

Amerikin

a play by
Chisa Hutchinson

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Jeff Browning – a white man in his late 30's/early 40's
Poot Spangler – a white man in his late 30's/early 40's
Alma Tillery – white woman in her late 30's/early 40's
Dylan Hoffenberger – a white man in his early 40's
Michelle Browning – a white woman in her late 30's
Gerald Lamott – a black man in his late 40's/early 50's
Chris Lamott – a black woman in her early 20's

SETTING

Sharpsburg, MD. 2017.

Note: For dialect purposes, you can check out these links:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OgvQqg9q6Q>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfhgysEjRWc>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hwIzx-iryw

Also, I just thought this was interesting. For reasons that have nothing to do with Dry River installation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOQQIOPRJJ> .

Likewise, I found this gem when I was trying to determine whether a Marylander would say “soda” or “pop”: <http://popvssoda.com/statistics/MD.html> . Peep the tenth line down under “other responses.” And the seventh from the bottom. In a survey about soft drinks.

Act One: Inside Out

SCENE ONE

The maternity ward of Frederick Memorial Hospital. JEFF stands center, staring into the (fourth-wall) window separating him from his newborn son. He is in love.

JEFF

(grinning)

Hey. You're awake.

(he taps on the window)

Hey, little fucker. I'm your Daddy. You might recognize me from the room where your mom shat you out. I was the one trying not to snot all over you when she handed you to me. Cryin' like Matt Ryan when he finally made it to the Superbowl. Aw man, you're gonna love football. Ain't gonna have much choice, runs in the family. And not just the men in the family, neither. Shit, your mama's a crazier fan than I am. She roots for the damn Falcons, though— her daddy's people come from Georgia— so I'm gonna need you to be a Ravens man with me. We can outnumber her. Maybe she'll cave under the pressure.

(beat)

I'm a little worried about your mom, tell you the truth. She uh... ain't been herself since you came out. I wouldn't mention it— don't wanna worry you before you get good and settled in the world— but... I didn't want you to take it personal if you sense any uh... weird vibes. It's probably just her hormones goin' nuts, and she's probably just tired from manufacturing a fuckin' person for nine months. But I'm sure she'll bounce back. And when she does, she is gonna be the best mom to you. She is gonna love you so hard. I mean look atcha. Can't nobody not fall in love with ya.

(Suddenly:)

POOT

That's a triple negative, asshole, which means you just tol' your baby he's unlovable.

(Jeff turns his head to find his best friend, POOT— by his side, grinning. They embrace dude style, with lots of back slapping.)

POOT (cont.)

Got here as fast as I could, man.

JEFF

I know you did. And who's an asshole?/ You're the asshole, sneaking up on me when you know my nerves are shot...

POOT

You, asshole. An asshole with terrible grammar. Mrs. Weaver would not approve.

JEFF

Oh man, Mrs. Weaver. I haven't thought about Mrs. Weaver in a long time.

POOT

Don't blame you. She hated your dumb ass. You probably blocked it all out. Traumatized.

JEFF

Fuck you, Poot. I'm smart.

POOT

Well shit, let's hope this kid's smarter than you.

JEFF

Let's hope he don't get Mrs. Weaver for fourth grade.

POOT

You know, that is entirely possible. You believe she was only in her 40's when we were in her class?

JEFF

No shit? Damn, she looked ancient even back then.

POOT

Yeah, and she ain't got nothin' better to do than teach since Mr. Weaver died. Probly gonna be on her damn death bed talkin' 'bout some, "I before e except after —"

(He mimes dying in lieu of finishing the rule.)

JEFF

Ha! You're probly right, Poot. You are probably right.

POOT

I was gonna ask which one's yours but damn, I can see your nose from here.

(Jeff punches Poot in the arm.)

POOT (cont.)

Nah, he's cute as fuck, man. Well done. You two did good.

JEFF

Thanks.

(A beat during which they both acknowledge what Poot must have just overheard.)

POOT

...How's Michelle?

JEFF

She's... hangin' in. It was a rough delivery.

POOT

I coulda guessed that by looking at that prize-winning, flesh-colored watermelon in there. He's a big boy.

JEFF

Yeah. Ten pounds, thirteen ounces.

POOT

Fuck.

JEFF

Indeed. I don't know how she managed to not split in half.

POOT

I'm so glad I'm not a woman.

JEFF

Thing is, now that I seen her squeezing a baby outta there, I don't know if I'm ever gonna be able to look at her hoo-hah the same. I mean you have an idea, but I was not prepared for how... *wide* that thing can stretch.

POOT

Naw, I guess you wouldn't with a dick like a Tic-Tac.

JEFF

I'd rather a Tic-Tac dick than a limp one like yours.

POOT

(respect for a quick burn)

Nice.

JEFF

Come at me, bro.

POOT

I hear it takes a while to... you know... spring back. Be like fucking a glass of water for a while, I imagine.

JEFF

Yep.

(Jeff looks out at his son adoringly.)

JEFF (cont.)

Worth it.

(Poot considers his friend, clocks the genuine joy in his face.)

POOT

You're gonna be an awesome dad, Jeff.

JEFF

Ain't I though?

(End scene.)

SCENE TWO

The backyard of the Browning house.

Jeff stands in pajama bottoms and an undershirt, whistling for his dog.

JEFF

Heeeeeerrre, boy!

(whistles)

Come on back now, ya mangy bastard.

(Jeff is about to whistle again when he sees his neighbor, ALMA, approaching the fence separating their properties. She is dressed in nurse's scrubs.)

JEFF (cont.)

Well, good morning, neighbor.

ALMA

Morning, Jeff. You're up dark and early.

JEFF

Didn't wake you with my whistlin'¹, did I?

ALMA

Me? Nah, I just finished my shift. Just got home a little bit ago, so... I'm up. Can't say the same for the Hendersons on your south side there. Or anybody else within a 5-mile radius.

JEFF

Yeah. Sorry. Guess it ain't the best hour to be out here impersonatin' a siren, but my clock's all off. Haven't really slept in a good while.

ALMA

Newborn time.

JEFF

Newborn time.

ALMA

How *is* the baby? Sorry I haven't stopped by yet. My hours have been insane.

JEFF

Yeah, I do not envy your schedule. Whenever I start feeling down on my boring ol' nine-to-five, I just think of you. Baby's fine. Healthy. Easy, as babies go. Really only cries when he's hungry.

¹ If the actor can't whistle, feel free to just change this to "hollerin'".

ALMA

Aren't you the lucky one.

(Beat.)

JEFF

We got your flowers. That was real nice of you. Considering.

ALMA

Pff. Least I could do was put a call in to Village Floral.

(A loaded pause.)

ALMA (cont.)

Congratulations, Jeff.

JEFF (cont.)

Listen, Alma...

ALMA

(deliberately cutting him off)

So your dog run off, hunh?

JEFF

(catching the hint)

...Yeah. All the excitement with Michelle going into labor and all, we left the damn sliding door open. Guess he saw that as his chance. Ungrateful little shit.

ALMA

...Maybe he didn't like his name.

(Jeff looks at Alma, all mischief.)

JEFF

I'm sure I don't know what you mean.

(Alma cuts Jeff with some side-eye.)

JEFF (cont.)

What? It's a great name for a dog.

ALMA

Really, Jeff?

JEFF

It's a great name!

ALMA

Yeah, okay.

(looking for a way to broach something serious)

Not for nothin', but...you're a dad now.

JEFF

I am aware.

ALMA

You gotta be careful... what you expose your kid to. Be careful the ideas you put in his head.

JEFF

I know.

ALMA

You think that's gonna put the right idea in his head? You think it'd be okay for your little son to be runnin' around sayin'... *that?*

JEFF

I think it's gonna give him a real appreciation for irony.

ALMA

So... it really is just a joke to you. Okay.

(Alma nods her head like he just confirmed why things could never work between them.)

JEFF

Alma, this may be my first kid, but I know what I'm doing, alright?

ALMA

Yeah, that's what worries me.

(Jeff rolls his eyes a little. Alma walks off.)

ALMA (cont.)

I'm headin' in. Try to get some sleep. You gotta get practiced in the art of the powernap if you're gonna survive the next year or so.

(Alma is gone. Jeff looks after her for a moment. Then, just to spite her, he whistles and goes:)

JEFF

Heeeeere, Nigger Nigger Niggerrr...!

(End scene.)

SCENE THREE

The Browning house. Small. Working class. A little cluttered but reasonably neat.

In the living room, Jeff holds his baby boy wrapped, all burrito-like, in a blue blanket. Poot's on the couch and Dylan, who's wearing a t-shirt that says "Black Labs Matter" is standing next to Jeff, checking the baby out."

DYLAN

Looooook at thaaaaat. Man, if I were Michelle, I'd be pissed. This kid is all you.

POOT

You clock that nose?

DYLAN

Shit, it's clockin' me.

JEFF

Assholes. *(In baby talk:)* You've got assholes for uncles, lil' man. Yes, you do. Yes, you do...

DYLAN

(heading toward the couch)

That's a beautiful baby, man. Love the name, too.

JEFF

Hunter Grayson Browning.

(Jeff sits in the Daddy chair. You know what that is.)

DYLAN

Sounds like a rich guy name. He's gonna be tall and rich. And a lady killer. Already got them Aryan blues. That's half the battle right there.

POOT

Hell, with a name like that, that could be a future President of the United States you got in your arms right there.

DYLAN

President Browning. I'd vote for 'm.

JEFF

How 'bout it, Hunter? You the next Trump? Hm?

DYLAN

Damn right he is. Only if he gets his brains from his mama, though.

POOT

That's what I said!

JEFF

Ha ha.

DYLAN

Where is Michelle, anyway?

(Jeff exchanges a quick glance with Poot.)

JEFF

Gettin' some rest. Baby's got her up all hours. Gotta be fed every little while, you know.

DYLAN

Yeah, I 'member. Kim was a goddamned saint about it. I found I was gettin' mad for her every time she had to drag herself outta bed to go slap a tit in Skyler's screamin' mouth.

JEFF

That is quite the visual, Dylan. Thank you for that.

DYLAN

What? My wife has great tits.

POOT

You got any beer in this house yet?

JEFF

You know that was the first damn stop I made on the way home from the hospital. Help yourself.

(Poot gets up and heads off in search of a cold one.)

DYLAN

Man, there's no way I coulda gone without beer during Kim's entire pregnancy. Alcohol was the only thing got me through her mood swings.

JEFF

Solidarity, dude. If she couldn't, I wouldn't. Plus, Michelle wasn't as bad as Kim.

DYLAN

Nobody was as bad as Kim. 'Member that one time she chased me outta Captain Bender's with a butter knife?

JEFF

'Member it? I still got video of that somewhere.

(Poot returns with a beer for each of them,

courteously opening Jeff's for him before handing it to him.)

JEFF

Thank you kindly, sir.

DYLAN

(toasting)

To President Browning.

JEFF

Fuck yeah.

(The other two raise their beers in affirmation and swig.)

JEFF (cont.)

Check me out. Beer in one hand, baby in the other. Man, this is the fuckin' life.

DYLAN

I guess you're probably gonna have to start toning it down with the cuss words, huhn? Kim started a damn swear jar when Skyler was born. Got enough saved up for a trip to Vegas or some shit by now.

JEFF

Aw, he's young yet. He don't know what I'm sayin'. *(to the baby)* You don't know what the fuck I'm sayin', do ya? You don't know a naughty word from your mother's tit.

POOT

Hey uh... the dog come home yet?

JEFF

Nigger? Naw, not yet.

DYLAN

I ever tell you how fuckin' brilliant that choice of name is? I wish I thought of it first. I really do.

(Dylan laughs hard. Poot hardly laughs.)

POOT

I dunno. I think it's kind of a lazy name.

DYLAN

Fuck you mean? It's genius.

POOT

I dunno... black dog...

*(He just sorta holds his hands out instead of finishing.
Dylan holds out his hands back like, "What?")*

POOT (cont.)

Whatever. It's a stupid name.

JEFF

You sound like Alma.

DYLAN

Oooooh shit. Alma. How's she takin' all this?

JEFF

She's... bein' mature.

POOT

Sounds about right.

DYLAN

Sounds about like why she left your ass in the first place. Serves you right for literally trying to date the girl next door.

(This is a sore spot.)

JEFF

She left because I started seein' Michelle.

DYLAN

Yeah, seein' her naked at the Quality Inn.

(Right on time, Michelle appears. She manages to look angry and low-energy all at once. She doesn't bother to acknowledge anyone, just stomp-shuffles her way through the living room, ostensibly to the kitchen. The men just watch her go. Quiet. Caught.)

When she's out of sight, Jeff gives Dylan a look like "Good going, dick." Dylan shrugs. Poot looks half amused, half terrified of what might happen next.

A moment before Michelle crosses through once again opening a bag of Doritos as she goes.)

POOT

Hey, Michelle.

Hey, Poot. MICHELLE

Good job on the baby. POOT

Thanks. MICHELLE

Don't I get a hi? DYLAN

I don't like you, Dylan. MICHELLE
(flatly, without stopping)

*(Aaand with that, she's gone. The men all just
look at each other for a beat.)*

Welp. It's refreshing to hear her say it out loud 'steada just telegraphin' it with her eyes like she usually does. DYLAN

She alright? POOT

Her? I'm the one what got cut. DYLAN

Naw, I'm serious. She looks a little... I dunno... sad...? POOT

Proibly just postpartum or whatever. She'll be fine. Right, Jeff? DYLAN

Mm-hm. JEFF
(not entirely sure)

Well, lemme know if there's anything I can do to help. Warsh bottles or pick up pampers or whatever. POOT

Sure, man. Thanks for offering. JEFF

(Jeff and Poot reflexively look over at Dylan.)

