

The Man Who Built Chicago
by
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FADE IN:

INT. A PLANTATION OFFICE -- NIGHT

Mississippi, 1927. Rain. A white man named CLAUDE, a middle-aged plantation manager, is doing paperwork. ROY, a gigantic black ex-con and field hand, in his thirties, enters with a pistol.

ROY
Mister Claude, you stop right there.

CLAUDE
What you think you're doing, boy?

ROY
You open up that safe of yours.

Claude opens a safe in the floor.

CLAUDE
Waiting til we sold off the load, very clever. We're loaded with cash.

ROY
Don't come up out of the safe with anything but money. Else I drop this hammer on you.

Claude puts a sizeable pile of money on the desk.

CLAUDE
There it is, the whole load.

ROY
Go into your green book, get my account.

CLAUDE
What -- you don't want the whole thing?

ROY
Find out how much you owe me. You're not gonna keep cheating me.

CLAUDE

Roy, you know how we do it. Each week we give you a little pocket money, keep the rest safe for you right here. We ain't even got to the Christmas Settle.

ROY

I keep asking for my money, you keep pushing me off. I want dollars.

CLAUDE

Your money's here. Better than a bank.

He consults a ledger and counts out money.

ROY

A bank gives you your money without bringing in a gun. Real money, not plantation money.

CLAUDE

The extra is 80 cents, give you another dollar, show there's no hard feelings.

ROY

I take an extra 20 cents, that's armed robbery, you boys gonna string me up.

CLAUDE

Well, we gonna do that anyway.

ROY

Keep the 80 cents.

CLAUDE

Pull a gun, just to get your own money? Got guts.

ROY

Now give me a receipt.

CLAUDE

A receipt? You gonna die with that receipt in your hand.

ROY

Not today I won't.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

Rain. A black family begins their day. The father, JAMES, is 40; he is about to go to a plantation. The mother, SADIE, 40, and her mother LIZZIE sit in chairs, a jar of moonshine between them, Sadie sewing and Lizzy kneading dough. Their girl LUCY, 16, and their son WALTER, 14, eat beans. Walter's shirt is made out of burlap sacks. Keep in mind that through most of the Mississippi scenes, the black men will be wearing overalls, and a lot of the women will as well.

JAMES

No ham til Mister Claude pays me at the Settle. Til then, it's beans and bread.

SADIE

I need money now, for - it's alright. ...Laundry day. Walter, they don't need young folks in the fields. Fetch wood for the stove and then help your sister.

WALTER

Doing laundry??

LUCY

You see these three tubs? We got to fill all three with water.

The boy fetches wood. The children go down the hill with four buckets, bring up water. It gets competitive. Walter drops a bucket, goes down for another load. Soon the tubs on the porch are full. The children are wet, sore, shoulders rounded.

WALTER

Least that's done.

LUCY

That's the first load. We do all that three more times. This is lye soap, take your skin right off.

INT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

Continuation. The kids watch two big pots boiling on the stove. On other burners, irons are heating.

LUCY

Lord it's hot in here. Got to watch the stove every minute. Take this ash pan, dump it out back.

When he returns, he watches through the window as Lucy goes to the porch; she is beating clothes in a tub, to get dirt out. She returns.

LUCY (CONT'D)

We got four irons, need to heat of three of em, iron with the fourth one.

They each pick up an iron. Lucy examines a shirt.

WALTER

Dang, this must weigh seven pounds.

LUCY

No! Check for soot on the iron. We got to wash that again. Here, take this -

She screams. She has burned herself.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Happens every week.

WALTER

Lordy my arms are tired.

LUCY

Just wait. Tomorrow we knead bread dough. I'll milk the cow, you're not used to doing it in the dark. Just be glad Mister Claude took the mule, else we'd have to get his water too.

(leans back)

Lord, I can't do this no more.

WALTER

You got the Sears Roebuck? Mama makes corn bread, messes me up bad.

She hands him catalog pages. He holds his belly.

EXT. OUTSIDE THE HOUSE -- DAY

Continuation. Walter goes behind a tree with the pages, the family lacking an outhouse. He looks longingly at a guitar on the catalog page.

INT. PLANTATION OFFICE -- DAY

Heavy rain. Claude is providing a briefing to LEROY Percy, a rich white planter of 67. A white Army officer named CONNOLLY and other white planters await in the office.

LEROY

And then he took the money and ran off?

CLAUDE

Just his own money. He could have had the bank for the whole shipment.

LEROY

I'll be damned. Got the Settle coming, you got the boys with their guns? Be ready if the colored boys get riled.

CONNOLLY

Folks, you don't mind, I need to catch the train back to Washington.

LEROY

This is Major Connolly from the Army. Army built those levees up there.

CLAUDE

How long we got? Before they blow?

CONNOLLY

No. The levees are going to hold. You can stop the sandbagging. The river can't break through. Our best engineers looked it over top to bottom.

LEROY

Major, we had rain all last year. Cumberland River already flooded.

CONNOLLY

The levee is indestructible, sir.

Leroy pulls Connolly aside.

LEROY

Look down the main street. Who would have thought, something so beautiful in Mississippi?

(MORE)

LEROY (CONT'D)

This city, Greenville, been my family's dream for decades. The aristocracy of the whole Delta. Got the opera house, telephones in the hotel rooms, prettiest girls in the world.

He points down the hill.

LEROY (CONT'D)

And none of this is possible, without that bottom land, ten thousand darkies picking cotton. If the levee breaks, floods those fields, it takes my city with it. We'll be ruined. Ghost town.

EXT. JAMES AND SADIE'S CABIN -- DAY

James and Sadie prepare for work; the children will be left alone.

SADIE

Tonight you two take a bath. After the Settle, we do some shopping up the hill.

WALTER

Can I get the tub first this time?

SADIE

Lucy gets the water first.

WALTER

Why?

LUCY

Cause baby pees in the tub.

WALTER

No I don't!

SADIE

Hush now. All we got to eat is bread and beans. You remember the rows in the garden?

WALTER

Tomatoes, peppers, cabbage, okra.

SADIE

Tomorrow you look in on the Hoppers
down the hill, got three children
left alone. You get a month school
before we start planting, learn
your letters.

The adults leave. The children sit on the step. Walter
finally takes out a slingshot consisting of a forked tree
branch and a rubber band, and picks up rocks to shoot.

WALTER

Come on, old snake, I'll fix you
good.

LUCY

Get us a squirrel, we can eat that.
We have extra church. Christmas.

WALTER

Christmas?

LUCY

Christmas week we go to church
twice, then the Settle, with Mister
Claude. ...When you use the Sears
Roebuck, don't use the part with
the dresses. Gonna get a dress one
day. Lord, I'm tired.

WALTER

You always tired.

INT. SHARECROPPER CABIN - NIGHT

Lucy and Walter play cards outside. Sadie and James talk
softly.

JAMES

We got to make money on the Settle.
Corn is weak, the yams just not
coming.

SADIE

I need you around more. Maybe you
skip the trip to the bottom this
Saturday.

JAMES

You tell me where I can't go?

SADIE

Go down there with your guns every time, every week one of you gets drunk on shine, shoots somebody over a woman.

JAMES

Just playing some Georgia Skin. I brought you five dollars last time.

SADIE

That all you're up to? You're not carrying on like Sampson? He's got two women all the time, one with a baby coming, the other one ready to plow. Had to have the hoodoo gal solve his problem for him, kill that thing with a quinine shot.

JAMES

You know I'm not doing that.

SADIE

It's got so I'm counting on the cousins up the hill to help me out.

JAMES

We need money. Lucy needs a doctor.

SADIE

It's my mother needs the doctor. And I'm worried about that man Claude. Sniffing around here when you're in the fields.

Claude rides up. Lucy, nervous, comes inside.

CLAUDE

Jemmy. Seen Roy?

JAMES

Mister Claude. No sir.

CLAUDE

Didn't expect you home Saturday night. Got yourself a poker game, I thought.

JAMES

No sir.

Claude puts his hand on Lucy's shoulder.

CLAUDE

Lucy, hardly recognize you. You're not a little girl anymore. You make cobbler like your mother? It's time your Lucy came up the house, do housework. It's a job for a grown woman. Good night.

He leaves. Lucy throws Sadie a frightened look.

SADIE

Remember all that talk about getting off this plantation? How much money we need?

JAMES

Doesn't matter if we go deeper in debt each time.

She puts her hand on his shoulder.

SADIE

Come give me some sugar.

LUCY

You keep me away from Mister Claude. Don't care how.

EXT. THE RIVER - NIGHT

A boat loaded with three white men and explosives sails to the Greenville levee which is 40 to 50 feet high. The men struggle with wires in the boat, as they approach the levee. An EXPLOSION blows a few chunks off the levee. There is nothing left of the boat but debris. A trickle of water appears on the landward side of the levee.

INT. SHARECROPPER CABIN - DAY

Walter sits at a table.

WALTER

You have this notion of white folks being a bunch of jackasses get liquored up and kill us and rape our girls. Oh no no. What they came up with was genius.

INT. PLANTATION HOME -- DAY

Leroy talks with his son WILL, 42. Will is very good looking, with blond hair and blue eyes.

LEROY

This sharecropping system is almost Communist, sharing profits with the workers. These hands must be making 400 dollars a year.

WILL

Colored folks have a point. If the foremen won't keep their word, the government should get after them!

LEROY

Those darkies are my people. Too much money in their pockets, they run off. We follow all those fancy accounting rules, the other farms will outdo us, we go broke. You want to give up your book collection or your automobile?

EXT. OUTSIDE A PLANTATION OFFICE -- DAY

Claude stands in an iron gateway as hands pass through.

CLAUDE

Come on in for the big Settle! Work is what sets you free!

INT. PLANTATION OFFICE - DAY

Claude sits at a desk, two armed white men behind him. James sits before them.

JAMES

I'm in debt? I thought I was coming out ahead! The prices in the plantation store keep going up, I need money!

CLAUDE

Well, I had to subtract the office fee, interest on last year's debt, the repair on that plow, bunch of other things.

JAMES

Subtract? You weighed the sacks right?

CLAUDE

You questioning my arithmetic? A good year, you almost broke even. We add the new debt to the old debt.

JAMES

What if I sold the cotton in the city, gave you your share?

CLAUDE

I sell the cotton. You don't know the market. Trust me.

JAMES

Can't you pay in real money, not plantation money?

CLAUDE

You owe ME money. Boys, this man doesn't trust my ciphering. Wants to sell cotton himself and get American money for it.

ARMED MAN

Is that so?

Two armed men throw James through the door.

INT. SHARECROPPER HOUSE - DAY

Walter at a table, with Sadie who is cleaning James' scrapes. They're talking to the audience, which will happen a few more times in the story.

WALTER

They took Daddy for a beating. Every Christmas at the Settle. If the hands complain, if they ask to see the books, they try to sell the cotton themselves, they get a beating. You go to the law, you get a beating. You run out on your debt, they hunt you down, string you up.

SADIE

No matter how, we get our hands on money, they figure how to take it away. The plantation office made mistakes in their figuring, and the mistakes never swung our way.

WALTER

Uppity colored boy go to town with money, gets a nice suit, tries to start a business, the white folks won't use his shop, bank cuts him off. Then the night riders come. Burn him out.

EXT. COTTONFIELD - NIGHT

James, bruised, and Walter hoe cotton plants.

WALTER

You chopped the roots, you killed it!

JAMES

Mister Percy's cotton, not mine.

James and Walter carry sacks to the scale, James holding rocks.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Put some rocks in so we make weight. Here, switch shirts with me, maybe we get paid twice.

They do, and line up for their pocket money.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - NIGHT

James and Walter walk home.

JAMES

Here, the light's out, grab some corn.

They do; they hear dogs barking. They walk down the road; James is singing "I'll Overcome Someday". They reach a crossroads, where a crowd of field hands, angry about the Settle, is eyeing the road to the plantation house, where a small group of armed white men watch them nervously.

JAMES (CONT'D)

So who came out ahead on the
Settle?

Silence. The two groups glare at each other.

INT. SHARECROPPER HOUSE - DAY

Walter at the table.

WALTER

What the planters did to us was
theft, organized theft across the
whole state. So we fought back.
White people, black people spent
the whole year cheating each other.

EXT. A COTTONFIELD NEAR A LEVEE - DAY

Rain. Claude and Leroy stand at the bottom of a levee,
looking up its sloping sides at a boat sailing by. The river
is so flooded that most of the boat is visible above the
levee. The boat bumps against the top of the levee, and for
one horrifying moment it looks as though it will flip over
the levee and slide down the hill.

CLAUDE

Jesus. Senator, it's like that boat
is flying through the sky.

LEROY

We're running out of levee and Old
Man River ain't running out of
river.

Brown water squirts through a tiny hole.

LEROY (CONT'D)

They call that a boil. See how
brown the water is? That means it's
river water, the real thing. If the
levee gonna break, a boil is where
it starts.

CLAUDE

Can we stop the boils?

LEROY

Probably a hedgehog or a rat dug a
hole. This thing is just dirt, you
know.

He FIRES his pistol. A man atop the levee FIRES his shotgun in response. Leroy looks to the east and sees a tiny sharecropper cabin.

LEROY (CONT'D)

Can you imagine, living right under the levee like that?

They begin to climb up the side of the levee.

EXT. A BOAT ON THE MISSISSIPPI -- DAY

Claude and Leroy climb the levee, and find armed men. They look across the river with field glasses and see another levee, also loaded with armed men. The river is a stormy ocean, three miles across, chocolate brown, crashing against the grass-covered levee in waves, drenching the men on it.

CLAUDE

Why you got everyone turned out?

LEROY

Claude, look at those fellas over there. The levees gonna break but we don't know which side, our side here, or Arkansas over there.

CLAUDE

I don't understand.

LEROY

Levee breaks over HERE, they celebrate over Arkansas because the river won't flood their land if it floods ours.

(pointing west)

If THEIR levee breaks, then our fields will stay dry, we get to eat next winter while they starve. Folks on each side praying the other side gets hit. Last big one, we used field hands as human sandbags, laying on top the levee. Got soaked but they didn't drown.

CLAUDE

So why all the guns?

