin' their sticky hands all over the money I gotta put in my till.

AVNER

How you think they'd take it if you put up a sign says, "No Collards"?

BAGGOT

They wouldn't. I'd be dead broke in a week.

LYNCH

It's the chickens runnin' the henhouse is what it is.

CHICKORY

Do you realize, thanks to that goddamn bridge, there's folks I couldn't even see from my side of the river, and now I gotta pass 'em on the street and say "How do" if they even half-way smile at me? And ask 'em "How's your kin?" and talk about the weather when I see 'em in church.

LYNCH

I can't hardly go to my Klan meetings no more, we got so many Collards showin' up to help with the lynchings.

BAGGOT

It's not two years since they put in that bridge and now some of my best friends in the world is folks used to be dirty Collards, and you know how that makes me feel?

ETHAN

Dirty?

EVAN

I'm from Collard's Green.

BAGGOT

All right. So think how you're gonna feel a coupla years down the line, when you got friends used to be slaves.

LYNCH

You just made my skin creep.

AVNER

Soon as you let other people into your way of life, it stops being your way of life and starts being "our" way of life. And that ain't no life at all.

ETHAN

So that's why you're against abolition, even though you're an abolitioner?

AVNER

I told ya, I ain't no abolitioner. I wish you'd stop spreadin' that around!

EVAN

But you run a stop on the Underground Railroad.

AVNER

That's right, I'm proud to say. I got 37 neggras in my fruit cellar right now. And that's the way I'd like to keep it. Today, they look up to me. But you know what happens to me if they free those slaves?

CHICKORY

You got one happy fruit cellar?

AVNER

I'm outta business is what happens. Maybe they start thinkin' bein' in my fruit cellar's not such a good deal. Maybe they start to thinkin' they're doing me a favor bein' there. Maybe they start thinking they'd be happier in my fruit cellar if Harriet Tubman was runnin' the Underground Railroad. And next thing you know I'm tossed out o' my own home on account of I tried to help those people.

LYNCH

Some folks is just born ungrateful.

BAGGOT

Look, I got nothing against any o' God's creatures. Even if some of 'em he messed up and shoulda had to go back and do over again. Didn't I bring a pitcher o' cool water and some biscuits over to your fruit cellar the time they was complainin' about heat stroke 'cause you locked 'em in there too long during that drought we had?

AVNER

I was outta town on business. What was I supposed to do?

BAGGOT

The point is, I'm not gonna mind if a coupla slaves wanna escape up north to Canada and act like they're free up there in the privacy of their own country.

EVAN

Or parts o' Europe.

BAGGOT

But you free all the slaves all at once, just on general principle, just 'cause it seems like the decent thing to do, and it won't be long before we got some of 'em runnin' around free right here in town. Next thing you know, they'll be teachin' it in schools.

ETHAN

Teaching slavery?

BAGGOT

Now, why the devil would they go and teach slavery? That's just common sense. No, they'll be teachin' that slaves is free.

LYNCH

What! That ain't right.

EVAN

Can they do that?

BAGGOT

No, they can't do it, 'cause it's a dog-dang lie! It's a God's-honest historical fact that slaves are not free. And if we let our children think that slaves is free, then it changes the whole definition of freedom. And that's what I can't stand about these abolitionists. Always tryin' to redefine freedom.

CHICKORY

There oughta be a law against it.

ETHAN

Against freedom?

CHICKORY

No! Against changin' the definition of freedom to include people who wasn't free to begin with.

EVAN

Wouldn't we just use the same old definition?

BAGGOT

Hell, no! The old definitions is out the windows, now! We're on uncharted grounds. If we want to go keep things the same as they was, we gotta change everything. We need us a whole new constitutional amendment to protect the institution of freedom and the traditional meaning of what freedom is and always has been.

ETHAN

Which is what?

AVNER

That all men are created equal, and have the God-given right to do all the things God put us on the earth to do. And women and darkies can stay in the fruit cellar where they belong.

ETHAN

But ain't some o' the darkies men, too?

BAGGOT

Now you wanna change the definition of manhood?

EVAN

You got women in your fruit cellar, Avner?

AVNER

Of course I do. And it wouldn't be none o' your concern if I did!

LYNCH

That don't sound right.

EVAN

Why do you have 'em in there?

CHICKORY

They had to go somewhere after the Sheriff shut us down.

ETHAN

You got a bordella in your basement?

AVNER

You see? Do you see what's wrong with this country? Coupla Presidents ago, you wouldn't dare to ask me that question in broad daylight. But nowadays I have to explain myself why I want to keep things in my fruit cellar that's always been in my fruit cellar, and I shouldn't have to explain it. What's the world coming to?

CHICKORY

Perdition, if you ask me.

BAGGOT

You're right, Avner. You may be an abolitioner, but your business is your business. And the government's got no business pokin' around in it. What we all do in the privacy of our own home oughta be a sacred trust between a man and his conscience.

EVAN

And what if a man don't got a conscience?

BAGGOT

Well, then it's nobody's damn business at all. Including him.

AVNER

Look, I'm not gonna stand here and defend abolition. It sounds too much like abomination. And you all know where the Bible stands on that.

LYNCH

No.

ETHAN

Nuh uh.

EVAN

Kinda vague.

CHICKORY

I believe it's a two-chicken sacrifice. Maybe an unblemished calf. I gotta look it up.

AVNER

But slavery's in the Bible, too. And that's "Do unto others". And when you got God Almighty on the one hand, and Jesus Christ Almighty Jr. on the other, some times it's best to leave well enough alone and stick close to that fence line.

CHICKORY

Maybe it's a turtle dove.

AVNER

You give people freedom, they're gonna want rights. Rights, they'll want jobs. Jobs they'll want to vote, and you know what's next?

CHICKORY

Beastuality!

LYNCH

Now we're talkin'.

AVNER

That's right!

BAGGOT

Now hold up. I think you done jumped a rail there.

ETHAN

I thought you said there wasn't no slippery slope from here to beastuality.

LYNCH

Yeah, how do you get from freein' a coupla slaves to a man makin' sweet love to his livestock? Which I still say oughta be legal.

AVNER

Who says I'm talkin' about a man?

BAGGOT

Oh?

CHICKORY

You got my attention.

AVNER

Gentlemen, who among us knows what lurks in the lustful hearts o' ladies?

EVAN

Not me.

ETHAN

Me neither.

LYNCH

Nobody knows. It's a damn mystery.

AVNER

Any you fellas ever seen a pretty southern belle get all hot and flustered after she ain't seen a man in awhile 'cause all the good ones done gone off to war?

LYNCH

Does she turn to her livestock for comfort? An' can I watch? An' does she got a sister?

AVNER

No! Get your mind outta the pigpen! But she might just turn to the lovin' arms of an educated black man, who's been workin' the field all day, covered in sweat and the clean smell o' good earth.

BAGGOT

Educated! Now hold on!

LYNCH

But that's impossible! A neggra's barely even human. They's practically a monkey.

AVNER

That's right, and once a red-blooded southern gal's had her way with practically a monkey, she's gonna want to have her way with actually a monkey. And that's beastuality.

ETHAN

What!

EVAN

No!

AVNER

And after that she'll be into the livestock!

LYNCH

God damn!

BAGGOT

And next thing y'know they'll be teachin' that in school. 'Cause you know half o' them southern belles is just a school marm waitin' to happen.

ETHAN

We gotta do somethin'!

EVAN

I don't wanna go back to school!

AVNER

The minute them slaves is free, there won't be no such thing as slavery. We'll all be equals. And when that happens, we're all no better than slaves.

BAGGOT

You let a slave call himself "free" and "freedom" won't be worth the paper it's printed on.

(takes out a Confederate dollar)

You see what it says here on this worthless Confederate dollar? In the fine print.

CHICKORY

"Freedom". My God, it's happening already!

AVNER

How you gonna feel when slaves got the same jobs you got? When they got houses and front yards like you got? When they got family's like you got?

LYNCH

Like a slave, I reckon.

CHICKORY

Stands to reason.

BAGGOT

And it won't stop there. How you gonna like it when they start lynching white folks with the same ropes as neggras?

EVAN

They can't do that, can they? They gotta use a clean rope.

ETHAN

They'd have to redefine lynching.

LYNCH

Redefine lynching? Is nothing sacred?

AVNER

You start treatin' a slave like he's got the same rights as a free man, he's gonna start thinkin' he can do the same things as a free man. Like buyin' some land, buildin' a home, startin' a business, and fallin' in love with a pretty white girl...

LYNCH

Never!

BAGGOT

We won't stand for it!

CHICKORY

We got to protect our sweet virgin freedom!

ALL

Damn straight!

LYNCH

God damn straight!

ETHAN

Straight as an arrow!

EVAN

With a thick, thick shaft!

BAGGOT

I got half a mind to go down to your fruit cellar and teach a coupla folks a thing or two about keepin' their hands off o' my unellenable rights.

LYNCH

I'll get some rope!

LYNCH rushes off.

AVNER

You know what? You're right! I'm sick o' all their belly-achin'.

CHICKORY

Hear, hear!

AVNER

Y'know, I worked my life away tryin' to make a better life for those neggras locked up down in my cellar. Not a better life than I got. I'm a realist. But better than the life they had on the slave ships comin' over, stacked up like cord wood. And now that I unstacked 'em and cleaned 'em up. And give 'em a fresh bowl o' water and some o' my best table scraps. What's the thanks I get? They say "thank you". That's it. They don't pay me. There's no reward.

They don't give me no goods and services. Not even a foot massage. Hell, if I want a glass o' sweet tea, I gotta go in the kitchen and ask for it. Anybody like a refill, by the by?

ETHAN

Me!

CHICKORY

I do!

AVNER

Alabaster!

AVNER exits into the house.

LYNCH comes back with rope.

LYNCH

I found some old rope! Anybody know how to tie a hangknot?

EVAN

But fellas, don't you think we're overreacting just a little?

ALL

(overreacting)

What?! What the-?! What did you say?! What the hell did he just say?! Shut up, I didn't hear what he said! I can't shut up, I don't know what we're talking about!

EVAN

Well, it just seems to me, if freedom's such a good thing, what's the harm in everybody havin' some?

BAGGOT

Everybody?

EVAN

Yeah, everybody.

BAGGOT

You want we should give 'em some of yours, Evan?

EVAN

Well, no.

BAGGOT

But you want 'em to have some o' mine?

EVAN

That's not what I said.

BAGGOT

I know what you said, and I don't think you know what you're talkin' about.

EVAN

Look, we all love our freedom, don't we?

CHICKORY

Y'hear that, boys? It looks like we got one o' them freedom-lovers on our hands.

LYNCH

You know, I think we might just want to think about redefining lynching, after all.

EVAN

Now, wait a minute--

LYNCH

And then we oughta get us some torches and pitchforks and go across the river and burn down Collard's Green again.

EVAN

What do you mean "burn it down again"?

LYNCH

(caught)

I mean, y'know, like it did the last time. When it spontameously--

BAGGOT

Spontaneously combusted.

LYNCH

Spongthaneouxly kabusted. Purely on accident.

EVAN

I'm from Collard's Green. I lost my grandma and two good hogs in that fire.

LYNCH

Now, look, I already apologized about that.

EVAN

When?

LYNCH

It's a figure of speech! Lordy, you Collards is thick.

EVAN

Maybe you oughta set us on fire again, and thin us out some.

LYNCH

Help me out here, Baggot.

BAGGOT

Don't look at me. I have an alibi for the events of that terrible, terrible evening.

LYNCH

We built you that nice river bridge after, didn't we? So you still had a place to shop.

EVAN

We didn't want no bridge. We wanted our town not to been burnt to a cinder in the first place.