DYLAN

Don't look at me. I once went out for pampers and came back with an air rifle.

POOT

True story.

DYLAN

Hey, Jeff. You ever send off that test?

JEFF

Oh! Yeah! Almost forgot about it, tell you the truth.

DYLAN

You had a lot on your mind. Understandable.

JEFF

Should get the results back any day. Shit. Kinda nervous about it, now you mention it.

DYLAN

Don't be. The Brothers are pretty excited about an upstanding, gainfully employed family man such as yourself wantin' to join the ranks.

JEFF

Gainfully empl – I sell security systems, Dyl'. I ain't a damn/doctor or lawyer.

DYLAN

No, you *used to* sell security systems. Now you *manage* the guys who sell security systems. I'd call that gainful. (*beat*) Seriously. They like you. Plus, this test is something you should probly wanna do for yourself anyway now that you got offspring. Purity of lineage, brother. Gotta keep your kin clean.

JEFF

You do it?

DYLAN

You know it. (*Counting off on his fingers.*) German. Romanian. Scottish. Spanish.

POOT

Spanish?

DYLAN

Spain Spanish. Not spic Spanish. (*swig*) Don't tell her I told you, but Kim was kinda borderline.

JEFF

You got her tested too?

DYLAN

Fuck yeah! Gotta know who I'm breedin' with. Turns out... she's got some Italian in her.

JEFF

(facetious)

Naaaaw!

DYLAN

You can joke if you want to, but a lot of them Italians got black in 'em, you know? That boot's got its toe just a 'tap-tap-tappin' on the African continent. Lotta mingling going on there. Plus, you ever hear of a guy named Hannibal?

JEFF

Lecter? Sure.

DYLAN

Cute. Naw, Hannibal of Carthage. African fuck what invaded Southern Italy. Kim's saving grace is that her lineage traces back to Northern Italy.

JEFF

(suddenly a little worried)

Wow. That's... lucky.

DYLAN

You're damn right it is.

(Silence as they all sip their beers. After a moment:)

POOT

Ain't Spain close to Africa, too?

(End scene.)

SCENE FOUR

Late night in the nursery of the Browning house where little Hunter is winding up for a cry.

After a few moments of him crying, we hear shuffling coming from up the hall.

Michelle appears in the doorway. She pauses before making her way over to the crib.

She stands there staring down at the baby for a gooooooong looooooong while.

Finally, she picks him up and begins breastfeeding him.

Slowly, she walks over to a rocking chair and sits.

She begins singing a lullaby. Of sorts.

MICHELLE

Lullabyyyy and goodniiiiight...

(beat)

I don't thiiiiink I can love you.

(beat)

You are juuuust a parasiiiiite,
Draining everything from me.

Drink up, my milk is poison,
Laced with fear and shame and doubt.
I do not want to hurt you,
But I gotta get this out.

(At this, Jeff silently appears in the doorway, unseen by Michelle.)

Lullabyyyy and goodniiiiight.
Shoulda had you aborted.
But nooooo I gotta fiiiiight
To make you mean something to me.

(A sob abruptly escapes Michelle's mouth. She stifles it pretty quick, and after a little bit, begins humming the lullaby. Jeff watches for a moment longer and then goes as quietly as he came.)

(End scene.)

SCENE FIVE

The living room of the Browning house.

*Jeff has just come in from checking the mail.
He flips through the small stack, going:*

JEFF

Bill...bill...junk...

(Finally, he finds what he's looking for, separates it from the others, takes a deep breath, before opening it. As he reads, a few things surface on his face: confusion, denial, panic.)

JEFF (cont.)

Shit.

(Just then, Michelle enters, carrying the baby.)

MICHELLE

What's that?

JEFF

Nothin'. A bill.

MICHELLE

I tol' you to go paperless. It saves them money, so it saves you money.

(When Jeff responds to her, it's really only to keep her from getting too suspicious. But he's distracted, so the words come out kinda slow.)

JEFF

It... saves you money...

MICHELLE

Yeah, eventually. Like when they don't have to pay for postage and printing and all that, they can offer whatever they're offering for cheaper.

JEFF

Postage and printing...

MICHELLE

It's called trickle-down. Look it up.

JEFF

I'm... not sure that's how capitalism works, pumpkin.

MICHELLE

Whatever. It's a thing. And I don't need your condescension this morning.

JEFF

Okay.

(Jeff starts to leave the living room, mail in hand, but she stops him with:)

MICHELLE

Where you goin'?

JEFF

Patio. To finish going through the mail. In peace.

MICHELLE

Well, can you wait five minutes and hold the baby while I pick up after you and your pig friends?

JEFF

Well, when you put it like that, of course.

(He puts the notice in his back pocket, takes the baby from her. Silence. Tension.)

MICHELLE

I heard y'all. Talkin' 'bout Alma.

JEFF

...Okay.

MICHELLE

Yeah.

(Pause.)

MICHELLE (cont.)

You thank her for her tacky-ass flowers?

JEFF

...Yeah.

MICHELLE

I'm sure you did.

(Pause. At this point, Michelle has gathered an armful of beer cans and whatnots. She disappears into the kitchen.)

In her wake, Jeff looks lost. He bounces the baby anxiously. We hear angry clean-up noises offstage: cans being chucked into the recycling can, dishes being abused, cabinet doors slamming.

Then Michelle returns, grabs the baby, and without saying a word more, exits.

A moment passes before Jeff pulls the notice out of his back pocket and examines it again.

He sits, forlorn, on the couch, the notice dangling from his limp hand.

He stares into space for a good long while.

Suddenly, he reaches into his pocket for his cell phone and dials a number. A moment.)

JEFF

Come on, man. Pick up...

(an answer)

Poot! Hey, man. You busy?

(End scene.)

SCENE SIX

The patio outside the Browning house. Jeff is handing Poot a soda or something. (Bit too early for beer.)

POOT

Thanks.

JEFF

Don't mention it. Thanks for comin' over.

(They sit in deck chairs. A beat as Jeff tries to figure out how to ask what he needs to ask.)

JEFF (cont.)

Poot..... how come you don't join the Knights?

POOT

Me? Well..... I guess I'm just not Knight material.

(Poot sips his drink, content to leave it at that.)

JEFF

How you figure? You're a good guy. I don't know anybody who'd say one bad word about you.

POOT

Yeah, that's nice and all, but I ain't... you know...

(Jeff does not know.)

POOT (cont.)

I ain't a... upstandin', gainfully employed family man or whatever.

JEFF

Whatchu talkin' 'bout? You work. You earn a livin'.

POOT

Ain't exactly a honest livin' though.

JEFF

You fix computers.

(A beat during which it becomes clear that maybe Jeff doesn't know his friend as well as he thinks he does.)

JEFF (cont.)

Don't ya?

POOT

Right. You know where I get most of my money? From wives who wanna break into their husband's email or hack their Facebook, see if they got secret accounts. Find out if they're cheatin'.

JEFF

Yeah. Okay. Well. The Knights don't know that. Shit, *I* didn't know that 'til you just tol' me.

POOT

Yeah well.

(swigs)

And as for the family man part... I am a bit of a playboy. As you know.

JEFF

So are a lot of guys. Lot of 'em married. As *you* know, apparently.

POOT

Yeah, but *they* hide that shit. Everybody knows *I'm* fuckin' everybody. I got a reputation. One that don't square up with their whole "family values" deal, so...

JEFF

Hm. *(beat)* So. It's not because you don't believe in their values, right? I mean... you believe in doin' right by your own and all that? Advancin' your people?

POOT

Um... yeah, I dunno that I'd go as deep as all that, but I ain't stupid. I see the good they do for our community. I see how they helped Greg find work when the BP closed. I see the moms taking turns lookin' after each other's kids, tutoring 'em and stuff. Even helped plan Mr. Weaver's funeral when Mrs. Weaver went out to lunch. That's all good shit. But I also know how hostile they can be to outsiders. People they consider to be outsiders. So. I ain't all in with 'em, but... I'm not tryna give 'em a reason either, know what I mean?

JEFF

Yeah...

(Poot nods, swigs. A beat.)

JEFF (cont.)

Poot, you been my best friend for as long as I can remember —

POOT

I'm not mad.

JEFF

...?

POOT

That they asked you to join but not me.

JEFF

Uh...

POOT

That's what you're gettin' at, right? You think I'ma hold it against you if you join? Naw, dude. I'm happy for you. Really. It's a sweet deal. And you deserve whatever break the Universe sends you. I would never begrudge you that.

JEFF

(recalibrating)

...I'm glad you feel that way, man. I am. Because... I got my ancestry results back...

POOT

No shit! What they say?

(Jeff balks for only the slightest of moments before reaching into his back pocket and pulling out the notice from the previous scene and hands it to Poot.)

Poot looks over it, smiling at first. Then the smile gradually gives way to all those things we saw on Jeff's face earlier.

Poot looks at Jeff, who is staring back at him intently.

Then Poot looks away and at a fixed point in space. He's putting it together.)

POOT (cont.)

Whaddya need?

(Jeff looks over his shoulder to make sure no one is around.)

JEFF

You know how to Photoshop and all that stuff, right?

POOT

...You want me to doctor it up?

JEFF

Could you... do somethin' like that?

POOT

Could I? Yeah. It'd be easy enough. Scan it in...get rid of this here, split the missing percentages... yeah, I *could* do it...

JEFF

Okay, so...

POOT

But the thing is... do you really want me to? I mean... do you really want to bend over backward to get in a group that wouldn't accept you if they knew who you really are?

JEFF

Whaddya mean "who you really are"? (*quieting himself*) I'm the same damn guy I been all my life. A *white* guy. And you said yourself it was a sweet deal.

POOT

Yeah, on a practical level. But the principle of the thing...

JEFF

I DON'T GIVE A SHIT ABOUT THE PRINCIPLE OF THE THING, POOT!

POOT

MAYBE YOU SHOULD, JEFF!

(*A pause. Something just broke between them.*)

JEFF

So *now* you're mad at me.

POOT

Naw, I ain't mad at you.

JEFF

You're just judging me, that it?

POOT

... A little, yeah.

(*Pause.*)

JEFF

Well, what about that other thing you said. The flip side of things. How they can be hostile to outsiders. Don't you think they'd be a little suspicious if I got this far with them and then, come time to get my ancestry results back, I suddenly back out? Don't you think they could smell that stank from a mile away? Don't you think that would alienate me worse than if they'd just known I was an outsider from the get? And whaddya think is gonna happen to me then? Hm? To my family. *To my newborn son*. You think any of them volunteer moms is gonna wanna look after/ my son?

POOT

I get it, man.

JEFF

So? You gonna help me or not?

(A pause. Then slowly, grudgingly, Poot folds the notice up and puts it in his back pocket. Jeff relaxes a little.

A beat.)

POOT

Can I ask you a question?

(Jeff gestures: "Sure.")

POOT (cont.)

If you had any black neighbors within, say, shouting distance of your house... would you have named your dog what you named him?

(Jeff sincerely considers this for a moment.)

JEFF

No. No, I don't suppose I woulda.

(Poot nods like a prosecutor who's just nailed his cross-examination, takes down the rest of his drink, and stands.)

POOT

Thanks for the soda.

(Poot exits.)

(End scene.)

SCENE SEVEN

The nursery. The baby is in his crib, crying. Michelle is standing over him, just watching.

We hear Jeff call from offstage:

JEFF (O.S.)

'Chelle? You got 'm? Or you need me to make a bottle?

(Michelle does not respond or even register. Only keeps staring down at the baby, who continues to cry.)

JEFF (O.S.)

Michelle...?

(No response. After a beat, she reaches down into the crib and places a hand over the baby's mouth, which stifles his cries.

Just then Jeff enters the room. He goes berserk when he sees what she's doing.)

JEFF

NO! WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU?!

(Jeff charges over to Michelle, grabs her by the shoulders and yanks her away from the baby. Violently. He picks up the baby, which is back in full cry mode, even louder now.)

JEFF (cont.)

Hey hey hey, it's okay... you're okay, lil' man. Daddy's got you... daddy's got you...

(Michelle is now backed into a corner of the room, weeping.)

JEFF (cont.)

Fuck were you doin'?! Huhn?!

(Michelle can't answer. She can only slide down the wall and cry even harder.

Just then the doorbell rings.)

JEFF (cont.)

Fuck! Who the fuck is this?

(He looks at his wife, crumpled and crying on the floor, and just can't muster the empathy.)

JEFF (cont.)

I can't... I can't do this right now, Michelle. I just... I need you to get your shit together.

(He shakes his head and heads out to the living room to answer the door, fully prepared to tell whoever's there to fuck off, but when he opens the door:)

ALMA

Hey.

JEFF

...Hey.

ALMA

Is this—

(adjusts volume to be heard over the crying baby)

This is a bad time, isn't it?

JEFF

...Naw...

ALMA

I can come back. I'm just not gonna have an opening in my schedule during civilized hours/ for like...

JEFF

Naw, naw, naw it's totally fine, come in. I uh— heh. I'm glad you— I could, I could use a hand, actually, if you don't mind.

(He heads into the kitchen. Alma follows.)

ALMA

Oh. Of course. Whatever you need.

(Once in the kitchen, Jeff takes a moment to get his wits about him — he's still coming down off the rage and bewilderment.)

JEFF

Uuuuuhhh... okay. Could you... could you just hold him for a sec while I...?

ALMA

Uuh...

(He's already laid the baby, who's been crying through this entire exchange, in her arms.)