LEROY

Arkansas quarrymen brought a boat over here with dynamite. Tried to blow a hole in our levee, save the Arkansas side.

CLAUDE

They tried to bust open our levee?

LEROY

I sent these fellas out. Any
Arkansas folks come near our levee,
shoot to kill. They ain't our
friends no more. This is war.
Arkansas against Mississippi.

Five Arkansas boats approach. The Arkansas men and
Mississippi men shoot at each other, wounding two on the
levee and three in the boats. The boats retreat.

CLAUDE

You must have every police man in
the Delta out here. Who's minding
the town?

LEROY

We call in the National Guard.
Don't want the darkies getting any
ideas. Specially with the Settle.
Lot of darkies dead broke, looking
for a fight.

In the distance we see Will walk atop the levee, James
following at a distance.

CLAUDE

Isn't that your boy walking the
levee?

LEROY

Sometimes I wonder if he's normal.
Never married. Likes walking the
levee, to think. Came back a war
hero, went to Harvard, wants to be
a poet.

CLAUDE

A poet? Who's that with him?

LEROY

Jimmy Gooden. Bought him from
Perkins.

CLAUDE

You bought him?

LEROY

He's a good hand, so I paid off his
debt with Perkins and brought him
here. I've bought lots of darkies.

INT. TRAIN STATION - DAY

A few passengers enter the station to board the train. The station is split down the middle by a railing, one side for whites, one for blacks.

BLACK BOY

So which side does the rail belong to?

BLACK MOTHER

Don't rightly know.

The black boy puts his hand on the rail. A white girl puts her hand on his. They giggle. Her father glares at the boy, pulls his daughter away.

EXT. SUNNY STREET -- DAY

A young black TEACHER walks down a prosperous street outside town. A local white MAN spots him.

LOCAL MAN

Hey. What you doing here?

TEACHER

Trying to find the colored school -

LOCAL MAN

What you doing on this street, near Senator Percy's house?

TEACHER

Leroy Percy?

LOCAL MAN

Owens half the land around here. You don't go near his house less you got business there. I'll set the law on you.

TEACHER

Looking for the school. I'm the teacher.

LOCAL MAN

I told you. You on the wrong street.

EXT. SUNNY STREET -- DAY

The teacher walks past a pool and sees white women in swimsuits. More white LOCALS spot him.

TEACHER

Lorda mercy.

SECOND LOCAL MAN

Hey! What you looking at over there?

Locals drag him behind the poolhouse, beat him up.

INT. JAIL -- DAY

The teacher is taken to jail; SHERIFF NICHOLSON awaits.

SECOND LOCAL MAN

He was hanging around the Percy place, eyeballing the white girls at the pool. One-man crime wave. Thought he was a hand, making trouble about the Settle.

LOCAL MAN

Want me to round up the boys? We can --

TEACHER

I'm a teacher!

SECOND LOCAL MAN

Did you just interrupt this man?

NICHOLSON

New teacher. Where you from? Up north?

TEACHER

Atlanta.

NICHOLSON

You stay out of the white part of town, except weekend on the main street. You don't go into a white man's house by the front door. You don't go out after dark. You met the mayor yet?

TEACHER

No, just your welcoming committee.

NICHOLSON

First thing, you swear an oath
you're not a member of the NAACP.

TEACHER

Wouldn't dream of it.

NICHOLSON

You got a night in jail.

TEACHER

I didn't do anything -

NICHOLSON

I know. Saving your neck. You don't
want to try walking the street
right now.

A deputy is reading a newspaper.

DEPUTY

You know Cincinnati and Pittsburgh
are already flooded out?

NICHOLSON

So?

DEPUTY

All that water is coming down here.

INT. PLANTATION HOUSE - DAY

Leroy is in his study looking at blueprints. Sadie enters
with a dish.

LEROY

Sadie. My door is always open, as
long as you make that cobbler.
Look, this is what the city
building will look like. Gonna
bring marble in on the train.

He begins to eat the cobbler. The teacher arrives and meets
Leroy and Will. Handshakes. The Percys notice the teacher's
bruises, but say nothing.

TEACHER

Senator. I've got good news. Our
people in Georgia are working with
folks in the capitol here in
Mississippi.

LEROY

Over in Jackson. Your people.

TEACHER

I went to talk books, schools.
They're looking at legislation, we
can get colored folks in high
school, and they want to build a
college here in the Delta!

LEROY

Is that so?

TEACHER

And I found some investors want to
build a new mill right here in
Greenville, biggest one in the
Delta!

LEROY

So you went there did all this for
us.

TEACHER

Yes sir, I did.

LEROY

Well. Thank you for stopping by.
You're a courteous and energetic
young man.

TEACHER

Sir?

LEROY

(at the door)

We'll talk again, I'm sure. Hattie,
you get Claude in here, then point
this young man toward that school.

Teacher leaves. Claude enters.

WILL

Daddy, isn't this wonderful?

LEROY

I'm all tingly. Hattie, I'm going
to need long distance on the
telephone... That teacher went to
Jackson and got us money for the
colored to go to high school, and
got us money for a mill too.

CLAUDE
Dammit, Senator -

LEROY
Claude, I had nothing to do with it. Bunch of helpful people in the statehouse threw this at us.

WILL
Daddy, I don't understand.

LEROY
Will. You remember the Shelby place? Our friend Shelby wanted to improve the lot of the colored man, teach em to be mechanics and such. Teaching the hands to do something besides cotton. The local planters burned down his house.

WILL
Lord.

LEROY
You know why I'm not in the Senate anymore? I told the planters I didn't want the Klan here. They threw me out of office. We keep the darkies picking cotton. If we teach em to read, give em a mill to work in, then we lose our hands, we go broke.

WILL
So why did the legislature do all this -

LEROY
The Settle's got the colored boys riled up, now the capitol wants to rile up the white trash, teach me a lesson, being too nice to the darkies...We keep that colored school nice and small. This new teacher is all they get. They get a few months of school a year, that's it. That factory ain't coming here neither.

WILL
And the college?

LEROY

Oh, the college is coming. I'll even make a conspicuous donation. But in return for my donation, they're gonna move that damn college to another part of the state.

WILL

Wouldn't a mill be a feather in our cap? And a college?

CLAUDE

We like things just as they are.

EXT. THE LEVEE - DAY

A stream of brown water is coming through levee. As we watch, the stream gains force. A young black girl sees it, looks up to the top of the rumbling levee, and begins running.

INT. LEROY'S PLANTATION HOME - NIGHT

Rich white PLANTERS enter, head upstairs to socialize. A brick comes through a window.

LUCY (V.O.)

The Percys said they wanted to treat colored folks right. Old man Leroy and his son Will. But now they had enemies.

Will picks up the brick.

PLANTER

(eager to change the subject)

Got a nice crowd, cream of society.

LEROY

I did that for a reason.

WILL

Next election, it's one man, one vote. Civilized folks outnumbered by the rednecks, descended from criminals, in-bred. Hate to say, colored folks are intellectually and spiritually superior to the white trash.

(MORE)

WILL (CONT'D)

That's why I'd rather hire darkies than the white boys - problem is, all this cotton money attracted the rednecks to our county. The aristocracy and the negroes are the only classes in the South of which God must be proud - it was us built the Delta. The colored man is our younger brother, not ready to be an adult, he needs protecting.

PLANTER

Tuesday, making a speech on lynching?

Will goes to a desk, pulls out a grey object. CUSTIS, a black butler, enters with drinks.

WILL

Last month there was a colored boy on Main Street, a newspaperman walked up, talked to him. Just for talking to that reporter, boy got beat, then strung up in the woods. They cut off his balls and - this is his toe. Twenty cars full of rednecks, chased him halfway across the Delta. They announce the lynchings in the paper ahead of time.

EXT. PLANTATION HOUSE - NIGHT

Leroy picks up the brick and walks out the front door. He looks into the trees where he knows Klansmen await. Will, armed, follows.

LEROY

I know you're still out there, a whole bunch of you, with your guns, and your masks. Otherwise you'd never dare come up here. I'm gonna keep on. I'm gonna keep asking the statehouse to let the colored folks vote. I'm gonna keep teaching em to read, so they can be good field hands. This is my country and we're gonna run it my way, like always.

(MORE)

LEROY (CONT'D)

You have a couple of your Klan parades through the main street, and I promise you grass will be growing in the street the next year because the darkies will all be gone. And that I will not allow. There will be no Klan here. Anybody want to dispute that, feel free to step forward in the light.

Nothing.

LEROY (CONT'D)

And by the way I know why you came here first, cause I married a Catholic. Anybody who has a word to say about her, just remember that I'm the best shot in the county.

He walks to the door where a house servant, smiling, nods to him.

INT. PLANTATION HOUSE - NIGHT

Continuation.

PLANTER

You know the new county prosecutor is the Cyclops of the local Klan?

LEROY

Prosecutor - when was the last time one of these colored boys lived long enough to go to trial? Custis, poker and bourbon in the parlor.

WILL

Letter at the office, attacking you for hiring a colored teacher. Threatens you, threatens me. You and I stick together on the road, carry our guns.

In a corner, Lucy is preparing to serve food. She goes into the kitchen and begins to laugh.

INT. CHICAGO APARTMENT - DAY

Lucy sits at a table, smiling.

LUCY

The best part of working the big house, was the day I realized. The white folks, their greatest fear wasn't the colored folks rising up. They were afraid of each other. Every time somebody says the Klan, Senator Leroy turns white as a sheet. So I wasn't afraid of Leroy or Mister Will. But that Mister Claude, he was a whole nother thing.

INT. PLANTATION KITCHEN - DAY

Lucy fixes a plate of food and turns to see that Claude has been watching her from a corner.

INT. LAW OFFICE - NIGHT

Will enters, carrying the brick, finds the local prosecutor, RAY TOOMBS, throws the brick on the lawyer's desk.

RAY

Will. Got business with the prosecutor's office?

WILL

Business with the Cyclops of the Klan. Got your message. Anything happens to my father, you will die. You specifically.

RAY

You're a lawyer...and I hear you're a poet?

WILL

And I killed people in the war. Don't know that one or two more would make a difference. Good night.

EXT. IN FRONT OF SHARECROPPERS' CABIN - NIGHT

LUCY (V.O.)

Getting cheated on the Settle every Christmas was bad enough. But then the Alabama boys showed up.

James comes to the house and finds Sadie.

JAMES
Sadie, where's Walter?

SADIE
What?

JAMES
Told you to keep him here.

SADIE
He's in town getting flour.

JAMES
The Alabama gents are back.

SADIE
Good Lord. If I hurry I can catch
him -

JAMES
The Alabama boys. Coal miners! It's
not safe to be downtown. Slave
auction.

He runs out.

SADIE
Jemmy, they could come after you
too!

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD LEADING IN TO TOWN - NIGHT

The sheriff and deputy walk into town.

DEPUTY
So how does this even work? You're
not paying me a salary.

NICHOLSON
I don't get a salary neither. Boy,
what's the only thing we got here,
to make money with?

DEPUTY
Cotton?

NICHOLSON
Close, but no. Only way to make
money in Mississippi, is colored
people.

DEPUTY
Don't follow you.

NICHOLSON

We arrest em, and we sell em. The more we arrest, the more money we make. It's like a license to print money.

DEPUTY

Sell em?

NICHOLSON

Sell em to farms, quarries, lumber camps.

DEPUTY

We can do that?

NICHOLSON

Who's gonna stop us? We're the law. We sell off all the darkies, we don't need to build a prison. That's not even the best part. We got these two coal mines over Alabama, they come here for more men. They need twenty thousand miners, so they come here for our prisoners. Georgia needs em too.

They arrive on the main street where blacks and whites are all enjoying their evening. They approach Walter who is drinking a soda.

NICHOLSON (CONT'D)

See, Saturday night, perfect, all the darkies are downtown, getting drunk. Hey, boy, you got money?

WALTER

Beg pardon?

NICHOLSON

You got money?

WALTER

Yassir.

NICHOLSON

You're under arrest for theft. Put him in the wagon. Boy, you got money?

SECOND BOY

Uh, nossir.

While the sheriff is rounding up his next victim, Walter, terrified, is being put into a wagon. The wagon is loaded with strong-looking black men.

NICHOLSON

You're under arrest for vagrancy.
In the wagon.

And he joins Walter. The deputy points to an older man.

DEPUTY

How about this one?

NICHOLSON

Too old. Just the young bucks,
fifteen years old up to fifty or
so. You boy. Who's your boss?

THIRD BOY

Mister Sims.

NICHOLSON

Can you prove it?

THIRD BOY

Prove it how?

NICHOLSON

Under arrest for vagrancy. In the
wagon.

They see a black man of thirty five who is very well dressed.

NICHOLSON (CONT'D)

Ah, perfect timing. You, boy.
Trying to open a new dry goods
store?

WELL DRESSED MAN

Sir?

NICHOLSON

Where does colored man get the
money to open a dry goods?

WELL DRESSED MAN

Sir?

NICHOLSON

We already got us a dry goods. We
really don't like troublemakers
here. Vagrancy, in the wagon.

The wagon follows the sheriff and deputy as they walk to the jail. Two well-dressed white men await, examining the line of black men arriving.

NICHOLSON (CONT'D)

Now see, this here, a little bit of heaven. See the two boys with the briefcases? There's two different coal mines building up, they came on the same train, each one trying to grab all the darkies before the other boy can get his innings. So we play em off each other, sell to the highest bidder. Time for an auction! ...Okay fellers, let's figure out who we're bidding on, first thing. How about this fine buck here?

MINE FOREMAN

Sure, he's in good shape. Him, the next two, and the big boy in the middle.

NICHOLSON

How about this one?

MINE FOREMAN

Looks old, kinda sick.

NICHOLSON

My apologies, uncle, you're free to go.

SECOND MINE FOREMAN

Yes, we just want the strong backs and the weak minds.

DEPUTY

What's that lawyer doing?

NICHOLSON

Each darkie here has to sign a contract. Lawyer can buy or sell the contract like a stock. If he thinks the darkie is gonna die or escape, price goes down. Big strong buck can't think too good, price goes up. It's like the stock market. Okay, boys, court first, the auction after!

An older white man arrives and sits in a chair in front of the jail. The sheriff brings forward a black man.