LYNCH

Some folks is just ungrateful.

AVNER returns with refills.

AVNER

What's goin' on here?

LYNCH

We's about to lynch us a Greenie. Just to get us warmed up.

AVNER

Oh, leave the boy alone. Evan's one of us.

LYNCH

Maybe so. But we ain't one o' him.

LYNCH lights a torch.

AVNER

And you're not takin' that torch in my cellar.

LYNCH

Gol-daggit, Avner, you take all the fun.

AVNER

Leave the torch on the porch. I ain't gonna discuss it.

BAGGOT

I'm with you on that score. We don't have time to debate this and think about what we're doin'. We are on the verge of history. The President's talkin' about signing that proclamation tonight. If we don't do something right this minute, this town'll be overrun with free slaves tomorrow. Now we either lynch us some neggras or we don't.

LYNCH

Or we lynch us some Collards or we don't. Or maybe we lynch us just one Collard and call it a day.

EVAN

(draws his knife)

Come and get me.

AVNER

Oh, leave the boy alone. Ain't you done enough to his gramma and his hogs?

LYNCH

He started it.

EVAN

How?

LYNCH

Lookit how you was born!

AVNER

All right, that's enough. He didn't mean nothin' by it.

BAGGOT

You're not sidin' with a Collard are you, Avner?

AVNER

Well, I was just talkin' it over in the kitchen, and it occurred to me...

BAGGOT

Aw, Avner! You didn't let your kitchen help talk you out of a lynchin'? O' course they're against it. They got a bias.

AVNER

No, now this is my decision.

LYNCH

You got that foot massage, didn't you?

AVNER

I just think we oughta let cooler heads prevail before we start goin' off half-cocked.

BAGGOT

And whose head would that be, Avner? Yours? You think you got a cold head and a whole cock and I don't?

AVNER

Be reasonable.

LYNCH

We don't have to be nothin'. This is a democracy,
and we got us a lynch majority. We can put it to a
vote.

AVNER

Not this again.

LYNCH

Now I done enough o' these elections to know it's all
in how you phrase the question, so: All in favor o'
noosin' up Evan, along with anybody tries to vote for
him?

BAGGOT

Aye!

LYNCH

Aye!

CHICKORY

Aye.

LYNCH

Uh oh. Looks like we got us a tie. I don't know
what you do in case of a tie.

CHICKORY

I think it calls for secession.

BAGGOT

Sure, that'll fix things. We just gotta secede and
start our own town where we can lynch anybody we like
and we don't need nobody's permission to do it.

CHICKORY

Secession!

AVNER

Now, hold on, there's no need for a tie. I vote for
it, too.

ETHAN

What?

AVNER

And so does Ethan.

ETHAN

I do?

AVNER

Yes, you do.

ETHAN

Okay.

EVAN

Ethan?!

ETHAN

I'm sorry, Evan.

LYNCH

It's unanimous! I finally won one! Democracy works!

AVNER

Congratulations, Deputy Lynch. Looks like you got
yourself a mandate.

LYNCH

Whoa, nelly! I don't want no part o' no man date.

AVNER

Too late for that now. You got the ball rollin', you gotta follow it through. You can't just vote and run hide. That's the coward's way in. So now that we're all in agreement...

EVAN

I'm not in agreement!

AVNER

We gotta decide what's the best punishment for Evan bein' a Collard.

LYNCH

I thought we decided on lynching?

AVNER

Lynching's one option. But there's other ways to teach a boy a lesson than just stringin' him up by his privates.

LYNCH

There is?

EVAN

By my what??

AVNER

When I was in the merchant marine, we used to take a lad that was mutinous, tie him shirtless to the mainmast, and flog him sensible.

EVAN

Flogging??

ETHAN

Shirtless?

CHICKORY

You know what my daddy always used to do to us when we got rambunctious? He'd turn us over his good knee and give us a good, hard spanking. I tell you, I learned more bent over that man's lap than all those years I spent in federal prison.

AVNER

What do you say, Baggot? We're not blood-thirsty killers, are we?

LYNCH

I am! Well, not yet. But I been lookin' forward to it an awful long time.

BAGGOT

Nobody asked you, Lynch.

CHICKORY

Sometimes, daddy'd call me into the kitchen, especially if he'd been drinkin', and he'd get a switch and I'd drop my britches, and boy he'd give me what for. Half the time, I didn't even know what he was mad about, but I guarantee you I never did it again. That's for dang sure.

BAGGOT

You're right, Avner, that Collard's got us over a barrel. We don't wanna come down on the boy so hard he can't buy groceries after.

But we can't let him off easy, or it makes us look like we're soft on Collards.

AVNER

Well then it's settled. I make a motion we send Evan on back to my woodshed with Ethan for a good, clean switchin', and leave it at that.

AVNER nudges ETHAN.

ETHAN

Second the motion!

AVNER

All in favor?

ETHAN

Aye!

CHICKORY

Aye.

BAGGOT

Aye.

LYNCH

Now wait a minute--

AVNER

It's unanimous.

LYNCH

How come Ethan gets to switch him?

AVNER

I'm sorry, Judd, did you want to do it?

LYNCH

Well, maybe I do.

AVNER

You shoulda said something. I didn't know you was sweet on the boy.

LYNCH

Sweet on him?!

AVNER

That's what it usually means when a fella goes outta his way to volunteer to go back to the woodshed alone with another fella for an old-fashioned switchin'.

LYNCH

It's not outta my way, and I'm not volunteerin'!

AVNER

Well, that's too bad. Cuz you're gonna have to do it now. You got the least seniority outta anyone.

LYNCH

Me?! I got way more seniority than Ethan does. We oughta force him to go do it.

AVNER

He's got a point there, Ethan. I'm sorry, it looks like you're stuck with the job. You better go on get to it.

ETHAN

Yes, sir, Cap'n Pillicock.

EVAN

Thank you, Cap'n Pillicock.

ETHAN and EVAN exit into the back yard.

LYNCH

What's he thankin' you for?

AVNER

Strange boys, those Collards.

CHICKORY

Yer tellin' me. Why I remember one time when I was about 17. I came upon a Collard sittin' by the river mindin' his own business. Well, I shoved him in, to see if he would float. Turns out he didn't. But I learned something that day.

AVNER

What's that?

CHICKORY

If you don't like a Collard, you gotta push 'em in the river. He ain't gonna fall in by himself.

AVNER

You want some sweet tea, Grocer Baggot?

BAGGOT

Don't mind if I do.

AVNER

I'll have Alabaster brew some up for you.

AVNER exits into the house. BAGGOT sits and whittles. Sounds of switchin' in the distance, as the sun slowly sets.

END of ACT ONE.

ACT TWO

*The next day. The front porch of Avner Pillicock's house on Main Street. Same as yesterday, except that a large black man is sitting on the front porch. His name is **ALABASTER MCGILL**.*

***AVNER** enters with a serving tray full of mint juleps and offers one to **ALABASTER**.*

*Enter **ETHAN** and **EVAN**, comin' up the street.*

ETHAN

Mornin', Cap'n Pillicock!

AVNER

Mornin', fellas. Back for more?

EVAN

Heck, I'm still sore.

AVNER

I thought you might be. So you enjoyed yourselves?

EVAN

Well, now you mention it, we was wonderin' if you might borrow us the use of your woodshed again.

ETHAN

We figure now there's Emancipation goin' 'round and everyone's equal for a change, it's only fair I took a turn gettin' switched.

ALABASTER

I'm pretty sure that ain't the point of Emancipation.

AVNER

Why don't you boys come on up and set a spell? There's someone I want you to meet. Ethan, Evan, this here's my dear friend and associate, Alabaster McGill.

EVAN

Pleasure to meet your acquaintance.

ETHAN

Any friend o' Cap'n Avner's just about can't help bein' a friend of ours.

ALABASTER

Likewise, I'm sure.

EVAN

Alabaster's quite a mouthful.

ETHAN

(glares)

How would you know that?

ALABASTER

Thank'ee, Evan. I was named after my mama's favorite bed lamp.

ETHAN

Sounds familiar. Are you new in town, Mr. Alabaster?

ALABASTER

Yes 'n' no. I suppose I'm new to you.

AVNER

Alabaster and I are old friends.

ALABASTER

We do go way back.

EVAN

So are you just visiting Cap'n Avner?

ALABASTER

No, but I reckon if he twist my arm, I might stick around awhile longer.

AVNER

Would you boys care for a mint julep? We was just about celebratin'.

ETHAN

Would we ever!

EVAN

My momma says juleps is worse than a sourmash appletini for corruptin' the morals of a young man.

AVNER

Well, we wouldn't want to disappoint your ma now.

AVNER gives them both mint juleps.

EVAN

Thank you.

ETHAN

Thank'ee, Cap'n Avner.

AVNER

What's that going on down at the general store? We heard a ruckus and some gunfire awhile ago.

EVAN

Oh, that was just Grocer Baggot turning away customers.

ETHAN

It's been pretty busy down at the store. What with people stockin' up in case it's the End Times.

AVNER

That ain't like him to turn away customers. Especially not during an apocalypse. That man never met a penny he couldn't pinch. He even accepts Confederate currency 90 days same as cash.

ETHAN

Well, you can't hardly blame him. They was neggra customers, after all.

ALABASTER

They was what?

ETHAN

From Collard's Green.

AVNER

I didn't know you had neggras over across the river.

EVAN

Neither did we. But now they got the 'mancipation, turns out we had three Underground Railroad stations of our own right there in Collard's Green.

And now they can be free and all out in the open, and don't gotta go hidin' in closets and fruit cellars, looks like we got us a whole new African-American community we didn't even know we had all along.

ALABASTER

Well, ain't that somethin'...

AVNER

African-American?

EVAN

That's what they took to callin' themselves.

ALABASTER

I think I like the sound of that.

AVNER

Sounds kinda uppity, you ask me.

EVAN

Well, they ain't African. And they ain't American, so... African-American.

ETHAN

It's like a polecat. It ain't a cat. And it ain't a pole. So what else are ya gonna call it?

ALABASTER

But if Grocer Baggot don't let 'em purchase his merchandise at the general store, how's he expect folks to eat?

EVAN

It don't seem like he rightly aims to care.

ETHAN

I reckon they're gonna have to open up special neggra-friendly businesses over in Collard's Green, if they don't wanna go hungry.

ALABASTER

Now, why would they want that?

EVAN

My momma says she's thinkin' 'bout startin' up a all-neggra bakery.

ALABASTER

Y'don't say?

EVAN

That's why she lemme have her ass this mornin' to go and come get 'er some flour.

ETHAN

Donkey.

EVAN

Daggit, Ethan! Now I got ass on the brain, thanks to you and your mouth.

ETHAN

Don't mention it.

ALABASTER

Your momma ain't gonna mind hirin' folks used to be former slaves?

EVAN

That's the best part! They may be free on the outside, but inside they still cook like a slave.

ALABASTER

What's that supposed to mean?

ETHAN

He means inside the kitchen. You get a slave over a hot stove, you'd think they never left.

ALABASTER

And what the dark blue blazes do you think you mean by that?

AVNER

Now Alabaster, simmer down. They don't mean no offense by it.

ALABASTER

They better not be meanin' no nothing.

EVAN

We surely don't, honest injun. Slaves is good in the kitchen, that's all.

ETHAN

I'm sure they don't mean to be. They just ain't learned to cook like they's free yet.

ALABASTER

What?

EVAN

My momma reckons her all-neggra bakery's gonna outbake any real pie shop with their hands tied behind their backs.

ETHAN

She oughta untie 'em, though, if they're gonna be handlin' cookware.

EVAN

Well, she don't want 'em runnin' off with the silver, does she?.

ALABASTER

Gawd name it, Avner! They keep doin' it!