ALMA

Sure.

JEFF

I just... I just need to...

(He grabs a pot and fills it with water. Meanwhile, as soon as the baby's settled in Alma's arms, he stops crying.)

JEFF (cont.)

...heat up a bottle.

(Suddenly, Jeff becomes aware that the baby is quiet, and looks over at him.)

JEFF (cont.)

Huh. Whaddya know about that?

ALMA

Uuuuh... not much, actually. Babies aren't really my thing. As you know.

(Pause.)

JEFF

Yeah well, this one seems to like you just fine.

(Alma sits at the kitchen table. She's smiling down at the baby now. She may have just accidentally fallen for him. Jeff clocks it, smiles a wistful, regretful little smile.)

ALMA

Yeah, I guess he's alright, too. Cute little guy...

JEFF

It's weird. I thought he was hungry. He usually only cries when he's hungry.

ALMA

Maybe somethin' else set him off.

JEFF

(darkly)

Yeah. Maybe.

(Alma sniffs.)

ALMA

Doesn't smell like he pooped or anything. He could still be hungry, you know. He's probably just quiet now 'cause he's expectin' I'm gonna whip out a boob any second, so you better hurry on up with that bottle.

JEFF

Right. Yeah.

(Jeff puts the pot of water on the stove, turns on the burner, retrieves a bottle from the fridge over:)

ALMA

(baby-talking)

Hey. Hey there, lil' man. Aw, look at that lil' smilin' face... are you flirtin' with me? Are you bein' a lil' flirt? I think you are...

(Listening to this woman's sweet baby talk unties a knot that's been forming inside Jeff since Michelle gave birth. He begins to cry, quietly and with his back to Alma who just goes on, unaware of the effect, on Jeff, with:)

ALMA (cont.)

Who me?... Why yes, I *am* single, but... I mean not for nothin', but I think I might be a little old for you, dontchu think?... Well, that's very flattering, but I don't think I'm ready to be a cougar just yet. But try me again in eighteen years.

(This makes Jeff laugh a little. He discreetly wipes his eyes, and shakes his head.)

ALMA (cont.)

(to Jeff)

Kid's got game, man. I almost went for it.

(Jeff faces her and there's a moment between them, a tacit, mutual reverie. Alma breaks it up.)

ALMA (cont.)

Hey, where's Michelle? She go out for a lil' break or somethin'?

(Well, that squashes any good mood that might have been forming for Jeff.)

JEFF

No.

(Alma senses this is a sore subject and changes tack.)

ALMA

Oh. Okay. Well, I have the entire day off, if you can believe that, so I can help out for as long as you need.

JEFF

That's real nice of you, Alma. Thank you.

(A moment during which it looks as though Jeff might break down and cry again, but holds it together.)

ALMA

Don't mention it.

(Just then, Michelle appears in the kitchen doorway. Jeff looks at her like he's trying to dissolve her every molecule with his eyes. Alma follows his hard gaze to the bleary-eyed mess of a woman standing behind her.)

ALMA (cont.)

Hey, Michelle.

(Michelle does not appear to have registered that Alma just addressed her. She just stares at the baby. Then at Alma. Then at Jeff. In silence.)

MICHELLE

You all look... happy.

(Michelle gives Jeff an opportunity to respond to that, but he does not. He only keeps glaring at this woman he married.)

ALMA

Well... it's... hard to not be happy with... this little person you made around.

(And just when Alma is feeling satisfied that she was able to come up with a diplomatic response under pressure, Michelle bursts into tears.)

ALMA (cont.)

Oh. Oh, Michelle...

(Alma's empathy switch is automatically flipped. She looks to Jeff, not understanding why he isn't moving to comfort his wife, but is instead just leaning against a counter, staring at a fixed point on the floor. Alma stands and, baby in one hand,

reaches for Michelle with the other.)

ALMA

Sweetheart...

(Michelle violently swats Alma's hand away and draws back.)

MICHELLE

DON'T YOU FUCKIN' TOUCH ME.

(Alma does not expect this response. Though maybe she should've.)

Michelle just stands there like a mountain. A big, depressed fucking mountain.

Jeff is still staring at the floor.

A loooooooong pause.)

ALMA

(close as she can get to chastising considering)

Well. You two have made a beautiful child. He's a beautiful, innocent child who deserves love and attention and the chance to grow up in a stable and happy environment.

MICHELLE

You keep him, then.

(And with that, Michelle is gone, leaving Alma to wonder at Jeff and what the hell might be going on in his head right now.)

Jeff still says nothing. Just looks at Alma, takes in the sight of her holding his baby, then turns to check on the pot of water.)

(End scene.)

SCENE EIGHT

Jeff is in the living room, playing with Hunter. It's adorable. Like maybe the baby grips Jeff's finger every time he sticks it in the vicinity of his hand. Or maybe Jeff is getting a vocal reaction from Hunter whenever he makes a certain face. Whatever it is, it just tickles Jeff to pieces.

A few moments of this before the doorbell rings.

Jeff answers. It's Dylan. Holding a bag and giving Jeff a preemptively gleeful, expectant look.

DYLAN

Whatchu got for me?

(Jeff smiles at Dylan. Then heads to the coffee table where his (new and improved) ancestry results await pick-up. Meanwhile:)

DYLAN (cont.)

(shouting)

Hi, Michelle!

JEFF

She's asleep.

DYLAN

Good. Didn't wanna have to deal with her mean ass on what I'm sure is about to be a happy occasion.

(Jeff hands Dylan the results with a grin.)

JEFF

Read it and weep.

(Dylan takes the results and looks them over. Jeff's grin fades as he watches Dylan read. The anxiety of potentially getting caught drags his face down.)

DYLAN

Niiiiiiiice, nice... *(a beat)* Wait a minute...

(Dylan looks like something's not adding up for him. Jeff stops breathing, goes rigid. Like if you could find an actor who can sweat on cue, he'd be perfect for this moment right here.

Did Poot fuck something up? Fuck. He should've reviewed it more carefully...

Jeff just about disintegrates when Dylan looks up at him, questioningly.)

DYLAN (cont.)

...English *and* Irish? You're a redcoat *and* a potato-eater? (*smiling*) You know there's some fucked up history in there. Somebody got raped real good.

(Dylan laughs heartily. Jeff audibly exhales. He tries to laugh with Dylan, even manages to speak.)

JEFF

(nerves calming)

Heh. Yeah.

DYLAN

Otherwise, you're pure as the driven snow, man! I can't wait to share this with the Brothers. And! I get to plan your induction ceremony, too, since I'm the one recommended you. There is gonna be so much booze! And hot-wings. I know how much you love your hot-wings. And I'll ask Kim to make you one of her pineapple upside down cakes. It's gonna be so awesome. This is so awesome. And hey, look! I got you something.

(Dylan reaches into the bag he brought with him and pulls out a Confederate flag. Jeff unfurls it over:)

DYLAN (cont.)

Figured it was safe to go ahead and get it. And if it wasn't, well, I can always find someplace to hang one of those, you know? Hang it high and proud, you hear? Right out front, so folks know what you stand for.

(Jeff nods like, "Right on.")

JEFF

Thanks, man.

DYLAN

You know it.

(Dylan goes in for a hug, remembers the baby, slaps Jeff on the back instead. Then addresses the baby:)

DYLAN (cont.)

Sorry I almost squished you there, Hunter. I'm just so happy because your Daddy's gonna be a Knight! Yes, he is. And you will be, too, some day.

(looks up at Jeff, all sentimental-like)

DYLAN (cont.)

Yessir. I can see the future is in good hands right here.

(a beat)

Listen, man. I can't tell you how much it means to me that you're joinin'. Tell you the truth, I was startin' to worry about the Knights. Ain't as many of us as there used to be and... I mean, I'm the youngest one up in there. Seem like so many men of our generation... well, the real smart ones left Sharpsburg altogether. No offense.

JEFF

None taken.

DYLAN

And most of the ones that stayed are fuck-ups. They're fucking aroun', can't hol' down a job—I mean it's one thing when you can't find one 'cause fuckin' Obama decimated your industry or whatever, but these fuckers are just lazy. And the ones younger than us... forget it. They're lazy *and* spoiled. No work ethic. No sense of responsibility. Still latched onto their mother's tit. We're supposed to trust them with our mission? The All-Important Work of Advancing the Race? This shit is urgent, man. This country's gettin' browner and browner every day, and they're fuckin' around. Listenin' to rap music. Drinkin' beer out a ceramic duck and shit. How is that helping the cause, you know?

JEFF

(wavering)

Yeah...

DYLAN

It's like they just don't care that there's a genocide goin' on, you know? It ain't right.

JEFF

Yeah. Hey, Dylan... I been meanin' to ask...

DYLAN

What's up?

(Jeff's wheels are spinning so hard on how to ask this question without drawing suspicion.)

JEFF

I'm all for advancin' the race and all, but... the Knights... they don't do it—

DYLAN

It's *we* now, Brother.

JEFF

Right. Yeah. We don't do it at the expense of others. Right?

DYLAN

Who the fuck cares if it is? It's kill or be killed out there.

JEFF

No, see, like that... I mean... we don't... actually like... *kill* people. Do we?

DYLAN

Oh, fuck no, dude! That's just a figure of speech. It ain't that kinda party. It ain't 1960. We can't really get away with that shit any more.

JEFF

But I mean... we don't *want* to kill black people either, right?

DYLAN

Nobody's tryna kill any black people, Jeff. We don't even hate black people, most of us.

(Jeff nods, relieved.)

DYLAN (cont.)

We just don't want 'em marryin' our people or livin' in our neighborhoods or takin' our jobs.

(Jeff looks like he doesn't quite know how this doesn't equal hate, but he nods anyway.)

JEFF

Oh. Okay.

DYLAN

Not for nothin', but why would you wait 'til you're one unanimous vote away from being accepted into a club before askin' 'bout what they stand for? You ain't gettin' cold feet, are ya?

JEFF

No. No, of course not. I just wanted to make sure I was clear on what I'm gettin' myself into here.

(Dylan just looks at Jeff for a dubious moment.)

JEFF (cont.)

That's all. I swear. I'm... I'm real excited to join. I am. You *know* I am.

DYLAN

Yeah, you better be, motherfucker. 'Cause we need ya.

(End scene.)

SCENE NINE

Jeff and Michelle's bedroom. It's pretty dark, though there's daylight creeping in around the edges of drawn shades.

Michelle is in bed, balled up under the covers, eyes wide open.

We hear Jeff before we see him.

JEFF (O.S.)

Michelle...

(He appears in the doorway, holding a breast pump.)

JEFF (cont.)

HEY.

(It's all Michelle can do to roll over and face her husband.)

He says nothing. Just holds up the breast pump in lieu of a request.

It's excruciating for her to sit up, but she manages.

Jeff comes over, lifts up her shirt, attaches the breast pump with some difficulty, his face scrunched the entire time.

He turns on the machine, stands up straight, and takes in the pitiful sight for a moment before heading for the door. He pauses, makes a decision.)

JEFF

You need to take a shower today.

(He leaves Michelle to consider.)

(End scene.)

SCENE TEN

The living room, where Poot sits on the couch having a beer while Jeff lies on the floor on his back with the baby on his chest.

JEFF

Tell ya, I just about shit myself when he got a look like somethin' was wrong with it.

POOT

Nothin' was wrong with it. I made sure it was perfect.

JEFF

I can't believe it worked.

POOT

Of course it worked. It's my handiwork.

JEFF

Check the modesty on you.

(Poot shrugs like, "What can I say?")

JEFF (cont.)

(sincerely)

Naw, really. Thanks, Poot. I know you weren't exactly keen on doin' it, but you did. And you did a great job.

POOT

I did a fuckin' fantastic job.

JEFF

Alright. *(beat)* My induction party's supposed to be Fry-dee week. You doin' anythin'?

POOT

Oh, I'm invited? It's not an exclusive VIP event?

JEFF

I can invite whoever the fuck I want. It's my party. And you *are* a VIP, asshole.

(Poot smiles.)

POOT

Yeah well... maybe I'll show up. Can I bring a date?

JEFF

Depends. What's her skank-factor on a scale of one to meth-head-amateur-porn-star?

Fuck you, she's respectable. POOT

Riiiiight... JEFF

She's black, though. POOT

(Jeff is quiet as fuck for a moment trying to figure how to respond to this.)

I'm just fuckin' with ya. POOT (cont.)

(Jeff breathes a sigh of relief.)

Aw man. Had me goin'. Got me over here sweatin'. JEFF

Naw, I know better. Come on now. POOT

(A moment. A beat.)

Actually, I did date a black chick once, though. POOT (cont.)

No shit! JEFF

Yeah. POOT

Fuck! When? JEFF
(tickled by this)

Summer of oooooooh... six? Yeah. Fuckin' Bryce Hawkins got hooked up with some theater freak he met online and had me playin' wingman and shit, goin' over to Shepherdstown for that... you know... that festival thing they do at the university that bring all them annoying-as-fuck tourists through here... POOT

Yeah okay... JEFF

POOT

So I go with him to this one play... some bullshit about a woman goin' to the Jersey shore to find herself or somethin'...

(quick snore noise)

But there is this actress in it who's pretty nice-lookin' ...

JEFF

(ridicule at the ready)

You dated an actress?