JUDGE

Court is now in session. First buck up.

NICHOLSON

Leaving his employer without permission.

BLACK MAN

Your Honor...Leaving my employer without permission? How could I even do that? I ain't got no employer.

JUDGE

Fine, charge is vagrancy. Thirty days hard labor.

BLACK MAN

Thirty -

JUDGE

That's just for the charge. Add the fees for the sheriff, the deputy, the clerk, the witnesses, looks like about a year to work it off.

BLACK MAN

But I want a trial -

JUDGE

You want a trial, you got more fees for the sheriff, for the court, and you end up in the same place with a white jury and a longer sentence. Plead guilty and save yourself a lot of trouble. You're the one got that girl, Alice?

BLACK MAN

My daughter?

JUDGE

You can sign her up on a contract, pay off your debt, get her working at the lumber camp.

BLACK MAN

She's sixteen.

JUDGE

Grown woman. She can sign her own X. Help you out.

The sheriff sees the deputy writing.

NICHOLSON

And what do you think you're doing?

DEPUTY

You said the deputy keeps the books. Recording the charges. Not given, not given, selling his own cotton in town, not given, using foul language, leaving his employer without permission, gambling...Most of em, not given, we don't even have a charge.

SHERIFF

And we don't keep these records. So throw that shit out right now.
...Time to do sandbags.

EXT. A COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

A police car leads two trucks through a row of sharecropper's cabins. Blacks emerge from the cabins. A policeman stands on the truck bed with a rifle.

POLICEMAN

Listen up, I need hands to fill sandbags on the levee. ...Come on now, don't make this hard.

EXT. A LEVEE -- DAY

At a distance from the levee, a small herd of cows begins mooing. Panic.

Closer to the levee, white National GUARDSMEN are rounding up HANDS in a field below the levee.

GUARDSMAN

Everybody down the road to the levee.

They all begin walking.

FIELD HAND

Never seen rain like this.

SECOND FIELD HAND

Are they taking us to a shelter?

FIELD HAND
National Guard. Maybe a soup
kitchen.

They find shovels and sandbags.

GUARDSMAN
Alright, every man grab a shovel
and start filling sandbags.

FIELD HAND
Now wait a minute -

GUARDSMAN
Dammit, everybody grab a shovel! If
this levee goes, we all go with it!

FIELD HAND
So how come you're not shoveling?

GUARDSMAN
Russell? You get on over here.

Three frightened Guardsmen approach with rifles.

GUARDSMAN (CONT'D)
(to the field hands)
You get to work now.

The African Americans look with alarm at the levee, and begin
sandbagging.

SECOND FIELD HAND
Just last month we had an
earthquake and a tornado both. We
got trouble coming.

FIELD HAND
I can feel the levee shaking. If
this thing blows out, you run.

SECOND FIELD HAND
What about the soldiers?

FIELD HAND
Don't you worry, they'll be running
too.

Further down, a hole opens in the levee, 3000 feet wide. The
force is greater than Niagara Falls. Sandbags are washed
away. The soldiers and workers run but many are swept away.
Terrifying, deafening ROAR. The initial surge of water is 100
feet high.

EXT. MAIN STREET IN GREENVILLE - DAY

All through the town, the church BELLS begin to ring, discordantly. Then the fire WHISTLES. Then a mill WHISTLE. And they don't stop.

EXT. LEVEE -- DAY

Below the levee, black sharecroppers run for high ground, some not fully dressed. More of the ROAR.

INT. MIDDLE CLASS HOME -- DAY

A white WOMAN is running down the stairs. She finds a white MAN rolling a carpet.

WOMAN

First we get the rugs up to the second floor. Then we move the furniture.

MAN

We don't have time!

WOMAN

Ain't nothing gonna flood the top floor.

She looks out the window and sees a wall of water approaching, thirty feet high. And the ROAR.

EXT. SHARECROPPER'S CABIN -- DAY

James, Sadie, Lucy and Lizzy run out of the house. James enters a barn and appears in a window. He sees the water coming.

JAMES

Everybody up the barn!

They run to the barn, while James is removing roof slats from the inside, on the side away from the onrushing water. They all climb through the new hole onto the roof.

The water hits the barn broadside, and the barn begins to roll on its side. The family leaps from the half of the roof with the hole in it, to the other half.

The barn continues to roll, and they jump again, landing on the front of the barn, right onto the door. The current carries everything swiftly.

The barn collapses in the rushing water. Lizzie and Sadie, holding each other, half-drowned, manage to hang onto the door. The others are in the water.

James is flipped over. He has a gash on his head. He slowly manages to swim to the barn door.

JAMES (CONT'D)
Got hit in the head with my own
damn pitchfork. Where's Lucy?

Lucy is downstream of them, clinging to an uprooted tree. The river sucks in the tree and shoots it downstream. It strikes a boat and capsizes it. Lucy, still riding the tree, screams.

JAMES (CONT'D)
The water's slowing down. Try to
steer.

Lizzie breaks off a plank and begins to paddle.

JAMES (CONT'D)
Lucy, you need to swim.

LUCY
There's snakes in here!

She jumps in but the door slides beyond her. The door hits choppy water and the family hangs on.

EXT. RAFT -- NIGHT

James' raft-bound family watches as cows and pigs sail by, some alive, some dead. They see people sitting on their rooftops, stuck in treetops.

SADIE
We got to help em!

JAMES
We can't hardly steer this thing!

SADIE
Try to help that yella gal in that
tree.

They see a girl in a tree, but nothing can slow down the make-shift raft.

EXT. RAFT - DAY

The barn door's seaworthiness is fading fast.

JAMES

Keep your feet out of the water.
Got snakes, eels.

They see boats, rafts, other makeshift vessels float by. All the seaborne refugees watch each other warily. One or two have shotguns.

The raft snags on a railroad grade. The family stands knee deep on the grade, lifts the raft over it.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Want to keep going? Levee's right over there, the current's all tuckered out.

Sadie looks nervously at the raft, but he's right. The calm waters allow them to paddle to the levee.

SADIE

How we gonna find Walter?

INT. BARRACKS AT AN ALABAMA COAL MINE - NIGHT

A foreman leads Walter and other prisoners into the crowded, filthy barracks where another overseer is punishing a laborer by holding his head underwater in a barrel.

FOREMAN

Welcome to Alabama. ...Alright, chain him up for the night. You run again, it costs me a hundred fifty dollar fine. Next time I let the dogs have you.

They hang him from a pole by his wrists. The foreman addresses another prisoner.

FOREMAN (CONT'D)

And you? Adding a new criminal charge, eating food you're not entitled to.

PRISONER

I thought I was getting out -

FOREMAN

(mock sympathy)
And you were almost there. See where you are round Christmas. Okay, chain em up.

All the other laborers are chained to their beds.

PRISONER

Best get some sleep. They get us up three o'clock in the morning, bring us back eight o'clock at night.

WALTER

So we sleep eight to three?

PRISONER

And we work from cain't-see to cain't see. That's why they call it Sunday - only day you get to see the sun.

Walter sees another prisoner moaning, his hand wrapped in a bloody rag.

WALTER

What's the matter with him?

PRISONER

He thought he was gonna get out of work by chopping off a finger - they worked him anyway. Next time take off the whole hand.

INT. COAL MINE -- DAY

An overseer leads Walter and other prisoners down a mine shaft; they find a two-foot by two-foot opening in the wall.

FOREMAN

You get in there, go about twenty feet in, chip out a nice big chunk of coal, about a hundred pounds, get it out of there.

WALTER

How?

FOREMAN

You grab it and get it out. You do that eighty times, you got your four tons. You're new. Next week it's eight tons every day, if you don't want the whip.

WALTER

Can't see.

With his pick he crawls into the hole, dripping from the heat, covered with coal dust.

He chips ineptly at the ceiling and causes a collapse. He screams and manages to clamber out, covered in coal dust.

WALTER (CONT'D)

It's in my eyes!

FOREMAN

So what you got? Nothing. You owe me four tons today, eight tons tomorrow. Hope you learn fast.

The foreman goes up the shaft and finds another foreman.

SECOND FOREMAN

You know we're gonna need to slow it down some.

FOREMAN

What the hell for?

SECOND FOREMAN

Got twelve hundred darkies down there, got so another man dies every day. The runoff messed up the water, dysentery killed three men this week. Three more with TB. Two of em got stabbed with coal picks, two more suicide.

FOREMAN

Been a bad week.

SECOND FOREMAN

Week before, we had the explosion and the fire in the south shaft.

FOREMAN

I told you, the only way to stop the fire was to flood the shaft.

SECOND FOREMAN

There was a couple thousand dollar worth of darkies down there. About a quarter of these dinges be dead within a year.

FOREMAN

So we just go buy more. This ain't like owning slaves. You own a slave, you want him to live long, work long, make more slaves. This mine, we only have em for a year or so, who cares if they die at the end of it?

EXT. RIVER - DAY

A BOATMAN sees Lucy in the water.

BOATMAN

Come on here, girl, I got you.

He drops a rope in the water and she swims to it. He steers the boat to a sandbar and she gets in. She sees a water moccasin in the boat and screams.

BOATMAN (CONT'D)

Hush, child, leave him alone and he won't bother you. They fall out of the trees in my boat all the time.

LUCY

Kill it!

Expertly he scoops the snake up with an oar and flips it overboard.

BOATMAN

First thing, we go back around the Wilson place, got me an idea.

He steers the boat to an island with a cabin and a barn. He pulls the boat onto land; they get out.

BOATMAN (CONT'D)

Looks like Hickory Hill turned into Hickory Island. Here comes more water.

A wave of water carries a smashed boat and a bloated dead body onto the island. Lucy screams.

BOATMAN (CONT'D)

Damn, girl. Never mind the dead man, keep that wreck from hitting my boat.

He goes to the barn, and shortly emerges with a thresher machine engine.

BOATMAN (CONT'D)

Always wanted to try this.

He rigs the engine onto the back of the boat, and after two tries, the engine roars to life.

BOATMAN (CONT'D)

Get your butt over here, girl!

They board and sail off. She sees his gun.

BOATMAN (CONT'D)

If you ain't got a gun, pretty soon
you ain't got a boat. Too many
river rats. The mayor is taking
people's boats too. Ain't slept in
two days. Dang, take this oar,
shove that tree out the way.

EXT. RIVER - DAY

Continuation. The boat sails to a small town; only rooftops
are visible. People sit atop their homes.

BOATMAN

Heard of a town called Venice, over
Italy. Let's start over here.

The boat approaches a general store.

STORE OWNER

Got a bunch of people up here.

BOATMAN

Start with the people who can't
swim.

STORE OWNER

Make some room, I need to save my
piano.

BOATMAN

Your piano.

STORE OWNER

It's imported from Europe!

BOATMAN

Ain't taking no piano, I don't care
if it was built by Beethoven
himself. Hey, get that cow away
from the boat!

A terrified cow tries to board. The boatman shoots it.

The boat sets off. The Greenville levee comes into view.

BOATMAN (CONT'D)

What you doing girl?

LUCY

Try to find my family.

BOATMAN

I'm not going near that levee.

LUCY

Don't care. There, there's my
father! Thanks, Mister!

She jumps from the boat, swims to her parents.

EXT. GREENVILLE STREET - DAY

The muddy street suddenly splits as a shower of mud shoots up from a hole in the road; the mud then turns to water. This flow of water is soon joined by water rolling down the street in a massive wave.

INT. PLANTATION OFFICE -- DAY

Leroy awaits as Claude, drenched, arrives with a damp piece of paper in his pocket.

CLAUDE

Everything's down, we had to get
the Morse man from the station.
Power's gone, phone's gone, water.
We're cut off, no railroad.

LEROY

Well, what they say in the capitol?

CLAUDE

(reading)

Levee broke in a hundred places. In
places water's thirty feet deep.
One tenth of Arkansas is under
water.

LEROY

And Mississippi?

CLAUDE

Seems like half the Delta is gone.
All your farmland. Half a million
people ain't got no homes.

LEROY

Red Cross coming. Get the police
out, rounding up all the food and
all the boats. Keep everything
under control.

EXT. LEVEE -- NIGHT

More than 10,000 African-Americans, and a few whites, are stranded atop the Greenville levee; the levee is seven miles long and only eight feet wide on the level part at the top.

A man looks for his wife, and an old woman clings to a carpetbag.

Two hands try to control a cow and a pig. Further down, hundreds of head of livestock.

Roy watches white men in a boat; he hides in a crowd.

INT. PLANTATION OFFICE -- NIGHT

White men including Leroy and Will discuss plans.

LEROY

You know my son Will, worked with the Army on relief efforts in Belgium. I'm putting him in charge of relief here.

WILL

We got food and medicine coming in on the Red Cross boats. We can get at it first thing in the morning.

LEROY

Remember the water too.

WILL

We use steamers to go to the levee, and rescue the folks who are stuck up there.

LEROY

Son, remember, first thing is get the white folks off that levee.

WILL

Yes, sir, if that's what you want. And then we'll use the boats to go back for the colored folks.

An uneasy silence. They all look at each other.

LEROY

Next thing, need a line to the capitol so I can talk to the governor...

EXT. LEVEE - DAY

A steamer approaches the levee. A rowboat is lowered into the water with armed white MEN in it. They row to a group of white people on the levee.

MAN IN ROWBOAT

Everybody back! I want you, you,
and you folks there. Everybody
else, stay back.

He points to the white people, who board the boat.

Next a white MAN steers a larger barge toward the levee where a horse and a mule stand placidly.

MAN IN BARGE

Alright, first the horse, then the
mule.

JAMES

What about us?

MAN IN BARGE

It's gonna be hard enough getting
the animals across on this thing.

LUCY

Daddy, look at those boats. White
folks, horses, mules, more white
folks.

Sadie puts her hand on James' shoulder.

SADIE

They're gonna leave us on this
levee. Colored folks and the
cattle.

Another boat shows up, loaded with black people.

BOATMAN

All you colored folks get on that
levee there. It's the only dry
place.

EXT. A HILL OUTSIDE THE PERCY HOME - DAY

The hill behind the house is covered with dead fish, roaches
and water bugs.

INT. PERCY HOME - DAY

Leroy and a cook look out the window at the hill.

