

Heads

by Murray Mednick

Heads was first produced at the 1991 Padua Hills Playwrights Festival/Workshop under the direction of Steve Albrezzi and with the following cast:

Peter: Norbert Weisser

Tom: William Dennis Hunt

Ella Mae: Nancy Mette

Illiterate Daughters: Karole Foreman, Gina LaMond

Subsequent productions include Push Push Theater of Atlanta and the Omaha Magic Theatre.

Characters

Tom 50. *Long hair. Forceful, charismatic. Raspy voice, slight Southern (West Virginia) drawl.*

Ella Mae *His wife. 40. Worn, but still quite pretty; sensuous.*

Jeanine 20. *Daughter of Ella's from a previous liaison, brought up by Tom. Ethereal, heavy-set blonde woman. Conceals a bright, unengaged mind.*

Peter 45. *A black man. A long-ago live-in friend of the family.*

Amy Lou *Another daughter. Mulatto. An extremely smart, angelically beautiful teenager.*

Scene

Interior of a small house—a shack, really—on the outskirts of Woodstock, New York. Furnished poorly, but clean and neat. We face (right to left) a living room-lounge area, a combination TV and sleeping room (JEANINE’S place), and a section of the kitchen. This could be a small loft built above, or the lounge can be divided from Jeanine’s place with a curtain. A thin, makeshift wall separates the kitchen. Lots of evidence of impromptu carpentry and mechanics, especially the stove apparatus TOM has rigged up in the kitchen, having adapted a gas-burner into a wood-burning heat source. Jeanine enters and turns on the black-and-white television set upstage, leaving the sound off. A pause, then ELLA enters.

Ella Jeanine? Jeanine?
Jeanine Yes, Mom.
Ella I was looking at the night.
Jeanine What, Ella Mae?
Ella The stars. What are you doing?
Jeanine I'm watching a story now, Mom. Did Dad go out?
Ella *(Big sigh)* Your father went out.
Jeanine Yeah.
Ella He felt a pull.
Jeanine Mom?
Ella Something...a pull...
Jeanine Is Amy Lou coming back?
Ella The End of Days, Jeanine.
Jeanine What?
Ella The End of Days.
Jeanine Mom?

SOUNDS, off.

Ella Here comes your father. *(Jumping up)* Someone's with him. He's got someone.

TOM walks through the door, right, with PETER in tow.

Tom Look what I found, Ella Mae!

Ella Oh! Peter! Peter! Hi!

Peter I was wandering in the Safeway and I heard a voice.

Ella Peter! *(They embrace)*

Peter Went right through me.

Ella What are you doing here?

Peter Well, I'm visiting with friends, actually. I mean—

Tom Good thing I went out, Ella.

Ella Yeah.

Tom Didn't know what I'd see, but I followed me the feeling, eh, Ella Mae?

Ella We both did, Tom.

Tom Hey. Voice drove me into the Safeway for a quart of milk, said, "Buy the family milk, Tom."

Ella Did you look for Amy Lou, Tom?

Tom I sniffed around the depot for her.

Ella *(To PETER)* That's our daughter. Amy Lou.

Peter Amy Lou?

Tom I saw no sign of her. Worrisome child. *(Snorts)*
Independent.

Ella Oh, Tom. She left without supper. Goes where she wants, when she wants. Why didn't you let us know you were coming, Peter?

Peter Well, I didn't know you were here. I mean, I didn't know you lived here.

Tom It's Providence.

Peter Actually, I should get going—

Ella You should stay in touch, Peter.

Tom Been here for years.

Peter Do you have a phone?

Ella But I'm glad to see you anyway.

Peter My friends will be looking for me.

Tom No phone.

Peter That's okay. I ought to get back—

Tom Can't afford a phone.

Ella Amazing. I didn't think you could live without one.

Tom Easy as pie.

Peter I really should—

Ella Stay, Peter. You just got here.

Peter Okay, for a minute, then I gotta go.

Tom Relax, man. What's it been, fifteen years?

Peter Yeah, I guess.

Ella God, I can't believe it. You look the same, Peter.

Peter You, too.

Ella I can't believe it.

Tom You've gotten some gray, Peter.

Ella But he looks the same.

Peter So do you. You both do.

Tom Hell, we do.

Peter You do.

Ella Nothing changes.

Tom Yeah. You got any grass, Peter? Ella's been after me for some grass.

Peter No. I don't smoke.

Tom Grass?

Peter I haven't for years.

Tom I'll be damned.

Peter My friends might have some.

Tom Oh, yeah? You wanna go get some?

Peter Well, I'm not sure they do. They might.

Ella Oh, that's all right. Sit down, Peter.

Peter *(Hesitant)* Uh...well.

Ella How 'bout a cup of coffee?

Peter Okay.

Ella You remember Jeanine?

Peter *(Amazed)* Is that Jeanine?

Tom Yeah, she's grown some. *(Snickers)*

Ella Say hello to Peter, Jeanine.

Jeanine Hello.

Peter Jeez, I remember, we used to wrestle, she and I...

Ella You remember playing with Peter, Jeanine?

Jeanine Uh-huh.

Ella What do you take in it, Peter?

Peter Uh, black.

Tom You missed the other one.

Peter The other one?

Ella Amy Lou.

Peter Amy Lou. Right. You said that—

Tom She's out somewheres rockin' and rollin' and gettin' laid.

Ella Oh, Tom!

Tom She's an eyeful at seventeen, Peter.

Peter I didn't know you had another girl.

Ella Looks just like her father. *(Pause)*

Peter Where'd you say she was?

Tom She comes and goes as she pleases. I don't rule her.

Ella She's wild. *(Hands PETER the coffee)*

Peter Thank you. *(Takes a sip, puts it down)*

Ella I don't know what will become of her, Peter. *(Sighs)*

Tom She's untamed, is all.

Ella And unschooled.

Peter Unschooled?

Tom I took her out of that mess when she was seven. Both her and Jeanine.

Peter You took them out of school?

Tom Damn right.

Ella They can't read or write, Peter.

Tom I'm the Father!

Ella *(To PETER) I tried. (Sighs)*

Tom I didn't want all that shit in their heads.

Peter What shit?

Tom You wouldn't know it lessun' you're outside of it. *(Snickers)*

Peter Try me.

Ella Don't get started, Tom.

Tom Money and the state shit. All that mind-fuckin' which forces people to hire themselves out to the economy. *(PETER nods agreeably to avoid conflict) I'm the Father! (Cackles)*

Peter You're the father.

Tom Yeah. *(Grins)*

Peter Is that a big 'F' or a little 'f'?

ELLA chuckles.

Tom Any kinda 'F' you want, son. Don't mean a snail's prick to me. *(Snickers)*

Peter Isn't it illegal to keep kids outta school?

Tom Hell, man, who cares? I am illegal. I am totally illegal. I'm outside the pale. What're they gonna do to me?

Peter How'd you manage it?

Tom I fought 'em, son. I took on the town, the county and the state.

Ella He wore 'em out.

Tom What are they gonna do? *(Snickering)* Arrest me? They

send me shit in the mail—I burn it! They send people to my door an' I yell at 'em!

Ella They finally figured it wasn't worth the trouble he was causing. Amy Lou did start attending after a while, so she could make some friends.

Peter They can't read or write?

Tom Nothin' to stop them from learning if they want to. Jeanine here don't mind. All she's interested in is watching the funny box. Ain't that right, Jeanine?

Jeanine Uh-huh.

TOM snickers.

Ella You're not drinking your coffee, Peter.

Peter Oh. I'd really best be going, Ella. Thanks.

Tom Hang on a minute, Peter, and I'll run ya over in the Buick.

Peter Okay, but we ought to get moving pretty soon then.

Tom Relax, Peter.

Peter I am relaxed.

Tom Hell you are. You're so tense your back neck is stiffer 'n a concrete post. (*Touching his neck*)

Peter It's always like that.

Tom Too bad.

Peter I'm working on it.

Tom Are you? How?

Peter Uh...

Ella What do you think of his car?

Peter Seems to run all right.

Tom That there is a fifty-three Buick. It'll run forever.

Ella He rides around in it like the King of the County.

Peter I noticed.

Ella Fifteen miles an hour.

Tom Hell, what's the rush? Where we all headed?

Ella Drives me crazy. I won't ride with him if I can help it.

Tom So you don't smoke, eh, Peter?

Peter Well, I smoke cigarettes.

Tom No more of the weed, eh?

Peter Nope.

Ella Well that's a wonderment.

Tom Ain't it, though? Why's that, Peter?

Peter No big deal. I just stopped enjoying it. I don't know if I ever did, really.

Ella (*Flirtatious*) I find that hard to believe.

Peter I don't like what it does to my head. Paranoid and fuzzy. I will have a toke now and then, but that's all.

Tom Time was when we'd all be dipping into ol' Peter's stash, eh, Ella?

Ella I guess that wasn't very nice.

Tom The hell it wasn't. It was part of the deal, right Peter?

Peter (*Uncomfortable*) Sure was, Tom.

Tom You lived with us, and we all shared the cookies, eh Peter?

Peter Can we get going now, Tom?

Tom (*Ignoring him*) I thought we had a emergency joint hid away here, Ella.

Ella We already had the emergency, Tom.

Tom We did? When?

Ella Last night.

Tom That was the one, eh?

Ella Remember?

Tom Oh, yeah.

Peter Tell you what. You run me over to where I'm staying, and I'll see if I can round you up some grass, okay?

Ella That sounds good. Will you come back then?

Peter Well, I'm supposed to be in this poker game, but later, later on I'll come back. How'd that be?

Ella You promise? It's been thirteen years, Peter.

Tom Oh, what is it you have to be in a poker game for, Peter?

Peter I don't HAVE to, Tom. It's a social thing.

Tom Well, finish your coffee, then.

Peter They won't know where I've gone to.

Tom They'll realize you're a grown man now, Peter.

Peter That's not the point, Tom.

Tom Did you know I called to your California number a couple of times, Peter? *(No reply)*

Ella We had a phone then.

Tom Yeah, I called a few times. Talked to your machine. Guess it got erased or something. *(Pause)* Yeah, and back a couple years we read in the *Record* how you'd be doing a reading and a lecture of sorts down in Middletown and we almost rode down for that, weren't I was worried the Buick might not like a long trip in cold weather.

Ella That car wouldn't 've made it.

Tom Did you show up for that?

Peter Yes. I was there.

Ella Oh, Peter! You should have called!

Peter I had no idea you were living up here.

Tom Yeah, I heard on the grapevine you were doing real well in California, making lots of money.

Peter Not true, Tom.

Tom Heard you were making money working in the film business.

Peter It's not true, Tom.

Tom Hmmm.

Peter I don't know how these stories get started.

Ella What do you do, Peter?

Peter I teach. I get by.

Tom Who are these folks that are putting you up? I know everybody in this town, or they know me, heh, heh.

Ella For sure.

Peter Man's a doctor who lives here, works as a radiologist in Poughkeepsie.

Tom What's his name?

Peter Weiss.

Tom Weiss. Don't know him.

Peter I'm here visiting with his son, a very old friend of mine. *(Pause)* He'll be looking for me, Tom.

Tom Don't know where he lives, Dr. Weiss.

Peter I can find it. It's over on the north end of town, near a big stream.

Tom Oh, yeah. Rich folks' section.

Peter Let's go, Tom.

Tom What's the son do?

Peter Name's Michael. He's a television producer.

Tom You hear that, Jeanine? Peter's friend here is a TV producer! Jeanine's an expert on TV, heh, heh. What show's he produce?

Peter Oh, he does different things, in the business.

Tom You hear that Jeanine? Peter's friend does TV shows! *(No reply)* Jeanine? You wanna contribute to this conversation Jeanine?

Jeanine *(After a pause)* No.

Ella Leave her alone, Tom.

Tom Who's bothering her? She hasn't seen Peter in how many years? And the two of 'em used to be tighter 'n two bugs in a rug!

Ella That's the truth. I can hear that.