POOT

Lemme finish, fucker. So after the show, buncha the cast and folks involved with the play go meet at the Mecklenburg there. And I decide I'll tag along with Bryce and Theater Freak, hopin' for a chance to meet this actress chick. Only she never shows up. And I'm sittin' there waitin', perkin' up like a damn dog missin' his master every time the door opens, right? Expectin' it's gonna be her. Well, one time it opens and... dude. I ain't never seen nothin' like this chick in my life. She's wearing all these colors that you don't think got no business goin' together like purple and orange and shit, but she somehow makes it look terrific. And she's got this... majestic... headwrap... thing on and these big, gold, doorknocker earrings, and a smile like a fuckin' sunrise—

JEFF

Wow, Poot, you're a poet.

POOT

(without missing a beat)

Shut the fuck up, Jeff. So she's got this smile just shinin' in her rich, chocolatey brown face that look like it don't got no pores, it's so smooth. I mean she look like she just stepped outta the Nile or somethin'. Like some kinda African goddess with the *(gestures breasts)* and the *(gestures ass)*. And in my head I've already had her in about three different positions when she notices me lookin' at her, and... swear to God...

JEFF

(smiling, riveted)

Oh no...

POOT

She walks right up to me and goes... "Dark and stormy." And I'm like *(gestures "what the fuck?")*. Is she introducing herself? Is she tryna tell me how she likes it in bed? Like I am tryin' real hard to figure this shit out before the jig is up and she puts it together that I'm just some workin'-class white boy from a hick town with no real swag at all...

JEFF

Ha!

POOT

Seriously! And like she's readin' my mind, she follows up with, "That's the drink I want you to order me, dummy!"

(They have a good laugh at this.)

POOT (cont.)

Yeah, I knew I was in for it then, brother. She was a firecracker. Turns out she was a grad student from New York workin' in the costuming department for the festival.

JEFF

Explains all that... *(crazy gestures for headwrap and earrings and loud colors)*... style.

POOT

Yyyeahp. I hung out with her pretty much the rest of the summer. She was the only woman I slept with while she was here.

JEFF

Holy shit.

POOT

I know. Even tried to do the long-distance thing for a minute, but... I kept havin' to go there to her place and she got uh... kinda tired of that. Plus, it got pretty expensive after a while, so... things just kinda... you know...

(Poot swigs some beer.)

JEFF

Why couldn't she come here to visit you?

(Poot just gives Jeff a real wry look like, "Really, white supremacist motherfucker?")

JEFF (cont.)

Oh. Right.

POOT

Yeah. Right.

(A beat.)

I really liked her.

(A beat.)

Ah well. Onward. I better get back home. I was uh...*(with a naughty grin)* kind of in the middle of somethin' when you called.

(They both stand, Jeff holding the baby to his chest still.)

JEFF

Shit, man. Why'd you pick up? Why'd you agree to come? I'da waited.

POOT

You needed pampers, man. Easier for me to put the pussy on pause than for you to travel with a newborn, I think. Plus, she gives me points for helping 'cause, you know... baby.

You're a good man.

JEFF

Don't I know it.

POOT

So who is it?

JEFF

Check this: Lauren Connelly.

POOT

Shut the fuck up. You been after that since high school.

JEFF

Best things come to those who wait. And to those who develop a reputation for givin' great head.

POOT

Well shit, if she was who you was thinkin' of bringin' as a date to the party, she'll probly already be there. Her dad's a Knight.

JEFF

No shit. Bob Connelly?

POOT

Yep. Treasurer.

JEFF

Huh. Well, that makes sense, I guess, seein' as he's a bank manager and all.

POOT

(Just then, Michelle emerges. Much cleaner and a bit more put together than she has been.)

MICHELLE

Hey, Poot.

POOT

(a little too enthusiastic)

Hey! She's up! How you doin'? You feelin' okay? Still tired? Husband treatin' you alright?

(He winks at Jeff with that last little bit. Jeff is not amused.)

JEFF

That's a lotta questions, man.

MICHELLE

It's fine. I'm glad somebody's askin'.

(A loaded beat.)

MICHELLE (cont.)

I feel a little better today. Took a shower.

POOT

That's... (*"Fuck, that's what counts as a win these days?"*)... that's great. You look good.

JEFF

You do look... better.

MICHELLE

...Thanks.

(beat)

You know, I got some text messages from some people. People I didn't even know still knew I existed... Amber Lynn Snead. Erica Dinwiddie. Even Kim Hoffenberger. Who you know don't want nothin' to do with me since... what happened with her brother.

JEFF

Okay...

MICHELLE

Yeah, they were all just writin' to congratulate me and welcome me to the Knights family and find out if there was anything special I wanted for your party Fry-dee week.

JEFF

...

MICHELLE

So. You got in.

JEFF

...Yeah.

MICHELLE

I thought we were just going to talk about it more before you just up and joined. And hell, Jeff, even if I didn't take no issue with ninety percent of the people associated with that group, didn't ya think that's somethin' your wife might like to know?

JEFF

(irritated)

You haven't seemed to care about much o' nothin' lately, so... under the circumstances, no. I did not think that, Michelle.

MICHELLE

Well, maybe if anybody around here cared about *me*, I could care, too. Did anybody ask me how I was feelin' after squeezin' a damn bowlin' ball out of my vagina?

POOT

(muttering)

I did...

MICHELLE

Did any of those bitches call after Hunter was born or send over a card? A onesie? A damn baby toy from the Dollar General? I didn't even throw a baby shower 'cause I knew none of 'em woulda showed up.

JEFF

Maybe they woulda if you hadn't fucked all their husbands at some point.

(A pause during which Michelle just stares at Jeff.)

POOT

Welllllll, I should probly /get goin'...

MICHELLE

Why'd you marry me?

JEFF

What?

MICHELLE

Why'd you pick *me* to settle down with? I mean I'm sure you knew all about me.

POOT

He loves you, Michelle. He's just —

JEFF

No, I don't.

POOT

You don't mean that. *(to Michelle)* He don't mean that.

JEFF

Naw, I do. And she knows I do.

MICHELLE

So why me, Jeff?

(All is still while Jeff considers this. Then:)

JEFF

I guess I married you 'cause I knew you'd be grateful. And... I needed that after... after Alma. After she found out I was messin' with you and... and aborted my baby... I needed someone to...*(big breath)*... I needed somebody to think I was worth settlin' down with. I needed somebody to look at me and go, "Yeah, I wouldn't mind havin' his baby." And there you were. Already standin' there. *Lyin'* there. Wide open. And nobody else would have ya, so I knew you needed me, too. We needed each other. More than we loved each other. We both had so much *need*. Still do. Thing is, ain't neither of us been in a position to deal with the other one's needs. We just reachin' and reachin' and ain't nothin' there to grab. But that stops today. From today on, we are gonna be there for each other, help each other. We are gonna look each other in the eye, we are gonna talk honest, and we are gonna listen real good. I'm gonna be a husband and a father. You're gonna be a wife and a mother. And now that we got community we can count on, we are gonna make this shit work. We are gonna fuckin' *function*. With dignity. You hear? We are gonna build something our son can be proud of. And *then*... maybe we can find our way to lovin' each other.

(Michelle takes all that in. A moment.)

MICHELLE

Gimme the baby.

(Jeff balks big-time.)

MICHELLE (cont.)

I WANT TO HOLD MY SON.

*(Jeff reluctantly, carefully hands Hunter to Michelle.
For a moment, they actually resemble a family.)*

Suddenly:)

POOT

Can I—?

JEFF

Go home, Poot.

(Poot beelines to the door.)

POOT

Thank you.

(End scene.)

SCENE ELEVEN

Jeff, who's dressed like he's heading to a church picnic, is holding Hunter and running around looking for something when he hears a dog barking in the distance, and looks up, hopeful. But nope. Not Nigger. Ah well.

He calls offstage:)

JEFF

Michelle, where'd you put the baby bag your aunt (*pronounced "ant"*) sent us?

MICHELLE (O.S.)

It's on the shelf in the coat closet.

JEFF

Oh. That makes sense. Can you bring some pampers out of Hunter's room when you're ready? Like three or four. Or five.

MICHELLE (O.S.)

Okay.

JEFF

(to the baby)

You ready for your debut, lil' man? You ready for your first big adventure in the world?

(As Jeff starts packing bottles into the bag one-handed, Michelle emerges with pampers, baby blanket, and various other baby things in her arms. She's still kinda low-energy, still a bit mopey and shuffly, but she actually looks really nice. An odd combination of sexy and wholesome. Like you can kinda see why Jeff was attracted to her in the first place.)

Jeff stops fussing with the baby bag and stares at her over:)

MICHELLE

I'm bringin' the blanket, too, in case we wanna lay him out on the grass or somethin'. You think that's okay to do or is he too little for that?

(noticing Jeff staring at her)

What?

JEFF

Nothin'. You just... look nice.

(Pause.)

MICHELLE

You want me to hold 'm while you pack the bag?

JEFF

Yeah.

(They trade. Michelle drops all the baby items on the couch for Jeff to sort out and pack. She takes the baby.)

JEFF (cont.)

Okay, what we got here? Oh good, the wipes. Thank you. I woulda forgot about those. We woulda been ass out. Literally.

(He checks in with Michelle, who looks a little like she may not be ready for this.)

JEFF (cont.)

You alright?

MICHELLE

Hm?

JEFF

To do this? You still wanna come? Because honestly, you really don't have to. I really don't think anybody would hold it against you if you stayed home. Okay, maybe they would, but... fuck 'em, right?

(Michelle smiles a little. He's trying.)

MICHELLE

Naw, I'm good. I am.

(Jeff nods, goes back to packing the bag.)

MICHELLE (cont.)

You excited?

JEFF

Tell you the truth, I kinda am. I know it's silly. It's just the same damn people we known all our lives. But somehow it feels different, you know?

MICHELLE

Yeah. I do.

JEFF

It's like... these people who known me all my life, known me when I was a fuck-up, known me when I ain't have nothin', known me before I married you and had him... they're lookin' at me now and goin', "You turned out alright, Jeff." Like I finally did something with my life, and they wanna honor me for it. Make a man feel like he belong somewhere in the world.

Yeah, I unnerstan' that. MICHELLE

It's stupid, I know. JEFF

(At this, Michelle has wandered over to a window and is staring out of it, orange light illuminating her face. She keeps her eyes fixed out there for the following:)

Um... MICHELLE

You think this is enough milk? JEFF

Hhh... MICHELLE

Should we bring one more bottle? JEFF

Jeff... MICHELLE

Overkill, right? JEFF

JEFF. MICHELLE

What? JEFF
(looking at her finally)

There's a cross burnin' on our lawn. MICHELLE

(That stops him dead in his tracks. He hurries over to the window and sees that there is, in fact, a cross burning on their lawn.)

Fuck. JEFF

(End of Act.)

Act Two: Outside In

SCENE ONE

The home of GERALD who currently is sitting at his desk, utterly riveted by something he is reading on his obsolescent desktop.

Offstage, we hear the frantic footfall of his daughter, CHRIS, first here, then there, then here again. Gerald doesn't seem to notice it at all.)

Chris calls:)

Daaaad!
CHRIS (O.S.)

Yeah?!
GERALD
(eyes still glued to the screen)

You seen my phone?!
CHRIS (O.S.)

Nope!
GERALD

(The phone, meanwhile, is right there next to his clicking hand. When Chris appears in the office, she spots it almost immediately. As she retrieves it:)

Thanks sooo much for looking. Such a big help.
CHRIS
(sarcastic as hell)

Mmhm...
GERALD
(still distracted)

When are you gonna get a new computer? It took me like half an hour to upload an assignment on that thing.
CHRIS

It works just fine.
GERALD

CHRIS

It better after monthly visits to the Tech Doc.

GERALD

At least *I* never spilled water on my computer.

CHRIS

It was apple juice, and this was the *first* time. (*noticing the screen*) What are you doing?

GERALD

Working.

CHRIS

Really? Because it looks like you're fucking around on Facebook.

GERALD

I still really hate it when you say "fuck."

CHRIS

It looks like you're farting around on Facebook.

GERALD

I'm researching. This is how I get ideas for pieces these days.

CHRIS

(kind of impressed)

Wow. Welcome to the twenty-first century.

GERALD

Listen to this:

(reading)

"This is the garage of my friend and next door neighbor, Jeff Browning. The vile slur spray-painted on it is the latest in a series of terrorist attacks against him by a handful of white supremacists that live in our town. They somehow found out that Jeff, who's about the whitest looking man you ever met, has African ancestry and now they're targeting him. The police can't or won't do anything about it, so I'm posting this in hopes that it will find its way to the right eyes, someone with a platform or the ability to pressure the authorities into doing the right thing. Jeff is a good man. He has a wife and a one-month old son who were both in the house when a brick came crashing through their window. Last week, he was unfairly fired from his job. They burned a cross on his lawn, for crying out loud. It has to stop. For his safety, for the well-being of his family, and for all that is good and decent in the world, please share this post so that this matter gets the attention it needs. Thank you."

CHRIS

Huh.

GERALD

Whatchu think?

CHRIS

I think that's a human interest story and you're a politics writer.

GERALD

Remember what Augusto Boal said...

CHRIS & GERALD

"We must make the personal a political project and the political a personal project."

CHRIS

But like in Spanish, so it was way sexier.

GERALD

I think there's something here.

(Chris makes a face and a noise like, "Not sure I agree...")

GERALD

Chris, how long have I been working at the Post?

CHRIS

A hundred years.

GERALD

Right. And in all that time, have any of your friends ever mentioned an article that I wrote? Have any of them ever posted about it on Facebook or Tweeted about it?

CHRIS

We're more an Instagram people.

GERALD

You know what I mean.

CHRIS

Without prompt from me? No.

GERALD

So you can see how, after a hundred years of work, a man might begin to question his relevance and wonder if he's making a difference. And then maybe try to think of new angles.

(A beat as Gerald quietly re-reads the post.)