They are knee-deep in water.

LEROY

The stench is gonna kill us all.
Get some food for the boys
upstairs. You give me any more
sass, I'll stick you on the levee
with the other colored folks.

COOK

There's a snake in the parlor. I'm
staying back here.

Leroy, Claude, Will and white planters wade through foot-high
water on the first floor and head upstairs to consider
events.

LEROY

We're in bed with the devil. Only
place to get motorboats is the
moonshiners over Arkansas.

CLAUDE

Good luck. When our levee blew
open, the Arkansas folks were
celebrating, shooting off their
guns. Couple hours later, their
levee blew too.

LEROY

(looking steadily at
Claude)
Human nature can be an ugly thing.

CLAUDE

Senator, got a lot of respect for
you. Built this fabulous city.

LEROY

Just spit it out, Claude.

CLAUDE

We need to know whose side you're
on, us or the darkies. You know I
stuck up for you when you ran the
Klan out of town.

LEROY

I don't want the Klan here. Darkies are easier to deal with than white trash.

CLAUDE

Now, see, that's exactly what I'm talking about.

LEROY

I take care of my darkies. They're simple, can't take care of themselves. Need to treat them right: we go back to the old ways, they'll get riled up and leave the Delta. Then we got no cotton.

CLAUDE

See, there, we agree on that. We need to keep the colored folks here, or we're done for. But you tried pampering them, it didn't work. They hate the Delta.

WILL

What's your point?

CLAUDE

You got thousands of darkies stuck on that levee over there. Your son wants to use the steamboats to get them off. You do that, they all leave.

WILL

I don't follow you.

CLAUDE

Leave them on the levee for now. Til they cool off.

WILL

Keep em out there? No water, food?

CLAUDE

Tell em we give them field kitchens and tents if they stay on the levee. They get food if they unload the relief boats. So we don't need to pay them.

WILL

Daddy, are we really going to leave those people on that levee?

(MORE)

WILL (CONT'D)

I have plenty of boats to get them to dry land.

Leroy pulls his son aside.

LEROY

I already talked to your Red Cross boys about this...Son, Greenville is something special. Back during the war, our folks shot at the bluecoats, they burned down the town. We rebuilt it, schools and churches. Made a fortune in cotton. You fetch those colored folks off the levee, they disappear. The town will die. All those white trash will turn on me, and on you. No colored man is allowed off that levee, except to work.

WILL

(appalled)

Daddy, I just can't believe...

LEROY

So you got the white folks off of there.

WILL

And the horses and mules. Like you said.

EXT. LEVEE - DAY

Rain. The top of the levee is quickly turning to mud. A BOY has straggly strings leading into the water.

BOY

That's a sturgeon. Look at the size of it!

SECOND BOY

Didn't see no sturgeon. Dang, sturgeon be big enough to feed all of us.

Roy, James and the newly-arrived teacher confer.

TEACHER

Down south, the river is sixty miles across. Like the ocean. Seems like half of Arkansas gone, two parishes down Louisiana.

ROY

I heard Little Rock was under water.

TEACHER

Helena, Holly Ridge, Leland - they're lakes now.

ROY

More colored folks heading to Chicago?

TEACHER

The ones that can get to the trains. Half a million people in tents, in blankets, under the trees. They gonna starve to death before the skeeters can even get their turn. Got a dozen kids can't find their parents.

JAMES

Got a few tents. Save em for the sick, the old folks.

TEACHER

Why won't they come get us?

JAMES

Can we set up a tent so the womenfolk can go to the toilet?

TEACHER

And dump it in the river? Stink gonna kill us all, the disease.

JAMES

Jesus, when is the rain gonna stop?
...Roy, you best keep out of sight.

Will arrives by boat and delivers sacks of bread and a barrel of water.

WILL

This will have to last you until we can get the rest of the trucks unloaded.

Down the levee, a black REVEREND is managing a service. Sadie is among the churchgoers.

REVEREND

And when the Lord brought down the rain, the sinners perished in the waves. Only Noah and his holy progeny were spared.

CHURCHGOER

Wonder if the Lord saved the white folks and the mules, like Mister Percy did?

SADIE

Reverend, day like today, you preaching about the flood? How about some Exodus? Lead the slaves to the Promised Land?

REVEREND

(resigned)

Why don't we just sing then?

They do a hymn, humming rather than singing.

Further down, Lucy is curled up in a lean-to, sick, when two black INTRUDERS enter.

INTRUDER

You ever seen anything so fine?

Roy approaches with a sack and lays one of them out with the dull end of his cleaver. The other intruder backs away.

ROY

You go on and git.

Roy picks up a gun, finds Sadie outside the tent.

ROY (CONT'D)

Got no business leaving her sick. Bad folks up here. Boys with guns.

SADIE

Bad folks? You were in Parchman. I know you.

ROY

I work in a butcher shop now.

He holds up his cleaver.

SADIE

That man had a gun, you laid him out with a cleaver?

ROY

Now I got a gun too.

SADIE

Why aren't you out there loading?
You trying to get over on the white
man?

ROY

Hiding out. Mister Claude looking
for me. Police too.

SADIE

You still trying to get over on em?

ROY

Your girl sleeping. She sick?

SADIE

It was so cold last night. I'm
hoping she's just hungry and tired.

ROY

Jerky in my poke. Don't like it
nohow.

He offers a nasty piece of meat.

SADIE

Thanks.

ROY

Got fellas treat women with
respect, and then there's the other
kind. You Miss Lizzie's girl, then?
She's a good egg.

SADIE

She's still keeping on. If we get
out from under, I'd stay down the
bottom, taking care of her. That
stupid old cabin good enough for
me. Just get me off this levee.
Thanks anyhow.

LUCY

You remember how much water we had
to get just for the five of us? I
can see a thousand people just
right here.

There are, in fact, thirteen thousand people stranded on the
levee.

SADIE

Lucy, we're surrounded by water.

LUCY

That's mud. People pee in it.
Tomorrow, gonna have a hundred
people with the flux, shitting
right back in the river. People
gonna die. Let's go upstream.

A little GIRL, wading in the water off the levee, screams.
Lucy runs over to her.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Right, there's a metal fence under
there. Half the folks here
barefoot.

They tend the serious cut on the girl's foot.

GIRL

Thanks. Haven't seen my Mama. I
don't even know if our house is
there anymore.

LUCY

You sit right here. What I wouldn't
do for a couple pair of dry socks.

EXT. LEVEE -- DAY

Boats line the levee, loaded with armed white GUARDSMEN.

GUARDSMAN

Guard, affix bayonets.

The guardsmen do, and look at the blacks on the levee.

Two black MEN slide a door in to the water. A boat with two
Guardsmen rows over.

GUARDSMAN (CONT'D)

You take that door and sail right
on back to that levee.

BLACK MAN

Who the hell are you?

GUARDSMAN

National Guard.

BLACK MAN

So why can't I get off the levee?

The Guardsmen look at each other.

GUARDSMAN
The waters are unsafe.

BLACK MAN
Says who?

GUARDSMAN
You stay in this water, I'm gonna
blow your damn fool head off. Is
that unsafe enough for you?

The door returns to the levee.

EXT. LEVEE - NIGHT

Two young black MEN look out into the flooded plain. They see
a boat with a white occupant.

BLACK MAN
Take a look at that boat right
there.

SECOND BLACK MAN
What about it?

BLACK MAN
I think he fell asleep.

SECOND BLACK MAN
He's got a shotgun. There's snakes
in the water.

BLACK MAN
Got that right. Come on, you want
to sit on this levee til the trump
of judgment?

They swim quietly out to the boat and gently grab the rail.
The first one taps on the second man's hand three times, and
they both pull down on the rail, capsizing the boat. The
white passenger falls in. The black men drown him. They
wiggle into the boat and paddle to the levee, letting their
victim sail away in the current.

REVEREND
Hey, boy, bring that over here.

BLACK MAN
This is my boat.

REVEREND

And you're gonna bring it over here.

BLACK MAN

Who the hell are you?

REVEREND

Now fill it up with women and children.

BLACK MAN

And what if I don't?

REVEREND

I tell the Man you kill that white boy.

Women and children board and sail away.

BLACK MAN

You say anything I'll find you. Not like you can run.

EXT. LEVEE -- DAY

The next morning, the boats are much further away from the levee, and there are more guns. Two black would-be HIJACKERS observe.

HIJACKER

White folks learned their lesson.

SECOND HIJACKER

Afraid to come near the levee now.

A white MAN steers a supply boat toward them.

HIJACKER

Red Cross boat. Ain't no guns on it.

BREAD MAN

Alright folks, I got sacks of bread

-

The people on the levee grab the man and throw him on the levee. They run onto the boat, take bread, and begin loading black people into the boat.

BREAD MAN (CONT'D)
 Hey, that boat doesn't belong to
 me!

HIJACKER
 Damn right it doesn't.

They take the boat out into the river, grabbing a loaf of bread as they go. The white men in the other boats slowly realize what they've done and begin shooting at the boat, hitting one.

ARMED MAN
 Damn dinges stole a boat. Grab an
 oar!

SECOND ARMED MAN
 They're too far down. Let's stay on
 the line, case they try anything
 else.

Further downriver, a barge arrives. Armed white MEN stand at the rail.

BARGE MAN
 We ain't pulling up to the levee.
 Y'all swim out here, swim back with
 the bread.

REVEREND
 We're doing what?

BARGE MAN
 Swim. One at a time.

And they do, carrying the sacks over their heads as well as they can. Soon the barge is unloaded.

EXT. LEVEE - DAY

Roy, Sadie and Lucy stand on the levee.

LUCY
 Mama, could you watch out for me?

SADIE
 What?

LUCY
 I been in these clothes for three
 days. I just want to rinse out my
 draws.

SADIE

Let's go upstream, it's cleaner.

An armed white MAN brings another supply boat. When Roy sees it, he hides in a nearby crowd.

PEACH MAN

Got more food coming for you.

SADIE

What's that barrel back there? That looks like canned peaches.

PEACH MAN

Sorry, that's going somewhere else.

SADIE

The white folks.

PEACH MAN

It's going somewhere else.

SADIE

So what do we get?

PEACH MAN

Got plenty of bread. And fresh water.

JAMES

Like being in the county jail again.

LUCY

So when do we get it?

PEACH MAN

That's the other thing. No family gets food, unless their man is unloading the Red Cross shipments.

SADIE

What about the folks too sick to work?

TEACHER

(approaching)

Is anybody gonna get paid for unloading?

PEACH MAN

No pay, just food. Need you to round up about 500 people to unload, two shifts, twelve hours each. Don't I know you?

He's looking at Roy.

SADIE

My cousin. Visiting from Memphis.

EXT. LEVEE -- DAY

It's dawn, still a bit dark. White OVERSEERS with guns watch James and other black HANDS unload. Will and Leroy observe the process from a boat.

JAMES

I can't hardly see.

OVERSEER

Twelve and twelve. We start working when it's dark, we finish when it's dark.

ANOTHER HAND

It's summer, that ain't no twelve hours, more like fifteen.

JAMES

So when can we stop for water -

He gets a whack on the back with a rifle strap.

OVERSEER

I whip you if you stand, I shoot you if you run. We need this load gone by noon.

WILL

(to Leroy)

We're gonna need to let these darkies off this levee. What happens then?

INT. PLANTATION OFFICE - DAY

Will has a guest, Secretary of Commerce HOOVER.

WILL

Mister Hoover, thank you so much for coming. We really could use your help.

HOOVER

Will, I remember what you did for me in Belgium. I know you wouldn't come to me unless it was important.

WILL

We've got all these colored folks on that levee over Greenville.

HOOVER

What do you mean, on the levee?

WILL

They're living on the levee right now.

HOOVER

One of those big embankments? They're living there? How big is this levee?

WILL

It's a good eight feet across up top.

HOOVER

And why didn't you get them off the dike?

WILL

Well, sir, that's the issue... And now the colored leaders refuse to round up workers to unload the Red Cross.

HOOVER

How much are you paying them?

WILL

We're not.

HOOVER

You keep them stuck up on those dike walls and tell them to work for free?

WILL

And we need your help persuading them.

HOOVER

Will, I've known you a long time.
Did you approve this?... Alright,
this is your country, I suppose you
know best.

EXT. LEVEE - DAY

A white BOATMAN brings black hands to the levee.

BOATMAN

Get your people back on there.

A tense moment; then the hands wade to the levee.

Hoover addresses black men on the levee.

HOOVER

Folks, I'm glad I came to look over
this situation. My aide wrote down
your complaints. You refuse to
unload the boats?

TEACHER

Yes sir. All due respect.

HOOVER

I'm going to appoint a commission
to investigate this flood. They're
writing a report. A colored man is
writing it. Man named Robert Moton.
Will that satisfy you? Best I can
do for now.

EXT. GREENVILLE STREET -- DAY

Refugees collecting food supplies from a truck. The sheriff
and other armed men approach.

REFUGEE

We going back to the levee again?

NICHOLSON

Listen up. I need forty new
volunteers to unload the boats.

JAMES

How many white folks unloading?

NICHOLSON

You telling me my business?...I'm
not really asking.

(MORE)

NICHOLSON (CONT'D)

This is an emergency. I am the sheriff. I can make this real easy on myself. Far as I'm concerned, you're breaking the law. All we gotta do is arrest all of you, I got free prison labor all summer. Just need forty.

JAMES

Least prison is on dry land. Most of us did night shift, now you want day shift too? How many white folks unloading?

NICHOLSON

You know full well how many. And thank you for stepping up. Thirty nine to go.

He gestures to his white "organizers".

NICHOLSON (CONT'D)

Take your pick of the litter. Strong backs and weak minds. I don't need any more cotton-field lawyers.

JAMES

You show me one white man out there, I'll haul with him. Show me one -

Sheriff shoots James four times. Long silence.

NICHOLSON

Seems like I miscounted. Still need forty. This is an emergency. Marquess of Queensbury ain't around to call balls and strikes. It's just me and my men. Any more lawyers out there?

EXT. LEVEE - NIGHT

Black men with guns mill about.

ROY

Alright, how many you hands were smart enough to bring your guns with you?