Tom Remember, Jeanine? (*JEANINE nods*)

Ella I was even jealous of her in those days. (*An awkward silence. PETER stands by the door. TOM snickers*)

Tom I let her stare at the damn thing, but I won't have sound. I won't have it. Picture's bad enough.

Ella You watch it yourself, Tom.

Tom (*Caught*) Hell, it's the only way to keep her company.

Ella You watch it anyway, Tom.

Tom Yeah, it's like having a telescope on Mars. (*Snickers*)

Ella What does that mean?

Tom Means I'm watching the earth slugs spreading their dumb viruses around, heh, heh.

Peter Tom, I gotta go. I just wanted to see you...and, uh...say hello...

Ella He's waiting to go, Tom.

Tom I know he is.

Peter I'll come back later.

Tom When?

Peter Maybe tomorrow. We can have breakfast or something.

Ella It would be nice to smoke some grass.

Peter I'll try to get you some. I think I can. I know Michael smokes.

Tom I usually have a nice stash around. Hell, it's the easiest thing in the world. Caught us at a bad time, is all.

Peter I don't smoke.

Ella (*Bitterly*) We're broke, Peter.

Peter Listen, I can loan you a little money, Tom. My checkbook is over at Doc Weiss's place.

Tom Hell, I don't want no check. What would I do with a check?

Peter I'll get you some cash, then.

Tom Fuck it, Peter, and sit down! Let's have a fuckin' conversation! You been here, what, fifteen minutes?

Ella Stay awhile, Peter, the poker game can wait.

Peter *(After a pause, with foreboding)* Okay.

Tom There you go. Want some more coffee?

Peter No, thanks. Where's the john?

Tom *(Pointing)* It's in there.

PETER goes. ELLA sits across from TOM. They stare at each other. TOM snickers. ELLA goes back to the kitchen. TOM goes to the front door and quietly locks it, putting the key in his pocket. Re-enter PETER, who stops to look at the stove apparatus in the kitchen.

Peter What is this, Tom? What did you do here?

ELLA giggles.

Tom That there is a wood-burning stove, Peter.

Peter Does it work?

Tom Damn right it works. I smashed a hole in the roof, hitched up a pipe through it, and got us a heat source independent of the gas company.

Peter Why?

Tom Why? Because I got tired of dealing with the gas company bureaucracy, that's why. Bunch of fuckin' airheads.

Ella We didn't pay the bill for twenty-eight months, so they went ahead and disconnected us. I thought it was cruel.

Tom The heating bill got higher than the rent! That gas there in the ground belongs to all the people! It don't belong to the gas companies! Next thing is, I'll put a fireplace in the living room here.

Ella Sure you will, Tom.

Tom I'll be working on that.

Peter This is quite an apparatus, I'll say that for it.

Tom It works.

Peter In the winter?

Tom We just sorta shift the center of family activities into the kitchen.

ELLA sighs.

Peter What about the landlord?

Tom *(Snickering)* What about him?

Peter What's he think of the hole in the roof?

Tom It's sealed. Anyway, I ain't asked him.

Ella We haven't paid rent in years. *(Laughs, sighs)*

Peter How'd you manage that?

Tom Squatter's rights. Onliest way for him to get us outta here is the sheriff and the fire department. I guess he don't feature the trouble and the publicity.

Ella You never know, Tom. One of these days.

Peter Do you play at all, Tom?

Tom Sit down.

Peter *(Sitting)* Do you?

Tom Play? It's all play. It's all play. *(Grins)*

Peter I mean the guitar.

Tom I bang on it once in a while.

Ella That's the truth.

Tom Playin' a guitar is old shit, man. I BANG on my guitar. It's around here someplace. I bang on it when I want to shout out a song.

Ella That's what he does all right, he shouts his songs. He screams them at you.

Tom Otherwise, it don't get through. Maybe I'll shout one at ya later, Peter.

Peter I can't wait.

Ella You guys used to make such beautiful music. Remember, Peter?

Peter Yeah, sure.

Ella I just loved it. (*Awkward silence*)

Peter We were stoned day and night in those days.

Ella Do you still play?

Peter No, I'm no musician.

Ella Your stuff sounded good to me.

Peter You were stoned.

Tom So you put it all down, eh, Peter?

Peter Yeah, I have no training, no chops, and no interest anymore.

Tom Is that right?

Peter That's right.

Tom And you don't smoke the weed?

Peter Hardly ever.

Tom Do you take anything at all?

Peter I like a couple drinks before dinner.

Tom No acid? Mushrooms? Peyote?

Peter No, none of that.

Ella Oh, Peter.
Peter Can't take it anymore.
Tom Can't take what?
Peter What I see.
Tom I can.
Peter Bully for you.
Tom I get way up there.
Peter Where?

TOM snickers.

Ella He's looking down at it all.
Tom What about narcotics?
Peter Never.
Tom Coke?
Peter Hate the stuff.
Tom I thought you were on the methadone program.
Peter I kicked it eleven years ago.
Ella But that's supposed to be impossible.
Peter It very nearly is.
Tom Well, at least you're off the government shit.
Peter I'm off it all, Tom. *(Pause)*
Tom All?
Peter I drink. You got anything to drink?
Tom *(Studying him)* Like what?
Peter I don't know. Vodka? Just a beer would be fine.
Tom No. You an alcoholic?
Peter *(Startled)* What?
Tom New York?
Peter Pardon? The answer is no, Tom.

Tom Okay. I went down to New York a while ago just to see for myself if it was still there and what was going on in it. *(Whistles)* I'm standing at a corner on Fifth Avenue and I must've seen a hundred thousand guys with the same suit on and carrying the same briefcase. Robots. Waves of robots rollin' down the avenue. I had me a vision that day. *(Pause)* Bunch of 'em buyin' crack an' shit by the library. *(Snorts)* Eh, Ella?

Ella Ain't it the truth, Tom.

Peter *(Recovering)* Did you go, too, Ella?

Ella Yeah. I waited for him in the park while he took his walk. You know I hate the city, Peter. *(Pause)*

Peter *(Trying to be casual)* I guess I ought to be heading on back... *(Yawns, rises)* Maybe we'll talk some more tomorrow.

Tom Sit down, Peter. You're more restless than an amphetamine freak.

Peter I've got people waiting for me. Let's go.

Tom What for?

Peter I don't need to give you a reason, Tom. It's been nice to visit with you. Now it's time for me to go. *(He looks at ELLA, who looks back at him silently)*

Tom Kids got fuckin' crank factories in the woods out here. Don't they, Ella?

Ella They do, Tom. A horror.

Tom *(To PETER)* You can't go.

Peter I'm going. I'll find my own way.

Tom I don't see why we can't set around and have a relaxed conversation.

Peter This is not relaxed.

Tom Why not?

Peter So long, Tom. I'll see you around. (*Goes to the door*)
Bye, Ella. (*Tries door*) Is it locked? (*Tries again, in disbelief*) It's locked. (*Long pause as he looks at TOM*)
Open the door, Tom.

Tom No.

Peter Open it, Tom.

Tom I won't.

Peter Why not?

Tom Not till we've had us a talk.

Peter I don't have any more to say.

Tom Sure you do, son. Sure you do.

Peter I'm not your son.

Tom I'm the Father.

Peter Oh, horseshit.

Tom I'm the Father.

Peter Ella?

She shrugs.

Tell him to open the door, Ella.

Ella I can't.

Peter Why not?

Tom Relax.

Peter Fuck you. You relax. (*Crosses resolutely left*)

ELLA and TOM look at each other.

Ella Tom...?

Peter (*Returns*) Where's the back door?

Tom Ain't no back door.

Peter No back door?

Tom Had to seal it up. Keep the cold out.

Peter This is bad shit, Tom.

Tom Hell, man, this is nothin'. The bad shit is what's comin' down out there.

Peter Where?

Tom Where? Right here in Woodstock and in the rest of the country coast to coast.

Peter Like what, Tom?

Tom Like the citizens goin' for theirselves, sayin' it's the natural way, beatin' each other down—eat up the minerals, the trees, the grasses, killin' off the animals, an' no thanks to nothin'! Look what happens—preachers rippin' off the dummies! *(Snickers)* Pourin' filth into the waters! Coast to coast! Whole families out on the streets wandering the countryside! Got enough NUKE-LEE-ER CRAPOLA in the silos of the heartland to poison the whole solar system FOREVER. THAT'S THE BAD SHIT, PETE. *(A pause)* Just fuckin' sittin' there, man! Out on the prairie! Warheads! *(Guffaws)* And for no goddamned reason! Fuck, man, they got holes ten miles deep just for the fuckin' waste!

Peter Tom?

Tom *(Suddenly reflective)* And hell, that ain't nothin', that's just politics.

Peter Tom?

Tom Yeah?

Peter I don't want no trouble. *(TOM snickers)*

Tom Hell, I know all about that.

Peter What?

Tom Your poor insecurity.

Peter What?

ELLA giggles.

Open the fucking door. Open the door and let me go on with my business. *(Pause)* This is crazy, Tom. *(Pause)* Ella?

Ella We're just glad to have the company.

Peter You can't force people to be company, Ella!

Ella I'm not doing anything. Am I?

Peter Come on!

Tom Twelve, thirteen years go by, you'd expect an old friend 'd want to sit down and catch up and reminisce the old times.

Peter I told you at the Safeway, Tom, I only had a minute. I only came by to say hello. It was a shock to run into you.

Tom I could see that.

Peter I mean, it's nothing personal. If I'd known you were here, I'd have set something up in advance. As it is, I'm pressed. I've got people waiting on me and things to do.

Tom What things?

Peter Things.

Tom Like what?

Peter None of your fucking business!

Tom Have it your way.

Ella Are you hungry, Peter?

Peter *(Incredulous)* Hungry? For God's sake, Ella!

Ella I could fix you a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

PETER looks at her, horrified. She smiles.

Peter Open the door, Tom, and let me go.

TOM snickers. A silence. PETER is frozen to the spot.

Tom.

Tom I ain't gonna hurt you none.

Peter Tom.

Tom Sit down. Have a sandwich.

Peter I don't want a sandwich.

Tom Then sit without one.

Peter What are you doing, Tom? What is this about?

Tom Hell, I'm playing it by ear, like I always do.

Peter By ear?

Tom I do whatever feels right. I'm the Father.

Peter I don't understand what that means.

Tom Means I got responsibilities.

Peter Give me an example.

Tom I got responsibilities to my children.

Peter Like what?

Tom See, you don't understand 'cause you ain't got none yourself.

Peter I can see what a great job you've made of it, Tom.

Tom You don't see shit.

Peter You got two illiterate kids, Tom. And one of 'em is staring at the television set with the sound off. Don't she have anything to do? Doesn't she have any interests at all? Jesus Christ, Tom, she was a wonderful three-year-old kid!

Tom Jeanine!

Peter Forget it, Tom. Open the door, and that's it.

Tom Jeanine!

Peter Please let me be on my way, Tom.

Tom Jeanine!

Ella Oh, leave her be.

Tom Jeanine!
Jeanine All right.
Tom Come over here and talk to your old friend, Peter.

JEANINE slides away from the TV and sits with the others. She and PETER look at each other, at a loss.

Go on, talk to him, Jeanine.

Jeanine We only got two channels. *(A silence)*

Ella That's all she can think of saying.

Tom Talk to the man, Jeanine. Don't you remember cuddling with Peter?

Ella Oh, shut up, Tom.

Peter That's all right, Jeanine.

Jeanine Channel two and channel four. It's all black, white, and grey. If we had cable, we could get more channels, probably channel seven and public TV. That would be good. I get tired of two and four all the time. I know what's on every hour of the day, every day of the week. Sometimes they change it and then I'm surprised. They change the programs in the summer, to give people a rest. I like all the stories, and the stories in the commercials, too. I like every kind of story. I don't mind the sound being off, because I can tell what the characters are saying.

Ella How can she do that?

Jeanine I can hear what they're saying, because I can hear the story. I follow the story right away.

Tom Does that make sense to you, Peter?