CHRIS

You're gonna interview him, aren't you?

GERALD

I'm thinking about it.

CHRIS

Where is this?

GERALD

Sharpsburg, Maryland.

CHRIS

Ah. *There's* the politic. That's Trump Country.

GERALD

And only an hour away...

CHRIS

Fuck. Field trip.

GERALD

(admonishing)

Christina Joy.

CHRIS

Fudge. Field trip. Can't you just call these people? This... *(checking the screen)* Alma lady seems more than open to a convo...

GERARD

Yeah, of course I'll do that, but I'm guessing that talking to Jeff won't be as easy, or else Alma wouldn't be online fighting this battle for him. The man doesn't even have a Facebook account. I checked. He might not even pick up the phone – I can only imagine how many crank calls he's gotten. But he'll be home. He's got no job to go to, and his family's under constant threat. Plus, people feel beholden if you've traveled just to talk to lil' ol' them.

CHRIS

Thaaat... is... *("sneaky as fuck, but...")* actually kinda brilliant.

GERALD

I won't be gone long.

CHRIS

We better not. I've got an essay due.

GERALD

We?

CHRIS

You think I'm letting you go into Confederate territory by yourself, black man? They just had a Klan rally there.

GERALD

Yeah, in 2013. And there were like twelve people at that rally.

CHRIS

Try twenty. Which in a town of 500—

GERALD

700. And most of them are good people, I'm sure.

CHRIS

Still not great odds. And you think the ratio hasn't tilted since Twitler took office?

GERALD

It's not Afghanistan, Chris.

CHRIS

Um: Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile—

GERALD

Cops love me.

CHRIS

Yeah, remind me: how many times have they *loved* you this year so far?

GERALD

Exactly my point. When I get pulled over, it is always without incident.

CHRIS

So far.

GERALD

It's fine. I'll be fine.

CHRIS

Then why don't you want me to come?

GERALD

...Because. It's... just...not...

(Chris gives him an expectant look like, "This oughta be good." Gerald is cornered and he knows it.)

GERALD (cont.)

You have an essay due.

(Chris is raising the bullshit flag in her head. She gives him a look that communicates as much. Gerald relents.)

GERALD (cont.)

Fine. But I'm driving.

CHRIS

Yeah, the speed limit.

(End scene.)

SCENE TWO

Gerald's car. Gerald is, in fact, driving, while Chris sits in the passenger seat, looking out the window.

CHRIS

Twelve. Thirteen.

(Gerald rolls his eyes.)

CHRIS (cont.)

Ooo, look at this guy, big supporter –

(her best Sesame Street Count impression)

Fourteen-Fifteen-sixteen Trump signs! Ah-ah-aaah...!

GERALD

Yes, Chris. I get it. How much longer you gonna play your little game?

CHRIS

Um, you're welcome. I count; you keep your eye on the rearview. Be a nice little detail to open your piece with: "On the ten-mile stretch of road connecting I-70 to Shepherdstown, WV, lawns and windows boasted no fewer than sixt –"

(spotting another)

Seventeen Trump/Pence signs and four Confederate flags. One hanging over what appears to be a small general store." Because it's so much more convenient when I can get my toilet paper, half gallon of milk, and racism all in the same place.

GERALD

This is a historic town, you know. Antietam and all that. They probably just hang those flags to pay homage to the history of the place.

CHRIS

Do you think there are entire towns where Germans are still hanging Nazi flags to pay homage to *their* country's biggest losers?

GERALD

False equivalence.

CHRIS

How?

GERALD

What do you mean *how*? Hitler was an evil maniac bent on world domination. Southern states just wanted to be left alone.

CHRIS

...To dominate an entire race of people.
(*Gerald sighs.*)

CHRIS (cont.)

You don't have to do that, you know.

GERALD

Do what?

CHRIS

Pretend to sympathize with them. This is me you're talking to here. You're allowed to be black with me. You don't have to play Martin to my Malcolm, do that whole compassionate crusader thing with me. Least of all me.

GERALD

(*a little disturbed*)

Most of all you. I'm trying to... this is not an act, Chris. I firmly believe in the power of understanding. To understand something is to know how it works. And once you know how it works, you have the power to disable it.

CHRIS

Yeah, you know what else disables? Bombs.

(*A heavy little beat.*)

GERALD

That's not funny.

CHRIS

Not a joke. Maybe you don't feel like you can be black with me, but I'm not ashamed to tell you that my angry black ass has considered *all* the means to the glorious end of the Demise of Racism. Including blowing up the racists. After Freddie Gray, I actually considered using my college fund to buy mass amounts of fertilizer and shipping boxes. It really is ridiculous how easy it is to find instructions on how to build homemade bombs, how to avoid detection. That might alarm me if there weren't a more imminent threat to black safety. Islamic terrorists? Pff. They ain't looking to blow *me* up. They feel for me, recognize my struggle under the same system they rage against. Hell, I'm a potential ally as far as they're concerned. And I might be. I could be.

GERALD

You can't really think that.

CHRIS

Like hell I can't. I fantasized about mailing several boxes a day. Specifically targeting precincts that protected their murderers, sent them on paid vacations. At the expense of the very taxpayers they terrorize. Several boxes a day. Until they caught me. And I wouldn't make it easy to catch me. I know they would eventually, but by the time they figured it out, the damage will have already been done. The statement made.

GERALD

And the statement would be...?

CHRIS

STOP FUCKING WITH US. Because we can fuck with you back. We will hold you accountable if the justice system won't.

GERALD

So what's stopping you?

(A beat.)

CHRIS

You worked *really* hard for that college fund.

(Chris looks at her dad. He glances back at her, reaches for her hand, holds on for dear life.)

(End scene.)

SCENE THREE

The Browning home. A window in the living room is boarded up. The couch has mussed sheets and a pillow on it. Someone's clearly been sleeping on it.

In the kitchen, Jeff is making breakfast. The baby's in a baby seat on the kitchen table. Michelle is nowhere in sight.)

JEFF

Michelle! I made eggs! There was only three left so... egg and a half each? I was gonna make toast, but... I had to throw the last coupla slices out 'cause there was mold. So much for making it last, right? But Poot says he can loan us some money come Tues-dee, pick up some food. Michelle? Come on out now...

(No response.)

JEFF (cont.)

Fine. Stay sleep. I'm gonna eat. Me and Hunter.

(He starts to do just that when the doorbell rings. Jeff gets real alert. He picks up Hunter's baby seat and heads into the living room. He sets the seat down someplace safe, heads to the door, grabs a rifle that's waiting faithfully next to it. He calls through the door:)

JEFF (cont.)

Who's 'ere?

GERALD (O.S.)

My name is Gerald Lamott. Uh... your friend Alma sent me?

(Jeff, a little confused, peeks through the peephole. Which makes him a lot confused.)

JEFF

You say Alma sent you?

GERALD

Yes sir. She said you've been having some uh... troubles with your... neighbors. I'd like to help if you'll let me.

(A beat. Jeff quietly consults with his son:)

JEFF

Whatchu think, Hunter? Should I open the door? Yeah?

(Jeff opens the door cautiously, not wielding his rifle, but not putting it down either. If this alarms Gerald, who's standing on the other side of the door holding two bags of groceries, he doesn't show it. On the other hand, Chris' eyebrows leap for the sky.)

GERALD

Hello, Mr. Browning.

JEFF

It's Jeff. Gerald, was it? *(to Chris)* And who're you?

GERALD

This is my daughter, Christina.

CHRIS

(eyes on the rifle)

Hi.

(Jeff nods at her.)

JEFF

How do you know Alma?

GERALD

...We're Facebook friends.

(Jeff briefly evaluates this claim.)

JEFF

(re: the grocery bags)

And what's that?

GERALD (cont.)

This? We uh... figured you might need some reinforcements.

JEFF

I don't take charity from strangers.

GERALD

But I'm not a stranger. At least in the sense that I am familiar with your situation.

JEFF

(instantly offended)

My situation?

GERALD

I had a newborn once. I remember how hard it was to get out of the house. Especially the first few months when my wife was too exhausted to be left alone with the baby for too long. So. No, not charity at all. Just a gesture of solidarity.

(This strikes a chord with Jeff. He steps aside. An invitation to come in. He checks to see if any of his neighbors are spying this before shutting the door. He puts his rifle back in its place next to the door.)

JEFF

That's my son right there. Hunter.

GERALD

Hey, Hunter.

CHRIS

(trying for cool and casual)

He's really cute. He's got your eyes.

JEFF

...Yeah. Y'all can sit.

(Realizing that the couch being made up like a bed might make that awkward, Jeff grabs the sheets and pillow and throws them on the Daddy chair. His guests sit.)

JEFF (cont.)

Here, lemme take those into the kitchen. Y'all want uh... a glass of water?

(Jeff grabs the grocery bags and the baby, heads into the kitchen to put the groceries away. Meanwhile, Chris allows her concern to surface.)

CHRIS

(quiet panic)

Dad.

GERALD

(calling to Jeff)

No, thank you.

(to Chris)

It's fine. We're fine.

CHRIS

(jabbing a thumb over at the rifle)

Really?

(In the kitchen, Jeff is kind of impressed with the selection of groceries.)

GERALD

If you'd been through what he's been through, you might want to arm yourself, too.

JEFF

(calling to Gerald and Chris)

This was real... thoughtful of you to bring this stuff.

GERALD

(to Jeff)

It's no big deal.

JEFF

(to himself)

Organic. Hm.

(A beat.)

La-dee-dah.

CHRIS

(loud whisper)

It smells weird in here.

JEFF

(to Gerald and Chris)

You sure you don't want anything? Some coffee?

(muttering)

I got some fancy coffee now, apparently, so...

GERALD

(calling off to Jeff)

Really. We're fine. Filled up before we got here.

(Jeff heads back out into the living room with the baby in tow.)

JEFF

And where did y'all come here from exactly?

GERALD

D.C.

JEFF

Huh. And what is it you do in D.C.? You a politician or somethin'?

GERALD

No, I uh... I write for the Post.

JEFF

The Warshington Post?

GERALD

Yes.

JEFF

...And... you wanna help *me*?

GERALD

Yes.

JEFF

...How exactly?

GERALD

There's no problem that can't be fixed with good publicity.

JEFF

Psh. I highly doubt that.

GERALD

I can understand why you might.

JEFF

...You tryna say I'm ignorant or somethin'?

GERALD

No. No, not at all. I meant that as a reference to—it's quite the ordeal you're going through. Seemingly insurmountable.

JEFF

...?

GERALD

Impossible to get through.

JEFF

Yeah. It is.

GERALD

But I think if the right people knew what was happening to you they would care enough to do something about it.

JEFF

People like who? The FBI?

GERALD

Yes, maybe.

CHRIS

Or maybe someone who could help you relocate to someplace a little... safer for you and your family.

JEFF

I don't wanna relocate. I ain't no refugee. This is my home. Been my home all my life.

CHRIS

Okaaay, but...

GERALD

What she's trying to say is you have options. And I'd like to try to connect you with them by reporting on what's happening here.

JEFF

And just what do you know about what's happenin' here?

GERALD

I know what Alma shared with me.

JEFF

Which is...?

GERALD

I know that you have African ancestry.

JEFF

'Course, you do.

GERALD

And that you're being persecuted for it. They burned a cross on your lawn. They graffitied your garage. Threw a brick through your window. I know you lost your job...

JEFF

That... that was not because I got African ancestry.

GERALD

No? What for, then?

(A moment after which Jeff makes the decision to really speak to this man.)

JEFF

Window wasn't the only thing they broke when they threw that brick.

(A beat.)

JEFF (cont.)

You might wanna get a pen.

(Gerald gets a pen and notepad. Chris whips out her cell phone which puts Jeff noticeably on edge.)

CHRIS

Just a voice recording. It's a little more efficient than scratching away on a notepad. Is that okay?

(It is clearly not, but...)

JEFF

...Sure. *(beat)* Sure.

CHRIS

Cool.

GERALD

Thanks, Chris. *(to Jeff)* So can we start with... Let's start with how you came to know that you have African ancestry and more to the point, how your tormentors came to know it.

JEFF

Well... um... my wife. Michelle. She uh... when she found out she was pregnant... which—full disclosure—happened before we were married...when she found out she was pregnant, she... told me she wouldn't go through with having my baby unless I had a DNA test done. To prove... well... to prove that I was pure white.

CHRIS

(shaking her head, disapproving)

Mmph.

JEFF

(bolstered by the empathy)

That I didn't have any black in me. She said she didn't want a black baby.

CHRIS

Mmph.

JEFF

And I never bought into that idea that black is inferior, you know? People are people. I knew she was wrong for thinkin' like she thought, but... I mean, she was carrying my baby. Which I wanted. So...

GERALD

...So you got the test.

JEFF

Right. I got the test. And it came back that I'm part... I'm part African.

GERALD

Right.

JEFF

Now, I couldn't let her find out about that, knowing how she was, so... I asked my friend Poot to—

CHRIS

I'm sorry... Poot? You said his name is Poot?

JEFF

Uh yeah. Cody. Cody's his real name, but we call him Poot.

CHRIS

(clearly amused by this)

Okay.

JEFF

Yeah. Poot's real good with computers and graphics and whatnot, and I trust him. So I asked if he'd... you know... fix up the results. Fix 'em so it'd look like I ain't have no African in me.

GERALD

Ah.

JEFF

Yeah. Only thing is, though, Poot's kind of a playboy...

CHRIS

(extra amused at this)

Is he now?