AVNER

Now, calm down. I apologize for Alabaster, he's still a mite sensitive on the subject of race.

EVAN

There's a subject o' race? I thought we settled that.

ETHAN

Yeah, now that there's Emancipation, we don't gotta talk about it no more. In fact, I'm sorry I brought it up.

EVAN

You should be. It's practically ancient history by now.

ALABASTER

Ancient history to you, maybe.

EVAN

We all got the same history, Alabaster. Unless you grew up in a differ'nt time zone I don't know about.

ALABASTER

Maybe we got the same history. But we ain't hardly on the same page.

ETHAN

How long you wanna dwell on the past, Alabaster?
It's already 'bout noon.

AVNER

I expect Alabaster's gonna take a mite longer than
most, what with being a former slave and all.

ETHAN

What with what and all?

AVNER

Bein' a former slave.

EVAN

He is?

ALABASTER

I was.

ETHAN

You are?

ALABASTER

24 hours free. And countin'.

EVAN

Countin' what?

ETHAN

Why would you count it?

ALABASTER

So I know how long I had it 'fore y'all go take it
back away again.

AVNER

Now, Alabaster, these boys ain't gonna be the ones
takin' it back.

EVAN

Takin' what back?

ALABASTER

My freedom.

ETHAN

Holy Mother Moses, Alabaster! Ain't nobody gonna
take nobody's freedom no more. It wouldn't be legal.
Not like it was yesterday.

EVAN

Yeah, that's all behind us.

ALABASTER

I'll believe that when it don't keep happening.

ETHAN

I never heard nobody cared so much about dark
history. You're not one o' them abolitioners, are
you, Alabaster?

ALABASTER

White folks ain't the only ones cares about slav'ry.

EVAN

(puzzled)

Who does that leave?

ETHAN

Yeah, I don't get it.

Then EVAN gets it.

EVAN

Oh my God, Ethan, I think he might be tellin' the truth.

ETHAN

How do you figure?

EVAN

Well, look at him.

ETHAN

What do you think I been doin'?

EVAN

No, look right straight at him.

ETHAN squints at ALABASTER.

ETHAN

Oh my Jesus!

EVAN

You see what I mean?

ETHAN

Holy Mary quite contrary!

EVAN

Mr. Alabaster, I hope you won't be takin' this the wrong way, but...

EVAN exchanges glances with ETHAN.

ETHAN

Well, I ain't gonna tell him.

ALABASTER

What is it?

EVAN

Mr. Alabaster, to be honest, I gotta tell ya plain, you're whatcha might call a African-American.

ALABASTER

You think I don't know that?

ETHAN

Oh, you already know?

EVAN

Well, that's a relief.

ETHAN

I guess, you'd be the first to know, wouldn't you? Well, your momma, then you. Well, your momma, the plantation owner, then you.

EVAN

Don't forget the midwife.

ETHAN

Your momma, the midwife, plantation owner, your daddy if you had one, then you.

EVAN

Unless your daddy was the plantation owner, then they'd've both found out at the same time.

ALABASTER

Y'know, I think I will go stick my head in a hot stove, after all.

ETHAN

We're real sorry if we offended you some, earlier.
We had no idea you was colored, or we wouldn'ta said
nothin'.

EVAN

No sir, not a word. We woulda sat here real quiet as
mice, and just stared politely.

ETHAN

We just thought you was white is all.

ALABASTER

Now, what in the world give you that idea?!

ETHAN

Well, look at you. You're sittin' on the porch.
Just like normal folks.

EVAN

Yeah, you act normal.

ETHAN

Drinkin' mint juleps.

EVAN

You speak very well.

ETHAN

Y'got right decent posture.

EVAN

We had no way o' knowin'.

ALABASTER

Well, then I guess it's lucky you figgered it out
before you went and said somethin' ignorant.

EVAN

It is. That's lucky.

ETHAN

Real lucky.

AVNER

Now, Alabaster, there's no need to be facetious.

(to *ETHAN* and *EVAN*)

Don't mind him, he's still adjustin' to the changes.

ETHAN

Oh, yeah, sure, o' course. Progress takes gettin'
used to.

EVAN

We still can't hardly believe it ourself.

ALABASTER

You can't? That's strange, cuz you boys strike me as
right gullible.

EVAN

(to *ETHAN*)

Can he call us that?

ETHAN

(to *EVAN*)

Boys?

AVNER

Just don't call him it back. I don't wanna clean up
what's left o' you. Now drink up your juleps.

ETHAN and EVAN down their entire mint juleps. They stare at ALABASTER.

EVAN

Mr. Alabaster, if you don't mind my askin'...

ALABASTER

I got a feelin' I'm about to mind. But go ahead.

EVAN

What are you doing here?

ALABASTER

I live here.

ETHAN

But you just got here.

ALABASTER

No, I think I been here all along. You just never bothered to notice.

ETHAN

Yeah, but not on the porch.

EVAN

With the rest of us.

ETHAN

Out in public.

ALABASTER

I got about as much right to be here as anybody Cap'n Pillicock says got a right to be on his porch.

(to EVAN)

You're here, ain't ya? And you're from Collard's Green.

EVAN

Yeah, but that's different.

AVNER

How is it different?

EVAN

I don't know, it just is.

ALABASTER

If you don't know, then maybe it just ain't.

EVAN

I can't explain it. I feel it in my guts.

ALABASTER

Maybe your guts is wrong.

EVAN

Why would my guts lie to me? They never done before.

AVNER

Live long enough, you come to find out your innards ain't always lookin' out for your best interest.

EVAN

They did make me eat my momma's whole cherry pie that one time. Oh, I was sick for days.

ETHAN

So Cap'n Avner, you knew about Alabaster bein' a colorful fella and you let him come out on your porch anyways?

EVAN

That ain't like you.

AVNER

Well, boys, I know you know I was just about as anti-Emancipation as any man.

ETHAN

(to ALABASTER)

It's true. He 'bout pop a capillary when he found out.

AVNER

But Alabaster has been my friend and boon companion for nigh on 9 years. Others have come and gone, but he's stuck by me all these years locked up down in that fruit cellar. And sometimes in the kitchen. He makes a mean sweet tea.

ALABASTER

I seen the inside o' that woodshed a time or two, too.

AVNER

But now that the government says it's agin the law and I can't keep him locked up all the time no more. I got to thinkin' maybe it's high time he come out and whittled on the porch just like anybody else.

EVAN

You whittle, Mr. Alabaster?

ALABASTER

How do you think we passed the time down in that fruit cellar?

ETHAN

Land o' Goshen, that oughta be a sight.

ALABASTER

What, you think a neggra don't know how ta whittle?

ETHAN and EVAN exchange glances, not sure what's the right thing to say. They shake their heads.

EVAN

No, that ain't what we think.

ETHAN

Not at all.

EVAN

No, siree.

Awkward silence. They exchange glances. They nod.

EVAN

Yeah, it is.

ETHAN

That's what we think.

EVAN

Kinda stands to reason.

ALABASTER

Jesus, Mary an' Joseph, boys!

ETHAN

Why would he wanna marry Joseph?

EVAN

Yeah, ain't Jesus already married to all them nuns?

ALABASTER

Was you fellas born thick, or'd they home school it
inta ya?

AVNER

Now give 'em time, Alabaster. They'll learn.

EVAN

It's true. We's real impressionable. In fact...

EVAN turns to ETHAN. ETHAN nods.

EVAN

Well, we was about to do some whittlin' ourselves.

And we was wonderin' if you'd care to join us?

ALABASTER

Well, if that ain't the kindest thing anybody's ever
said to me in my whole entire life.

ETHAN

Y'welcome.

AVNER

(to ALABASTER)

I don't think they know you're hyperbolatin'.

ETHAN

What's that, hyperbolatin'?

AVNER

Makin' somethin' out to be bigger than it is.

EVAN

Why would he do that?

*ALABASTER takes an enormous knife out
of his pocket and starts to whittle.*

ETHAN

Great loaf o' Jesus!

EVAN

Mercy General Hospital!

ETHAN

That thing is enormous!

EVAN

You scared the life outta me.

ETHAN

I thought it was a snake.

ALABASTER

No, that's just my whittlin' instrument.

ETHAN

That's all instrument?

EVAN

How--how--how--how do you walk straight with that
thing in your pants?

ALABASTER

It's all in the hips.

EVAN

You must have a swagger about a mile wide.

ETHAN

There ain't no need to fawn over it, Evan.

EVAN

Well, did you get a gander at the girth of it?

ETHAN

I can see it from here. You don't gotta get so close.

ALABASTER

You boys wanna hold it?

ETHAN

Thank'ee kindly, Mr. Alabaster, but we better not. We don't know where it's been.

ALABASTER

It's been in my pants.

EVAN

Good enough for me.

EVAN takes the knife.

ETHAN

Evan!

ETHAN snatches it away from EVAN.

EVAN

Ethan!

ETHAN

Well, don't you go snatchin' the man's instrument. Now somebody's gonna have to wipe it down.

ETHAN polishes ALABASTER'S pocketknife.

EVAN stares at his hands, in awe.

EVAN

I ain't never gonna start washin' these hands again.

ETHAN stares at his hands, perplexed.

ETHAN

Do you hear singin'?

EVAN

Like a choir of angels?

ALABASTER

Yeah, I get that sometimes.

AVNER

Would you boys like another mint julep?

BOTH

Please!

AVNER serves them mint juleps. EVAN chugs his down at one go and reaches for another. ETHAN glares at EVAN.

ALABASTER

You boys ain't whittlin'.

ETHAN and EVAN grab their pocketknives and whittle like they're compensating for something.

AVNER

Now slow down, boys, it ain't a competition.

They whittle even faster.

They are startled by the sound of a loooooonng, descending scream, a thump, and a grunt.

ALABASTER

Jeremiah was a bullfrog!

AVNER

Sounds like Deacon Chickory's at it again.

ALABASTER

That ol' fella just slid all the way down Mud Hill.

ETHAN

Yeah, he does that.

ALABASTER

And now he's just lyin' there in the street.

Sound of a carriage approaching.

ALABASTER

He's gonna get hisself run over.

EVAN

We gotta do something!

ETHAN and EVAN run to the porch railing and shout toward Main Street.

EVAN

(shouting toward the street)

Get up! Get up!

ETHAN

(shouting toward the street)

Get up!!

ALABASTER leaps off the porch and rushes off into the street.

ALABASTER

Hold your horses!

He exits. Sound of horses whinnying.

ALABASTER

I said, "Hold 'em!"

AVNER

I'll get the smellin' salts.

AVNER exits into the house.

ETHAN

Oh! Lookit that! Alabaster knocked that horse out cold with one punch.

EVAN

And now he's beatin' him.

(Pause.)

He's still beatin' him.

ETHAN

Look at him beat that horse.

EVAN

You think maybe Alabaster got a lot o' pent-up anger?

ETHAN

He'd have to have a lot o' pent-up everything,
wouldn't he?

EVAN

Stands to reason. I wonder if he's got any pent-up
design ideas. My momma's gonna wanna redecorate that
front window, if she opens a bakeshop.

ETHAN

How's Deacon Chickory?

EVAN

Alabaster's got him. Looks like he's gonna be all
right.

*ALABASTER re-enters with **CHICKORY** and
helps him up to the porch.*

CHICKORY

Thank'ee, lad. You about saved my life. I reckon I
owe you one.

ALABASTER

Don't think nothin' of it. You all right?

CHICKORY

I think I threw out my hip again comin' down that
hill. Maybe sprained an ankle. Nothin' a pint jar
o' grain alcohol won't fix.

ALABASTER

You know what you need is a staircase goin' up that
hill.

CHICKORY

Oh, that's a slippery slope...