Peter Of course it makes sense.

Ella Not to me. It's beyond belief.

Jeanine Where the stories come from, is what I don't know.

Tom They come from Hollywood, Jeanine.

Jeanine Yeah.

Ella Some people write them, then other people film them. You know that. And those people you see are actors. I've told you a hundred times.

Jeanine Not all of 'em. Some of 'em are real people.

Tom Peter here lives in Hollywood, don't you, Peter?

Peter No, I don't.

Ella Where do you live, Peter?

Peter Uh, in Silver Lake.

Ella I lived in Silver Lake!

Peter Did you? Where?

Ella Gee, it was on...on...near Glendale Boulevard. I can't remember.

Peter That's right near my home.

Ella Oh, it was lovely there. That was when Tom sent me out there, you know, to get me away from Jeanine's father. Remember?

Peter I didn't know you then.

Ella But I told you about it.

Peter Uh, yes.

TOM snickers.

Ella I thought he was going to kill me.

Peter Who?

Ella Jeanine's father. He got outta jail and he was coming around. Then Tom sent me out to L.A., to get me away from him. Me and Jeanine took the bus. You remember that, Jeanine?

JEANINE doesn't answer.

- Peter** Where is he now?
- Ella** Gene?
- Peter** Was that his name?
- Ella** Yes. Gene. That's how come, "Jeanine."
- Peter** I get it.
- Ella** He's in prison, I think. Oh, he was such a handsome man, you know. I called him the dark prince. I was eighteen and he was twenty. But he was SO violent.
- Tom** You never met ol' Gene?
- Peter** No.
- Ella** He was a poet, too, you know.
- Peter** Never met him.
- Ella** He wrote beautiful poetry. But he was SO violent.
- Peter** *(Kindly)* Which shows do you like the best, Jeanine?
- Jeanine** I like the products. You can see every kind of product on TV. And each one has a song, you know. I've got 'em all memorized in my head, all the products and all the songs. And, of course, each one has a little story, too. I know all the products, along with the stories and the songs. My head can do that by itself. My head remembers each story and song...it just won't stop singing.
- Ella** My God, Jeanine. I don't know what you're talking about.
- Tom** Hell you don't, Ella.
- Jeanine** Sometimes they'll change the story and not the song, sometimes the song and not the story, sometimes the story AND the song. That's tough on my head. *(Laughs)*
- Peter** You've got to learn to read, Jeanine.
- Jeanine** If you know the products, you know it all.

TOM *guffaws*.

- Tom** You hear that, Peter? She's more 'n half right, ain't she!
- Jeanine** I also like the animal programs and the nature programs. I watch every one that's on the two channels. I wish we had PBS. There's more nature on PBS and more animals. But we'd have to have cable for that. Anyway, it's not so bad. I'm familiar with the animal kingdom and all nature, from the mountains to the sea, and from the icy world to the tropical forests.
- Ella** She really likes that subject. She could have been a naturalist or a biology major. Something.
- Jeanine** I can't believe all the different kinds of fish there are. And plants that bite, and birds that swim, and snakes that walk on water. *(Sings)* Time flies, and you are there, *et cetera*.
(Laughs shyly)
- Ella** You want a sandwich, Jeanine?
- Jeanine** *(Going back to the TV)* Yes, Mom.
- Peter** Please open the door now, Tom.
- Tom** Have a sandwich, Peter.
- Peter** I don't want a fucking sandwich, Tom.
- Tom** Hell, man, then don't have a sandwich.
- Peter** Should I feel frightened now, Tom, or just disgusted?
- Tom** You can feel however 'n hell you want to, Peter. Shit, that's where it is, anyhow. It's where you get up in the morning and where you sleep in the night. Hell.
- Peter** And you? Where are you, Tom?
- Tom** I ain't where you are. I'm putting in my time. I'm here to make my mark. But I ain't where you are.
- Ella** You see that, Peter? That's what he does. He does it constantly. There's a word for what he does. He's—

Peter Condescending?
Ella Yeah, condescending. I guess that's it.
Peter Where do you get off, Tom? Who the fuck are you?
Tom I'm the Father!
Peter What the hell does that mean!?
Ella Now look who's yelling, Peter.
Peter I don't give a damn! Open the fucking door!
Tom I'll open it when we've finished our business.
Peter What business?
Tom Won't take long. Sit down, Peter.

PETER sits.

Peter What business?
Tom Oh, come on, Peter. You supposed to be so smart-assed.
Peter I don't know what you're talking about.
Tom Hell, you don't.
Peter *(Helplessly)* Ella?
Ella I believe he wants to know where you been for thirteen years or whatever.
Peter California.
Tom Lots of folks we ran with are dead now. Bonnie's dead.
Ella She died of leukemia, Peter.
Tom She was poisoned to death by the air.
Ella Tom always wanted to fuck her.
Tom I don't deny that. Eric's dead.
Ella Eric was killed by the police.
Tom Paul is dead.
Ella Paul OD'd.
Tom Simon's dead.

Peter Simon was murdered.
Ella What happened?
Tom Ella and Simon had a thing goin' once.
Peter Did you?
Ella It was nothing serious, Peter.

TOM snickers.

Do you know what happened?
Peter Only by hearsay. He was dealing coke in L.A. Large amounts. He tried to do a scam on some people.
Ella And they shot him?
Peter That's what I heard.
Ella Poor Simon. He had a terrible crush on me.
Tom How'd you hear?
Peter I don't remember now, Tom.
Ella Ain't life something, though.
Tom We found a lyric of yours.
Peter What lyric?
Tom I put it to music. You want to hear it?
Peter Oh, God.
Tom I'll play it for ya. Where's my guitar?
Ella Behind the sofa.
Tom (*Getting it*) Jeanine! Jeanine, you want to be on the tambourine?

No answer. ELLA giggles.

Jeanine!
Jeanine Okay. If you want to.

Tom I want to! Bring the tambo in here!

Jeanine Okay.

Tom Here it is.

TOM bangs on the guitar and screams the words as JEANINE beats on the tambourine. PETER covers his ears.

*We murdered a man
You and me, you and me,
And we buried the body down
In the yard, in the yard—
We buried the man in the yard.
It's over and done
Ain't nothin' we can do,
For they know about the body
In the yard, in the yard—
We buried the man in the yard.
So give up your trouble,
You can throw away your life,
They will soon find the body
In the yard, in the yard—
We buried the man in the yard.
I'm sorry for it, friend,
I'm ashamed of what I did,
They are digging up the body
In the yard, in the yard,
We buried the man in the yard.
There he is, there he is,
He's a man like us,
They are bringing out the body*

*In the yard, in the yard,
We buried the man in the yard.
There he is, my friend,
That we killed, you and I—*

Peter *(Screaming)* ENOUGH!
Tom *(Stops singing)* Thank you, Jeanine!
Jeanine Okay. *(She goes back to the TV)*
Peter That was awful, Tom.
Tom You didn't like that?
Peter That was an assault! *(Screaming)* FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU!
FUCK YOU! YOU FUCKING PRICK! *(Pause)* How'd you like
that? WHO THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE!
Tom I'M THE FATHER!
Peter YOU'RE AN ASSHOLE!
Ella All right, that's enough. *(A pause)* Peter?
Peter What?
Ella Who was it? *(No reply)* Was it John?
Peter John?
Ella Our John. Who was with us in the days of trial.
Peter The days of trial? John shot himself, Ella. *(Quietly)*
The song was a dream.
Ella Was it Luke?

TOM snorts.

Peter I told you, Ella. It was a dream I had.
Ella I don't believe Luke shot himself. I don't believe Luke
could do that. I believe John shot him.
Peter Oh, fuck this shit.
Tom Hurts, eh, Peter?

Peter No. I wrote a song based on a dream, that's all.
Ella John killed him.
Peter I don't know what happened, Ella.
Ella And then John shot himself. Back of the cooling shed, on the farm in Pennsylvania. *(Sighs)*
Peter I wasn't there.
Ella You were his friend. You were friends with both of 'em.
Peter I wasn't there.

TOM and ELLA exchange a long look.

Tom They'd come to the end of their days, Ella Mae.
Ella We heard the shots.
Tom We thought it was a deer being kilt in the woods.
Peter The song was a dream, like in the movie *Deliverance*.
Tom Didn't see it.
Ella We never go to the movies.
Tom Part of the deepy, deep sleep.
Jeanine Oh, Tom!
Tom Jeanine'd live in a movie if she could.
Ella Leave her alone.
Tom I ain't botherin' no one.
Peter They throw a body into the river, which gets dammed. So they think the body's gonna float up to the surface...body in the yard...starts to get funky...gonna dig it up.
Tom Yeah...?
Peter We killed something. Something alive. Buried it in the yard. It was a dream.
Ella Are you okay?
Peter No, I'm not. I'm not okay.

Ella Would you like a cup of tea?

Peter Are you kidding, or what?

Ella No.

Peter I don't want a cup of tea. Un-fucking-believable. Why'd I have to be walking into the Safeway at that moment? Why?

Tom I knew you'd be coming along sooner or later.

Peter Oh, horseshit.

Tom Chickens gotta come home to roost. I knew you'd come along.

Peter Yeah, you're the Father.

Ella I felt that I'd see you again.

Peter Are you the mother?

Ella Well, I've given birth a couple of times.

Peter No, I meant in the higher sense, like Tom here being the Father.

Ella I don't know, to tell you the truth. Maybe I am, maybe all women are.

Peter I guess that's right. That's right. You're the Mother, Tom's the Father.

Tom The time hasn't improved you none.

Peter Hasn't done shit for you neither, Tom.

Ella (*Of PETER*) I don't think that's true. I think he's mellowed.

Peter Yeah. Time for me to go, Tom.

Ella He used to be SO angry.

Tom His ears are still clogged up with his ego.

Peter Oh, get off it. You're the biggest egomaniac on earth.

Tom Is that a fact?

Peter Yeah, the Father. I don't know what happened to you, man. When I met you, you were a sweet, mild-mannered, good-natured person.

Ella That's the truth.

Peter You sang your folk songs and drove around in your little Austin and peacefully smoked your dope. You were kind to Jeanine and good to Ella. At least, as far as I could see.

Tom We took you into our home.

Peter You took me into your apartment, which you were having trouble paying for. With me around, you got the rent paid and a steady supply of grass.

Ella It was more than that, Peter, and you know it.

Peter That was the bottom line. God, but we were fucked up. I was homeless and out on the street. I wasn't paying any attention to what was happening to me.

Ella You were a poet.

Peter What's a poet? Poets don't make a living! Nobody makes a living being a poet!

Ella That's the trouble with this country.

Peter No, it isn't! It has nothing to do with the country! That is the way it is.

Ella I never thought I'd hear you say that, Peter.

Peter Listen, I don't think this conversation is useful, Tom, Ella, and I'd like to go now.

Ella Wait, Peter. You haven't told us what you do out there in California.

Peter Yes, I did.

Ella Tell us again.

Peter (*Quickly*) I live a quiet, lonely life. I live in a cabin off a dirt path on the edge of a canyon. Through my windows I watch birds and squirrels and the neighborhood cats and dogs. At night there are raccoons and possums and an occasional coyote. I'm five minutes from downtown L.A. Eighty percent of the time I am alone in that cabin. The phone rings maybe

twice a week. I have no correspondents. I survive by teaching part-time at a small university. Once in a while I'll get a rewrite or a polish for the industry. I have a small following of readers and former students. Every day I fight the battle of accepting my lot and for the most part fail. I do not accept my lot. That's it. Open the door, Tom.

Tom You don't think this is a useful conversation? I think it's useful. Jeanine!

Jeanine Yeah?

Tom Is this a useful conversation?

Jeanine I liked the part about the raccoons and possums. That was very good.

Tom *(Snickering)* See?

Ella Do you have a garden?