JEFF

Yeah, and right around the time he was workin' on my results, he was messin' with a girl whose dad is like one of the leaders of the Kn... the white supremacist group. That's what I heard, anyway. And—

(Suddenly, the lights change. We are in a flashback. Gerald and Chris are still there, but clearly just as observers. Jeff and Poot, whom Jeff lets in through the door, talk as if no one else is in the room. The window is whole and uncovered.

Jeff begins pacing in the living room while Poot sits, tense as fuck, on his couch.

Offstage, Hunter is crying.)

POOT

I'm telling you, I know it was her. She wasn't waitin' for me when I got back from here the other day, and it was strange when I didn't hear nothin' from her, but I thought she was just annoyed that I took so long to come back and was like, *Cool*. 'Cause there's really no gracious way to kick a chick outta your place.

JEFF

You expect me to believe that your tech-savvy, security-obsessed self got hacked by a girl who still hasn't mastered the K-turn? Hold on a minute...

(Jeff heads off for a moment. We can't hear everything he's saying, but we gather enough to know that he's pleading with Michelle to feed the baby. And that he's straining to temper his tone while he does.)

The baby stops crying. A moment later, Jeff returns.)

POOT

No. No, man, of course she didn't hack me. The original. She musta got hold of the original.

JEFF

...What?

POOT

That's what I'm sayin'. When I finished workin' on it, I didn't know what to do with the old one —

JEFF

YOU BURN IT, YOU DUMB FUCK!

POOT

I didn't know if you'd want to keep it for like...

JEFF

For what? *Posterity*? You gotta be fuckin' kiddin' me!

POOT

People got the right to the truth of where they come from.

JEFF

(grabbing his own crotch)

He came outta this here! He came outta that woman right in there! That's all he need to know!

(The baby starts gag-coughing. Like a bolt, Jeff is back there checking it out. We hear Michelle

snap at him:)

MICHELLE (O.S.)

He's fine, Jeff! I ain't killin' 'm! Just drinkin' too eager, that's all.

JEFF (O.S.)

Maybe if you didn't wait forever to feed him, he wouldn't be drinkin' like he don't know where his next meal's comin' from!

(A beat.)

JEFF (O.S.)

I'm sorry. I'm just—I know you're doin' your best. Just—I'm sorry.

(Jeff returns once more.)

POOT

It's not like I left it out in the open. I put it in a drawer when I knew she was coming over. She musta been snoopin' around like girls do when you leave for a minute. I didn't even know it was gone 'til I heard...

(Jeff collapses into the Daddy chair.)

POOT (cont.)

You call the cops?

JEFF

'Course I did. "We'll look into it."

POOT

Right. Shit.

(A beat.)

JEFF

You shoulda destroyed it, Poot. You shoulda tore it to pieces and flushed it down the fuckin' toilet. Where it belongs.

(Poot looks so sad and so sorry. Jeff even sadder and sorrier.)

POOT

I'm sorry, man. I'm really sorry.

JEFF

I know.

POOT

I wasn't tryna sabotage you or nothin' like that. I would never do that.

JEFF

I know.

(A beat.)

JEFF (cont.)

I guess you're in the shit, too, so...

POOT

I dunno. Probly won't be that bad for me. I was just an accessory. An accessory that happens to have dirt on pretty much everybody in this town. Anybody with any kinda sense ain't gonna fuck with a hacker, so...ain't nobody comin' for me, I don't think.

JEFF

That... does nothin' to improve my opinion of you in this moment, Poot.

POOT

Sorry. *(A beat.)* Whatchu gonna do?

JEFF

I don't know.

(Poot disappears and the lights change back to normal. We are back in the present with Gerald and Chris. Jeff addresses them.)

JEFF (cont.)

And that's when it all started. The burning cross, the harassing phone calls, the vandalism. And then one day, I come home from gettin' groceries —

(Again the lights change to indicate a flashback. Once again, Gerald and Chris observe.

This time, Jeff stands at the door, holding a bunch of grocery bags. He stares at the window that was just boarded up, but now is uncovered, just smashed open.

Michelle is on her hands and knees, scrubbing the shit out of one particular spot in the carpet.

Hunter is crying back in his room.

JEFF

What the fuck happened here?!

MICHELLE

A brick.

JEFF

What?

(Jeff drops the grocery bags and beelines for Hunter's room.)

(Eventually, Hunter stops crying. Jeff emerges from back there with the baby in his arms.)

JEFF

(quietly, but not calmly)

They threw a fuckin' brick through my window with my son in the house?

MICHELLE

(quietly, totally dissociated)

Yeah. I cleaned up the glass. But tttthhennn... while I was picking it up... I cut myself and got blood on the..... so now I'm cleaning that up.

(Jeff notices for the first time that Michelle is bleeding. Bleeding a little too much for someone who accidentally cut herself.)

JEFF

Michelle...

MICHELLE

(woozy)

I don't... I don't want it to s — staaaainnnn...

(Michelle passes out. Jeff stoops down to check her out. Panics some.)

JEFF

MICHELLE?! MICHELLE!!!

(Now he's trying to hold the baby, stop Michelle from bleeding, grab his cell phone to call 911, and not completely lose his shit all at the same time.)

(He gets blood on the baby and everything.)

JEFF (cont.)

Oh God, no. No no no no no no no no no...

(These lights fade to black. In the blackness:)

CHRIS

Oh my God. Your wife... did she...? Is she okay? I mean... did she survive?

(Lights up in the present. The window is boarded up again. Michelle is gone. The room is blood-free.)

JEFF

...Yeah. Yeah, she did. But. Things aren't the same, you know? *We're* not the same.

GERALD

Of course you aren't.

CHRIS

(compassionate-like)

Who would be? God...

JEFF

After that, I went out to lunch for a minute. Which is why I got fired. Barely left the house since then.

GERALD

And when did that happen?

JEFF

What's today? The 7th?

GERALD

The ninth.

JEFF

Oh. Yeah. So... a little over three weeks, then. Paternity leave was up even before that, so...

CHRIS

Oh my God.

JEFF

Yeah. Poot's been bringing us stuff, though. Checking up on us.

CHRIS

He sounds like a good friend.

JEFF

He is. *(beat)* He is.

GERALD

You said his real name is Cody? What's his last name?

JEFF

(not sure if he should share the info, but...)

Uuuuh... Spangler.

GERALD

And would we be able to talk to him?

JEFF

...He's... not really... I don't think he'd wanna get any more mixed up in this than he already has.

GERALD

Do you think your wife would be up for a talk? Where is she?

JEFF

Um... well. Being here after all that just proved too much, so she's with relatives. In Georgia.

GERALD

A phone call then?

JEFF

... I don't think so. She's pretty broken up and... you know... she doesn't wanna have nothin' to do with me and the baby no more. Just wants to forget the whole thing, so...

CHRIS

(under her breath)

Well, that's fucked up.

GERALD

I could explain to her that as it stands now, whatever I wind up writing won't exactly cast a favorable light on her, and that talking to me would give her a chance to share her side of the story. To get people to understand where she's coming from.

CHRIS

Hmph. *You* can try to understand if you want to. I don't need to understand anyone who thinks like that. Anyone who'd *abandon her own baby* because she thinks like that.

GERALD

("That's not nice. Or professional.")

Chris.

CHRIS

What? I'm just saying what we're all thinking. You can't possibly tell me you have an ounce of empathy for that woman. Even if she did try to kill herself, she's still a negligent bigot.

GERALD

That's the man's wife you're talking about, Chris. And my job is not to empathize. It's to record.

CHRIS

(holding up her phone)

No, that's this thing's job. I think you're more deliberate than that...

GERALD

No...

CHRIS

And I think you're allowed to be. *Expected* to be. Because these days, *that's* how you stay relevant. By owning a perspective. And you *know* you have one. This man has been wronged. I know it. You know it.

GERALD

We can't *know* anything for sure—

CHRIS

You know it. Or else you wouldn't be in here using words like "persecuted" and "tormentors." He's been *wronged*. And you can't have a *wrong* without a wrongdoer, Dad. Who's the wrongdoer here?

GERALD

I get what you're saying, Chris. I do. I just don't want to jump to the easy conclusion. There are still a lot more questions we have to ask before we can get anywhere near a conclusion.

JEFF

(bolstered by the Chris' ally talk)

Ask away.

GERALD

Well... Okay, let's go back for a second. You say that your wife... Michelle, right?... You say that she threatened to not go through with th—

CHRIS

Mm-hm. *Threatened*.

GERALD

(rethinking his word choice)

You said she *told* you that she wouldn't carry the pregnancy to term unless you took the DNA test. This presumes that you would have gotten the results back in time for her to have an abortion if she didn't approve. So... what's the timeline there? How far along was she in her pregnancy when you took the test and how long until you got the results back?

JEFF

...She had just... missed the one period so... not far along at all. Maybe six weeks? And it only took about... what?... six weeks to get the results back, so... plenty of time left over for an abortion if she wanted one. A legal one.

GERALD

Right. And how far after that did you ask Poot to amend the results?

JEFF

Basically the day I got them back.

GERALD

And he did it right away or...?

JEFF

Yeah, pretty much. Next day.

GERALD

And he kept the original? On his desk?

JEFF

...Yeah.

GERALD

Until this one uh... lady friend of his showed up six, seven months later, and then and only then did he think to stash it in a drawer.

(At this point, Chris has begun to suspect that her father knows more than he's let on and is up to something.)

JEFF

.....Yeah. He said he didn't know what to do with it.

GERALD

Mm-hm...

JEFF

(suddenly annoyed at the line of questioning)

That's what he said.

GERALD

Okay. I just wanted to clarify the timeline.

JEFF

Okay.

GERALD

So when in all of this did you decide you wanted to join the World Knights?

(Chris is all eyebrows. Jeff is flabbergasted.)

JEFF

...Excuse me?

GERALD

When on this timeline that you have laid out did you begin your initiation into the white supremacist group known as the World Knights?

JEFF

I... I don't... *(an airy, embarrassed laugh)* Who told you that?

(Flashback. Now it's Jeff and Chris who observe as Gerald carries on a phone conversation with Alma, who's dressed

in her scrubs. She looks a little worried.)

GERALD

You're a brave woman for sharing this story, Ms. Tillery. Thank you for this.

ALMA

Thank *you* for taking an interest in what's going on here. Really. And call me Alma.

GERALD

Well, Alma, we'll be leaving here in maybe an hour, so we –

ALMA

We?

GERALD

I'll be bringing my daughter, Christina, as a sort of assistant. She's studying journalism, so this will be good practice for her.

ALMA

Oh, that's nice. Following in her father's footsteps.

GERALD

Yes, I'm a proud papa. Anyway, we should get to Mr. Browning's house by about 1:30.

ALMA

Oh, my shift's over at 2:00 if you'd be more comfortable with me there to introduce you or as support or... something.

GERALD

Well, I'll certainly want a follow-up with you, but actually I'd like the chance to talk with Mr. Browning alone first, if that's okay. There're some things it's easier to say in the presence of strangers than in the company of friends, you know?

ALMA

Yeah. I do know. Um... listen, Mr. Lamott...

GERALD

Gerald.

ALMA

Gerald... I gotta ask you somethin' and I don't want you to take offense...

GERALD

Okay...

ALMA

Are you... are you black? Because you sound... you know... black.

GERALD

...Yes. I am indeed black. Does that matter?

ALMA

It's just that... I just don't want you to be blindsided by any uh... racial... stuff.

GERALD

I'm sure I'll be fine. Plus, I know some folks from Sharpsburg. *(An attempt at a joke:)* I know it's not as bad as the liberal media makes it out to be.

ALMA

(missing the joke)

Yyyeah, that's not... I mean... with Jeff. Specifically.

GERALD

Oh.

ALMA

No, don't... I don't mean that he's like a rabid racist or anything. He's just a good guy with some bad ideas.

GERALD

Okay.

ALMA

He actually tried to... he was trying to join the white nationalist organization? It's how they found out about his ancestry and all that.

GERALD

Ah. I can see why you left that part out of your post.

ALMA

(trying so hard to patch it up)

I really think he's just... he just does these things for the camaraderie, you know? To fit in, be liked.

GERALD

These things? Plural?

ALMA

Yeah, you know... joining that group, telling little jokes...*(omit, omit, omit...)*

GERALD

Mm.

ALMA

Thing is, I've never actually seen him in the presence of a... of a black person, so I can't really say

ALMA (cont.)

for sure how he really feels about 'em. I mean, I don't know if he actually believes any of that stuff or...

GERALD

Ooooooerrrr if he'd bite a nigger's face off?

ALMA

Well. Maybe not all that, but... yeah.

(beat)

I feel like I'm really killing your good will here. It's like with every word that comes out of my mouth, you're less and less likely to share his story.

GERALD

You kidding? *(Headline)* White Supremacist Hopeful Becomes Target of His Own Hate. That's a *great* story. I'd have to be an idiot to not want to share that.

ALMA

(not comfortable with the spin)

Oh. Huh.

GERALD

And good will has nothing to do with it. I once interviewed David Duke. And Dick Cheney. In the same day. So I'm pretty sure I can handle Mr. Browning. And handle him fairly.

ALMA

...Okay. Well. I just felt I should mention it. In case.

GERALD

Mm. Well, thank you. There's nothing a journalist values more than honesty. Not even his own safety. And now, if you don't mind, there's something I feel I should probably mention to you...

ALMA

Oh. Of course.

GERALD

(smiling)

It's not an insult to call a black man black.

ALMA

Oh. *(beat)* Oh. Right.

*(A patient call button sounds in the background.
Repeatedly.)*

ALMA (cont.)

Shit. I gotta run. Duty calls. But I'll be there as soon as I can.