AVNER enters with smelling salts.

AVNER

I found the smelling salts.

CHICKORY

Don't mind if I do.

He grabs them and takes a big snort.

CHICKORY

Got any more o' that mean ol' sweet tea?

AVNER

Sorry, Alabaster's takin' the day off. Have a julep.

*CHICKORY pours the rest of the smelling
salts into his mint julep and drinks.*

AVNER

Are you all right?

CHICKORY

I will be, thanks to this big feller.

He pats ALABASTER on the shoulder. He notices how strapping he is. He looks him up and down. He stares at his pants.

CHICKORY

Is that a pocketknife in your britches, or are you just smugglin' a dachshund?

ALABASTER

Um... No... That's my knife over there on the rockin' chair.

CHICKORY

Oh.

He glares at ALABASTER's pants.

CHICKORY

Bad dog!

AVNER

What brings you outta the house this time, Deacon?
That's two days in a row.

CHICKORY

Oh, my wife heard about the 'mancipation, and she won't leave it alone. She says I oughta cut her some slack now there's freedom in the air.

AVNER

What's she want? Another foot o' rope?

CHICKORY

What she wants is suffrage. But she's gonna have to make do with a foot a rope, 'cause I ain't openin' that kettle o' worms.

ETHAN

Suffrage? Lady suffrage?

EVAN

That's apples and oranges, ain't it? Just cuz the law says we gotta treat one group like decent human beings, don't mean we gotta be decent to anyone else.

ETHAN

Till the law tells us to do that, too.

EVAN

That'd be like opening the barn door before the cows got out.

ETHAN

It don't make no common sense.

CHICKORY

I know it sounds ignorant. But she can't help it. She was born that way.

ALABASTER

What way is that?

CHICKORY

Female. They get ideas in their head and there ain't no talkin' 'em down from it. And you can't reason with 'em. Not like you can with a Klansman, or an evangelist, or a mental retard.

That's the real reason why they ain't never gonna get the vote. Cuz the rest of us'd never hear the end of it.

AVNER

Actually, they ain't gonna get the vote, cuz the last thing we need is a woman President.

ETHAN

Well, the second last thing.

ALABASTER

Why? What's the first last?

The others exchange glances.

EVAN

Catholic.

ETHAN

Mormon.

CHICKORY

Injun.

AVNER

Woman Vice President.

Enter LYNCH, comin' up the street with a spring in his step.

LYNCH

Good mornin', all!

ETHAN

Mornin' Deputy Lynch.

LYNCH

Why are you all sittin' on the porch like a bump on a log, when you oughta be out dancin' in the street?

CHICKORY

Whatta you got to be so chipper about?

LYNCH

It's Emancipation! Haven't you heard?

AVNER

I think we all heard it together.

LYNCH

Best thing ever happened to this town.

LYNCH kicks up his heels and does a little jig.

AVNER

I wouldn't have thought you'd be the one to be so ginned up about that.

LYNCH

I wouldn't have thought so neither, but it just goes to show you gotta keep a open mind, cuz you don't never know when your hindsight's gonna be 20/20.

EVAN

Ain't it always 20/20?

LYNCH

See, that's what I mean: Close-minded. Ain't nothin' always no way, Ethan. That's what I come to find out.

EVAN

Evan.

LYNCH

I used to think freein' them slaves would be the beginning of the end. And I mean the very end. Like the End Times. Devil times. With wars and rumors of wars. Fire and brimstone. And the Aunty Christ and ol' Uncle Satan comin' outta the woodwork and forcin' us all to do things to each other I wouldn't be caught dead doin' to a pig. Well, not a male pig. Not sober anyways. Not after the last time. Still too soon. But maybe for Mardi Gras, if I had the right outfit.

LYNCH gives it some thought.

LYNCH

I'm gonna need special chaps, though.

The others exchanges worried glances.

AVNER

Ahem...

LYNCH

But now that day has arrived!

EVAN

Mardi Gras?

LYNCH

No! Emancipation! Don't you never pay attention, Ethan?

EVAN

Evan.

LYNCH

And now that Emancipationization is sweepin' the nation, turns out it ain't the beginning of the end at all. It's just the beginning of the beginning.

ETHAN

You mean like the Garden of Eden?

LYNCH

That's exactly what it's like! I feel like Adam and Eve all over again! Walkin' 'round naked as a jaybird. Eatin' some apples. Name-callin' all the animals I see. 'rangutang. Chimp'nzee. Gator bait. Coon.

ALABASTER

Um...

LYNCH

Meadowlark. Jungle bunny. Chiggers, frog, crow. Ching Chong. Golliwog. Porch monkey. Coon.

ETHAN

I think you said coon.

ALABASTER

I think you better stop.

LYNCH

But I'm just getting warmed up! In fact, if you fellas don't mind, I think I'll take off my pants and enjoy the cool breath o' freedom the way God intended.

ALL

No!!

LYNCH

Thank'ee, fellas. Much obliged.

LYNCH starts taking off his pants.

ALL

No, yes! We mean, yes. No, we do mind.

AVNER

We're glad you're excited about the 'mancipation, Judd. But we'd rather not see it in person.
first hand.

LYNCH

I'm just gettin' in the Holy Spirit o' things.

LYNCH reaches for his pants again.

ALL

No!! Whoa!!

LYNCH

Well, I hope I ain't hearin' you right. You fellas ain't gonna be a prude about how another fella expresses his privates? 'specially a fella with a gun an' a right to bear it?

EVAN

Please, don't bare it.

LYNCH

I ain't ashamed o' the way God made me and you shouldn't neither. Now I'm takin' off my pants, and anybody tries to stop me's gonna get lead in his britches.

ALABASTER

Avner...

AVNER

Now, Judd, you know we wouldn't stand in the way of your freedom of expression. We know you got a right to your privates, see, it's just... Well, we thought...

LYNCH

You thought what?

AVNER

Well, you're practically a civil servant, ain't you?

LYNCH

And proud of it!

AVNER

Well, there you go. So it sounds like you're qualified. Ain't he, fellas?

ETHAN

(playing along)

Oh, yeah, yeah.

EVAN

Overqualified.

LYNCH

For what?

AVNER

...Civil nudity.

LYNCH

Civil nudity? What's that?

AVNER

Well, it's just like regular nudity. Only you ain't naked.

LYNCH

I ain't naked?

EVAN

(catching on)

You're civil naked.

LYNCH

And it's the same as reg'lar naked?

AVNER

It's exactly the same as regular naked.

EVAN

Only you ain't naked.

ETHAN

At all.

EVAN

Not a stitch.

LYNCH

So how is that the same?

AVNER

Well, it has all the same rights and privileges as your traditional garden-variety nudity.

EVAN

Only you ain't naked.

ETHAN

You're civil naked.

CHICKORY

As a civil jaybird.

AVNER

But you get to do all the same things.

LYNCH

Like what?

AVNER

Like walk around naked.

EVAN

Civil naked.

AVNER

Whittle on the porch naked.

ETHAN

Civil naked.

AVNER

Go for a dip down at the swimmin' hole.

CHICKORY

Skinny civil dippin'!

AVNER

See? All the same things.

LYNCH

Yeah? What about get a suntan?

AVNER

It's even better for that. No chance o' sunburn.

LYNCH

I hadn't thought o' that. This civil nudity sounds like a good deal all around.

AVNER

It's better for everybody. 'specially the children. You don't have to worry about exposing them to civil nudity cuz it ain't the same as real nudity.

LYNCH

It's not?

AVNER

I mean, it is. It's exactly the same as real nudity.

CHICKORY

100%.

AVNER

Only it's not.

EVAN

At all.

ETHAN

Even remotely.

LYNCH

And the only thing different is the name?

AVNER

That's the only thing. Otherwise, civil nudity is exactly precisely identical in every legal way to plain old-fashioned buck naked nudity.

EVAN

Only you ain't naked.

ETHAN

Or nude.

CHICKORY

And you don't get a buck.

LYNCH

Golliwhillikers, I gotta jump on this civil nudity thing. I never heard a sweeter deal in my whole life.

EVAN

Plus, under civil nudity, you don't gotta worry about gettin' sand in places.

LYNCH

Thanks, fellers. You saved me a whole lotta 'barrassment gettin' naked in public when I coulda been civil naked this whole time. My poor mama woulda had a heart attack. Rest her soul.

ALABASTER

Just savin' you from yourself.

LYNCH

Oh, look'ee here, I got so tickled about
Emancipation, and civil nudity, I didn't hardly
notice you got yourself a new friend. Is he one o'
yours, Avner?

ALABASTER

One of his friends.

AVNER

Deputy Lynch, this here's Alabaster McGill.

LYNCH

Nice to meet ya.

ALABASTER

Likewise, I hope.

LYNCH

(suspicious)

McGill? That ain't Scotch, is it?

ALABASTER

No. It's a mint julep.

LYNCH

That's a relief. I don't need no Scotchman rainin'
on my parade.

ETHAN

You gonna throw a parade, Deputy Lynch?

LYNCH

I think this deserves one, don't it? A grand ol'
parade right down Main Street. With flags gettin'
waved, and horns gettin' blowed. And crosses
lightin' up the sky! Maybe I'll even wear my Mardi
Gras outfit.

CHICKORY

I got a rusty trumpet somewhere.

LYNCH

There ya go.

CHICKORY

I think it was Miami.

LYNCH

We'll have a great old time.

AVNER

Well, it does my heart good to see you had a change
o' heart about black freedom.

LYNCH

Change o' heart, change o' mind, and now I'm gonna
need a change o' complexion. How are you fellas
fixed for make up?

EVAN

What? Why?

LYNCH

I need to borrow some for tonight.

AVNER

Some make up?

LYNCH

Yeah, you know, face paints.

ETHAN

You mean like lady make up?

LYNCH

Isn't that what I said?

AVNER

Now Judd, I don't think there's a man in this town
what's gonna own up to owning lady make up. That I
know of. And can talk about.

ETHAN

Why don't you ask a woman?

LYNCH

That's a kinda personal question, don't you think?

ETHAN

Sorry. Didn't mean to pry.

LYNCH

I had a dry spell, if you must know.

ETHAN

Well, whattaya think we got?

EVAN

Yeah, it's the spell that's doin' it.

LYNCH

I used to have all the makeup a fella ever needed.
But then my momma died.

ETHAN

Why do you want make up for?

LYNCH

What do you think I want it for?

EVAN

Bring out your eyes?

ETHAN

More kissable lips?

CHICKORY

You don't wanna know what I think.

LYNCH

I told ya, I'm goin' out tonight.

CHICKORY

That's what I thought it was for.

EVAN

And you wanna look your best?

LYNCH

No, I wanna look my worst.

I just come from the church. And we had a meeting to
plan our very first real live lynching.

ALABASTER

Lynching?!

EVAN

And you're gonna wear lady makeup?

LYNCH

We're gonna dude up like wild injuns so no one knows
it's us burnin' crosses in everyone's yards.

ALABASTER

So you're cowards is what you're sayin'?

LYNCH

What was that?

ALABASTER

Sounds a mite cowardly. Sneakin' 'round after dark.
You oughta take pride in your work.

LYNCH

This ain't about pride, Alabaster.

ALABASTER

Then why don't you just wear a bag over your head and
show your true colors.

LYNCH

Well, the bag'd have to be white.

AVNER

You've been holding lynchings every week for as long
as I've known you. This wouldn't rightly be the
first.

LYNCH

(a little embarrassed)

Well, yeah, but those wasn't real lynchin's. We was
all mostly talk. Under slavery, neggras was hard to
come by. They just wasn't that many extras running
around loose. And you couldn't very well bust onto a
man's property and lynch one that he bought and paid
for. You do that you're like to end up swinging at
the end of a rope yourself. So up to now, we mostly
just had meetings and talked about it a lot and how
much fun it would be and who all we'd like to lynch
if we could. And how much better it would be to be
white if there wasn't so many differently-complected
people makin' it hard on the rest of us.