Peter A garden? Uh, no. That is, there's all kinds of stuff growing out there. I don't know what any of it is. Once a year I'll have it cleared. Then I'm always watching to see what's going to grow. Because it doesn't take long. Stuff starts coming up. Green. It's all foreign to me, looking at the green coming up...I'm a hermit, is what I am! I'm the solitary old coot in the canyon who throws rocks at dogs and kids.

Ella I don't believe it.

Peter I throw rocks at them. Busting into my solitude. Dogs and kids. Kids yelling, dogs shitting on the path. Nothing much worse than coming off the freeway and stepping in dog shit. Feels like life is trying to tell you something about your real worth as a person. If I owned a gun there'd be some dead dogs in the canyon. I'm the eccentric poet who lives by himself in the cabin off the path, the guy who never talks except to complain about the dog shit. Quiet. Comes

and goes by himself. Drives a nine-year-old Toyota. Sounds of a clattering typewriter. Only human voices the ballgame on the radio. Two or three times a year a formal letter from him about the dog shit. Never has visitors, male or female. Empty vodka bottles in his trash. Right across the canyon lives a happy young couple with their little son. All day long I can hear and see the manifestations of their familial happiness. They have a happy dog. No doubt he shits on the path along with the other dogs. The woman is a luscious blonde. Once I watched her sunbathing in the nude. She saw me and hasn't done it since. I'm the horny, aging bachelor on the other side of the canyon. The man who chases the dog. "Got to keep the dog away from that guy, no telling what he might do!" One day they lost their kid. Lost in the canyon. It's like a jungle. First they're calling him softly: "Max! Max! Where are you, Max!" That's the kid's name. Then gradually it becomes hysterical. They've lost their child to the canyon. I'm listening to this and I too am frightened and filled with dread. To witness such a terrible tragedy. I finally go out into the yard. I'm looking for the kid along with the rest of the neighbors. The police are on their way. Everyone is running around frantically beating the bushes, everyone is included...but me. No one came to my door, no one approached me in the yard.

Ella Did they find him?

Peter Yes, thank God.

Ella Where was he?

Peter I don't know. Nobody thought of telling me, one way or the other.

Ella I'm sure you're exaggerating, Peter.

Peter I'm not. Those are the plain facts. I'm a recluse.

Tom How do you account for that?

Peter I can't.

Ella You're not with anyone?

Peter No. Why?

Ella You don't have to be defensive, Peter.

Peter I'm not being defensive.

TOM snickers.

What are you snickering about?

TOM smiles.

(To ELLA) Why do you ask?

Ella I don't know. I wondered. It's a normal question to ask.

Tom We heard you got married.

Peter You heard wrong.

Tom Okay.

Peter I need a drink.

Tom Alcohol?

Peter Yeah, Tom.

Tom Won't touch the stuff.

Peter Let's go to the store.

Tom Not since I left the Virginia hill country thirty-two years back.

Peter I got to go anyway.

Tom Haven't been near a bar since we played that joint on Avenue B.

Peter Just as well. I'll go myself.

Tom Hell of a thing, playing music for a bunch of drunks.

Peter Time for me to move on.

Ella You were never much of a drinker, were you, Peter?

Peter I was. Always.

Ella I don't remember you that way.

Peter Can't be helped.

Ella What?

Peter How other people remember me. There's no accounting for it. Other people's dreams, opinions, delusions. Can't be helped. In fact, I've always been a heavy drinker.

Ella You're just hard on yourself.

Peter I'm an alcoholic. I'm just trying to get through the days and nights, one at a time, with the help of my friends. So if that's what you needed to hear, Tom, you can open the door now and let me be on my way.

Tom Why would I want to hear that?

Peter I don't know. People take solace from the sufferings and misfortunes of others. I thought you might qualify.

Ella What a terrible thing to say!

Peter Oh, come on, Ella. What's so terrible about it? See, now Tom the Father here can't feel quite so superior, having taken on the state, the economy, and the local police, because my life is as miserable as his.

Tom *(Very loud)* I DON'T QUALIFY. I DON'T QUALIFY. I DO NOT QUALIFY. I AM NOT IN YOUR MISERABLE CANYON. I DON'T LIVE WHERE YOU LIVE. I DON'T THINK LIKE YOU THINK. I WALK OUT THERE AND I'M SINGING ME A SONG. I AM WALKING THE HIGH ROAD, FRIEND, AND I AM SINGING ME A TUNE. *(Laughs in PETER'S face)*

Peter Get away from me, Tom.

Ella There's no need to shout.

Jeanine No need to shout!

Tom *(Shouting)* I AM THE FATHER. I SEE THEM, BUT THEY SEE ME NOT. THEY DO NOT SEE ME. THERE IS NOTHING THEY CAN DO TO ME FOR I WILL NOT ALLOW IT. I SQUAT DOWN WHERE I PLEASE. I AM A FREE MAN, THE FATHER. I AM SINGING. ALL THE TIME, ALL THE TIME I AM SINGING. ALL THE TIME.

Peter I know what you are.

Tom WHAT?

Peter Don't yell.

Tom TALK TO ME.

Peter You see the ears. You see the teeth. You see the hair. You see crotches and assholes. You see the fear. You see the weaknesses and the egoism. You see the lust and the hate. You see the higher ape with his clothes on, with his face on. It's the acid. That's why you snicker.

Ella That's very good, Peter.

Peter Thank you. Open the door now, Tom.

Tom No.

Peter Why not?

Tom I WANT TO HEAR WHAT ELSE YOUR FACE HAS TO SAY.

Peter All right, Tom. It's the acid. Some people strive and work hard to become better, to mature; you just kept taking acid until you got to where you could feel permanently superior to everything around you. It was the acid.

Ella You're blaming the drugs?

Peter Yes.

Ella What about what he has to say?

Tom Ha!

Peter What is it that he has to say?

Ella Well, he's saying that you shouldn't participate.

Peter I get it. Tune in, turn on, and drop out.

Ella No, it's not that. That's old. He's gone beyond that.

Peter Come on, he's going around calling himself the Father.

Ella He doesn't do it very often.

Peter What does he mean by it? What do you mean by it, Tom?

Tom IT JUST CAME TO ME, DON'T YOU KNOW.

Peter Please don't scream at me. I'm sitting two feet away from you. Why do you do that?

Tom BECAUSE PEOPLE CAN'T HEAR.

Peter I hear you.

Tom THEY CAN'T HEAR. THEY'RE CONDITIONED TO IT. THEY'RE DEAF. THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT KINDA ANIMAL THEY ARE. THEY DON'T KNOW THEY'RE GONNA DIE.

Peter And you know?

Tom I know.

Peter Is that how come you're the Father?

Tom I told you. It come to me.

Peter From where?

Tom From above.

Peter Okay.

Tom I locked the door on ya to see if I can get ya to hear me.

Peter I heard you.

Tom You ain't heard shit.

Peter Have it your way, Tom, and open the door.

Tom See, I got no plan. I got no agenda. I take it as it comes, and here come Peter. I guess I got to go with it because I loved ya once and we communicated through the music.

Ella You surely did, too.

Peter A person doesn't just wander off into the Safeway and disappear. When they don't find me they'll have to call the police or the sheriff or somebody.

Tom Well, if that's what's gonna happen, then that's what's gonna happen, and I'll deal with it when the time comes.

Peter You don't care what happens?

Tom 'Course I care, but it's out of my hands. No reason to throw in the towel, heh, heh! I can roll with it. See, ain't nobody or nothin' can throw fear into Tom no more.

Peter Congratulations.

Tom Thank you. See, you're more 'n half-gone with fear and doubt and disappointment. That's because you had expectations, you had an agenda, you figure you turned out a failure.
(Barking) RIGHT?

PETER winces but doesn't answer.

You figure you ought to have a family and money in the bank and be one of them heavy hitters and you got none of it. RIGHT?

Ella Ease off a bit, Tom.

Tom *(To PETER)* And now you're starting to turn old. Heh, heh. Now me, I don't worry about any of that shit.

Peter You don't.

Tom No. I ain't got no agenda, and I got everything I need. Alls I got to do is make every moment of this life fresh and new, fresh and new, and make a response to my family when they need a response. And that's how come I'm the Father.

Peter Can you do it without drugs?

Tom I can do it with and I can do it without. But I PREFER being high, you HEAR ME. I don't see no sense in NOT BEING HIGH.
(Snickers)

Ella He's snickering again.

Tom Now Ella, here, we been together past twenty years.

Ella Ain't that a wonderment?

Tom And she gets irritated with some of my habits, but she understands me now more often than she don't, and once in a while my kids do, and once in a while some of the youngsters who come around here to hear what I have to say.

Ella He yells at them, too.

Tom I tell 'em they don't have to act like trained dogs. I tell 'em to be peaceful. Take her as she comes. No competition in the damn marketplace.

Ella And no meat.

Tom It's hard for a carnivorous animal to stay peaceful, heh, heh.

Peter What the hell happened, Tom?

Tom Nothin' happened. One day just turns over into the next one. See, you can't hear. You're too full of what's in your own head. You're PATHETIC.

Peter And you're prematurely senile, Tom. You go around like a crazy old man.

Ella Don't start calling each other names.

Tom You ever read the prophets?

Peter Not lately.

Tom They was crazy old men too, seems like. They're in the Bible.

Peter Oh, come on Tom.

Tom COME ON WHAT!

Peter Look at all the aggression, Tom. Look at it. Listen to it. It's sheer aggression. All that talk about peaceful and nonviolent. You're the most violent man. I don't know what happened to you. I believe you snapped when—

Tom WHEN?

Peter I don't know. One too many acid trips. One too many bills to pay. I don't know. Isn't the screaming at people aggression? Tearing up the house? Keeping the kids out of school? Hassling the bureaucrats? Locking the fucking door, Tom?

Tom *(Rises)* You're pathetic. *(To ELLA)* I'm going to the toilet. *(Passing JEANINE)* What are ya watching now, Jeanine?

Jeanine Quiet, Dad.

Tom QUIET? YOU'RE NOT EVEN LISTENING TO THE DAMN THING!

Jeanine Because.

Tom BECAUSE WHAT?

Jeanine Just because.

TOM enters the john and slams the door.

Ella I don't know why we heard you were married.

Peter I was living with someone for a long time.

Ella How long?

Peter Seven years.

Ella Well, that's a common law marriage, Peter.

Peter Yeah, but we weren't married. Do you have a key to the door, Ella?

Ella No, Tom's got the only key.

Peter I'm sorry if I upset him, but he went and locked the door on me.

Ella He's not upset.

Peter It's going to cause trouble, Ella. Do you want trouble?

Ella No.

Peter Then do something. Ella?

Ella What do you want me to do?

Peter Ask him to turn me loose. Get the key from him.

Ella I hope you get a chance to see Amy Lou.
Peter Amy Lou?
Ella She might show up. She's a piece of work, that one.
(Shakes her head and sighs)
Peter I can't believe this. Does she have a key?
Ella I don't know. She might. I doubt it. What happened?
Peter What happened?
Ella Your relationship.
Peter I don't know if I can explain it in a minute.
Ella We got more than a minute. *(Smiles)*
Peter She met someone else.
Ella Uh-huh. I can feel it.
Peter What?
Ella That you've been alone.

PETER jumps up and tries the door—it remains locked.

Peter Wait a minute— isn't there a window? There's got to be a window in the house.
Jeanine There's one over here.
Peter Okay.

He moves toward the window, up left, but just then TOM comes out of the john, grabs a hammer, nails and some boards, heads PETER off and proceeds to nail the boards over the window.

Tom! What the hell are you doing? For Christ's sake,
Tom! Tom!

Tom *(Finishing the job)* No one gets in, no one gets out, heh, heh.

Jeanine Now you did it, Dad.
Tom Now I done it.
Ella How will we get any air?
Tom We don't need more air.

ELLA giggles.

I LOVE IT!