Teams of armed blacks roam along the levee. Armed white men in boats watch them. Will arrives in a boat. He sees Roy and becomes angrier.

BLACK MAN

It's that Mister Will. We kill him right now. Use a knife, no one will hear.

ROY

You hold on... Mister Will, we just don't want to hear it anymore. Jimmy Gooden got shot, couple other hands got shot.

WILL

Well. Getting chilly out here. I'm asking you to stay calm.

ROY

When you bringing boats to get us off here? Got your own damn navy out there!

WILL

Well, it's hard to explain.

ROY

No, it's not hard. This is a slave camp.

Will holds up a newspaper.

WILL

We'll give you justice. We try to help you, you did nothing for yourselves. We ask you to do one little thing. You got northern papers criticizing me, how we been handling this flood. Your sinful, shameful laziness, because you refused to work in your own behalf unless you were paid, one of your race has been killed. That foolish young policeman is not the murderer. The murderer is you. Your hands are dripping with blood. Get down on your knees and beg God not to punish you as you deserve.

This essentially is what the real Will Percy said to the hands after the shooting. Silence descends.

BLACK MAN

Well. After all this time, some plain speaking. ...Maybe you just go back to your boat.

Will leaves. Some hands bring James' body in a sheet. They give Sadie a moment with the body. They tie it to a plank, say a brief prayer, and set it sailing into the river.

Will sits in the boat with Claude, watching.

WILL

Look at that dead man. The Delta here, most fertile land in God's creation. What a terrible pity it is, that so much of it was wasted on men like you.

Sadie watches the water, dry eyed. Unseen hands place a blanket on her shoulders. She looks up to see Roy walking away along the levee.

INT. PLANTATION OFFICE - NIGHT

Hoover sits with Robert MOTON and other African Americans from outside Mississippi.

HOOVER

Mister Moton, so glad you could come.

MOTON

Well, our report is complete, and I must say, I've never seen anything like this. You were down there, correct?

HOOVER

Yes.

MOTON

White folks spending more effort using colored folks for free labor, than helping them find food and doctors. They demanded that the colored folks rebuild the levee for free. They stole the aid which was supposed to go to black folks. Got more and more lynchings. They wouldn't even let the folks talk to our commission. Old folks say it's like it was before Emancipation.

HOOVER

I'm asking you for a favor. We need to make a deal. I'm running an election campaign, and right now that campaign needs to be about other things.

MOTON

Other things?

HOOVER

This effort with the flood made me the frontrunner for the White House. The other party is running a Catholic, that Smith man. The Klan is out doing my dirty work for me, they hate Catholics. If we put out your report, the Klan comes after me and after your people. I need you to keep quiet about the levee til after the election.

MOTON

Keep quiet?

HOOVER

Rewrite that your report of yours, take all the vinegar out of it. Don't talk to the press until the election.

MOTON

And what do I get in return?

HOOVER

After the election, I can do whatever you need. Not just the flood and the relief - I can get some reforms through Congress, land reform. I promise.

EXT. THE LEVEE - DAY

Boats piloted by white men sail up to the levee.

PILOT

Maybe we should make em sing us a song first, before we let em off? Give us a song.

The blacks on the levee just glare at him.

CLAUDE

Alright, women and children first,
then we come back for the men.

FEMALE HAND

Bout time. I'll wait with my man,
all the same to you.

Women and children begin boarding a boats.

EXT. BOAT - DAY

Two black families in a boat, steered nervously by a white
PILOT with a gun.

PILOT

Told you, north hollow is
underwater, we ain't going up
looking for your house. You go to
the refugee camp on the ridge.

HAND

Can't you take us to the end where
the hollow comes out? I want to
see.

PILOT

Ain't got all day. Gonna be going
back to that levee a dozen more
times.

He steers downstream and they see a small valley, ten feet
underwater. Trees poke out of the water.

HAND

Our house is up that way.

PILOT

Your house is in the Gulf of
Mexico.

EXT. BOAT - DAY

Sadie and Lucy, in a boat with a white PILOT, head toward a
muddy, torn-up bit of ground.

PILOT

I think you were high enough,
water's down. Not that it'll help
much. Sorry.

They hop out of the boat. They see a few bits of heavy wood, and a flatiron.

SADIE

Don't rightly know. Is this where the house was? Where's the tree?

LUCY

This is my iron!

SADIE

You sure? I don't recognize this place.

LUCY

Here's another iron. Rest of the house washed away, laundry tubs, everything.

SADIE

Let's go up the hill. My cousin might have clothes, we get out of this place.

LUCY

We never coming back?

SADIE

When they send the boats back for the men, there's gonna be trouble. We don't want to be here when it happens. Jimmy isn't here to protect us.

They begin to climb.

EXT. FRONT GATE OF A LUMBER CAMP - DAY

Sadie approaches the gate where a white guard awaits.

GUARD

You got lost, gal?

SADIE

I'm looking for my son.

GUARD

Your son?

SADIE

Got arrested. I looked in every prison farm and turpentine camp in the county. I want to find him, I want to see him!

GUARD

You want special favors for your boy? Maybe you be giving special favors to me.

SADIE

Name's Walter, he's fourteen.

GUARD

We don't take em that young, they die too fast. Waste of a bunk.

INT. PLANTATION HOUSE - DAY

Leroy is at the window, looking out.

LEROY

Damnedest thing. The downtown is getting back to normal, lots of white folks out there. Where did all the darkies go?

EXT. TRAIN STATION -- NIGHT

Claude and white POLICEMEN watch nervously; black CUSTOMERS approach the station with carpetbags.

LUCY (V.O.)

That night a battle began. The Battle of the Illinois Central.

CLAUDE

We're losing too many colored folks. By the time we got a cotton crop, the darkies will all be gone. You need to keep em from leaving.

Police line the platform, blocking the train.

POLICEMAN

We're done boarding for the night.

TEACHER

What do you mean?

CUSTOMER

We been here all night! We got tickets.

POLICEMAN

The train's full.

SECOND CUSTOMER

That train ain't never been full.

CUSTOMER

Look at the damn windows.

POLICEMAN

Don't make me tell you again.

SECOND CUSTOMER

Get out the way and let us on board.

Pushing. A shot fired in the air. The white STATION MANAGER comes to the platform.

STATION MANAGER

Officer, you can't do this.

POLICEMAN

Are you interfering with an officer of the law?

STATION MANAGER

Some of these folks have tickets, paid in full. I sold em myself.

POLICEMAN

What the hell did you do that for?

STATION MANAGER

The railroad wants the money. You got to stop this.

EXT. TRAIN STATION -- NIGHT

Continuation. Police stand at the ticket window.

FEMALE CUSTOMER

There's a police at the ticket window.

CHILD CUSTOMER

What do they want?

FEMALE CUSTOMER

I don't know.

CHILD CUSTOMER

We're not doing anything wrong.

POLICEMAN

Where do you think you're going?

FEMALE CUSTOMER

Chicago.

POLICEMAN

You go on back home now.

FEMALE CUSTOMER

I want two tickets to Chicago. Got the money right here.

POLICEMAN

What you want is to go home.

FEMALE CUSTOMER

I want my tickets.

POLICEMAN

Girl, you don't want no trouble here.

FEMALE CUSTOMER

I want my tickets. I want my tickets!

STATION MANAGER

(approaching)

Officer, I need to do my job here.

The policeman backs off, proceeds down the line.

POLICEMAN

How about you, buck? Where you think you're going?

MALE CUSTOMER

Out of this place.

POLICEMAN

You got any debts back in town?

MALE CUSTOMER

Debts?

POLICEMAN

You owe the office any money?

MALE CUSTOMER

They owe ME money.

POLICEMAN

You can't leave town if you owe any money. You owe the jail any fees?

STATION MANAGER

Officer?

EXT. TRAIN STATION -- NIGHT

Continuation. The policemen check the tickets at the platform, snarling up the boarding process.

POLICEMAN

I told you, everybody get your tickets out. Let me see.

STATION MANAGER

(approaching again)

I have a conductor for that. Had to get a second conductor just for the colored car.

POLICEMAN

I'm protecting you. You don't want anybody riding for free, do you?

STATION MANAGER

This train is supposed to be gone already. When can they get on?

POLICEMAN

When I say so!

STATION MANAGER

I'm going to have to call the railroad if you keep throwing off my timetable.

EXT. OUTSIDE THE TRAINYARD -- NIGHT

Continuation. Police cars are blocking the road to the station, looking for more black passengers.

POLICEMAN

Where are they all?

EXT. OUTSIDE THE TRAINYARD -- NIGHT

Continuation. Black potential STOWAWAYS circle around the roadblock through the trees. A black HUNTER leads them, aided by a black YARD MAN.

BLACK HUNTER

Keep that baby quiet, we'll have dogs in the woods! You folks with tickets, you can go back up the platform that way.

STOWAWAY

What about the rest of us?

BLACK HUNTER

Jesse?

YARD MAN

I used to load freight on this train.

BLACK HUNTER

Got your tools?

YARD MAN

Put you people in the last freight car. Don't make a sound or I cut you out of the herd.

CHILD STOWAWAY

Mama, I need to pee.

STOWAWAY

Over on that tree, gal. Make it quick.

CHILD STOWAWAY

Tell that boy to stop looking at me.

A mother smacks a boy on top of his head.

EXT. THE PLANTATION OFFICE - NIGHT

Field HANDS gather outside the office; Claude emerges. Armed white men follow.

CLAUDE

Alright. In the past we did our Settle at Christmas, when the old crop was in. Now we wait til spring.

HAND

Spring?

CLAUDE

We're waiting until you hands plant the next crop.

HAND

But I need money for -

CLAUDE

For what? Train tickets? You owe me money. And I'll be watching.

HAND

So the spring?

CLAUDE

And I'm going to be careful with my arithmetic. Y'all don't need to be wandering around with too much change in your pockets. Bobby, get some fellas out to the station, every night. If these hands try to leave before they pay their plantation debt, you hunt down the runaways, bring em right back here.

INT. A POOR BLACK CHURCH - NIGHT

Leroy visits a black preacher.

LEROY

Reverend, I need you to tell these darkies to stay put. If they all leave, you don't have a congregation anymore.

INT. TRAIN STATION - NIGHT

Sheriff takes a ticket from a field HAND.

NICHOLSON

So, one way or round trip?

STATION MANAGER

Round trip? They're all one way. None of these darkies are ever coming back.

NICHOLSON

What we got here, a prepaid ticket?

HAND

They sent it from Chicago, it's mine!

The sheriff tears it up.

NICHOLSON

Next train comes, you wave it on, it's not stopping here. That train there, run it on the siding, leave it there.

STATION MANAGER

I can only hold it three days, railroad is going to come down here with lawyers.

NICHOLSON

Let em sit on the siding for three days with no food! Train be empty by morning.

INT. TRAIN STATION - NIGHT

The sheriff screens HANDS who want to board.

LUCY (V.O.)

It felt unreal, fighting back like we did.

NICHOLSON

And where you think you're going?

FEMALE HAND

Just twelve miles up the next station, I got kinfolk there.

SECOND HAND

She does, they're field hands too.

A group of field hands in a corner.

THIRD HAND

We get to the next station, they don't know us. We buy the Chicago tickets there.

FOURTH HAND

What more can we sell? We're three dollars short.

THIRD HAND

We don't have anything worth selling. Give all that junk to the neighbors, but don't get caught doing it.

SECOND HAND

My cousin's in Detroit, sent twenty dollars.

CHILD

Can I see? All I ever seen is plantation money, never seen American money before.

THIRD HAND

The Defender says we can get food once we cross into Illinois.

FOURTH HAND

You talk about the Defender. How do you even know it's all true?

THIRD HAND

The Defender must be true, white folks take it away from us when they find it.

INT. TRAIN CAR - NIGHT

The sheriff enters a packed car with by a white DEPUTY.

NICHOLSON

Alright, drag these bucks off the train. Week in jail for vagrancy.

DEPUTY

Just the men?

NICHOLSON

Take the men, and the women and children will follow. Next, any darkie within a mile of the station, into the truck. Sell em off to Alabama. Two birds with one stone.

The deputy points to a white man in handcuffs.

DEPUTY

We got somebody here from Illinois.

NICHOLSON
 Recruiting agent for the
 meatpackers up north. Charge em on
 rogue and vagabond.

Also in handcuffs is the black preacher.

NICHOLSON (CONT'D)
 I cannot express how disappointed I
 am, Reverend. I thought we
 understood each other. Selling
 magazines from the NAACP? You can
 cool your heels in jail too.

DEPUTY
 We can't put the whole county in
 jail. Monday we ask the judge to
 arraign five hundred people, he'll
 put US in jail.

NICHOLSON
 Not if we send em all to Bama.
 He'll get his share.

A hand looks sees the White and Colored signs, with the rail
 between the two sides. He rips out the rail, throws it out of
 the station. He admires his work for a moment before he is
 arrested. A black boy looks at the wreckage and smiles.

EXT. SHARECROPPER ROW -- NIGHT

A black man sets fire to three cabins and runs.

EXT. A TOWN STREET ATOP A HILL -- NIGHT

Smoke from the cabins is noticeable from the town. Claude and
 an OVERSEER point.

CLAUDE
 Damn, got a big old fire down the
 bottom, round up the boys, find out
 what the darkies are up to.

OVERSEER
 You think they're trying to fool
 us?

CLAUDE
 Darkies ain't that clever.

INT. TRAIN STATION -- NIGHT

Sadie runs through the woods; she sees Roy hurt.

ROY
Miss Sadie?

SADIE
What happened to you?

ROY
Sheriff's deputy winged me in the woods. Got a surprise for you. Come on out here boy.

Walter comes limping out of the trees. Sadie runs to him and holds him tight.

SADIE
Where in the world --

WALTER
Ended up in Alabama. Coal mine. Stupid sumbitch with a pick chopped off two of my toes, miners told me go home. Can't hardly run too fast.

ROY
My boys found him, I was hoping you had enough gumption to get on the train. We can't stay here.

SADIE
Listen. My husband got four tickets, used my sewing money.

ROY
Your husband? Jimmy, got shot?

SADIE
Still got his ticket. Ain't worth nothing if nobody uses it.

ROY
I was gonna hop the freight car.