AVNER

But you never actually lynched anyone?

LYNCH

No. Every now and then one o' the fellas'd get a
little rambunctious, but we had to make do with
roughin' up some Collards or Indians. Maybe the
occasional Mormon. Knockin' over a cripple, or one
o' them blind kids lives up the way. Goin' over to
the deaf home, makin' fun o' the way they talk. Kick
a puppy. Mexicans, Canadians. Maybe look up a
country in the dictionary and make fun o' that
awhile. But now that slaves is free an' easy to come
by, the skies the limit! There's plenty enough to go
'round, and we don't have to reimburse nobody. And
thanks to the Emancipation, membership is way up.
And the next town over is chock full o' free-range
colored folks ripe for lynchin'. This bein' a white
ceramicist is finally gonna take off! In spades!

ALABASTER

I don't think I appreciate you joking about lynching
folks.

LYNCH

Good God A'mighty! I wouldn't joke about a thing
like that! I'm serious as a skin condition.

ALABASTER

How would you like folks makin' light o' your color?

LYNCH

My color? What's funny about that? I'm pale as as a nun's privates. Heh heh. I'm milky white as a virgin lamb's cuntwool. Heh heh heh. I'm white as a sheet that seen a ghost in a blizzard. And just as downy soft.

ALABASTER

Yeah? Let me feel you.

ALABASTER stands up, smacks LYNCH to the ground, sits back down.

ALABASTER

You're downy soft all right.

LYNCH leaps back up.

LYNCH

What the devil, Alabaster! I'm an official sheriff's deputy o' the law. You can't go strikin' me down like a dog. That's insulting an officer. Don't think I won't arrest a Scotchman just as quick as I'd hang a dirty Collard like that one over there.

EVAN

(draws his pocketknife)

You try it!

LYNCH

Oh, I'm kiddin'. Can't nobody take a joke today? Jimminy Christmas, Ethan! Now that you Collards is off the hook for bein' second class citizens, you might wanna start havin' a sense a humor 'bout your cultural heritage. Ain't nobody likes a ass.

EVAN

My name is Evan! And he's a donkey!

LYNCH

And Alabaster, what call o' you got to be uppity?

AVNER

I think Evan's still sore you tried to lynch him just yesterday. And I don't know as Alabaster's ever gonna see the humor o' stringin' up former slaves on account o' his bein' a former slave.

LYNCH

A former what? You mean to tell me Alabaster's a black fella?!

CHICKORY

What?! Where?!

ALABASTER

Don't nobody need to tell you, I'm settin' right in front o' you.

CHICKORY

God A'mighty! There's one of 'em right here on the porch. Run! Run for your lives!

CHICKORY is too sore to run, so he just yells at the others.

LYNCH

Well, why didn't you say so, Avner? Y'made me stand here and put my damn foot in my mouth.

AVNER

I think you did that all on your lonesome.

LYNCH

I'm sorry, Alabaster. If I'd've know you was colored, I wouldn'ta said nothin'. No, sir. I woulda took one look and just kept right on walkin' and we wouldn't be havin' this conversation.

ALABASTER

Well, if you want to go back out and come in again, I'm happy to give you another shot at it.

LYNCH

(wasn't listening)

I'm sorry. Can you hold a broom or something? My brain can't hardly wrap around what I'm seein'.

ALABASTER

You give me a broom, and I know what your brain's gonna be wrapped around.

LYNCH

I'm sorry, I can't-- It's givin' me a headache.

ALABASTER

All right, that's it, fetch me that broom.

LYNCH

You see what you done, Avner? You shoulda warned me Alabaster was gonna be a nubian man!

AVNER

A nubian man?

ALABASTER

Nubian? I kinda like that.

LYNCH

You do? Dammit, if you ain't offended, I ain't doin' it right. Now I gotta come up with somethin' else. How you feel about jungle meat?

ALABASTER shrugs.

LYNCH

Village people? Chocolate thunder? Brown lips? Spear polisher?

ALABASTER just glares.

LYNCH

What about "dark in the loafers"?

ALABASTER

What the hell does that mean?

LYNCH

All right, we're goin' with that. Now whatta you have to say for yourself, Avner? What's he doin' out on the porch?

ETHAN

He's whittlin'.

LYNCH

Well, see now? That's the problem. How am I supposed to know you got colored folks on your porch, if you got him out here disguised up like a normal person.

CHICKORY

That's right it ain't normal.

ALABASTER

I am a normal person. I'm a black normal person.

LYNCH

What the hell is that?

EVAN

I think he means he's a normal person who also coincidentally happens to be black.

LYNCH

Well, that'd have to be a helluva coincidence! You don't just "happen" to be black. You're not just sashayin' down the street and - POOF - look at me! I'm a neggra man! Ain't that right, Alabaster? I bet bein' a slave takes a lifetime to master.

ALABASTER

(to AVNER)

You know this fella?

AVNER

He's hard to forget.

ALABASTER

How many times you gotta smack him 'fore he shuts his damn mouth?

AVNER

I'm afraid it's gonna take more than smackin'.

LYNCH

I mean think about it, Alabaster. When's the first time you realized you wasn't like other folk? Since you was a little kid, wasn't it?

ALABASTER

This may surprise you, but I been a lot like a lotta other folks since the day I was born.

LYNCH

Ya see? It's in the blood. He can't help it. So don't tell me he come up with this on his own.

AVNER

Up with what?

LYNCH

The idea of passin' for a ord'nary person--in a public place I might add--when he's secretly been a full on dark fella this whole time?

ALABASTER

It ain't no secret.

CHICKORY

It ain't right. And I ain't gonna stand for it.

CHICKORY tries to stand.

CHICKORY

Help me up here, Alabaster.

ALABASTER doesn't help him.

CHICKORY

Never mind, I'll just sit.

AVNER

Alabaster's got every right to be here.

CHICKORY

Maybe so, but there's rights and there's laws.

AVNER

Well, the law says he has a right.

CHICKORY

Maybe so, but there's laws o' man, and there's laws
o' Moses.

AVNER

What's the laws o' Moses got to do with anything?

CHICKORY

Shame on you, Avner! That's straight on blasphemy!
The Laws of Moses got to do with everything.

CHICKORY whips out his Bible.

CHICKORY

This here is a comprehensive guidebook to every
situation known to man.

AVNER

That there is a pornographical picture book you
painted black so you could read it in church.

CHICKORY

Oh, yeah.

*He puts it away and searches his other
pockets.*

CHICKORY

Where'd I put that damn thing? Ah, here it is.

*CHICKORY whips out a similar black
book.*

CHICKORY

Now this here is also a comprehensive guidebook to
every situation known to man. Especially this one.

AVNER

I'd like to see where Alabaster sittin' on a porch
mindin' his own whittlin' is written in the Old
Testament.

CHICKORY

It ain't just written, it's carved in stones.

(peruses his Bible)

Where's my ten commandments? Thou shalt not...

Nope. Nope. Nope, nope, nope. Heh heh, I done that
one a coupla times. Stories I could tell, let me
tell you.

(back to the Bible)

Ahem, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope. Hmm... Not in
here.

AVNER

Well, I'm glad that's settled.

CHICKORY

Wait! That's just the top ten. Now we gotta look to the fine print. If there's anything worse than the ten big sins, it's the 67 little abominations. And this is definitely one of 'em.

AVNER

What is?

CHICKORY

Whatever he's doin'.

ETHAN

He ain't doin' nothin' but whittlin'.

CHICKORY

All right, you gonna make me look it up, I'll look it up, but I know he's an abomination. I shouldn't have to prove it.

(flips through his Bible)

Let's see. I know it's in here somewhere.

I just looked this up yesterday.

Here we go! Luke 16:15. "Love of money is an abomination to God." You got a love o' money, Alabaster?

ALABASTER

I dunno. I never had no money.

CHICKORY

Well, never mind then.

(flips through his Bible)

Here's one! "All the fowls that go creepin' on all four shall be an abomination to you." That's Leviticus 11:20. You ever done any o' that, Alabaster?

ALABASTER

What? Crept on all fours?

CHICKORY

Like a fowl. You ever been a four-legged duck?

ALABASTER

I never even seen a four-legged duck.

CHICKORY

Well, don't! It's an abomination.

(turns a page in his Bible)

How 'bout "fish that have not fins and scales"?

That's seafood. You ever had a clam bake? A shrimp fry? Scalloped potatoes?

ALABASTER

I dunno. I only ever eat whatever Avner sends down to the fruit cellar.

AVNER

We're 'bout a thousand miles inland every which way. The only seafood we get is catfish.

LYNCH

Now that's got to be an abomination. A cat that's a fish? That's worse than a pole that's a cat.

CHICKORY

God damn ya straight to hell, Lynch! A polecat is a perfectly God-fearin' animal. You can't just go makin' up abominations. It's got to be an official one, or it don't count. It's got to be in the book.

LYNCH

Sorry, Deacon. Just tryin' to help.

CHICKORY

(to ALABASTER)

You ever eat a crawdad? Now, there's an abomination.

ALABASTER

You're right about that, they's disgusting.

CHICKORY

Oh, no, them's good eats, crawdads. Mmm. You boil 'em up in a little grease. I'll have you over to the house sometime. My wife knows just how to make 'em. My mouth's waterin' just thinkin' 'bout it.

AVNER

Sorry, no crawdads.

CHICKORY

Deuteronomy 24. People who get divorced and remarried to the same person they was already married to before. Oh, that's a 'bomination! You ever been remarried?

ALABASTER

No, I never been married the first time.

CHICKORY

Me neither.

LYNCH

What about your wife?

CHICKORY

That she-harpy? Why you gotta bring her up when we're trying to have a pleasant conversation? Have you no decency? Have you no respect for the sanctity of marriage and a man's God-given right to get outta the house and not think about that trollopy little whore he's got chained to the stove, when he's off trying to have a good time with people he thought was his friends? You know what the Bible says about "he that soweth discord among brethren"?

LYNCH

Not to go do it?

CHICKORY

It says it's an abomination!

LYNCH

My God, what have I done?

I'm sorry, Deacon. But you brought her up.

CHICKORY

Oh, no, someone else brought her up. I don't never marry a gal, till she's housebroke.

ETHAN

Good advice.

CHICKORY

All right, "divers weights and measures".

ALABASTER

I don't even know what that is.

CHICKORY

I don't much understand it neither, but it amounts to unfair business practices. You own a business, don'tcha?

ALABASTER

No.

CHICKORY

Well, how you gonna make money?

ALABASTER

Reckon I gotta get a job.

CHICKORY

Careful now! You're on the road to abomination. You get a job, next thing you know you'll wanna start your own business, an' you're already one step closer to unfair business practices.

ALABASTER

I'll watch myself.

CHICKORY

Allright, what about this? Here's a hot one. A woman wearing anything that "pertaineth to a man".

LYNCH

You mean like a trannie?

ETHAN

What's that?

LYNCH

A trannie. A transvestite. Well, don't look at me, I don't know what it is either.

CHICKORY

It's a lady wearin' man-pants. You wearin' any man-pants, Mr. Alabaster?

ALABASTER

What do you think I got on?

CHICKORY

I wouldn't know. I never look a man below the waist. You could be wearin' a skirt for all I know.

LYNCH

He's a Scotchman! It could be a kilt!

EVAN

They look like pants.

ETHAN

Would you quit starin'?

CHICKORY

All right! Pants. We're halfway home. Now this next part is important. So be careful how you answer. While you're wearin' them pants... have you ever at any time... been a woman?