Peter Tom!
Tom I LOVE IT!
Peter Please let me go, Tom.
Tom We ain't finished yet.
Peter Finished with what?
Tom WE'RE GONNA DIG UP THE BODY, PETE.
Peter What body?
Tom THE BODY IN THE YARD. WE'RE GONNA DIG IT UP.
Peter Oh, for God's sake, Tom!
Ella Maybe Amy Lou will come home with some grass.
Tom HELL, YES. WOULDN'T THAT BE NICE, PETE?
Peter I don't smoke.
Tom Oh, that's right. I forgot. You drink.
Peter There's bound to be trouble, Tom.
Tom You won't touch the natural weed, but you'll put that poisonous alcohol into ya. Don't make sense.
Peter I said, THERE'S BOUND TO BE TROUBLE.
Tom I heard ya. Put the kettle on, Ella. We'll have some tea while we're waiting for the trouble.

ELLA does so.

Tom TAKE HER AS SHE COMES, PETE.

Peter Tom, that song you found was a dream I had, thirteen, fourteen years ago.

Tom I know it. By God, will ya look at what a piece of equipment a hammer is. Buy 'em in any hardware store. *(Cackles)*

Peter That was a long time ago, Tom.

Tom With a hammer and a saw, you can do just about any damn thing.

Peter It was a dream, Tom.

Tom I KNOW THAT.

Peter There ain't no body in no yard.

Tom I KNOW THAT, TOO. YOU THINK I'M STUPID?

Peter I think you've blown your fuses, Tom.

Tom Do ya?

Peter Yeah, I do. And you're scaring me with that hammer.

Tom *(Tucking it into his belt)* Oh, poor guy. Didn't mean to frighten you, son.

Ella What are you doing to him, Tom?

Tom HELL! NOTHING! WHAT ARE YOU DOING, WATCHING THE WATER BOIL?

Ella I'm getting the tea.

Tom WELL COME ON IN HERE AND SET.

Ella Soon as it's ready.

Peter Shit! Open the door or I'm gonna start to scream!

Tom No.

Peter *(Screaming)* OPEN THE DOOR! OPEN THE DOOR! YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE!

Jeanine Dad!

Ella *(Sweetly)* Peter, can you wait just a little while?

Peter FOR WHAT?

Ella He'll let you go. It would be nice to have tea together.
Tom Yeah, we'll have a cup of tea.
Ella Alright?

PETER doesn't answer.

I'll bring it right in.

Tom Ain't they something? Women? I live in a house with three of 'em. And they gots to have their attention, heh, heh. They got to have that love and attention or they can't live.

Peter So?

Tom *(Mocking him)* So?

Peter Are you above that?

Tom Yup. I'm the Father.

Peter You're a bum. You're an aging acid-freak welfare bum.

Tom He's starting in to call me names now, Ella.

Ella Well, sticks and stones.

Peter All these years, you've just been avoiding having to work for a living, Tom. You were doing it when I met you, and you're still doing it. You don't want to work to take care of your family. You think you're too good to work for a living. You think you're better than all the working stiffs out there. You think you should be taken care of by the state.

Tom Why not?

Peter Because nobody owes you, that's why. Get a job, man. Nobody owes you shit.

Tom Somebody's got to say NO, Pete. And that man is me. I SAY NO!

Peter Get a job.

Tom I SAY NO! There's a PINK SLIME in the ocean, Pete, a blotch, they can see it from outer space, it glows like NEON!

Peter Get a job—

Tom It's a TOXIC MASS, it's fucking PINK, it's so fucking big and bright you can see it from the MOON!

Peter Get a job.

Tom What's a VIRUS, Pete?

Peter Get a job.

Tom NOBODY KNOWS! IT'S A MATHEMATICAL INFECTION!

Peter Get a job.

Ella Tell him about vaccination, Tom.

Tom You tell him, Ella!

Ella They cut a cow and then they infect the wound, Peter, so the cow will grow the antibodies, and then they take those and freeze-dry them.

Tom TO VACCINATE THE BABIES WITH.

Peter GET A JOB.

Ella Climate's changing. The temperature is going up. Too many people and not enough trees.

Tom Nature is not nature! It's not nature anymore! Forever! It's befouled forever! With us! People! With dumps and plastic and pipes and dirty needles and poison—toxic waste! In the air and the water and the land! Because people have got to have their cars and comforts and egos and shit! Forever! Forever, Pete! We are not taking care of it! It's not working! And you want to talk about getting a fucking job? (*Scoffs*) I won't do it! I won't participate!

Peter Get a job.

Jeanine Dad!

Tom WHAT?

Jeanine You're making me miss an important part of the story!

Tom HOW'D I DO THAT?

Jeanine With all the yelling, Dad!

Tom WELL YOU GOT THE SOUND OFF ANYWAY.

Jeanine It's a distraction on my head, Dad!

Tom DON'T CALL ME DAD. CALL ME TOM!

Jeanine Tom!

Tom That's my name. It ain't Dad. *(To PETER)* I hate it when they call me Dad. I forbid it from Amy Lou as much as from Jeanine.

Peter I thought you were the Father.

Tom That ain't Dad.

Ella *(Bringing the tea)* No more fighting now. We're having tea. You take milk and sugar, don't you, Peter?

Peter No.

Ella Oh. I remember you taking milk and one sugar.

Peter Not anymore. Just straight is fine.

Ella Okay. *(Pause)* I didn't mean to make you feel bad.

Peter You didn't?

Ella 'Course not. I just feel sorry about it all.

Peter So do I.

Tom This here is some weak tea, Ella.

Ella I'm sorry, but I'm saving some for Amy Lou and some for the morning. Is it too weak for you, Peter? I suppose I could add more and let it steep if you want.

Peter It's fine.

Ella It's no trouble.

TOM snickers.

Company comes first.

Peter No, thanks. This'll do.

Tom She wants everything to be nice.
Ella I do wish we had a joint around.
Peter *(To himself)* God.
Ella Good chance Amy Lou will bring some home with her.
Peter I told you I don't smoke, Ella. I haven't for years.
Tom He drinks.
Ella I was thinking for myself. But you shouldn't drink, Peter.
It's not good for you.
Peter Right.
Ella You need someone to take care of you.
Peter Yes.
Ella It's no good being by yourself.
Peter True.
Tom Hell, the bachelor's life ain't bad.
Ella You wouldn't know.
Tom I was single before I met you.
Ella Yeah, and it's been downhill ever since.

TOM laughs.

But I wouldn't trade a minute of it.

JEANINE laughs.

I don't know what she's laughing at.

Tom It's the story in her head.
Jeanine No it's not, Dad!
Ella I hope you'll get to see Amy Lou, Peter.
Peter Yeah.
Ella She's really a knockout, Peter, but she's oh-so-wild.

Tom Untamed.

Ella *(With a touch of envy)* Does anything she wants. No restraining her at all. *(Sigh)* Tom spoiled her.

Tom No point in passing blame around, Ella. She's free as the wind is all.

Peter Well, I hope she makes out okay, considering she can't read. *(Rising)* Thanks for the tea, Ella.

Tom *(Ominously)* Where you going?

Ella Oh! Wait and I'll show you some photographs of Amy Lou, Pete? Okay?

Peter Okay. Yeah, sure.

Ella I'll find them for you!

Peter I'll look at the pictures and then you'll open the door, Tom, and we'll call it a night.

TOM doesn't answer, but takes the hammer out and plays with it.

Ella *(Searching)* Jeanine, where'd I put the album?

Jeanine What album?

Ella The notebook with the pictures in it, Jeanine!

Jeanine I don't know, Ella.

Ella I wish you'd take more notice of the world around you, Jeanine.

Jeanine I never had nothing to do with that notebook.

Ella You have nothing to do with nothing, Jeanine.

Jeanine You put it somewhere when you was stoned.

Ella *(Exploding)* Don't you dare talk to your mother like that! *(Throwing something at her)* DON'T YOU DO IT!

JEANINE withdraws and falls silent. TOM snickers.

Ella I'm sorry, Peter. Please excuse me. Well, here's some pictures of Jeanine. *(Sits close to PETER to show him the photos. Off, the SOUND of sirens.*

Tom The wild dogs are out again, keeping the wolves back.

Ella Oh, don't listen to it, Tom. Look, Peter, here's Jeanine.

Tom You're sure acting the proud parent, Ella.

Peter Well, she is definitely good-looking.

JEANINE chuckles.

Ella See how much she looks like Tom?

Tom Hell she does.

Ella How old was she when you last saw her, Peter?

Peter Uh, three? I don't really remember.

Ella It was winter.

Peter Yeah.

Ella And she was almost three.

Peter Oh, yeah. It was up at the farm. There was snow on the ground. The lake was frozen. You went ice skating.

Ella Yes!

Peter You looked like a young girl, all fresh and new, gliding around on the lake.

Ella I was pregnant with Amy Lou.

Peter Jeanine was bundled up for the cold. The sun was bright. I remember that. I miss that.

Ella Do you?

Peter Yeah, I miss the cold, clean air, the bite. I miss those sunny, winter days, Ella.

Ella *(Suggestively)* We had some good times, didn't we, Peter?

Peter *(Looks at ELLA, amazed)* What are you talking about?

Ella Well, I'm saying we had some good times, that's all.

Peter I don't want to get into this shit.

Ella Why are you so upset?

Peter Are you kidding, or what?

Ella No...I...

Peter YOUR HUSBAND LOCKED THE DOOR ON ME AND I CAN'T GET OUT.

Ella I know that. Let's make the best of it.

Tom No sense in calling up bygone days, Ella.

Peter Then why did you lock the door?

Tom I'm talking to Ella.

Peter If you didn't want to call up bygone days, why did you lock the door?

Ella He just wants you to stay, Peter.

Peter What?

Ella Stay.

Peter My God.

Ella You said you were lonely.

Peter I live in California! I'm going back in three days!

Tom What for?

Peter I like my life. I don't have any complaints. It's quiet. It's simple. It's my life.

Ella No one should live by themselves.

Peter Says who?

Ella Says me.

Peter Who are you?

Ella What do you mean?

Peter I mean, who are you? Who are you to decide? Who are you to make pronouncements?

Ella I'm me.
Peter Yeah. And you know.
Ella What?
Peter How people should live.
Ella (*Defensive*) Yeah, in general. I'm not saying everybody is the same, but definitely most people shouldn't live alone.

TOM snickers.

Stop it, Tom.
Tom Hell, you die alone, Ella.
Ella All the more reason not to live alone.
Tom (*Laughing, to PETER*) She's got me there.
Peter Oh, for Christ's sake.
Ella What?
Peter More fourth-rate pithy homilies, Ella.
Ella I don't care what you call it. I still think it's true.
Peter Okay.
Ella A man needs the love of a woman.
Peter There's another one.
Ella I don't care.

TOM chuckles.

Peter What are you laughing at, Tom?

TOM laughs.

It's not funny.

TOM laughs.

What are you doing with the fucking hammer?

TOM laughs.

What's the matter with you? Are you bored? Did you lock me in here so you could watch a scene between me and your wife?

Tom I told you, son, I play it all by ear.

Peter I'm not your fucking son!

Tom You want the key, then come ahead and take it.

Peter I don't want to fight with you, Tom.

Ella There'll be no violence in this house!

Tom Come on ahead.

Peter I won't fight. Just open the door.

Tom I'll open it when I get ready.

Peter Tell you what, you let me go and I won't do anything. But you let me go now.

Tom Do? What are ya gonna do?

Peter I'll go to the police and I'll swear out charges against you.

Tom For what?

Peter Imprisonment. Kidnapping. Assault with a hammer.

Tom Oh, hell, who cares? (*Laughs*)

Peter I promise you I will, Tom, unless you let me go now.

Ella Would you do that?

Peter Yes.

Ella You wouldn't. I don't believe you would. I don't believe you'd do that, Peter.

Peter Why not?

Ella Because I know you don't hold with the police.
You, of all people.

Peter You got that wrong, Ella.

Ella Then you have changed.

Peter Damn right.

Ella A lot.

Peter I sure hope so.

Tom Hell, I told ya, you can go to the cops, you can sic the sheriff on me, you can call out the National Guard if you want to. It don't mean anything at all to me. More hair of the dog.

Peter I don't know what that means. Do you want trouble?