*(The lights change back to normal. Alma disappears.
We are back in the present.)*

GERALD

She's really sweet. And earnest.

JEFF

(not quite knowing what to say to that)

...Yeah...

GERALD

And trustworthy.

(A loaded beat.)

GERALD (cont.)

So. Shall we begin again?

(End scene.)

SCENE FOUR

Darkness. Isolating lights up on Michelle. Just standing. Talking. Delivering the suicide note she might leave if she thought anyone cared enough to really read it all.

MICHELLE

I was raised Christian. Sort of. Mostly we just went to church for Easter and Christmas, but we bought that whole idea of heaven and hell and Jesus dyin' to save our souls and all that. But then you know how sometimes things can happen that make it real hard to keep believing what you been taught to believe? It's like this stuff's been planted in your head, and after a while you start to notice ain't nothin' ever come up but weeds, so you start wonderin', you know? Yeah. Story of my life right there. I ain't gonna bore you with the details because whatever, what's done is done and don't none of it matter now. But I ain't ashamed to tell you that I started studyin' on other ways of thinkin' about our souls and the afterlife and all that. And maybe I'll go to hell for doubtin'. Shit, maybe I'm in hell already. I dunno. What I do know is people believe some crazy shit. Like have-sex-with-snakes-and-wait-for-the-spaceship type crazy. Though I guess if you think about it, some dude gettin' born to a virgin, performin' what essentially amounts to the world's most epic magic show, and then gettin' nailed to the cross because his Dad willed it like, "Do it for the people, son..." That sounds kinda crazy, too.

(A beat.)

Anyway. I was readin' about Hinduism. Karma and reincarnation. The idea that you can just keep comin' back and comin' back as different things until you do life right. Until you get to the point where you don't even need life no more because you done already got everything you can get out of it and then you can just be... energy, or like... I dunno... from the way they describe it... like a current of electricity. Just flowin' around. Happy. Not needin' nothin'. I decided that don't sound so crazy. It sounds downright reasonable actually. And kind. Like the Universe is goin', "Welp, you fucked that up real good. Let's go 'head and give you a do-over, okay?"

(A beat.)

I'd like a do-over. I'm ready. Don't laugh, but... for my next life, I hope I come back as an elephant. Partly because I kinda just wanna know what it'd be like to be that damn big. But also because they're supposed to be real good mothers. And like not just to their own babies, but like all the babies. Whenever a baby elephant is born, all the ladies in the herd lend a hand. Or... you know, a trunk. How nice is that, right? Their pregnancies are like 22 months long, though.

(A beat.)

I think it'd probably be worth it.

(End scene.)

SCENE FIVE

Back in the living room with Jeff, Gerald, Chris and Hunter, who is now gurgling up a storm in his daddy's arms.

They are wrapping up the rebooted interview. Chris looks like she is over Jeff and his story, but Gerald is still attentive, still appraising.

JEFF

It got so I was afraid to leave her alone, between everything the Knights been doin' and... you know... what she did with that glass, but she begged and begged me to go buy some formula for the baby. Said she just couldn't take the breast-feeding no more. In hindsight, I see now she was just tryna get me out the house so she could make her escape. *(A beat.)* She left me a note. Wamme go get it? I still have it.

GERALD

Please.

(Jeff goes to the back to retrieve the note. Meanwhile:)

CHRIS

You're not seriously thinking about publishing a word of this?

GERALD

Why wouldn't I?

CHRIS

Because he's a liar. A racist and a liar.

GERALD

So is most of Washington. Your point?

CHRIS

My point is that you don't have to be an instrument for his salvation. Like what are you trying to prove?

GERALD

I'm not trying to prove anything. I'm just trying to let people know about a hateful thing that's happening in our world.

CHRIS

Really, Dad? *(Old-timey news anchor:)* "This just in: hate exists!"

GERALD

This kind of hate is currently undoing decades of political progress in this country.

(At this, Jeff is hovering in the hall overhearing everything they say.)

CHRIS

But by helping this guy, aren't you just *normalizing* his behavior? *Rewarding* it, even? I mean, if you want to do something to create change –

GERALD

I'm not trying to do *something*. I'm trying to do *something different*. Because clearly the same ol' I stand-over-here-you-stand-over-there-and-we-shake-our-fists-at-each-other-thing isn't changing anything.

CHRIS

Okay, that's a fine idea and all, but –

GERALD

No. No but. And I'm done with ideas. I'm moving on to practice. That's what this is. It ain't perfect, but...

(A beat.)

Lemme put it like this. Thirty minutes ago, you were all for sharing this man's story. You felt badly for him. What changed?

CHRIS

Um. What do you mean what changed? Facts. Facts changed.

GERALD

Facts do not change, Chris.

CHRIS

He lied!

GERALD

(overlapping)

Your understanding of them does. You were not aware of the facts because you hadn't looked closely enough. Once you became aware of the facts, your whole attitude toward the man changed. Right?

CHRIS

Right.

GERALD

Think of how that might work moving in the other direction.

CHRIS

...Okay...

GERALD

Fact: we are black. Fact: he tried to join a group known to harbor ill will toward black people. Fact: we black people are here. In his home. Offering a platform and the dignity that comes from having your troubles addressed. Despite our personal feelings. Despite the potential danger we've put ourselves in coming here. Despite the natural human inclination toward reveling in the misfortune of those who hate us. We are here. And we are trying. We are *doing something different*. And once he sees that we genuinely want to help, once he grasps the fact that okay, hate exists but so does basic human goodness, maybe *his* attitude will change.

(Jeff chooses this moment to emerge into their line of sight with a note in his hand. There's quite a mix of emotions surfacing on his face. He opens his mouth to say something but nothing comes out right away.)

GERALD

Jeff? Are you okay?

JEFF

(fumbling so hard but really trying)

I uh... I d—I don't hate you. I only tried to join that group because I needed... for my son, you know?... I n— I needed to give him an advantage. It means so much here to *belong*. I wanted... and I-I-I mean I don't actually *believe*... you know... all the stuff they believe, but... I couldn't exactly tell you. I'm... I'm...

(He looks like he wants to say so much more but doesn't get the chance because the doorbell cuts into his floundering. Jeff puts the baby in his chair, grabs his gun and moves to answer. Carefully.)

JEFF (cont.)

Who's 'ere?

ALMA (O.S.)

It's Alma.

(Jeff opens the door. Gratefully. Always gratefully for Alma. Gerald and Chris stand.)

ALMA

Hey.

JEFF

Hey. Um... your friends are here. We were... talkin'. You coulda tol' me they were coming.

ALMA

I was going to but—

GERALD

(interjecting)

But I begged her not to. Journalism is at its most truthful when the subjects are unprepped. You understand.

JEFF

...Yeah.

(A bit of an awkward moment where it's clear that Jeff isn't so sure he wants his "truth" out there any more.)

ALMA

Is it safe to come in now? I mean... have you covered whatever you needed to cover...?

JEFF

(looking to Gerald)

I don't know? Have we?

GERALD

Yes, I think so.

(Jeff lets Alma in. But while Gerald might be done, Chris is not.)

CHRIS

Actually, I do still have a couple of questions.

JEFF

(alarmed)

...Okay.

CHRIS

Where was the baby? When Michelle left. Did she just leave him here?

JEFF

Uh... no, she took 'm next door to Alma.

(Chris looks to Alma for confirmation.)

ALMA

(a little confused)

Uh... oh, that day. Yeah, she brought Hunter over, asked me to keep an eye on him for a little while. Said Jeff was out and she needed a break.

(Jeff nods like, "See? Like I said.")

CHRIS

And you did as she asked?

ALMA

Well, yeah. I mean, we had some words first, but yeah, I did what she asked. I didn't know how safe the baby would be if I left him with her. She had to be in a pretty desperate state to come to *me* looking for help.

CHRIS

What do you mean? She didn't like you?

(Alma looks at Jeff.)

ALMA

Ah. So you didn't cover everything.

(The lights change to indicate a flashback. Jeff, Gerald, and Chris all watch as Alma goes back to that day in her yard when Michelle approached her toting Hunter in his chair. Alma is in the middle of fixing a lawnmower. Michelle's clearly been crying. When she speaks to Alma it is direct and with some urgency.)

MICHELLE

Hey.

ALMA

Oh. Hey.

MICHELLE

Can you watch him? Jeff went out and I don't... I don't know what I'm liable to do if I don't get a break.

ALMA

Um... I'm...I-I don't...

MICHELLE

I hate your guts.

ALMA

Oh. Wow.

MICHELLE

(some abbreviated soul-searching)

No, not really. I'm just jealous. I don't... whatever it is you have with Jeff –

ALMA

I don't got nothin' with Jeff.

MICHELLE

Yeah well, I wish I had that kinda nothin'.

(a beat)

Anyway, what I meant to say is, I know we've had our differences or whatever, but the baby don't know nothin' about grown folks' business. He's innocent. I think. I mean he ain't ever done nothin' to nobody. On purpose. The thing is I can't... I can't look at him now... I mean, it was hard enough before because my hormones or whatever, but now I can't look at him without thinkin' about how the one pure thing I ever made in my whole life... is tainted. He's... polluted.

(Alma is horrified by this confidence. Michelle clocks it.)

MICHELLE (cont.)

I know to you that sounds awful, but trust me, it's even more awful feelin' it. Feelin' it about your own kid. Like the one thing that's supposed to give you joy, and he ain't give me nothin' but pain. Give me pain comin' outta me, give me pain every time he chomped down on my nipple, give me pain when the people who was gonna finally respect me found out what he really is, give me pain when he cry and cry aroun' me but quiet for anybody else. He's quiet for you. He likes you. So. That make both the men in my life what like you better 'an me.

(shoving the baby at Alma)

Take 'm.

(Alma takes the baby. Michelle quickly starts to walk away before Alma changes her mind.)

ALMA

There's something wrong with you.

(Michelle stops, listens with her back to Alma. What follows is probably the closest Alma gets to malicious. She's unaccustomed to spitting venom, and it shows in the initial hesitation in her speech. But she builds momentum as she goes.)

ALMA (cont.)

There's... a lot of somethings wrong with you. Like where do you start? Hormones I can understand. But that's a temporary thing. *You*, Miss Michelle, are like... permanently fucked. You are permafucked. You are messed up beyond repair. Between the sluttin' around and the victim complex and the bigotry... like who's bigoted against their own baby? Do you know how sick you have to be t—huh!—and I know about sick! I'm a goddamned emergency room nurse, for fuck's sake! I've seen a lot of sick people, but you take the cake, sweetheart! You are the Queen of Fucksville, and Jeff and Hunter deserve so much better than you. Enjoy your break, you messy bitch, and I HATE YOU, TOO.

(A moment as Michelle absorbs all of that.)

MICHELLE

Try not to curse so much around the baby.

(And with that Michelle is off. The lights change bringing us back to the present and Alma back into the living room with Jeff, Gerald, and Chris.)

ALMA

I know I probably shouldn't have said all that, but I had to let it out. It ain't healthy to keep toxic energy all pent-up, and I wasn't about to try after all of what she'd just dumped on me.

(a beat)

Where is she, anyway?

JEFF

Uh...

CHRIS

(pouncing on a potential lie)

Jeff told us she's in Georgia. With family.

ALMA

Oh. Huh. I thought she wasn't on good terms with her people down there, but... I guess maybe with everythin' she done been through here, they patched things up?

CHRIS

What do you think, Jeff? Did they patch things up?

ALMA

When did she leave?

JEFF

... Later that same day. Remember?

ALMA

Not really. When you came to pick Hunter up, you said she was sleepin'.

JEFF

Right. But... she snuck off when I wasn't paying attention.

ALMA

(flatfooted as hell, like honest to a fault)

Well, that's weird. Don't you think if she was gonna leave, she woulda done it when you was out and the baby was over here safe?

CHRIS

That's the note she left, right?

(Chris grabs the note Jeff is still holding in his hand and reads. Jeff tries to grab for it back, but Chris evades him and reads out loud:)

CHRIS (cont.)

“Jeff-- I can’t live like this no more. I left Hunter with Alma. I know you regret her getting rid of your baby. So think of this like a do-over.” So. When exactly did she leave again? Right after she dropped the baby with this lady? Or after she took a nap? (*showing the note to Alma*) Is this even her handwriting?

ALMA

(*finally getting that Jeff hasn’t been honest*)

I... I don’t kn—

CHRIS

(*interrogating Jeff now*)

How did she leave town? On a plane? By bus? Did she have her own car?

JEFF

I... she—

CHRIS

(*pressing*)

If not, how would she even get to the airport or to the bus depot? Did she call a cab? Do you even have cabs around here?

GERALD

Christina...

CHRIS

DID SHE LEAVE AT ALL? Because I really don’t think she did! I think she’s still here in this house and you just don’t want us to talk to her! (*calling*) Michelle...?!

(*Chris heads toward the back of the house. Jeff follows.*)

JEFF

HEY...

CHRIS

You tried to throw her under the bus, tried to make yourself out to be some kind of misguided saint...

(*At this point, Chris has reached a door that Jeff really does not want her to open. In a flash, Jeff raises his gun, which he’s been absentmindedly holding since he let Alma in and just when he’s about to aim it at Chris, Gerald reflexively charges at him. He knocks Jeff to the floor and presses the man’s own rifle against his throat, choking him out.*)

Hunter has started to cry with all the commotion, and

*Alma instinctively goes to comfort and protect him.
Meanwhile:)*

ALMA
Stop it! STOP! What the hell is wrong
with you all?!

CHRIS
Oh my God. *Oh my God!* Stop! Stop!!! Fuck!
DAD!!!