SADIE
You come with us. I'll stitch that hole. Boy, come on, I look at your feet too.

They find other blacks in the woods.

ROY

Now listen. The white folks gonna come back. We go up the tracks to the next station, they don't know us there.

SADIE

It's twelve miles. We'll miss the train.

ROY

We can't make tonight's train. But we wait in the woods, we catch it tomorrow.

SADIE

We got any food?

ROY

Feed the children first. But let's get walking now.

SADIE

Can't believe we're doing this.
Good Lord, look at all this mud.

Lucy arrives and throws her arms around her limping brother.

EXT. THE WOODS -- NIGHT

The hands find the next stop; a black railroad worker waves them toward the station building. One woman is wearing a dress made of croker sacks, but she pulls it off to reveal a fancy dress beneath. Pulling up the rear is the reverend.

SADIE

Reverend?

REVEREND

If my whole congregation is going up north, I'm going too.

INT. TRAIN CAR - NIGHT

The car is packed with blacks and luggage.

REVEREND

So we all got to fit in here?

ROY

All the colored folks, and all the luggage for the white folks too.

REVEREND
We stand all the way to Illinois?

EXT. TRAIN TRACKS - NIGHT

Continuation. Two armed white men appear on the tracks behind the train, just as the train begins to pull out. A small black GIRL, enraged, picks up a large piece of luggage and throws it at them, knocking one over.

GIRL
You go on git, you son of a bitch!

INT. TRAIN CAR - NIGHT

Inside the car is a crowd of fairly well-dressed blacks, the men in hats, carrying hatboxes, cardboard boxes tied with string, burlap sacks, and shoeboxes filled with fried chicken.

A girl shrieks and everyone turns to look. Outside the windows, a black body hangs from a light post.

LUCY
White folks saying goodbye. Is it safe? Can we get that crate?

They open a crate to find two black MEN inside.

BOX MAN
Out the way, I got to pee.

On a bench, Roy's shirt is off and Sadie is stitching a bullet wound.

INT. TRAIN CAR - NIGHT

BLACKS in the crowded car look out the windows.

REVEREND
Ohio River. Illinois. We made it.

One man pats the car door.

MAN
God love this train!

REVEREND
You can spread out, go into the white car. Next stop, Cairo Illinois.

One woman begins to cry, and another to sing.

INT. CHICAGO APARTMENT - DAY

Sadie and Lucy at a table.

SADIE

There was no Moses leading us to the Promised Land. All the famous colored leaders, they wanted us to stay down south. We had no leader. We just decided, and then packed up and ran. Thousands of people with their gunny sacks and their fried chicken. Some of em angry, all of em afraid. Trying to imagine what the city would look like.

LUCY

Whole lot of dreams riding that train. We lost so many fights down in the Delta, and then we won the biggest battle of the whole war. They wouldn't let us vote, so we voted with our feet.

INT. THE TRAIN - NIGHT

Roy and Sadie's family have spread out in the white car. The children are dead to the world. Roy sits in a two-man seat and gestures to Sadie.

ROY

When was last time you slept?

SADIE

What day is it?

ROY

Get some shut-eye.

SADIE

Can't sleep on my first train ride.

Next she is asleep, head in his lap, snoring.

Next she wakes with a start, jumping up, eyeing him suspiciously.

SADIE (CONT'D)

What you doing? What happened?

ROY

I made wild love to you, woman. The children were shocked.

SADIE

You hush. Where are we?

They look out the window, and Chicago appears.

SADIE (CONT'D)

Oh Lord, I can't, I can't.

INT. CHICAGO TRAIN STATION - DAY

The station at 12th and Michigan is a brown building with an oval waiting room. Black passengers pour in. Chaos, separated families. Three TRAVELLERS AID WORKERS, two white and one black, await. They see the gun in Roy's belt.

SADIE

You coming, then?

ROY

You know what you're getting into? These ain't the Pearly Gates.

WHITE WORKER

How many on this train?

REVEREND

Three hundred.

WHITE WORKER

Travellers Aid. We hired a colored assistant just for all you folks.

REVEREND

This is like the middle of a storm.

BLACK WORKER

We get 400 trains a day. Watch the shady types in the corners, steal your money.

SADIE

We got no money.

BLACK WORKER

Sick folks, pregnant women. Anybody get shot by the police down there?

EXT. WENTWORTH AVENUE - DAY

A wide Chicago street. Sadie, Roy and the children buy bread. They are stunned by the tall buildings, car horns, screaming El trains. They carry their bags down a street. They are lost.

ROY

Wait here. They put us on the wrong street.

Roy proceeds alone. Irishmen approach, let by LOGAN and the massive PADDY.

LOGAN

Jesus, here comes another.

ROY

I'm looking for -

LOGAN

Paddy? Another lost soul. Help yourself.

PADDY

Pleasure. ...Oi.

The brute crosses to Roy, pokes him, and is shocked when Roy responds immediately with a wicked uppercut to the face.

LOGAN

Well, imagine that.

A fight for the ages ensues, Roy and Paddy. Blacks line the other side of the road, watching. Sadie runs up the street, waving Roy's cleaver, the children behind her, all with their bags.

SADIE

You leave him alone or you gonna lose that hand!

LOGAN

Paddy. Wait. Stop.
(to Sadie)
You're with him?

SADIE

Damn right I am!

LOGAN

Paddy. Look at the sacks. He's not here to make trouble.

(MORE)

LOGAN (CONT'D)

He's just new. Right off the train.
Mississippi, Tennessee?

PADDY

You're on the wrong street. This
isn't the Black Belt. This is the
Irish. You come over here, you get
a beating. You or your lad there.
The ladies are off limits. Even
when they're waving cleavers.

(hand on a boy's shoulder)

Every darkie comes up means another
Mick with no job, this lad doesn't
eat.

LOGAN

This girl with the cleaver. Your
wife?

ROY

You leave her out.

LOGAN

You married her?

ROY

Not exactly.

LOGAN

Not exactly. Mary save us. Let me
see the cleaver.

She backs away and raises the cleaver.

LOGAN (CONT'D)

It's alright. Yours?

She slowly hands it over.

SADIE

His.

LOGAN

You're a butcher. Same as me. Let's
see the hands. The arms. Got the
same scars I do. No cotton calluses
here. ...Jesus! Paddy. Can this big
buck throw a punch?

PADDY

Not half bad. Want me to do him
again?

SADIE

You stay away!

LOGAN

No no no no! I'm having a brain attack. Thank the virgin for that last pint.

PADDY

What are you on about?

LOGAN

Three times we tried to start a union, picket line at the packing plant. Last time, the plant hired these colored boys, scabs, to stand the line with the coppers and beat the hell out of us.

PADDY

Yeah, I was there.

LOGAN

You know what that fooker at the plant said, the owner. Said he can hire one half of the poor to kill the other half. It's a game they play. We threw the darkies out of the union, bosses use em as scabs, we beat em up, the bosses win. Tomorrow they have this buck on the line, fighting against us. They'll offer him pennies, and you'd take it, wouldn't you? To feed them.

(handing Roy his cleaver)

What if he was on our side of the line?

PADDY

You want the darkies in the union? The packer boys will go mad.

LOGAN

You want to win the next fight? Don't you want this bloke right next to you with that bloody cleaver of his? Or do you want to end up fighting him again?

PADDY

(massaging his jaw)

Once was plenty, thank you.

LOGAN

(to Roy)

What do you think, buck? Ready for a real fight?

PADDY

You're daft, the pair of you.

SADIE

You're gonna get him beat up.

LOGAN

I'm gonna get him a job.

SADIE

And then you get him beat up. On that picket line.

LOGAN

Probably. But I'll be there with him. Paddy, take this lad and his kin down to the Black Belt. Don't stay too long, the colored boys might be laying for you.

Roy notices that Walter is holding his gun. He takes the gun and pulls Sadie aside.

ROY

Gimme that thing, boy...What you doing with that cleaver?...This is a fight I think I can win. Not like Mississippi. I like winning.

SADIE

Roy -

ROY

We got white people on our side.

SADIE

You don't trust him, do you?

He holds up two fingers, quarter inch apart.

ROY

About that much. You knew there was going to be some kind of fight, once we got here. They weren't gonna give us anything easy.

EXT. WENTWORTH AVENUE - DAY

Paddy escorts Roy and the family to the Black Belt, the middle of Wentworth Avenue. A group of black youths approaches, wary.

PADDY

Not looking for any bother, just returning your lost lambs to the fold.

(to Sadie)

This is where you're allowed. Black Belt. Over to 55th, it's all you get. This street you crossed here? Wentworth Avenue. The Dead Line. Black man crosses it, black child crosses, Mary save you. Good job we were there, the other boys would have crippled your man. ...Lads.

He nods to the black youths. One nods back.

EXT. AN ALLEY OFF WENTWORTH AVENUE - DAY

The family walks a poorly-paved, rutted street, past unpainted wood tenements with wood sidewalks.

INT. TENEMENT HOME -- DAY

A black LANDLADY shows the family a tiny flat.

SADIE

You coming in, then?

Roy nervously follows her in.

LANDLADY

You share it with the next family. You all sleep in this room here.

Roy and Sadie look nervously at each other.

LANDLADY (CONT'D)

Only reason we're not more crowded, white folks ran away when the colored folks showed up.

A train rolls by, very close to the house.

LANDLADY (CONT'D)

You got coats? Come November, wind comes off the lake, we call it the Hawk. There's only so many places colored folks can rent, they cheat you if they can. At least you got electric. Hot plate, ice box, bathroom down the hall.

SADIE

What's a hot plate? How's it work?

LUCY

I don't have to carry buckets of water from a pump? Fill up tubs?

LANDLADY

Laundry tub right back there.

LUCY

I don't have to chop firewood for the stove? Or stand over the stove all day? And this iron here - my old iron weighs a ton - it never gets ash on the shirts?

LANDLADY

There's no ash.

LUCY

And you don't burn your hands?

LANDLADY

Not unless you're clumsy.

LUCY

Lordy. ...I don't need to knead bread or milk cows?

LANDLADY

We got a grocery store.

LUCY

And there's a toilet right inside?

The landlady picks up a very rough-looking roll of 1927 toilet paper.

LANDLADY

And this is a thing called toilet paper. Girl gotta watch out for splinters. That could ruin your whole day.

LUCY

Don't need a kerosene lamp to read.
(beaming)
I ain't never leaving this place!

Sadie goes into the other room and Roy follows.

ROY

Logan says I start in the morning.

SADIE

I don't know if I can do this. I was so happy on the train, getting out of there. Since we got here, I been afraid.

ROY

What? Your mother?

SADIE

That's part of it. She really needs me back home to take care of her.

ROY

And what else?

SADIE

I look at that street, Irish stand there, dare me to cross to the wrong side. Even in the Black Belt, how do I keep Walter away from the bad element? How do I keep Lucy from the boys?

ROY

And what else? Only one thing left.

SADIE

You came out of Parchman, you carry a gun and a cleaver. Half the time I'm afraid of you, rest of the time I'm afraid that Logan boy gonna drag you into some riot, get you killed. And I still don't know why you're here.

He stands behind her and puts his arms around her.

SADIE (CONT'D)

I seen women try to make a bad man good. And try and try. ...What they want you for, back in Mississippi?

ROY

I threw a gun down on Mister
Claude, made him pay me everything
he owes me.

SADIE

Your big crime was taking money
that was already yours?

ROY

Yeah.

SADIE

And you left the rest of the money
there?

ROY

Not only that. He still owes me
eighty cents.

SADIE

So you robbed the man, you didn't
even break even? I think you need
to go straight, there, Buck. You
don't know nothing about robbing
people.

ROY

Can't get no respect nohow.

They laugh. She touches his shoulder.

SADIE

For real now. Means you were the
only honest man in Mississippi. Had
you wrong the whole time. But now
the other thing.

ROY

You saying there's more?

SADIE

You're going off with those Irish
boys to cause trouble.

ROY

Standing up for myself.

SADIE

My Jimmy stood up for himself. He's
on the bottom of the river now.

ROY

That was Mississippi, the rednecks.

SADIE

You think the factory men are any better? If they can make more money killing you, they'll do it. Maybe I'm better off by myself. I lost Jimmy seems like yesterday. I'm still numb all over. Someday that numb is gonna wear off, I'm gonna come apart. I'm gonna have to bury Jimmy for good. Don't make me bury you too.

INT. SCHOOL - DAY

Lucy enters the crowded hallway of her new school in an ugly sack dress. Black city girls including NELLIE and MARY, sharply dressed, intercept her. A black teen, CHARLIE watches; Walter watches him.

MARY

Hey, new meat. What you got on? Looks like it's made out of gunny sacks.

LUCY

Flour sacks. Pure cotton. That's the style, you know.

MARY

Just what we need, another field hand.

Mary pulls a thread off her dress. Lucy puts the girl to the wall with a single hard shove.

LUCY

(cool)

I can wrassle a hundred-pound cotton sack, I can do the same for you.

NELLIE

What happened with those nasty shoes?

LUCY

We were in the flood, the Delta. Water washed away our house, I got thrown in the river, grabbed onto a barn door. I had to swim across with the snakes.

NELLIE

Mary, maybe you shouldn't be
messing with this girl.

MARY

(smiles)
She got arms like a lumberjack. You
could make a living unloading
trains, girl.

LUCY

Talking back to people, takes some
getting used to.

MARY

Well, don't be throwing us around,
neither.

LUCY

Everything moves so fast here, I
don't know anybody, don't know
where anything is, I can't read
like y'all can.
(smiles)
And it's still better than
Mississippi.

NELLIE

Well, I can't be looking at that
nasty dress anymore. We go to
Maxwell Street.

LUCY

Dress like yours? All short and
tight? My mother beat me with a
broomstick.

NELLIE

Maybe something churchy-like. Hey,
Charlie, we're going to Maxwell
Street, put this girl out of her
misery, need a big fella walk us
over there.

CHARLIE

Who's the girl in the gunny sack?

EXT. MAXWELL STREET - DAY

The girls, Walter and Charlie find a huge open air market.
Horse carts carry produce down the street. Wares are spread
on blankets. Hawkers sell spices and used appliances.