Tom Trouble? What's trouble? There ain't no trouble. It's all trouble, or it's all happenings, scenes, one after the other. And that's it. Go on and bring the trouble.

Peter Open the door and I will.

Ella No, you won't.

Tom See, I don't believe in crime, and I don't believe in criminals. There's no crime, and there's no justice, either.

Peter Is that so?

Ella It's society that commits the crime, and it's people that pay for it. More lives down the river.

Peter Oh, horseshit.

Tom There's no crime and there's no justice, Pete. There's just a bunch of humans doing shit to get by, and another bunch wearing uniforms and guns, roaming around in their power trips. Guard dogs, I call 'em.

Peter If you say so, Tom.

Tom I SAY SO.

Peter Good. I don't want to argue. I want to go.

Ella Come on, Peter, say what you have to say.
Peter What for?
Ella Because otherwise it's not fair.
Peter Why?
Ella It's not fair to say something and not say it.
Peter Did you just hear yourself?
Ella You know what I mean.
Peter It's useless. You're both out of your minds. There's no connection to the real world.

TOM scoffs.

There are people out there who deserve to be drawn and quartered.

TOM scoffs.

Criminal psychopaths.

TOM scoffs.

You should count your blessings, Tom.

Tom I COUNT 'EM, PETE.
Peter That you were born in a country where they let you live.
Tom DAMN RIGHT. I'M AN AMERICAN.
Peter Where you are protected by law and order.
Tom I'M AN AMERICAN.
Peter And supported by the state.
Tom AN AMERICAN.
Peter Like a parasite.

Ella That was a hurtful thing to say, Peter.

Peter I didn't intend it as a compliment.

Tom Now we're getting to it, heh, heh.

A sigh from JEANINE.

Ella Jeanine?

Jeanine What?

Ella What are you watching?

Jeanine That was a good story, Mom. It was new, but the products were the same, but it was a new story, all about lawyers.

Tom *(Cackling)* Lawyers!

Jeanine But I don't know if I liked the characters, but I liked the story, but it was interesting to see, about lawyers.

Ella "But, but, but," what is this but everything all of a sudden?

Jeanine *L.A. Law.* Is that California?

Ella Jeanine, you've watched enough for one day.

Jeanine Yeah, that's California.

Ella Did you hear what I said, Jeanine?

Jeanine But I'm watching another new one now.

Ella No BUTS! Go to bed!

Jeanine It's the new fall season on NBC!

Tom Leave her be, Ella. She'll conk out pretty soon.

Ella *(To PETER)* See, he spoils her. And he spoiled Amy Lou. Spoiled brats. I can't do nothing with either of 'em. That's all she does. Day in and day out. Once in a while she'll go for a ride. She'll do the dishes. She'll sweep. Then it's the television, day and night. I hope the damn thing breaks, Jeanine!

Tom She'd just stare at it, anyway, heh, heh.

Ella It's not a joke, Tom!

Tom Got enough stories in her head to last her a lifetime.

Ella I've got to go someplace. I've got to do something. I've got a teenage daughter has a better time than I do. Amy Lou. She's out there now, enjoying herself. I never get out. I never meet people. No excitement. I've got to have some excitement sometimes. He takes me for rides. Rides in the country. When the Buick feels up to it. When there's gas in the car. Mostly it's the same same-old, same-old. And then you come walking in the door, Peter, and I thought...*(Bursts into tears)*

Peter Oh, for God's sake, Ella.

Ella *(Recovering)* I don't know what I was thinking. We haven't seen you in fifteen years. Can you imagine? Fifteen years! What a shock!

Peter It was a shock for me, too, believe me.

Tom Trouble is, now he don't like the company, Ella. He's all fired up to be someplace else.

Ella I know he is.

Tom Says we've blown our fuses.

Ella He didn't mean it.

Tom Called me a parasite.

Ella *(Tapping him on the knee)* What a horrible thing to say, Peter.

Peter *(Moving away)* I meant it.

Tom Time was, he couldn't avoid sniffing up that tail of yours.

Ella Yeah.

Tom Followed it everywhere. Ain't that right?

Ella That's right.

PETER stands as though preparing to run.

Tom Wasn't getting any on his own.

Peter That ain't the truth, Tom.

Tom Had to have a piece of mine.

Peter It didn't go down that way, Tom.

Tom Look at him squirm, Ella. He walks in here chock full of himself, and now he's on the squirm. *(Cackles)*

Ella Jeanine, are you listening to any of this? *(No answer)*

Tom She knows all about it, Ella. She was there.

Ella She was just a baby, Tom.

Tom Don't matter. She was around, and she knows what happened.

Ella It's none of her damn business!

Tom Alright, Ella.

Ella Don't "alright" me, Tom! *(Pause)* At least close the curtain!

Tom I'll do that for ya, Ella. *(Draws the curtain, which cuts off TV area)*

Ella Thank you. *(To PETER)* She doesn't pay any attention to me anyhow. No one does. But that don't mean she don't listen to what she wants to hear.

Tom I give ya the attention, Ella.

Ella *(To PETER)* Yeah. He acts. He knows he's got to give me a measure of attention or I'll start to scream.

Tom That's no lie. He's HEARD that, Ella.

Ella *(To PETER)* So every day he picks an hour or two where he sweet-talks me and attends to me. He's acting.

TOM smiles at PETER.

I don't care. When the time comes for me to scream, I'm gonna scream. I'll raise hell and then it'll pass and I'll go along for a while. There's no hope on this plane of existence.

Tom You got that right.

Ella No hope. No hope in shit and piss and going to the store and putting gas in the car. Nobody's going anywhere but the grave. The only hope is in God, the Father, because He is on another plane of existence. And I'm ready. I'm ready. I'm ready for the end, the End of Days. *(Sighs)*

Tom What is that, Pete? What is that called?

Peter What?

Tom What she's talking.

Peter I don't know. The Second Coming?

Ella All the dead bodies going into the ground, and Mother Earth receives them, and turns them over. Everything alive goes back into earth, where she turns them over.

Tom No, there's a word, Pete. Come on, you're the word-man, you're the poet. What's the word I'm looking for?

Peter Apocalypse.

Tom That's it! That's the word! Apocalypse! Heh, heh.

Ella And then the Early Ones will rise.

Peter *(Softly)* Who are they, Ella?

Ella *(In the eerie tones of a prophetess)* The First People, the Human Beings, who could obey Nature, and hear the electrical music of the stars.

Tom *(Banging the hammer)* Hey, HEY!

Peter Ella?

Ella Yes?

Peter Tell him to let me go, Ella.

Ella Not yet.

Peter What do you want?

Ella *(Giggling)* I want to be in Paradise, or life's not worth the trouble. Can you do that?

Peter No.

Ella I've had my moments. I remember one time, it was over in Rhode Island, we were visiting friends of yours, Peter, I was pregnant with Amy Lou, and you were standing with me in front of the house, and Tom was walking in a field with Jeanine. A beautiful fall day. Oh, it was just a golden day, and I took your hand, and you said, "Tom looks just like a prince out of a fairy tale." Do you remember that?

Peter We were stoned.

Ella So what? My sweet prince. He never raised his voice in those days, ever.

Peter No, he didn't.

Tom Heh, heh.

Ella It starts out with the best thing there is—making love—and then you get wore down with bills and the kids.

Tom It's been tough on Ella.

Ella I remember another time, it was on the farm in Pennsylvania, we had built a big bonfire, and Tom was playing and singing for everyone and I was watching you and you looked so handsome I went up to you and kissed you. Remember?

Peter I remember. We were probably stoned then, too.

Tom Don't be taking it all back now, Pete.

Peter I'm not trying to.

Tom The hell you ain't.

Ella I remember one time in the city we were loaded. You went and got us some very good acid and the three of us got high. I had a very good head on that day. Tom was in the other room. You were lying on the couch with an arm over your eyes. I was ready for anything that day. I came

and sat near you, and I said, “Are you afraid to look at me, Peter?” And you said, “Yes.” I got you to come inside with Tom and me. You were so shy. Then I asked you to take off your shirt, and you started to, and then there was a knock on the door. I couldn’t believe it. It was that girl Rifka, and her boyfriend, remember?

Peter Yeah.

Ella So we started entertaining the company. You and Tom played. Tom was flirting with Rifka. He’d always wanted to fuck her. We ate some watermelon and it was weird. That was the sexiest watermelon I ever ate. Along in there our feet touched, and it was thrilling. I said, “Was that you, Peter?” Finally, they left, but my head was gone by then, and you ran away.

Peter That was the night you called me a sonofabitch and a bad person.

Ella Did I?

Tom You remember what happened before that, Pete?

Peter Yeah, you and me had a conversation on the stoop.

Tom You were throwing up into the gutter.

Peter WHAT DO YOU WANT? WHAT IS IT THAT YOU WANT? WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS? WHY BRING IT UP AGAIN? THE DISTRESS AND THE TORMENT AND THE SICK LUST AND THE SHAME AND THE GUILT? (*He pauses for breath—to ELLA*) Your head—your head is a maze—a labyrinth—of fantasies and dreams—It was that way then and it’s that way now.

Ella (*Stunned*) What?

Peter It’s a fucking dream-world. Look at it—you live in squalor and poverty and you don’t do anything—you don’t know how to do anything but pretend to be a housewife and a

mother, and you cover it all up with grass and justify it with a crackpot religious belief.

Ella Crackpot?

Peter Crackpot! When all that shit was going down—Jesus Christ, what was it? You were this pretty, sex-obsessed, petit-bourgeois neurotic with a little kid on your hands, in over your head, married to a hillbilly folk singer who wouldn't get a job! The fairy-tale white prince! The golden-haired boy with the guitar! This prince of yours was lighting up his kingdom with grass and acid, which he had to do, since he was never going to make any fucking money! And then I come along! I walk right into it!

Tom *(Hoarsely)* Poor Peter. *(At first lightly, he begins tapping with his hammer, a slow, steady beat)*

Peter At least I had a job! I had a job and the fucking reefer, eh, Tom?

Ella *(Rubbing her head)* Oh, my head...my head is gone...I...

Tom Yeah, Pete, you had the job and the reefer, Pete. But I had the family, and I had the music, and I had the friendliness what took you in, Pete. I'M THE FATHER, PETE.

Jeanine Dad...?

Ella Shut up, Jeanine.

Tom Fuck this shit. You try to keep everything fresh and pure and you end up decrepit anyway. Fuck it. People are animals and worse than animals. Playing with the fucking machinery. Heh, heh. You spend your life working for the Man and then they stick you in the ground and say you done good. Head down and paying the bills and grief and sorrow and then it's over. Fuck that shit. YOU DIDN'T EXPECT ME TO BE ONE OF THEM, DID YOU, PETE?

Peter One of who?

Tom ONE OF THE SLAVES, PETE. Heh, heh. There's a bunch of pricks right now I'll bet sitting up in the wide offices of the tall towers of the cities, they forgot that shit comes out of their assholes and lies come out of their mouths, they are planning to get a jump on the Chinese and the Japs, don't you know, because they've figured out what's happening, see, in this dump we live on, let's blast the fuckin' thing and end up the rulers and get the population back down, especially the Asians and the blacks, let's blow the fuckin' thing, am I right, Ella?

Ella That's right, Tom.

Tom Yeah, and I'm an APPALACHIAN, PETE, I am THE REAL THING, a Scotch-Irish AMERICAN from the real HEARTLAND of this country, who has stood up and said NO! I am a sweet low-lander son of my daddy, HE COULD TELL A FOLK TALE, PETE, the peoples would come from all over to hear the man, he died of coal dust in his lungs, HE WAS THE AGE OF FORTY-FOUR YEARS, PETE.

Ella You killed him, Peter.

Peter What? Who did I kill?

Ella Tom.

Tom Oh, he could speak, he was a SPEAKER, my daddy was, he had the music in him from the old folks, from the home country, HE was a POET, natural-born!

Peter Ella, listen up. Please. That song I wrote, it was about something—a body—that Tom and I buried together. It wasn't Tom.