ALABASTER

No.

CHICKORY

Well, that's good, cuz you don't want that. My wife thinks she wears the pants, and I guarantee you that's an abomination. That there's a lifestyle children shouldn't be exposed to, let me tell you.

AVNER

So it looks like Alabaster's not any kinda abomination.

CHICKORY

Now hold on! I ain't through with him, yet. I know there's at least one more in here. Here it is... Oh, and this is a big one. This is the worst. If abominations was numbered, which they ain't for some reason, this would be the all-time number one worst abomination of them all.

AVNER

What is it?

CHICKORY

This is the mother of all abominations. Worse yet, it's the four-legged bastard step-crawdad of all abominations. This is the one thing the Good Lord hates more than anything else. Worse than murderin', worse than stealin'. Worse than havin' no other God before me. Worse than rapin' children and then transferrin' to a different parish so you don't get caught. Worse than going to war without a clear exit strategy. Worse than marryin' young girls under the age o' 12. I mean, seriously, fellas, they ain't ripe till they hit puberty.

ETHAN

(uncomfortably)

Yes, sir.

CHICKORY

Worse than coveting your neighbor's ass. But close. Real close to coveting your neighbor's ass.

AVNER

All right already!

CHICKORY

Worse than any other sin, or transgression, or uncleanness in the whole goddamn Bible. Why, this one's worse than all the other abominations combined and then dipped in chocolate. This is the one that's so clearly God's least favorite thing in the whole wide world that he created, that he probably didn't even create it. It's probably something the Devil made up on the sly, then he slipped it in the Bible when the Good Lord wasn't lookin'. I'm surprised it's not right at the front--Genesis 1:1--instead o' buried clear in the middle of Leviticus like an afterthought. I mean, this one's so bad, Lord Jesus don't even bother to mention it in the New Testament. He don't bring it up even once. And you know why that is?

EVAN

Cuz Jesus loved everybody?

LYNCH

Goddamn pansy.

CHICKORY

Because it woulda burned his holy tongue to say it, that's why! Because his everlasting brain woulda burst into hellfire, if it even crossed his mind! "Judge not, lest ye be judged", my patoot! "Let him that is without sin cast the first stone", my mouth-watering ass! This is the infernal cherry on top o' Satan's bundt cake of eternal abomination and there's no two ways about it. If this ain't the singlemost cause of all the world's problems, including war, taxes, crime, drugs, planes flying into buildings, and women, then I don't know what I'm talkin' about.

EVAN

What's a plane?

CHICKORY

And that's not just my opinion. That's not me twistin' God's word around like a false prophet and makin' the Bible say things outta context just cuz I don't like 'em! Not like the time I did when I told the congregation they wouldn't get to paradise if they didn't raise money to build a new rec room for the church with a private spa and a hot tub for the deacons. But they gimme that hot tub right quick, now, didn't they?! Heh heh.

AVNER

Just say it!

CHICKORY

Alabaster McGill, are you now, or have you never had...

(has to look it up)

"A proud look, a lying tongue and hands that shed innocent blood"?

ALABASTER

Not innocent blood, no.

CHICKORY

All right, well, he's clean.

CHICKORY puts away his Bible.

CHICKORY

But I think I proved my point.

AVNER

All you done proved is that Alabaster ain't done no 'bominations.

CHICKORY

Not yet, he ain't. But I keep tellin' you, it's a slippery slope.

AVNER

Yeah, you keep sayin' it, but it ain't gettin' any truer.

CHICKORY

It don't have to be true, if it's a God's-honest fact. Abomination's a slippery slope. And you don't need no Bible to tell you. You know it in your pelvis. One minute you're wearin' man-pants, next thing you know, you're a lady wearin' man-pants. One mornin' you're enjoyin' a wholesome breakfast o' catfish and biscuits, by supper time it's crawdads and pigsfeet and four-legged ducks! One day you're unemployed, and down on your luck, and next day you got your own business, you're lovin' money, and you're halfway to usin' divers weights and measures. Before you know it you're married and divorced and married and divorced so many times you can't see straight. You got your third wife chained to a wall sconce, and you're out scoutin' around for the next Mrs. Chickory.

ALABASTER

My name ain't Chickory.

CHICKORY

It better not be, because that's my wife you got chained up in my kitchen. And you know where that leads to, don'tcha?

LYNCH

Beastuality?

CHICKORY

No!

LYNCH

Well, then, you lost me.

CHICKORY

Use your head! What's the natural consequence o' neggra fellers out in public in broad daylight? Havin' access to white women?

ALABASTER

Happier white women?

CHICKORY

You laugh, but that's exactly what's wrong with it! Now that he's struttin' 'round free, like the cock o' the walk, what's to stop him walkin' right up to an impressionable young pretty gal in town, chattin' her up, takin' her out, showin' her the town, rapin' her in a dark alley, and then marryin' her to make an honest woman out of her.

ALABASTER

What?!

CHICKORY

Before the rest of us get the chance to do it first!

LYNCH

Is that what he's up to? Well, we're onto you now!

ALABASTER

You ain't onto biscuits.

AVNER

Alabaster ain't no raper.

CHICKORY

You mark my words! Love will find a way.

EVAN

You wouldn't do that, would you, Alabaster? Take advantage of a sweet young thing in a alley, just so you could convert 'em to a neggrosexual?

ETHAN

He don't seem like the type.

ALABASTER

If it eases your mind any, I ain't interested in stealin' anybody's white girls out from under 'em.

ETHAN & EVAN

(feigned relief)

Whew. That's a relief.

CHICKORY

More for me, I guess.

ALABASTER

Matter o' fact, in my whole entire life I don't reckon I ever knowed what it's like to love any somebody with all my heart... till I met Mr. Avner here.

Everybody but ALABASTER stops whittling. Stony silence.

EVAN

Did he just say--?

ETHAN

Ssh! Not now.

EVAN

But he--

ETHAN

Don't talk about it, maybe it'll go away.

More awkward silence.

AVNER

(trying to break the tension)

Um... well... yes... after all... Didn't the Good Lord and Savior tell us to "Love one another"?

LYNCH

(relieved)

Oh!

ETHAN

Sure!

EVAN

That's right.

LYNCH

I guess he did.

CHICKORY

"Love one another." It's right there.

AVNER

Anyone for a mint julep?

ETHAN

Yes!

EVAN

Please!

LYNCH

Make mine a double!

AVNER exits into the house. They all get back to whittling, very much relieved.

CHICKORY

What's that you're whittlin', Alabaster?

ALABASTER

It's a dachshund.

CHICKORY

Oh, he's a fat one, ain't he? Can I pet him? Hoo-ey! Look at him, purr. Who's a good boy? You's a good boy! Yes, you are! Oh, yes, you are!

ETHAN

That ain't a real dachshund, Deacon Chickory.

CHICKORY

Oh. Anybody got a real one he don't mind me pettin'?

EVAN

Look-a there comes Grocer Baggot.

ETHAN

Alabaster, don't say nothin'. See how long you can fool him!

Enter BAGGOT.

ETHAN

Mornin', Grocer Baggot!

EVAN

Mornin'.

BAGGOT

Good morn--What the hell?!

LYNCH

Happy Emancipation Day, Grocer Baggot!

CHICKORY

Howdy!

BAGGOT

What in the name o' tits, grits and biscuits do you think you're doing?

CHICKORY

Whittlin'. You want to join us?

BAGGOT

Why in condemnation would I want to join you?

ETHAN

Cuz you like whittlin' so much?

BAGGOT

Oh, I love whittlin', make no mistake. It's my favorite pasttime. You might say I live to whittle. Whittlin', done right, is a sacred bond between men! Whittlin', done proper, brings us closer to God.

LYNCH

Well, then come on up.

BAGGOT

But whittlin' with a neggra is like stabbin' baby
Jesus in the eyes!

ALABASTER

What?!

CHICKORY

Amen to that!

ALABASTER

You take that back!

BAGGOT

Get behind me, devil! But not right behind me, cuz I
don't wanna feel your thorny breath on the back o' my
neck.

ALABASTER

Now wait just a gin minute!

BAGGOT

Don't none o' y'all see what's going on right in
front o' your bare eyes??

LYNCH

Are you accusing us a whittlin' with a neggra?

BAGGOT

I don't have to accuse you. He's sittin' right next
to ya.

CHICKORY

What? Where? God A'mighty! He's right. Look at
you, Alabaster. You're a neggra man!

ETHAN

He's a former neggra man.

ALABASTER

No. I still am.

LYNCH

Now, don't be so hard on yourself, Alabaster.

CHICKORY

Yeah, you don't gotta nitpick.

LYNCH

(to BAGGOT)

Shucks, if you hadn'ta mentioned it, I'da plum
forgot. Ya whittle with him awhile ya forget he's
dark folk.

ETHAN

He don't whittle like a neggra.

ALABASTER

How you reckon a neggra whittles?

Awkward silence. LYNCH snickers.

LYNCH

Niggardly?

ALABASTER slaps him to the ground.

LYNCH

What'd you do that for?!

ALABASTER

You know why I did it.

LYNCH

All I said was "niggardly"!

*ALABASTER smacks him to the ground
again.*

LYNCH

It don't mean what you think it means!

ALABASTER

I don't care what I think it means. I think I know
what you think it sounds like it means.

LYNCH

Now, just you hold right on! It's a free country!
I'm allowed to say things that sound like they're
offensive but ain't. It's called artistical
expression. Niggardly, niggardly, niggardly!

ALABASTER

Your 'tistical's are 'bout to get some expression, if
you don't shut your mouth.

LYNCH

You even think about doin' nothin' to my nethers and
I'll have you brung up on charges!

ALABASTER

What charges?

LYNCH

The fugitive slave law.

EVAN

That's been overturned.

LYNCH

What about the Dred Scott decision?

ETHAN

Yeah, I don't think that applies either.

LYNCH

Well, what about the fugitive slave law?

EVAN

You said that already.

ALABASTER

Face it, Deputy Lynch, you haven't got a leg.

LYNCH

But I got arms, an' I ain't afraid to bare 'em.
(reaches for his gun; can't find it)
Dingit! Where'd my gun go?

BAGGOT

Well, I won't stand for it! We have to remember our
roots!

ALABASTER

I ain't uprootin' no one.

CHICKORY

I seen him do it!

ALABASTER

What?!

CHICKORY

Always rootin' around...

ALABASTER

When?

CHICKORY

It's a figger o' speech! I seen it in my mind.

BAGGOT

You see! It's like I tried to warn you! It's not bad enough they overrun our general store, now they gotta go runnin' 'round in our imaginations!

ALABASTER

Your imagination's all in your head.

BAGGOT

Don't you tell me what I think. I know what I think. And I don't like it!

ALABASTER

I'm pretty sure I don't like it, neither.

BAGGOT

(to ALABASTER)

I don't know who you are--

ALABASTER

Name's Alabaster McGill.

BAGGOT

I'm not talkin' to you!

ALABASTER

All right then.

BAGGOT

I don't know who you are. But you got no right comin' 'round decent folks stirrin' up controversy.

ALABASTER

Yesterday, maybe I didn't. But I'm pretty sure today I think I do have that right. And I hope I ain't stirrin' nothin' but this mint julep.

BAGGOT

What do you call bein' a slave and hangin' 'round normal folk?

ALABASTER

So far I'd call it more trouble than it's worth.

ETHAN

If he don't hang around decent folks, how's he ever gonna learn?

BAGGOT

Not in my presence. Now go on, crawl back in whatever dirty hole you sprung out of.

CHICKORY

And tell her I said "Howdy".

BAGGOT

Go on, now, git!

Enter AVNER with mint juleps.