A cop chases a black boy. A boy plays guitar; a girl reads palms at a table.

CHARLIE

Maxwell Street, Jews run the whole place. Daytime's alright. Night time, it's the police and the opium dealers, snatch you right out of your drawers.

NELLIE

That gunny sack you had -- up til recent, colored folks here were all city folks. All refined, don't want to hear boogie woogie music, they want opera. You cotton pickers come in, folks like my Mama get brassed off. See some Delta gal in the store wearing an apron and slippers, rag on her head, get all loud on the street, in church.

LUCY

Down home, colored folks dress like a field hand, overalls. If I dressed like you do down there, white folks think I don't know my place. Then there's trouble.

NELLIE

You're in the city. We got our own stores, newspapers, jazz club. My mother wants to move out of the Black Belt -- you try that, white folks shoot out your window.

Lucy sees used dresses on an outside rack.

LUCY

What you think of this one, Charlie?

Charlie smiles and nods; Mary glares. Charlie crosses to Walter.

CHARLIE

How old are you?

WALTER

Fifteen.

CHARLIE

I'm eighteen, I'm in the rail yards, fixing trains. You can't get full money yet, but you can work.

He looks at Lucy.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

I come by your house, take you over.

EXT. WENTWORTH AVENUE - DAY

Sadie sets up her stoop on the east side of the avenue like her porch back home, two chairs and a jar of moonshine between them. She sews and watches as three Irish girls talk across the road. Lucy comes down her side of the street with school friends. The two groups of girls eye each other.

LUCY

Least back home white folks were a mile away. Now they're across the street.

The Irish girls slowly cross. The black girls go to meet them. One very young Irish girl pipes up.

IRISH GIRL

Like the dress.

LUCY

Thanks.

IRISH GIRL

You black all over, then?

Lucy pulls off a shoe, shows the sole of her foot.

IRISH GIRL (CONT'D)

Gracious. You got any other parts that are white?

The black girls look at each other and laugh.

IRISH GIRL (CONT'D)

Sorry.

SADIE

Lucy.

A POLICEMAN has appeared. Lucy sees him; the girls wander back to their own sides of the street.

EXT. WENTWORTH AVENUE - DAY

Sadie's chair on the stoop is empty. School is out; BOYS stream down the avenue on both sides, Irish on the west side, blacks on the east.

BLACK BOY

Back home, we see how hard we can throw. This street here, it's the river. This side is Mississippi, that's Arkansas.

He throws a rock across the street, hits an Irish kid in the back. The Irish kid picks it up and throws it back. The black boy reciprocates. Boys on both sides prepare to charge across the street.

IRISH BOY

Hang on. Best throw owns the street for the week. We win, we get to play proper football. You win, you get to play that girl's game of yours, the rounders.

BLACK BOY

You mean baseball.

An Irish boy throws at Walter and misses. Walter throws at an Irish boy, nails him in the rear end.

WALTER

Baseball ain't so funny now, is it?

The Irish boy tries again. His throw is so weak that a black boy catches it in the air.

BLACK BOY

You throw like my sister.

Furious, the Irish boy throws again, wildly, hitting a window. Sadie emerges from her house.

SADIE

What in the world you up to? Miz Taylor gonna have a fit, she sees that. Who been throwing rocks?

The Irish boys look at the black boys.

BLACK BOY

Didn't see.

The policeman walks down the middle of the road. The boys run to their own sides of the street.

EXT. A COUNTRY ROAD -- DAY

Back in Mississippi. A ruined town. Broken farm implements are seen on half the lawns.

INT. PERCY HOME - NIGHT

Will and Claude talk with an out-of-town visitor, while Custis is in and out with a drink tray.

WILL

We need the colored folks back. White folks made so much effort to improve things with the darkies.

CLAUDE

We haven't had a lynching for months.

WILL

I cared for them, never got any thanks. We loaned them money, let em have a colored policeman. They were tempted by snake oil salesmen to run away. They'll never be able to take care of themselves - either we have to care for them, or the government. They're lazy. Get drunk, they steal.

CLAUDE

They knew we needed men, kept asking for more money. We tried European pickers, we tried mechanical pickers...

CUSTIS

Mister Will, been here a long time. You kept colored folks from leaving. You pay em scrip so they can't get tickets. You kept em in debt. You chase away the school and the mill so they can't learn anything. You kept em stuck on that levee. You ever think about just treating them right?

WILL

Custis!

CUSTIS

Run off the mill, the jobs, you killed this town.

(MORE)

CUSTIS (CONT'D)

Thousands of people left it all behind, went to a strange, cold city, thousand miles up, just to get away from you.

WILL

We protected you from the Klan.

CUSTIS

Who protected us from you? You didn't fight the Klan cause they were lynching hands and chopping our toes off. You rich boys hated the Klan cause they were low class and they stopped taking Senator Leroy's orders, they took over. Pardon me speaking up. Got a train ticket burning a hole in my pocket.

CLAUDE

You going to Chicago? I'm going too.

CUSTIS

You're doing what?

INT. A STREETCAR - NIGHT

Sadie's family and Charlie, in coats, board a crowded streetcar. Walter, with nowhere else to sit, sits nervously next to a white woman. She glanced at him, then shifts in her seat, resigned.

EXT. A BUSY STREET -- NIGHT

The family walks 47th street with Charlie. It's dark but beautiful stores are still doing business. Well-dressed blacks line up at a theater. Music pours out of the door of a saloon.

CHARLIE

Look, new radios! ...See up there? Night school. Get your diploma.

WALTER

Lordy, what's that?

SADIE

Don't you run off and get lost.

CHARLIE

Grocery store.

WALTER

All kinds of food I never saw
before. What's that one?

He holds up a stalk of Brussel sprouts.

WALTER (CONT'D)

Looks like something you whup
somebody with. Can we try em, Mama?

CHARLIE

Brussel sprouts. Trust me, you
don't want em as much as you think
you do.

Charlie takes the stalk; a black POLICEMAN sees him.

POLICEMAN

You, boy!

The family is nervous and intrigued all at once.

POLICEMAN (CONT'D)

You owe me a dollar on the White
Sox.

CHARLIE

Let's double down for the Yankee
game.

POLICEMAN

You think they beat the Yankees?
You done lost your mind.

CHARLIE

You just keep talking.

WALTER

You talk like that to the white
police?

CHARLIE

Only when they cut my White Sox.

A white man pour gravels into a pothole.

WALTER

Ain't never seen a white man pick
up a shovel before. What is this
place?

Sadie is checking prices.

SADIE

We make four times the money we did
back home. It's too good to be
true.

Lucy slips on ice, and Charlie catches her.

LUCY

What's that?

CHARLIE

Ice. You alright?

Charlie and Lucy stand together, looking into a shop window.
Sadie and Roy stand behind them.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

That's the dress for you, girl.

SADIE

It's perfect, what you think, Jimmy

-

Lucy turns and looks at her mother.

Sadie grabs Roy's hand and pulls him around the corner. She
begins to cry, hard. He holds her.

ROY

Name's Roy. Took you long enough.

INT. ROY AND SADIE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Roy comes home drunk, to find Sadie waiting.

ROY

Playing poker with these city boys,
dropped the hoodoo on em. When
they're not looking I sprinkle a
little salt on em. Full house!

SADIE

And how'd you come out?

ROY

It was a long night. I almost come
out even. I'll get em next time.

SADIE

Four Saturdays. You come back with
less money than you went out with.

ROY

Well I got to pay for liquor too.

SADIE

Do I say this now, or wait til you sober up?...Back home you were the hoodoo man, one scheme after another. You always getting over on the white man. But you don't get over on me.

ROY

You cracking a whip on me?

SADIE

(sticks out her arms, bird-like)

You feel like you're free as a bird up here. This place set me free too. I got two jobs, I can pay the rent myself, if I need to go my own way.

ROY

What brought all this on? Playing cards?

SADIE

It's not just the cards, the girls down 47th street. Last night the police came. Mister Claude down Greenville, he's trying to bring you back to Mississippi, put you in jail. Extradite, they call it.

ROY

Man, I thought I was done with it.

SADIE

You wanted a family? You got a family now. So stay off the street for a while. Is it so hard, to spend a Saturday night in my bed?

ROY

Well, you put it like that..

SADIE

Yeah, thought so. Meantime, look before you leap. ...Thinking about a visit back home. Mama got sick, you know they don't allow colored folks in the hospital. I miss a lot of people. I miss the heat.

ROY
Just to visit?

SADIE
I had a heaping helping of Chicago,
got to catch my breath. Coming here
didn't make us white, you know. Go
outside the Black Belt, you can't
even hire on to drive a bus, a
taxi. I can stand up for myself
when I need to; it gets tiresome.

She goes to the window.

SADIE (CONT'D)
Lucy, you tell that boy keep his
hands in his pockets.

INT. AN APARTMENT -- DAY

A rent party. Singing, dancing, bathtub gin, pig knuckles,
pig's feet, a card game, a huge number of Mississippi BLACKS
in too small a space. Claude enters and the noise stops; Lucy
stares at him and backs away. Custis follows.

CLAUDE
Lucy!...Roy.

ROY
We don't want trouble. What in the
world you doing up here?

CLAUDE
Senator Percy told me come here,
ask you to come home. We can't get
the crops in, everything Mister
Percy planned is gone sideways.
Even the young white folks are
leaving. We're doing some new
things. Written receipts at the
Settle, put electric in the cabins..

SADIE
You just want to put Roy in jail.

CLAUDE
That's not what I came for.

ROY
New things. You gonna stop the
lynching?

SADIE

Let us vote?

BLACK MAN

You going to send the Klan on their way, the sheriff, the loan shark?

BLACK WOMAN

Gonna build a school? Can we go to a hospital when our babies come?

ROY

Pay us the money we earn? Without a gun?

CLAUDE

Well, there's more than one way of looking at it. So you found the promised land up here?

ROY

Up here if we get drunk Saturday night we get thrown in jail, but we don't get beat up. ...I think you best go back home.

SADIE

Mister Claude, every year you cheated us, put us deeper in debt - all we had to do was run away, and our debt was gone. It was you ran us off the Delta. Make sure you tell that to Mister Leroy.

CLAUDE

We'll pay your train fare to go home. I promise, it will be fine.

A silence descends.

SADIE

You still owe him eighty cents.

Claude digs out coins.

CLAUDE

Good Lord. Here. We're even.

SADIE

You say a free ticket back home?

EXT. WENTWORTH AVE - NIGHT

Logan crosses over to the black side of the street. A few black youths approach.

CHARLIE
You lost again?

LOGAN
Is Roy around?

WALTER
Went to the store with Lucy.

LOGAN
I hear you know your baseball. Got quite an arm.

CHARLIE
I'll show you the World Series. Gonna be something this year.

LOGAN
Yanks gonna murder the Pirates. You want to go all the way to Pittsburgh?

CHARLIE
The real World Series, right here. Negro Leagues. Chicago Giants and the Bacharach Giants. Colored players could beat the white folks any old time.

LOGAN
What, colored boys beat Babe Ruth and Gehrig? In your dreams.

WALTER
My mother wants to go back to the Delta. Chicago, she's scared of this place.

LOGAN
She's daft. This place is just magic. Before the war, Chicago got hit bad. Typhoid epidemic, dysentery, cholera. People dying. They realized it was the water - we're on the Lake, so dirty water has no place to go. They had to build sewers. But to do that, they had to jack up the whole downtown.

He now has a crowd of curious blacks around him.

WALTER

Jack it up?

LOGAN

Yeah. Lift it all up with levers.

WALTER

You're winding me up.

LOGAN

They take a big building, covers an acre, thirty thousand tons of her. You get five hundred men with five thousand jack-screws. They keep jacking and jacking, get it up five feet. Took a week. Then they put in the foundation, the sewers, and go do the next building.

WALTER

Did it work?

LOGAN

Hell yes. Shops in the buildings didn't even close. People go in and shop, and when they came out, the steps were an inch higher than when they went in.

WALTER

You're making it up.

LOGAN

The wooden buildings, put em on rollers with horses, roll em away from the lake. One day they had nine houses rolling up the road. To make the sewers work, they made the Chicago River flow backwards.

WALTER

Still not buying.

LOGAN

God's truth, it is. Chicago. How can you not love a town like this? Jack a whole city clear off the ground. Magic. Of course jacking it all up was just Part One. Part Two is next, they're going to lower Lake Michigan.

WALTER

Okay, NOW you're making it up.

LOGAN

You see, if every one of us goes to the shore with a bucket, all at the same time...

The blacks laugh; Walter and Logan sit on the curb.

LOGAN (CONT'D)

Tell your mother. It'll all be fine.

WALTER

Says she just wants to be alone. She's afraid of that man Roy.

LOGAN

Your Dad?

WALTER

No. Daddy got shot down there. Roy just tagged along up here.

LOGAN

Good man to have at your back in a fight.

Down the block, Charlie talks to Lucy. Lucy is happy as a clam, until she sees Walter watching.

EXT. WENTWORTH AVENUE - DAY

Early morning. Roy heads up Wentworth to get to the packing plant. A handful of older Irishmen notice him. Curious, they follow him, staying on their own side of the street. Roy notices and finally crosses the road. An IRISHMAN of sixty or so steps out, followed by four others.

IRISHMAN

New darkie. What you doing over here then?

ROY

Just passing through to the plant. Ain't no other way to get there.

IRISHMAN

Our plant. What you doing there?

ROY

Working as a butcher.

He casually points to his cleaver.

IRISHMAN

Shift already started. This isn't a fookin plantation. You show up at seven or they dock your pay. Go on with you.

EXT. WENTWORTH AVENUE - DAY

Logan crosses the street warily. A group of black men intercept him.

LOGAN

Looking for Roy, that butcher.

Logan pulls Roy aside. Sadie hurries after them.

LOGAN (CONT'D)

The strike is on. I promise you, I'll bring him home alive.

SADIE

Every time a white man makes me a promise, I count my money.

ROY

Girl, I said I'd be good. I didn't say I'd stop causing trouble.

EXT. PACKING PLANT -- DAY

A picket line. White and black packers on one side, white and black strike busters on the other. A donnybrook ensues, baseball bats and the occasional cleaver, until a handful of policemen arrive and begin firing into the air.