Ella No?

Peter No, it was—

Tom You got him on the squirm again, Ella.

Peter I guess it was the friendship that we buried, and there was nothing to be done.

Ella That's what killed him. That's when he changed. Before that happened, he never raised his voice, he never screamed at people how wrong they were, he never banged on his guitar, he never...*(Bursts into tears again)*

Jeanine Mom! Mom!

Ella What is it, Jeanine?

Jeanine It's the story, Mom!

Ella Change the channel, Jeanine!

TOM snickers, still tapping out a beat with his hammer.

Peter The day you called me a sonofabitch, I was down on the street with Tom, I was throwing up, I was high and I was in a terrible state, I told him I couldn't take it anymore.

Ella You told him I was coming on to you.

Peter I told him something had to give!

Ella It was only natural. We lived together, we were attracted to each other, drawn to each other.

Peter I didn't want a scene. I wasn't ready for a scene, I couldn't have handled a scene. I couldn't share you. I had to have you, but I couldn't share you with him.

Tom YOU FUCKING EGOTISTICAL BASTARD! He thinks he's important! That's not important! You're not important! Listen to him! He couldn't share! Who is he? Who the fuck is he?

Ella A betrayer.

Tom He couldn't share!

Jeanine Dad! Dad!

Tom JEANINE, TURN THE DAMN THING OFF AND GO TO BED. AND DON'T CALL ME DAD!

A pause, then JEANINE opens the curtain and comes part way into the room.

Jeanine Tom? Why are you hitting with the hammer, Tom?

Tom I'm making me a song, Jeanine. I'm singing a song, and this here is the beat.

Jeanine Don't sing it, Tom.

Tom Why not?

Jeanine It's hurting my head. I can't listen to the story.

Ella The sound is OFF, Jeanine.

Peter My God.

Ella Stop hammering, Tom, it's giving us all a headache.

Tom Well alright, then, I believe I will stop, no problem there, I'm done. *(Stops)*

Ella You hurt his feelings, Jeanine.

Jeanine Stop crying, Ella.

Ella Go back to your story, Jeanine.

Jeanine Thank you, Tom. *(Returns to her spot in front of the TV)*

Peter You called me to you, Ella. You remember that? You called me, up there at the farm, on that foggy night, you called to me.

Ella Did I?

Peter Yes, you did. I knew something was going to happen. Years of flirting and touching and feeling and looking and smiling. I knew it was all coming down that night at the farm. I'm standing there by the lake smoking a joint and watching the mist on the water, my heart is pounding—

this is it, this is it, I'm finally gonna fuck her and screw Tom, and fuck everybody, this is it—and then I hear you calling my name, you're up the hill by the house, in the light from the kitchen window, I can see you swaying there in the fog, the way you used to shift your weight from leg to leg, that nervous, sexy way of moving, and I said, "I'm down here," and I went up to you like a dog. The poet! What was I doing? What was I planning? A life of crime? Then fifteen years go by and I'm living alone in a cabin in Los Angeles, a fucking recluse! Then I walk into a Safeway in Woodstock, New York, to buy a deck of cards and I hear a voice and it's you! And I'm here and you lock the fucking door! You're crazy as a fucking loon, Tom! And so am I! We're in the same boat! We're both the dregs, Tom, in the bottom of the barrel! The FATHER and the POET! Oh, but it was sweet there for a minute, eh, Ella? For five minutes? For an hour? I can't help but agree with you there. You were sitting on the bench overlooking the lake and I leaned over you and blew reefer smoke into your mouth. "That's a sweet trick," you said. We went for a walk, but we both knew we were going to my room in that ramshackle, rotting bungalow that was leaning part way into the lake. We were so anxious, we stayed downstairs necking and grinding at each other for a long time, and then we went up to my room at last. Moonlight was shining on the water, just like in the fairy tales. And then we heard a baby crying. It was Jeanine, and you ran off to her.

Tom Poor Peter. He comes up to me one day down in the city, I was playing a benefit for one of them street kitchens, and he says, "Tom, I met a woman," as if I gave a fuck,

as if it was VERY IMPORTANT to somebody—he says, “I met a woman, and I’m going for it, maybe you could pass that on to Ella, Tom!” (*Cackles*)

Ella That was the second one.

Peter The second?

Ella Betrayal.

Tom I laughed into his face. I said, “WHO GIVES A SHIT? I KNOW YOU SCREWED ELLA. WHAT DOES THAT MAKE YOU? You slip it to my old lady in the dark and you think you got to apologize to me for dickin’ some other broad?”

Peter I don’t remember that, Tom.

Tom Yeah. Ella and me got nothing hid from each other. We’re on the same path. Like it or not, we’re on the same path. We know all about that back alley shit and it means nothing to us, nothing at all.

Ella Amen to that.

Peter You should’ve stayed in Virginia, Tom. You’re a country boy.

Tom Fuck you, Pete! You should of stayed in your cabin in Los Angeles!

Peter (*Hard*) Yeah, well, we’ll play it out, Tom.

Tom You bet we will, Pete. You bet.

Ella (*Listening*) Tom?

Off, SQUEALING of an approaching auto careening to a stop at the side of the house. Car door SLAMS.

Who’s that, Tom?

SOUND of FOOTSTEPS racing to the house and then a CRASH at the door.

Amy Lou *(Off)* Open the damn door!

Ella It's Amy Lou!

TOM opens the door. PETER takes a step backward. AMY LOU rushes in and TOM closes the door, but doesn't lock it. They look at AMY LOU—she is disheveled, hysterical. A bloody red blotch shows through her white bandana. She and PETER take each other in, stunned.

What happened to you?

Tom What did you do, girl?

Amy Lou Goddamn it!

Ella You're bleeding!

Tom Fetch a towel, Ella Mae, and that peroxide, and some bandages!

Ella What happened?

Amy Lou I hit my head, damn it!

Ella How?

Amy Lou *(From sheer frustration)* AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!

Tom Go on, Ella!

Ella *(Frightened)* We don't have any bandages, Tom!

Tom Get what there is, then, Ella!

ELLA goes. JEANINE holds her head and whimpers.

Amy Lou SHUT UP, JEANINE!

Peter Tom, she needs a doctor.

Amy Lou WHO THE FUCK IS THIS?

Peter Let's get a doctor, Tom.

Amy Lou WHO IS HE?

Tom This here is Peter.

Amy Lou PETER THE POET?

Tom Yeah.

Amy Lou WHAT'S HE DOING HERE?

Tom I ran into him.

Amy Lou FUCK THAT SHIT!

Tom Simmer down, Amy Lou.

Amy Lou I SAY FUCK THAT SHIT.

Tom And I brought him home.

Amy Lou WHAT THE FUCK FOR?

Peter I had no idea—

Amy Lou I SAY YOU'RE TOO DAMN LATE!

Peter No idea you were here.

Amy Lou I'M THE POET.

Peter Okay.

Amy Lou I SAY MY POETRY.

Peter I write mine.

Amy Lou THAT AIN'T NOTHIN'! THAT'S SOME OLD SHIT!

Peter I'm glad to see you.

Amy Lou I SAY YOU'RE FUCKIN' LATE!

Peter Let's go to the hospital.

Amy Lou I CAN'T BELIEVE IT! I CAN'T FUCKIN' BELIEVE IT!

Ella *(Returning with a towel and a bottle of hydrogen peroxide)*
Here. Here, Amy Lou.

Tom What happened, girl?

Amy Lou EVERYTHING HAPPENED! THAT'S IT! IT'S ALL FUCKIN' OVER!

Peter Where's the hospital at, Tom?

Amy Lou NO! I DON'T WANT NO DOCTOR!

Jeanine You hurt yourself?

Amy Lou *(With fierce sarcasm)* YEAH, I HURT MYSELF, JEANINE!

Peter It looks pretty bad, Tom.

Amy Lou Oh, fuck you!

Peter Let's run her over in the Buick. Come on.

Amy Lou No, Tom! Don't do it!

Peter Amy Lou, I'm a friend.

Amy Lou YOU AIN'T NO FRIEND!

Peter Listen to me! You're coming with me!

Amy Lou I'm not going anywhere with you!

Peter Why not?

Amy Lou Don't let him take me, Tom!

Tom Sit down, girl, and let your mother help you.

Amy Lou *(Collapsing onto the couch)* Oh, God! Oh, shit! *(Bursting into tears)* It hurts!

Ella *(Dabbing at the wound with the towel and peroxide)*
Oh, my poor baby. Oh, my poor baby.

Amy Lou Oh, stop with the 'poor baby,' Ella!

Tom How is it, Ella?

Ella I think it looks worse than it is. At least I hope so, Tom.

Tom *(To AMY LOU)* Let it rest now, darlin'.

AMY LOU falls into her mother's arms.

Peter Tom? Listen to me. She doesn't know what she's doing.

Tom *(Holding AMY LOU)* Hang on, honey. Hang on, baby. *(To ELLA)* The bleeding?

Ella *(Removing the towel)* It looks better, Tom. Oh, it looks better.

Tom Hold that towel tight to the wound, Ella.

Ella That's what I'm doing, Tom! Oh, Amy Lou, what did you do to yourself?

JEANINE cries.

Amy Lou SHUT UP, JEANINE!

Tom We might have to go and get you stitched, Amy Lou.

Amy Lou Oh, it don't matter. It don't matter no more. Willie is dead on the floor. The sonsabitches shot us.

Peter What?

Tom They shot you?

Amy Lou They're coming for me, Tom.

Ella Where, Amy Lou?

AMY LOU sobs.

Where was this?

Jeanine Is she bleeding, Ma? Still?

Ella I don't think so, Jeanine.

Amy Lou *(Hysterically)* Christ, Jeanine, you're such a freak! I don't know why I came back here. Why'd I come here? I just drove Willie's Toyota truck straight up the road and I end up here in this fuckin' place. Where else was I gonna go? Without Willie Lefferts? The owners shot his brains out!

Ella What owners, Amy Lou? Amy Lou?

Amy Lou THE OWNERS! THE OWNERS AT THE FOUR CORNERS! THE OWNERS OF THE ALL-NIGHT JOINT AT THE FOUR CORNERS WHAT TAKES YOUR MONEY FOR EVERY GODDAMNED THING! THE SONSABITCHES! WE WENT IN THERE TO TAKE SOME MONEY BACK! ME AND WILLIE!

Peter You did what?

Amy Lou AAAAHHHH!

Tom Easy now. Easy, girl.

Ella WHAT POSSESSED YOU TO WALK INTO A LIQUOR STORE WITH A GUN, AMY LOU?

Tom None of that, Ella.

Ella STUPID! STUPID!

Amy Lou We're outlaws. And we see ourselves as such.

Peter Outlaws?

Amy Lou Outlaws, for sure. We didn't mean for no one to get shot. But we're outlaws anyway. That's how we're treated, always, Willie bein' a breed, and me the nigger trash with him.
(*To ELLA*) WHAT THE FUCK DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?
WALK IN WITH A GUN, WALK IN WITHOUT A GUN? EVERYBODY JUST RUNNIN' AROUND BUYIN' SHIT!

TOM cackles.

Ella A GUN'LL GET YOU SHOT, AMY LOU!

Amy Lou Yeah, you got that right, Ella.

Ella Jesus God!

Tom Lemme see your head, girl. (*Looking at the wound*)
Bleeding's a lot better. ...

Ella Thank God for that.

Tom I think it's a nick is all. Pellet from a shotgun.

Peter Can I see it?

Amy Lou No! Stay away!

Tom Does it hurt ya bad?

Amy Lou YEAH IT HURTS! (*To PETER*) What are you lookin' at?

Peter I'm looking at you.

Amy Lou I won't go with them, Tom.

Peter Tom, she doesn't know what she's saying.

Amy Lou I won't go.

Tom I know you won't, girl.

Amy Lou Good, then. That's good. *(Heaving a sigh)* Good. Ain't nothin' there no more, no more.

Jeanine Where?