AVNER

It's my porch. I'll decide who gits and who don't git.

BAGGOT

Avner, do you see this? You're not sayin' you condone it?

AVNER

I don't have to say it. It oughta be plain as the nose on your face, lookin' at my porch, with him on it.

BAGGOT

Well, you're just in time to see me get him off.

AVNER

If somebody ain't welcome on my porch, I think I know how to make it perfectly clear to them they ain't.

(pointedly)

Am I clear, Grocer Baggot?

BAGGOT

I don't think I like your tone.

AVNER

And I don't like you bein' all up in my tone. So you might wanna get outta earshot before I say something really curls your toes.

BAGGOT

Sticks and stones, Mr. Pillicock.

AVNER

Tongues and bungholes, Mr. Baggot.

BAGGOT

Oh! Ugh! That's disgustin'! For a sailor, you gotta wicked mouth!

AVNER

Why do you think they made me Captain? Now get off my porch.

BAGGOT

It may be your porch, but it's still attached to your house. And when your property values come tumblin' down, that effects my property values. And that effects the whole neighborhood.

CHICKORY

He's right. I wouldn't give a plug nickel for his house now that it's across town from yours.

AVNER

Oh, stop talkin' nonsense. You oughta listen to yourself.

BAGGOT

I don't have to listen to myself. I'm going home where a man can sit quietly and mind his own business and not say a word! And sit on his own porch and whittle himself blind without no neggras around to bother him.

BAGGOT exits. He comes back.

BAGGOT

And if you think you seen the last o' me, you don't know what I mean by sit quietly and mind my own business.

AVNER

Maybe I ain't seen the last o' you, but I'm lookin' forward to seein' at least the back part o' you walkin' some other direction.

BAGGOT

Oh!

BAGGOT exits.

ETHAN

Well, that was awkward.

ALABASTER

Julep, anyone?

ALABASTER takes the tray from AVNER and refreshes everyone's drinks.

AVNER

Y'know, we've been together a long time, Alabaster and me. In the sense that he's been livin' in my fruit cellar, and I been comin' down to visit him on the sly, time to time, when the upstairs gets lonely. So I reckon I'm man enough to admit it... I love you too, Alabaster McGill.

LYNCH spits his drink. ETHAN and EVAN exchange uneasy glances.

ETHAN

I'm not entirely comfortable with this.

EVAN

Yeah, me neither.

AVNER

What's the matter, Evan? You love your Ethan there, don'tcha?

EVAN

What? How do you know that?

ETHAN

Yeah, we barely know it ourself.

AVNER

Trust me, fellas. I got a sense about these things.

EVAN

You do?

AVNER

Always have. It's like some sort o' high-tech navigational directional...doodad.

ALABASTER

Like a sextant?

AVNER

There you go. Like a predilection sextant.

ETHAN

A predilextant?

EVAN

A prediloodad?

ALABASTER

I think we're gonna need a better name for it.

AVNER

And I got that sextant sensation about the two o' you since the first time I saw you rasslin' in the street.

EVAN

Okay, maybe I do predilect on Ethan some.

ETHAN

Evan!

EVAN

Well, it's true. But that ain't the same thing as you...lovin' Alabaster. Ugh. Now I got a taste in my mouth.

AVNER

Why not?

ETHAN

Cuz Evan ain't black.

EVAN

Now hold on. How do we know you're not the one that ain't black?

ETHAN

You're from Collard's Green.

LYNCH

Yeah! He's a Greenie. That's practically black as you can get.

(to ALABASTER)

Present company excluded.

EVAN

I don't appreciate you comparing Collard's Green to bein' born the wrong color.

ALABASTER

And I don't appreciate you comparing my skin tone to a bad taste in your mouth.

AVNER

And I don't appreciate being told who I can love and who I can't love.

CHICKORY takes out his Bible.

AVNER

(to CHICKORY)

And ain't nobody appreciates being compared to folks what eat crawdads.

CHICKORY

I never said nothing.

AVNER

Best not.

CHICKORY

'bomination.

Enter BAGGOT with a petition.

BAGGOT

All right, I'm back! And I just started up a new community organization - for the betterment of the community - and drew us up a petition I want you to all sign.

LYNCH

Is this gonna be like the time you started up a chamber of commerce so we could help each other's businesses? And it turned out you were the only one owned a business?

BAGGOT

We got that nice river bridge put in, didn't we?

LYNCH

And that's how we got Collards comin' over in the first place. And now we're practically overwrought with neggras to boot! From Collard's Green! And it's all on account o' you and your betterments. Not leavin' well enough alone.

BAGGOT

Well, this new group'll fix all that. We're gonna get rid o' all the old betterments and go back to how the founding forefathers did things in the good ol' days.

CHICKORY

Finally! I thought I'd never live to see the day we'd go back to doing things the old-fashioned way and quit all this new-fangled fanglin'. Lemme at it!

CHICKORY signs.

BAGGOT

We're callin' ourselves the Society for the Protection of Society.

AVNER

And how you gonna do that?

BAGGOT

By keepin' the races separate.

ALABASTER

Shouldn't you call that the Society for the Prevention of Society, then?

BAGGOT

Avner, would you tell your Mr. Alabaster that if he thinks I detect a note of sarcasm in his voice, he's wrong, because my earholes are white's only.

AVNER

(to ALABASTER)

He says he don't hear you.

ALABASTER

I'm not the one with colorblind earholes.

BAGGOT

If we all sign this petition to ban neggras and undesirables from whittlin', come November we'll get it on the ballot and vote it legal, and that'll be the end o' this nonsense, once and for all. Here you go, Evan.

EVAN signs.

EVAN

That's kinda redundant, ain't it? Neggras and undesirables? Aren't they the same thing? What other kinda undesirables are there?

BAGGOT

Well, of course, neggras is a big part of it. But there's always other things.

ETHAN

Such as?

BAGGOT

Half-neggras, quarter-neggras, octaroons. Mochalattes. Not to mention your Leprechauns, womenfolk and Collards.

LYNCH

Oh, I'll sign that.

LYNCH signs.

EVAN

Collards?! I wanna retract my signature.

BAGGOT

Too late. You're already on board. You always wanted to be a sailor, didn't you?

EVAN

Not that kinda sailor.

ETHAN signs.

EVAN

Ethan, what are you doing?

ETHAN

Oh, I thought we was all signin'.

BAGGOT

Your turn, Alabaster, go on put your "X" right there. "X" is the plus-shaped one.

ALABASTER

Now why would I want to go and sign that petition?

BAGGOT

To be like the others, of course. Why I'm surprised you're not first in line. Now that you got your freedom, the only way you're ever gonna prove you're equal is to start doing the same things as everyone else. You want to fit in don't you?

ALABASTER

I'm not sure fittin' in with you is the same as fittin' in.

BAGGOT

Well, of course it is. I'm what society is all about. We all are. Well, not you. Or him.

(points at EVAN)

And Ethan's a little young. But the rest of us. Me and my kind is what your people worked so hard to be a part of.

ALABASTER

We worked hard so we wouldn't get whipped to death.

BAGGOT

Now see! That's exactly what I'm talking about.

This is for your own protection, as much as anyone.

ALABASTER

How you figure that?

BAGGOT

Now that you're not safe and separate no more, you're in grave danger, Alabaster. You know they're already arrangin' lynchin' parties. Isn't that right, Lynch?

LYNCH

That's right! We got one tonight. You oughta come along if you're free, Alabaster.

ALABASTER

I am free!

LYNCH

I'll put you down then.

LYNCH writes ALABASTER'S name on a list.

ALABASTER

And I'm black.

LYNCH

Oh, that's right, I keep forgettin'. Never mind.

LYNCH scratches ALABASTER's name off the list.

BAGGOT

Listen, Alabaster, when you was back on the plantation, how many y'all got lynched?

ALABASTER

I haven't been on a plantation in nine years.

BAGGOT

Oh, you know what I mean! Hypothetically, if you was lucky enough to still be on a plantation, you wouldn't have to worry 'bout gettin' lynched all the time. Now would you?

LYNCH

That's true. Plantations was always off-limits.

BAGGOT

And this is a step in the right direction.

ALABASTER

It sounds like a step backwards.

BAGGOT

Do you have to repeat everything I say?

ALABASTER

I ain't signin' it.

BAGGOT

Fine. Go on be that way. We don't need you in our Society anyway.

ALABASTER

Now who's repeatin' himself?

BAGGOT

What about you, Avner?

AVNER

All right, gimme the petition.

BAGGOT

(to ALABASTER)

See there?

BAGGOT hands AVNER the petition.

AVNER

Gimme the pen.

BAGGOT gives AVNER the pen. AVNER snaps the pen in two and tears up the petition.

BAGGOT

What the--? You're gonna pay for that! That's expensive parchment!

AVNER

Here.

(throws money at him)

Go on, get off my porch. We don't want no part o' you and your Society.

BAGGOT

You do! You just don't wanna admit it!

(picks up the money)

Cuz you're jealous! You're jealous o' what I got, and you ain't.

AVNER

I didn't spend half my life workin' for the Underground Railroad so you could put us all back on the wrong track.

BAGGOT

I'm not the one that's on a one-way train to wherever the hell we're going.

AVNER

No, you're the cow standin' in the middle of the tracks that thinks he's the engineer.

BAGGOT

You ain't heard the last o' me.

AVNER

We never seem to.

BAGGOT leaves in a huff.

EVAN

Well, I think I better get back home to my momma. All o' sudden, this town don't feel so welcome anymore.

ALABASTER

Mind if I come along with you?

AVNER

Alabaster, where are you going?

ALABASTER

Things are gettin' right hostile around here.

AVNER

You don't gotta worry 'bout Baggot. He's all steam and no engine. We'll just hide you inside till he blows over.

ALABASTER

I appreciate that, but I don't see as goin' back in the fruit cellar solves the problem o' people thinkin' I never shoulda left the fruit cellar. And I can't go livin' off your leavings. Now that I'm free, I'm gonna need a job. I thought I might ask over at Evan's momma's bakery.

AVNER

But that's clear over in Collard's Green.

ALABASTER

You know they ain't gonna hire me down at the general store.

EVAN

I betcha my ma would love to have you. She's got the rheumatism pretty bad, you know. And you look like you got powerful strong hands.

ETHAN

Evan!

AVNER

But your home is here.

ALABASTER

I lived in it a long time. But it ain't really my home, Avner, it's yours. And I appreciate all you done for me. Don't think I don't. But at the end o' the day, I reckon tearin' up one petition ain't half o' what you shoulda done all those years I was locked up in your fruit cellar. It's more than most, don't get me wrong. But it still ain't all that much.

ALABASTER turns to go.

AVNER

Alabaster, wait! You're right. You deserve a lot more from me. And I mean to make it up to you, one day at a time for as long as it takes. If you gimme the chance.

ALABASTER

How? What's gonna half make up for everything I been through?

AVNER

Now, Alabaster McGill, I wouldn't take that tone with me, if I was you.

AVNER gets down on one knee.

AVNER

Or I might not ask you to marry me.

Everyone spits julep.

ETHAN

But- but- but- you can't marry him.

AVNER

Oh, why not? It's as free a country as it's ever gonna get. And I love him. And he loves me. And I'm willing to make that official. In front o' God and everybody.

CHICKORY

I'm pretty sure God don't wanna see that.

AVNER

Oh, for the love o' taffeta, why the hell not? Why wouldn't the good Lord wanna see two o' his creations happy for a change?

LYNCH

Isn't it obvious?! Because he's black! And you're white.

AVNER

What bit o' difference does that make?

LYNCH

Well... Because you're white! And he's black.

EVAN

You gotta be the same if you're gonna get married, everybody knows that.

AVNER

Says who?