INT. ROY AND SADIE'S APARTMENT -- DAY

Sadie waits as a CLOCK ticks in the background.

Roy and Logan, bleeding, enter the flat. They hear a POLICE CAR screaming by. The children awaken.

SADIE

Jesus, you're alive. Mister Logan...

LOGAN

I've had worse fights with me wife. Went out for a jar one night, came back three in the morning.

(MORE)

LOGAN (CONT'D)

I discovered my wife turned into
Jack Johnson. Bingo bango!

SADIE

This white man is trouble.

LOGAN

Police be looking for me.

SADIE

Well, thank you so much for
bringing him to my house. White man
on this side of the avenue, can't
be more than a hundred people
noticed.

LOGAN

Be out before dawn.

SADIE

Damn right.

ROY

Whole idea of fighting back, and
not getting strung up the next
night.

SADIE

And did the owner give in?

ROY

Not this time.

SADIE

So you going out there again!

She stomps out.

LOGAN

She's truly brassed off.

ROY

It's worse than that. She's still
in love with another man, I can't
shoot him cause he's already dead.

LOGAN

And every night you got the ghost
of Banquo at the dinner table.
Isn't that a nuisance.

In a corner Walter approaches Lucy.

WALTER

That Charlie treating you right?

LUCY

Every day.

WALTER

Mama wants me to beat him down.

LUCY

So do I sometimes.

They smile.

EXT. WENTWORTH AVENUE - DAY

Windy day. Sadie's laundry hangs from a fire escape; Irish laundry hangs across the road. Bits of laundry on both sides break free and cartwheel down the road. Irish girls and Sadie pop out of their doors.

IRISH GIRL

Bollocks!

SADIE

Lorda mercy.

The women look at each other, and run downwind to chase the laundry. Paddy comes out, plucks a pair of ladies drawers from the air.

PADDY

It's raining ladies' underwear. Had a dream like this once.

IRISH GIRL

You lay off my drawers, you sneak!

The women herd and sort the laundry.

PADDY

Oi, who's the colored girl on our side of the street?

IRISH GIRL

Rounding up laundry, you great pillock. Help us out or get out of the way.

PADDY

You're the girl with the cleaver.

SADIE

It's all mixed, yours, ours.

IRISH GIRL

I'll wash these again. That's mine.

SADIE

Yep. Sorry. Never seen drawers like this. Lord, this is beautiful.

IRISH GIRL

Thanks. My own lace work. That Roy's a butcher, then? Seems like a good sort for a - ...I know Logan likes him.

SADIE

That Logan wants to get him in trouble. Half a mind to take the family back home, bad as the Delta is. Chicago is pure trouble.

IRISH GIRL

Naah, you just got us on a windy day. I love this town. We get the train here and the aldermen are saying - this is America, aim high, you can go further than your father ever did.

SADIE

They don't say that to us. They want us to disappear. Nobody rooting for us, but us.

PADDY

See, until you darkies came along, the Irish were the bottom of the heap. Now you're the bottom, thank you very much.

SADIE

Still beats Mississippi.

IRISH GIRL

I heard about your Mississippi. See if this sounds familiar. In Ireland, the English wouldn't let us teach our kids, or even live near the towns. Rent men steal our money, then they give us the eviction cause the lords make more money turning our land to cattle.

(MORE)

IRISH GIRL (CONT'D)

Never mind people already live there.

SADIE

Then some potato thing. The famine.

IRISH GIRL

No. That's what the Limeys tell you. Even with the potatoes, there was still plenty of food in Ireland. The Limeys sent the army, shipped out all the food, at gunpoint. We begged for help. Their Minister tried to help, got sacked.

PADDY

Then they watched us die.

IRISH GIRL

First we starved, then influenza, smallpox. A million people dead. Another million ran away.

PADDY

That's what you darkies did, run from the Pharaoh down there. So we'll scrap with you out on Wentworth and put you out on the picket lines to face the coppers. But we know who you are.

IRISH GIRL

I think we're sorted. Paddy, help the girl take her washing over.

PADDY

The other side of the street?

IRISH GIRL

Off you pop.

Three black men watch, incredulous, as Paddy carries Sadie's wash to her apartment.

SADIE

It's alright. He's with me.

(to Paddy)

Roy says you and that Logan backed him up on that picket line, saved his neck. ...Well that is something new, I must say.

EXT. WENTWORTH AVENUE - DAY

An Irish girl calls on the west side of the road.

IRISH GIRL

Aidan! Bollocks. It's over an hour now.

A younger Irish girl emerges from a door.

SECOND IRISH GIRL

Told him the street was dangerous.

IRISH GIRL

That boy. Go get Kathleen. Aidan!

Four frantic Irish girls run down the road. Sadie comes out of her flat with a tiny boy, AIDAN; they cross with Walter to the Irish side of the street.

SADIE

Looks like my child turned white in the laundry.

AIDAN

Mammy, Gaffer said those black folks were cannibals, eat me alive!

SADIE

You're too small to eat.

IRISH GIRL

Sorry, Missus.

AIDAN

Mammy, she gave me this bread made out of corn, with molasses. It was bully, can you make me some?

SADIE

It's real easy.

WALTER

It's what we eat when we're not eating little children.

SADIE

Walter!

IRISH GIRL

So you make bread out of corn, then?

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Lucy approaches Roy nervously.

LUCY
Mister Roy?

ROY
I'm not Mister Anybody.

LUCY
You know that boy Charlie.

ROY
Got my eye on him. Okay, you tell me. Does he treat you with respect?

LUCY
Actually he's afraid of me.

ROY
Good work, girl! He got a job?

LUCY
Mechanic. Wants to open a shop. When Mama comes back, can you set with me when I talk to her? She likes you.

ROY
She's afraid of me.

LUCY
She's afraid of everything. You just keep on. She's not sure she wants you around, but I'm sure. Walter too.
(puts her arms around him,
smiling)
We need the free meat.

ROY
(smiles)
Go on, git. Do some arithmetic or something.

She touches his face.

LUCY
For real, now.

A knock. Charlie enters.

CHARLIE

Is it safe?

ROY

Get your butt in here. I have a meat cleaver and a gun.

LUCY

Roy! Dang!

INT. PLANTATION HOME -- DAY

Mississippi. Leroy sits in a comfortable chair in a robe. Sadie arrives with a dish.

LEROY

You're back.

SADIE

My mother's still working, she's sick.

LEROY

After the flood, the other darkies, old folks, too weak to start again.

SADIE

I came to see you too.

LEROY

Brought me cobbler from Chicago. My doctor would say no. My time is about up. My wife just passed.

He begins to eat; he doesn't offer Sadie any.

SADIE

Sorry. The streets are empty.

LEROY

After the flood, we rebuilt houses, roads, livestock. But you people. Every night, the train was packed with darkies. The tax man told me - half the people of the Delta left in a year. Empty cotton fields. Greenville never came back. The beautiful city.

SADIE

Well, have to say, you did build a beautiful city. It's called the Black Belt.

(MORE)

SADIE (CONT'D)

You built it in Chicago and it's full of your own field hands. Got our churches, music, motion picture shows. You built the Black Belt up there, when you kept us on that levee all that time.

LEROY

I was the one told the Klan we didn't want them here! Could have got killed!

SADIE

We told Mister Claude, now I'm telling you. All you had to do was let us off the levee. Give my girl clean water. My Jimmy just wanted to get off that levee, stand on dry land. So we knew where we stood, handy piece of information. And we left.

LEROY

Look out the window. My town is dead. Dead as Pompeii.

INT. AN OLD CABIN - DAY

Mississippi. Sadie is shocked to find Lizzie out of her sickbed, packed, dressed and ready to go.

LIZZIE

You did the Settle with Marse Leroy?

SADIE

Gave him a cobbler.

LIZZIE

I bought my ticket. Let's go.

SADIE

Mamma, you still got a fever.

LIZZIE

Minute I get to Chicago, my fever goes away. Gonna be a miracle.

EXT. WENTWORTH AVENUE - DAY

Sadie sews in her chair on the stoop. Lizzie takes her usual chair next to Sadie, moonshine between them.

Next to them, Roy has a barbecue stand with a steady stream of customers. The boys from both sides are playing stickball; Walter is pitching. Sadie watches.

SADIE
That's ball three.

WALTER
Right over the plate.

SADIE
Almost bounced off the street.

WALTER
Mama!

SADIE
Don't make me get out of this chair.

At the top of the street, a cop finds a sawhorse which the boys put across the road. Traffic is snarled. The cop marches down the street.

POLICEMAN
Who put the sawhorse in the road, then? You all get home.

WHITE BOY
Can I get a sandwich, then?

POLICEMAN
Get a move on.

The players, both colors, stream to the barbecue. The cop gets a freebie.

ROY
See, I was ready for you this time. Ten cents, show me your money.

IRISH BOY
Barbecue, where has this been all my life?

The lost boy from earlier approaches Sadie.

BOY
Got any of that bread? Got a penny here.

SADIE
Keep your money. See what I can do.

Sadie goes in, returns with a pan. The boy eats a chunk of bread. Aidan's mother walks over.

IRISH GIRL
He causing trouble?

SADIE
Working on that corn bread.

IRISH GIRL
You're making him fat with the
barbecue. Saw you ran off for a
while. Your girl has a beau.
Welcome home, anyway.

And with that Sadie, smiling, realizes she's really home. Irish girls cross, sit on the stoop, followed by their men. Logan strolls over to Roy and Sadie follows.

LOGAN
January, union sits down with the
packers, talk about pay. We did it!

SADIE
No more fights on the picket line?

Cheers up and down the street.

EXT. WENTWORTH AVENUE - DAY

Logan, Paddy and six Irishmen, dressed to kill, march down the road. Blacks cross their path.

LOGAN
Going to a wedding. You mind?

The Irishmen proceed; the black boys, incredulous, follow. Soon a river of humanity flows down the avenue, whites on the left, blacks on the right, eyeing each other, wondering what's going on.

INT. BLACK CIVIC CENTER/CHURCH -- DAY

Roy is in an office, wearing a woman's hat so Sadie can pin flowers on it.

ROY
I'm trying to turn a new leaf,
woman, don't push your luck.

SADIE

You hush. I'm done, let's get out there.

Outside, Lucy waits to marry Charlie at the altar. Black churchgoers watch.

SADIE (CONT'D)

Can't believe my girl is moving out with that mechanic boy.

ROY

Least we got a bedroom to ourselves.

The reverend looks up in shock: Logan and his Irishmen have come to see the wedding.

REVEREND

Why you come here causing trouble?

LOGAN

We have crossed no-man's land and into the heart of the enemy!

The reverend glares at them from the altar.

LOGAN (CONT'D)

(meekly)

We're Catholic, we'll sit in the back. Carry on.

Lucy runs down the aisle and hugs Logan. Sadie and Charlie follow.

LOGAN (CONT'D)

Got a pay rise, brought a present.

He puts a box on a table; Lucy and Charlie look.

LOGAN (CONT'D)

Baby clothes.

Luc shrieks and Charlie yanks his hand away.

LUCY

Baby clothes?

LOGAN

Family tradition.

SADIE

Don't you make me no Grandma.

LOGAN
 (taking Sadie's hand)
 Welcome home, lass.

REVEREND
 Got three weddings today, you white
 boys hush now.

Four of the Irish girls barge into the church, including a
 new one named BRIGID, Logan's wife.

BRIGID
 Where in eternal blazes is that
 boy?

LOGAN
 Brigid, what are you doing in the
 Black Belt?

BRIGID
 My bedroom window is just there.
 You're sneaking over here in your
 wool suit? Got yourself a little
 chippie, some slut?

LOGAN
 Yes, you got the right of it, cause
 when I'm looking for a whore, I'm
 going to run right into the middle
 of a Baptist wedding, you great
 cow. Look around you.

BRIGID
 Bloody hell. You the bride, then?

LUCY
 Yes, we just decided last minute.

BRIGID
 Here, lass, got something for your
 hair.

SECOND IRISH GIRL
 Slide this bracelet on you.

THIRD IRISH GIRL
 Got a lace handkerchief!

The Irish girls attack Lucy like an Indy pit crew.

LOGAN
 Lucy, got the best of all worlds. A
 colored church service with Irish
 bridesmaids.

THIRD IRISH GIRL

Oh, look! So that's what Logan was doing with the baby clothes.

BRIGID

Thought sure he had a little bastard hidden somewhere.

REVEREND

You white people, you set in the back and hush up!

Everyone takes their places except Sadie who is fussing with Lucy's flowers. Roy nods at Logan.

SADIE

You gonna cry? It's alright.

Lucy finally bursts into laughter.

Lizzie sits by Roy.

LIZZIE

Roy, you that crazy man stuck up Mister Claude with a gun?...This is over, you take me up 47th street. Gonna see that Earl Hines.

Sadie slides into the pew next to Roy.

SADIE

Next week, reverend does a memorial for Jimmy. Say goodbye, have a nice cry.

ROY

Alright.

SADIE

Week after that, you marry me. It's embarrassing, Lucy gets married before I do.

He takes her hand and she smiles. The ceremony finally begins. We cut to the end, as Lucy kisses her new husband. A black female SINGER is singing a gospel HYMN with backup from a black piano man.

BRIGID

That Logan, always giving me heart failure.

THIRD IRISH GIRL

Bloody hell, I'm gonna cry.

SECOND IRISH GIRL

What sort of Mass is this? No
candles.

BRIGID

Where's the little boy with the
incense and the bells?

SECOND IRISH GIRL

Music's lovely though, innit?

The singer and piano man launch another verse which carries
us into the next scene.

EXT. GREENVILLE STREET -- DAY

Modern day Mississippi. Old black WOMAN sits on a bench in
front of a store.

WOMAN

In a few decades, almost half the
African-Americans were up north.
They left. Leroy Percy died two
years after the flood, his dreams
for Greenville in ruins. This town
did come back, but he was gone by
then. Old Leroy didn't live to see
the new city building go up on the
big avenue here in Greenville. And
he wasn't here years later, when
the big avenue got its new name.

She smiles, looks up. A sign hangs over Greenville's main
north-south road: "Martin Luther King Boulevard".

FADE OUT.

THE END.