Amy Lou IN THE WORLD, JEANINE. But it don't make no difference to ya, does it, seein' as you never went out anyway. JEEZ, DIDN'T YA EVER WANNA GET LAID AT LEAST?

Ella Watch your tongue, Amy Lou.

Amy Lou OH ELLA, YOU'RE THE HORNIEST WOMAN I EVER MET IN MY ENTIRE LIFE. AND JEALOUS, TOO.

Ella Jealous?

Amy Lou Of Willie and me. My sweet boy. *(Sobbing)* We figured we'd get us a little money and hop onto the thruway an' disappear...but them owners...

Ella Jeanine, stop standing there and fetch a clean towel.

JEANINE is in a trance.

JEANINE!

JEANINE shudders and goes.

Amy Lou Tired of it.

Ella We all are.

Amy Lou Real tired.

Peter You're just a kid, a baby—YOU DON'T WANT TO DIE.

Amy Lou Tired of all the dummies out there eatin' an' shittin' an' talkin' an' buyin' and lyin' and spoilin' nature with their selfish ways.

Peter DID YOU HEAR ME?

JEANINE brings a new towel.

Ella Here, honey. Here's a fresh towel.

Amy Lou Don't call me "honey." You never call me "honey."

Ella Relax your hand, Amy Lou, let go.

AMY LOU lets go, ELLA replaces the towel.

There. Good. Bleeding's stopped. Thank the Lord.

Peter Let me see. Can I see it?

Amy Lou No!

PETER steps back.

God, it hurts, though. Stop looking at me, Jeanine! I got shot in the head, Jeanine! You're a piece of work, Jeanine! Why don't you go to Australia, Jeanine, and start over? That's what I'd do, I'd go to Australia if I was you. You could be with all the animals there, roaming the plains...
(Trails off)

Sound of SIRENS, off.

Jeanine I might do that one day.

Amy Lou Yeah, sure. When?

Ella *(As though realizing the truth for the first time)* Oh, Tom! Peter! DO YOU KNOW WHAT SHE'S DONE? OH, MY GOD. OH, MY HEAD.

Amy Lou YOUR HEAD? LISTEN TO HER! SHIT, WHY DID I COME BACK HERE? WHY DIDN'T I JUST DRIVE AND DRIVE AND DRIVE AWAY?

Ella YOU LITTLE SLUT. YOU SHUT YOUR DIRTY MOUTH. YOU SHOULD THANK GOD YOU HAVE A PLACE TO COME BACK TO.

Amy Lou Yeah, sure.

Ella THAT'S RIGHT. TOM? WHAT ARE WE GONNA DO, TOM?

Amy Lou We went in there to the Four Corners to take the money. Them owners said no. They weren't to give us a dime. Even a piece of candy was too good for us trash. Then Willie lost his temper and shot one of them with his rifle. It's just one of them single-shot-22 squirrel guns but Willie shot that man through the neck with it. Then the other owner pulls out a sawed-off shotgun and blew Willie away, blew his brains all over the fucking crap they sell in there, the Fritos, and the popcorn and potato chips and shit, OH IT WAS SOME REAL SHIT, JEANINE, I couldn't fucking believe it, it took about a second's worth a time, an' Willie's on the floor an' I'm screaming at that owner, YOU SONOFABITCH YOU SONOFABITCHIN SCUMBAG COCKSUCKER, AND THEN HE HIT ME!

Peter What ARE you gonna do, Tom?

Tom I'M GONNA DEAL WITH THE TROUBLE, PETE.

Peter How?

Tom HEAD ON, PETE! I'M GONNA CRASH THEM FUCKERS HEAD ON!

Peter Head on?

Tom We're gonna ride, we're gonna ride, eh, Pete? WE'RE GONNA SING US A SONG LIKE IN THE DAYS OF OLD.

Ella ALL RIGHT!

Peter No. Let me take her, Tom. (*He circles AMY LOU, who avoids him*)

Amy Lou GET HIM OFF ME, TOM!

Tom *(To PETER)* Listen, you prick, sit down and behave yourself or I'll crack your face with this hammer and saw your fucking head off with that saw there.

PETER stops.

I'm glad we got this prick here with us, Amy Lou, though I know you don't like him real well, he will come in right handy to us, heh, heh, pitiful as he is.

Amy Lou I LOVE IT!

Jeanine Tom?

Tom I'm talking about carpentry, Jeanine.

AMY LOU giggles.

You like that one, girl?

Amy Lou You're a trip, Tom.

PETER lunges at TOM and slugs him twice, knocking him to the floor. The hammer goes flying. A shocked pause.

Tom Motherfucker.

ELLA and JEANINE rush to TOM's aid.

Damned if he didn't hit me.

Amy Lou PUNCH HIM BACK, TOM.

Ella OH, LORD.

Tom Get away, Ella. Jeanine. No harm done. Fucker showed his true self.

Peter Now. Listen to me. Shut your mouths and listen to me.
I have rights.

Tom RIGHTS? I SAY THE HELL YA DO. YOU GOT NO RIGHTS.

Peter Let's go, Amy Lou. You're coming with me.

Amy Lou What the hell for?

Peter I want to know you. I want to have the chance to get to know you.

Amy Lou What are you?

Peter *(Stammering)* I'm...I'm...I'm your father.

Amy Lou You're another fuckin' idiot is what you are.

Sound of SIRENS approaching.

Here they come. The fucking guard dogs are coming for me, Tom. Fuck it.

Tom You ready, Ella?

Ella I'm ready.

Amy Lou Trash it!

Peter Why?

Amy Lou Fuck off!

Peter Why don't you hear me?

Amy Lou I AIN'T NEVER HEARD A WORD FROM YOU BEFORE!

Peter I'm sorry. I didn't know.

Amy Lou Fuck you. You're gone. You're nothing.

Peter Fuck you, too. You're less than nothing. Nothing but a whacked-out roll in the sack.

Amy Lou WHAT ARE YOU, THEN?

Ella I'll tell you what he is.

Peter SHUT UP. *(To AMY LOU)* I love you.

Amy Lou Horseshit! You don't know me!

Peter I love you. I'm...your father...

Sound of SIRENS, closer.

Jeanine Are they coming, Tom?

Amy Lou Christ, Jeanine. (*Weaker*) Are you watching a movie now, Jeanine? You're watching a movie, aintcha? And I'm the star in it, huh, Jeanine?

Jeanine You're the pretty one, Amy Lou. You're the pretty one.

Amy Lou (*With profound frustration*) AAAAAHHHH! GO WATCH TV, JEANINE!

Jeanine NO I WON'T! AND DON'T YOU BOSS ME!

Amy Lou I can't believe this. We got my fat white sister's total attention!

Peter Please, listen to me, Amy Lou. We'll get you fixed up, we'll start over, we'll make a life with our own—

Amy Lou I LOST MY OWN. I LOST MY WILLIE. IT'S OVER.

Ella It's all coming down now, Tom. Our daughter has brought it to us. Our beautiful, foul-mouthed, illiterate, untamed bitch of a daughter has brought it to us! And Peter, too! Peter's here, too! And just in time!

Jeanine What's going to happen, Ella?

Ella The end, Jeanine! The end is going to happen!

Sound of SIRENS, closer.

Amy Lou Here they come.

Tom OH HELL, GIRL, THERE'LL BE NO ARRESTS AND THERE'LL BE NO ENTRY. I'M THE FATHER!

Sound of more SIRENS.

Amy Lou LET'S STAY RIGHT HERE, TOM!

Tom That's just what we're doin', girl!

Peter TOM? TOM? YOU'RE IN DEEP SHIT, TOM.

Tom So are you, pal.

Ella *(Ominously)* So are you.

TOM just looks at ELLA and smiles. She smiles back and hisses at PETER.

You've done it again, Peter. You've betrayed us again. I think it's sad.

Peter Bullshit!

Ella But that's what you are. *(Hisses)* A betrayer.

Peter It ain't over, Amy Lou. We go on from here.

Amy Lou I SAY IT'S OVER.

Ella Amen. It'll be the Lord that does the finishing now.

Peter The Lord? What are you talking about? *(To TOM)*
YOU'RE GONNA SPEND THE REST OF YOUR LIFE IN THE
STATE PEN.

Tom HELL I WILL. I'LL BURN THIS HOUSE DOWN WITH EVERY-
BODY IN IT 'FORE I TAKE ONE STEP WITH A GUARD DOG.

Ella HEY!

Peter THAT'S GREAT, TOM. THAT'S REASONABLE. YOU FUCKIN'
BRAIN-DAMAGED ASSHOLE.

Tom *(To ELLA)* Wonder who'll be with 'em.

Ella Bill Fraley will be there.
Tom Yeah. And Frank? Frank Stratton?
Ella He's the only other cop.
Amy Lou He's the one asked me to give him head once.
Ella Damned filthy guard dog. He tried to get friendly with your father, time we had that trouble with the marshals.
Tom I wanted to see if he could stand reason. *(Cackling)*
He couldn't.
Peter Reason? Reason?

Sound of more SIRENS.

Tom An' a small army of state troopers. The dogs must have their day. Ella?
Ella I feel right. I feel right, Tom.
Tom ALL RIGHT.
Jeanine Ella? What are you all doing?
Ella *(In that strange prophesizing tone of voice)* We're on the line, Jeanine, that's all.
Peter The line?
Ella Between the dogs and the family—
Tom I'M THE FATHER.
Ella Between the dogs and the old race, the People, the Human Beings.
Tom What hears the electricity of the stars.
Ella You got to sacrifice, and go straight up. You got to go straight up, or get dragged down by the dogs. The time is come. The time is ripe. She doesn't know what she's done, but it's done. It's done, and now we're on the line. Now we have the chance to declare ourselves.

Tom AMEN.

Amy Lou (*Laboring*) The weirdest thing is how fast it happens... like lightning...the world's changed...you're looking out...and you're not you...and the world's not the world...it's new...forever...in a second...

Sound of SIRENS closer.

Ella?...Ella's getting ready to go to Heaven...(To PETER)
Who are you? Why are you standing there watching me?
GET AWAY FROM ME! YOU'VE KILLED MY SWEET BOY AND
THE WHOLE WORLD'S DEAD!

PETER goes to AMY LOU and succeeds in holding her in his arms. She gives up fighting him and subsides.

Peter (*Gently*) She's quiet now, Ella.

ELLA makes a strange keening sound, picks up the tambourine, and starts shaking it.

She's gone.

JEANINE runs out of the house.

Tom Better jump now 'fore the precipice looms up, Pete.

Peter No. I'm staying for the trouble, Tom.

Tom Well, well, look at what's still here, Ella.

Ella Let's go, Tom.

ELLA shakes the tambourine and hums a spiritual as TOM starts nailing boards up over the door.

Tom FRANK STRATTON, I KNOW YOU'RE OUT THERE! I TAKE IT TO YA! FRALEY, I KNOW YOU'RE OUT THERE! I TAKE IT TO YA! WHAT I AM! THE FATHER! THE FATHER! NOBODY GETS IN HERE! I'LL CUT OFF HEADS! I'LL BURN THIS HOUSE DOWN!

BLACKOUT.

*

Epilogue

HARSH LIGHTS DIM UP on the apron and the HOUSE LIGHTS rise to half. JEANINE steps forward, shielding her eyes from the glare. She speaks to whomever will listen:

Jeanine Don't hurt them. They're not bad. They're disappointed, is all. The story didn't come out right and they're disappointed. Tom acts hard, but he don't mean nothing by it. If you'd just leave them be, it'll turn all out right in the morning. I know it will. We can all go away now. They like to get high, but it doesn't last. It won't last till morning. The story's over and then something else happens. That's the story of those two, and my sister, Amy Lou. She went where she shouldn't go, and it happened, and now it's over. She's sorry for it. We all know that. She likes to soar, like Tom and Ella, she likes to fly. And I, too—I love it. Don't we all want to fly

and fly and fly? So you don't need to go in there, because that's what they're doing now—they're flying.

BLACKOUT.

The End