(At Chris' piercing plea, Gerald does stop what he's doing. He emerges holding the gun, which he regards like "How the hell did this get in my hands?" before tossing it a safe distance away. They all look at each other for a moment, Gerald standing over Jeff laid out down there on the floor, Chris bracing herself against the hall wall, and Alma holding the now whimpering baby.)

Hard breathing. A beat.)

Nah. Fuck that.

CHRIS

(Chris recovers and makes a bee-line for the door that Jeff was trying so hard to keep her from.)

NO! DON'T!

JEFF

(But to no avail. Chris has already opened the door. She recoils – the smell is awful – covers her nose and mouth with a hand. When she sees what's in the room, she backs away, eyes wide in horror.)

Oh my God.

CHRIS

(End scene.)

SCENE SIX

*Gerald's car. Gerald drives. Chris is in the passenger seat.
Both are quiet for a long while. Finally:*

GERALD

I'm glad you came.

*(Chris gives him that real wry look that we've come to
know her for.)*

GERALD

You're not?

CHRIS

I thought he was going to kill me.

GERALD

I wouldn't have let that happen.

CHRIS

I thought *you* were going to kill *him*.

GERALD

...

CHRIS

Not always Martin, I see.

GERALD

When my kid's being attacked? No.

(Pause.)

CHRIS

Well. Malcolm, Martin— they both got shot in the end.

(beat)

I can't get the picture out of my head. Like how do you...? I mean it's so fucked up.

*(Gerald opens his mouth to object to her language
but thinks better of it.)*

GERALD

I just hope they get him the help he needs.

Really?
CHRIS

What? I do.
GERALD

...Okay.
CHRIS

(A loooooong pause. A beat.)

GERALD (cont.)
What's that movie you begged me to see when you were ten? The one with Will Smith and the zombie-things?

CHRIS
("Random, but okay, I'll play along...")
...I Am Legend. So bad it's good. And they weren't zombies exactly. They were just infected with like... super-rabies, so they were way faster and stronger and smarter than zombies.

Which is terrifying.
GERALD

...Yeah.
CHRIS

GERALD
And Will Smith. He's like the last human being left. Or he thinks he is until a woman and her daughter come to his, his... bunker or whatever seeking help, right?

Right.
CHRIS

GERALD
And he shows them that he's been working on a cure for the uuuuhhh...

CHRIS
The super-rabies.

GERALD
Right. He's captured one of the infected and, instead of just blowing its head off like most people would do, he runs experiments and actually figures out a way to make the zombie human again.

CHRIS
(finally getting the connection)
Ah.

GERALD

You're right, it was a pretty terrible movie.

CHRIS

Sooooo much CGI.

GERALD

But it's always stuck with me that the guy who ultimately figures out how to restore humanity is a black guy. Which makes sense because... well, because we tend to be the first to suffer at the hands of those who lose it. You know?

CHRIS

Yeah. Okay. I still don't see how it's wrong to blow a zombie's head off, but okay. Point taken.

GERALD

The *point*, Chris, is that if it were *you* who got infected...

(real pointed)

If it were you who turned rabid and violent and lost your humanity... I hope that someone would have the heart to capture you and cure you. I hope that they could work past the urge to blow your head off and see that you were still human. *That's* the point.

(This lands. Chris regards her father like she's really seeing him for the first time. A pause. A beat.)

CHRIS

(real flatfooted)

You know Will Smith dies at the end of that movie.

GERALD

Yeah, but not before he hands the cure off to the woman and— you know what? Just... here...

(He switches on the radio. NPR.)

GERALD

Let's just...

(He gestures vaguely toward the radio in lieu of finishing the sentence. A moment later, Chris' eye catches on something as they ride past it.)

CHRIS

Stop. Go back.

GERALD

What?

CHRIS

The store. I want to go in.

GERALD

Because you haven't been in enough danger today?

CHRIS

Because I want to do something different.

(A beat before Gerald turns the car around.)

(End scene.)

SCENE SEVEN

Inside the general store. Gerald and Chris have just entered. Dylan mans the counter. He eyeballs the conspicuous visitors. Hard.

For a moment, Gerald and Chris both just stand there returning Dylan's stare.

It's awkward. As stifled hate generally is. Finally:

DYLAN

Something you want?

(A tense and loaded pause.)

CHRIS

(blurting)

... Venison jerky. I keep hearing how good it is from friends who live around here, so I thought I'd give it a try.

(Dylan takes his time about pointing it out. Chris moves to get it, leaving Gerald and Dylan to take each other in.)

DYLAN

Y'all just passing through or...?

GERALD

Yessir. On business.

DYLAN

What kinda business?

GERALD

A story. I'm a reporter for the Post.

DYLAN

Really?

GERALD

Really.

CHRIS

Smoked, peppered, or original?

DYLAN
(annoyed at the interruption)

What?

CHRIS
Which would you recommend: smoked, peppered or original?

DYLAN
(despite himself)
Smoked. More flavor.

CHRIS
Thanks.

DYLAN
What kinda story could you have possibly found in our modest little town here?

GERALD
Oh, you know what they say: big things come in small packages.

DYLAN
Things like...?

GERALD
...You'll just have to read to find out.

DYLAN
I don't read the Post.

GERALD
Well. I'm sure you'll hear all about it soon enough. In this little town.

*(Chris sets her jerky up on the counter. Dylan addresses her.
Dylan rings it up.)*

DYLAN
\$12.47.

(Gerald hands Dylan a debit card.)

DYLAN
I'm gonna need to see some I.D. with this.

*(Gerald complies. Dylan makes a big show out of
confirming that Gerald really is Gerald. Then as he
processes payment:)*

DYLAN

(to Chris)

You say you got friends from around here?

CHRIS

Yeah, at school.

DYLAN

And what school is that?

CHRIS

Georgetown.

DYLAN

Hm. You must mean Peyton Dinwiddie. He's the only one from around here gone there for a long time.

CHRIS

(caught off guard)

Oh. Yeah. Peyton. His parents must be proud. He's doing really well at school.

DYLAN

Not really. They wanted him to stay local. Take over the family business.

CHRIS

...Huh. Well... I can understand that. I think it's cool to follow in your father's footsteps. This one here's why I'm studying journalism.

DYLAN

You his daughter?

CHRIS

Yep.

DYLAN

I thought y'all looked alike, but I couldn't tell if it's 'cause you're related or...

(Pause as Dylan realizes that finishing that sentence might be offensive. He changes course.)

DYLAN (cont.)

This is a family business.

GERALD

Not surprised. It's got that feel to it. Your family?

DYLAN

Yessir. My great-great granddaddy built it. Been here in some form or other since just after the war.

GERALD

Ah. Hence the Confederate flag out front.

DYLAN

...Sure.

CHRIS

You have a son you plan to pass it on to?

DYLAN

A daughter. Skylar. But she don't want nothing to do with it, I already know. She wants to be a "pop star."

CHRIS

Oh-ho! She must beeeeeeee... twelve.

DYLAN

(kind of impressed)

...And a half.

CHRIS

We all go through that phase. And it typically hits around twelve.

(Dylan chuckles a little.)

GERALD

Well, you seem like a reasonable man. I'm sure you'll be proud of her no matter what she chooses. But if you have any say in it, don't let her become a journalist. She could wind up in all kinds of dangerous situations, know what I mean?

(Dylan's smile fades some.)

DYLAN

Noted.

(End scene.)

EPILOGUE

Gerald sitting in a tight spotlight.

GERALD

On the ten-mile stretch of road connecting I-70 to Shepherdstown, WV, lawns and windows boasted no fewer than *seventeen* Trump/Pence signs and four Confederate flags, one hanging over a small, family-owned general store where you can find, among other local delicacies, five different flavors of venison jerky.

(Beat)

One of the dozens of squat, ranch-style houses along this road stands out from the rest, not for its comparatively unruly lawn – though that definitely features – nor for its front door painted electric yellow. What really grabs your attention by the collar and shakes it nearly to death is the word spray-painted across the garage door in bold, black letters: N*GGER.

This is the home of Jeff Browning, new father, husband, and, by all appearances, just an average white guy. That is until he became a World Knight hopeful. For those unfamiliar with the World Knights, imagine a kind of quiet spin-off of the Ku Klux Klan. Folks you might see carrying torches and “White Power” signs at a protest in D.C. Or perhaps sitting behind a desk at your local bank.

I went to Jeff Browning’s house, not to find out how a would-be white nationalist could become a target of his own brand of hate – the disappointing DNA test that was supposed to prove his racial purity answers that question directly – but rather what compelled his racist aspirations and what he was going to do now that they were dashed.

Nothing could have prepared me for what I found.

I should mention that I brought an assistant with me – my daughter, Christina, who is a journalist in her own right. (In fact, she basically wrote the opening line of this piece.)

(Light up on Chris.)

CHRIS

(proud)

Thank you.

GERALD

I’m glad she insisted on accompanying me. She served as a constant and visceral reminder of what lengths a man might go to to ensure the safety and success of his child. When Browning, for example, learned he was going to have a son, he did what any good father would – began reprioritizing and strategizing to give his kid every advantage he could wrangle. In Sharpsburg, MD, that means plugging in to a supportive community, and that’s what the World Knights offers. Communal childcare, family events, professional networking... when you take the hate out of the picture, it all sounds pretty ideal.

I’d like to tell you that Mr. Browning was simply overlooking the hateful philosophy for his family’s sake. It would be easy to do for someone who perhaps doesn’t consider himself

GERALD (cont.)

actively racist but nevertheless doesn't know enough black people to care about them. He certainly seemed like that type initially when he left his plan to join the World Knights out of his account of recent unfortunate events entirely. He claimed that his wife, Michelle Browning, urged him to take the DNA test "to prove that [he] was pure white" because she refused to carry their baby to term if he wasn't. He said she ran off, abandoning him and their son, when she discovered that he had doctored the results of that test which, for those to whom such things matter, revealed him to be fourteen percent Sub-Saharan African.

In actuality, Ms. Browning, seemingly undone by the alienation of suddenly being married to a black man in a town plagued by white supremacy, committed suicide a week earlier. She was still dangling from a noose fashioned from a Confederate flag on the other side of their shut bedroom door when Christina and I got there.

(Light up on Dylan, reading this very article.)

DYLAN

(disturbed)

Shit.

GERALD

We didn't know this when we arrived, but when we got too close to the truth and Christina moved to open that door, expecting to find a subdued but certainly *living* Ms. Browning on the other side, Jeff Browning – new father, widower, average white guy – aimed a gun at her.

He aimed a gun at my daughter. Reflexively. And I believe he was desperate enough to pull the trigger. I believe he failed to see my child as a human being in that moment, to see her as anything other than a danger to what remained of his American Dream, a threat to be neutralized. I believe that had it been one of his few remaining white friends or even a white stranger heading for that door, he never would have lifted that gun. So while I would like to tell you that Jeff Browning is just, to quote a friend of his...

(Lights up on Alma's yard where she sits in a lawnchair, Hunter in her arms. Poot sits in a chair next to her, reading this article out loud.)

POOT

"...a 'good guy with some bad ideas'" ... that must be you he's quoting. Sounds like some shit you'd say, always making excuses for 'm...

GERALD

... a "good guy with some bad ideas" about how to protect and advance his family, I cannot give him the benefit of that doubt. But nor can I judge the man.

When I saw him lift that gun, when I saw him poised to erase over twenty years of love and investment, ready to blow my own version of the American Dream to black, bloody bits, I went blind with hatred. If violence were liquid, it could have been my blood, pumping hot and

GERALD (cont.)

vehement inside me. Before I knew it, I was on top of him with his own rifle pressed against his throat...

POOT

Fuck. Did that actually happen?

(Alma nods in reply.)

POOT

Jesus. That's crazy.

ALMA

Finish reading it.

POOT

"That's when I knew how far a man could go to protect against a threat..."

GERALD

...Or anything he perceives as a threat. And for the first time in my life, I actually felt grateful that as a black man, I am well trained in the art of dealing with threats, conditioned to treat any problem short of imminently fatal as something I can think my way out of or past. My skin is generally thick enough, my spirit strong enough to stave off destructive impulses and the tragic consequences thereof, which, in the case of Jeff Browning, is an indefinite stay in the psychiatric ward of Frederick Memorial Hospital.

I feel sorry for Jeff Browning. I pity any man living such a fragile existence. It must be exhausting, the mental acrobatics it takes to prove and protect your supremacy while simultaneously ignoring the irony of having to prove and protect it.

My daughter thinks I forgive too much and much too easily, but I cannot forgive Jeff Browning.

POOT

"I can't forgive him, but I understand him – more than I'd like to, if I'm being honest. Perhaps if and when Christina decides to have children of her own, she will understand, too."

(Beat.)

ALMA

Hm.

POOT

Yeah.

*(Silence. Because fuck, what can be said? The baby gurgles.
Alma looks down at him.)*

ALMA

Whatchu smilin' about, hunh? You ain't got nothin' to smile about, you lil' fool.

POOT

He got you. That's somethin'.

ALMA

Pff.

POOT

I'm serious. I think he's real lucky to have ended up with you. You're uh... you'll be a good influence. He could use that. Hell, we could all use that.

(Alma looks at Poot appreciatively and smiles.)

ALMA

Yeah, I guess I'll have to do.

*(Just then, a black dog² comes wandering up to her.
Jeff's dog. Alma is kind of amazed by this, as is Poot.)*

POOT

Huh.

(End of Play.)

² If my Jez Butterworth moment proves too much, you can totally fake the funk with fourth-wall doggie sounds and maybe an added, "He came back" after Poot's "Huh." K? K.