LYNCH

Says who? It goes without sayin'! That's the way it's always been! For thousands and thousands of years it's been like that. When two people are in love, they get married. And that means two of the same kind of people.

ETHAN

It's like in a fairy tale, a frog don't marry a prince. He gotta marry another frog. Or they gotta kiss him and turn him into a prince before he marries one.

EVAN

You mean a princess.

ETHAN

Princes, princesses, it's all the same thing. And frogs and frogs is the same thing. You don't go mixin' 'em around when it comes to marital matrimony.

LYNCH

You can't just up and change things that's been like they is for thousands of years.

AVNER

For thousands of years the earth was flat, and they changed that.

CHICKORY

And they was wrong to do it! Young whippersnappers. World was better off when it was flat. Simpler. Harder to slide off of. Now the whole world's made o' mud and you can't keep your footing. Trust me, if this freedom catches on, we're all gonna fall and break a hip.

LYNCH

Think about what you're doin'. If whites and blacks start marryin', that'll be the end o' marriage as we know it. You want that on your conscience? The total and permanent destruction of the institution of marital bliss.

AVNER

I hadn't thought of it that way. You really think black an' white marriage'd do that?

LYNCH

(shrugs)

Why wouldn't it?

AVNER

Alabaster?

ALABASTER

Avner Pillicock, I would be honored to accept your proposal, and your hand in marriage. Or anywhere else you wanna put your hand. I know there's folks gonna look down on us. But they just so happen to be the same folks looked down on me escapin' the plantation. And I reckon I'll never be free and we'll never be happy till we stop worrying about their feelin's gettin' hurt.

They kiss. For a long time. It makes everyone uncomfortable. Eventually, ETHAN gets a little turned on by it. EVAN has to giggle and slap his hand away. AVNER and ALABASTER finish kissing.

LYNCH

Avner, you know I'm as tolerant as the next man.

AVNER

That's only cuz you're standin' next to ol' Chickory.

LYNCH

But I don't approve of mixing races. Black marriage is one thing. And white marriage is another. But this gray marriage... I'm sorry. If you go through with this and get married I can no longer be your best man.

AVNER

I'm not askin' you to.

LYNCH

Well, I can't come to the wedding.

AVNER

I didn't ask you to do that either.

LYNCH

And I can't make it to the reception.

AVNER

I'm not askin' anything out o' you, Lynch!

LYNCH

Then what do you want from me!?!?

AVNER

Nothin'. I'm not askin' nothin' from you. Just leave us alone. We'll be fine.

LYNCH

All right, that's it, Avner. Now you gone too far. If I just looked the other way and left well enough alone, and let you be happy, what kinda public servant would I be?

AVNER

What are you gonna do?

LYNCH

The only thing I can do. I'm puttin' it to a vote. All in favor of lettin' black folks and white folks marry, say, "Aye".

ALABASTER

Aye.

AVNER

Aye.

LYNCH

All opposed?

ETHAN

I'm sorry, Avner. I just can't support that. It don't feel right. Nay.

EVAN

Nay.

LYNCH

It's up to you, Deacon. Yay or nay?

AVNER

You keep forgettin' to count yourself.

LYNCH

Don't tell me how to run my vote! Yay or nay, Deacon?

CHICKORY

I'm afraid I'm biased.

LYNCH

Don't be afraid. That's why the founding fathers give us the secret ballot box. So you can be as biased as you want, and proud of it. And ain't nobody got a right to hold it agin you. So what'll it be? Just go on whisper in my ear, and we'll count it that way.

CHICKORY

I'm biased, because Alabaster saved my life not too long ago. When the rest o' you prob'ly woulda let me lie in the street till my hip healed.

ETHAN

A man's gotta right to die with dignity.

CHICKORY

An' I reckon I owe him one.

LYNCH

We don't need a sermon, Deacon. What's your vote?

CHICKORY

I'm gettin' too old to stand in the way of love. No matter what it looks like.

Maybe I don't know what it's like to love a African.
But I once loved a woman who was half my age and made
o' leather. I still got a piece of her up in the
attic for when my wife don't feel like fulfillin' her
marital obligations.

(sighs)

Not the good piece, though, I'm sorry to say.

LYNCH

All right, y'know what, forget it, your vote don't
count. Baggot! Where's Baggot?
Never mind. Vote is cancelled. We all got to calm
down and vote again later, when we had time to think
about what we're doin' and get all worked up again.
I'm goin' to my lynchin'.

LYNCH exits.

ALABASTER

Deacon Chickory, Avner and me'd be tickled two shades
o' pink if you'd perform the services at our weddin'.

CHICKORY

Oh, I'm flattered Alabaster, but I can't marry you.
I'm only a deacon. It's not in my power.

AVNER

No, but I own a fleet o' fabric ships down around New
Orleans. And it's in my power to make you the
captain of a ship at sea.

CHICKORY

You mean it? Hot ziggity! I'm gonna be a boat
captain! And a reverend at the same time! I'm gonna
get so lucky it'll make my head spin. Rabbits are
gonna want my feet. I always wanted to join the One-
Mile-Out Club.

LYNCH runs in.

LYNCH

Wait, he's back! Votin's back on.

BAGGOT storms in with a court order.

BAGGOT

I'm back! An' this time I got somethin' better than
democracy. I got a court order.

AVNER

Aw, Baggot! You didn't go and wake the judge, did
you?

BAGGOT

I sure as shootin' did and he was more than happy to
sign it. Once I explained I wasn't gonna let him go
back to sleep till he did.

EVAN

A judge can't change the law on his own.

BAGGOT

No, but I got him to declare this porch a national
historical monument. Did you know the Underground
Railroad used to run right through here?

And now that these premises is part of our proud cultural heritage, they're gonna have to follow standards of behavior set by the historical society, which I have been president of since that group's foundation, some 5 minutes ago. Starting every Monday we'll have monthly meetings to decide how visitors should be allowed to conduct themselves on this property.

AVNER

You're stealin' my house from under me? That ain't like you, Baggot. I know you don't respect me, or any man living. But I thought at least you'd respect my property.

BAGGOT

Oh, Avner, don't you know me better than that? I'm a man o' principles, first and foremost. That's one thing you and me got in common. Not the principles. Those are completely different. But whatever they are, we stick to 'em, come hell or high water. It's still your house, and always will be. And you're still free to do as you please in it. But from now on "we the people" get to decide who you have over as guests, and how they-the-people gotta behave. Startin' with no unauthorized whittlin'. No drinkin' juleps. No bein' a former slave on the porch or any o' the surrounding environs. And no guests at all without permission. And it's all done fair and square and legal, so there's no question it's for the good o' the preservation of this great cultural site. And not for alterior motives. Or personal political agenders. Just like our founding fathers woulda wanted.

AVNER

Well, that sounds fair. Especially the part about it still being my house.

BAGGOT

Avner, we been friends a long time. You know I wouldn't lay a finger on a man's real estate.

ALABASTER

So I gotta leave?

BAGGOT

Yes! And good riddance.

AVNER

No. And get comfortable.

BAGGOT

What? Of course he gotta leave! What did we just talk about?

AVNER

We talked about rules and restrictions that apply to guests o' this house.

BAGGOT

And he's a guest.

AVNER

Only till we get back from our honeymoon. Cuz once we're married, Alabaster, it'll be your house, too. And your guests are gonna have to follow the same rules as everyone else.

BAGGOT

Once you're what?

AVNER

Once we're married.

BAGGOT

You're what?

ALABASTER

We're gettin' married.

BAGGOT

You're getting married?

AVNER

Yep.

BAGGOT

To who?

ALABASTER & AVNER

To him.

BAGGOT

To each other?

AVNER

Yep.

BAGGOT

But he's black!

ALABASTER

Sure am.

BAGGOT

You can't marry a black man.

AVNER

Why not?

BAGGOT

Cuz you can't! Cuz it ain't natural.

LYNCH

That'd be like me marrying my horse. And you know we had to get that annulled.

BAGGOT

Worse, it's like marrying a black horse. From Collard's Green. That eats crawdads.

AVNER

I know you don't approve, Neighbor Grocer. But don't you worry. We'll be sure not to have you over as a guest without your permission.

BAGGOT

But that's not fair!

EVAN

It sounds fair.

BAGGOT

Don't get smart with me, boy. Ain't nothin' sounds fair till you heard it from the horse's ass. You can't just turn everything upside down on one man's say so.

AVNER

Ain't that what you're trying to do?

BAGGOT

I'm tryin' to set things straight.

AVNER

And we're just followin' your rules. You're not gonna go against the traditions and bylaws of the great historical society so many of our forefathers fought and died to invent.

BAGGOT tears up the court order.

BAGGOT

That's it! There ain't no historical society! We're gonna start over first thing tomorrow with a new historical society with a new history, and new traditions that date back to before the founding fathers come along and ruined this country for the rest of us.

AVNER

Seems like you leave me no choice.

BAGGOT

Well, it's about time.

AVNER

C'mon, Alabaster. I guess that gives us till morning to get our wedding shopping done.

BAGGOT

Oh, no, you don't! In case you think you forgot who you're dealin' with, starting right now, all of you is banned from my general store, till you learned your lesson.

LYNCH

Even me?

BAGGOT

Especially you, Lynch! We'll see how you bellyache on a empty stomach.

LYNCH

Well, that ain't fair. What did I ever do to anyone? Shoot, I'm goin' to my lynching where folks ain't so spiteful.

LYNCH exits.

AVNER

Well, I'm sorry to hear that, Baggot. I guess we'll have to go all the way to Collard's Green for wedding supplies now. I'm sure gonna hate totin' all them boxes all that way.

ETHAN

We'll help you carry, Cap'n Avner.

AVNER

We're gonna need a whole mess o' flowers and a coupla storebought tuxedos and a great big expensive wedding cake. Evan, you mind leadin' us the way to your momma's bakery?

EVAN

Sure thing, Cap'n Avner, follow me! My ma's gonna be so excited to see your business. Maybe she don't knead like she used to, but she still frosts a pastry like she's 18.

AVNER

Chickory, you comin'?

CHICKORY

No, thank'ee. I'm gonna stay here and practice my wedding vows. I gotta look my sharpest for all the single gals on that ship. Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of the American God, and the good Lord Neptune...

EVAN, ETHAN, AVNER and ALABASTER exit off down Main Street.

BAGGOT

Don't walk away from me! You can't do this! You have to support your local businesses! Don't you remember what this town was like before I was rich? I sure don't! And you wanna go back to that? Or forward? Whichever way you think you're goin'? Well, it's the wrong way, I promise you that! Don't walk away from me! You call this progress? Well, it'll never stick! It never does! You'll be back. You'll see! An' I'll still be right here! This town is mine as much as yours! More even! Cuz I had it longer! Do you hear me? I was here first!

LYNCH comes in, dressed like a wild Injun.

LYNCH

Where is everybody?

BAGGOT says nothing. He just stands there and seethes.

LYNCH

I guess it's just you and me.

BAGGOT says nothing.

LYNCH

You feel like a lynching?

BAGGOT seethes.

LYNCH

Yeah, me neither.

BAGGOT says nothing.

LYNCH

Now that being free is legal, I kinda feel like a criminal.

BAGGOT seethes.

LYNCH

I kinda feel like I deserve a switchin'.

BAGGOT glares at LYNCH.

LYNCH

Woodshed's free.

BAGGOT shrugs and follows LYNCH off to the woodshed.

CHICKORY

...What freedom brung together, let no man put asunder. Amen.

And, ladies, I'll see you at the Captain's table.
Bring a change o' petticoats.

Sounds of switchin' in the distance, as the sun slowly sets.

CHICKORY

Is it cold on this deck, or you just happy to see me?

-----END OF PLAY