

Twilight Country

a stage play by

Robert Myers

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Characters

Claire - A Writer

Lexi - A Reader

Set

Most of the action takes place in the writer Claire McWhorter's home in the Smoky Mountains in Western North Carolina in 1948. The house is an open, airy modernist home, with clean lines and sharp angles and a picture window Upstage Center, looking out on the mountains, which are lighted differently depending on the time of day of the various scenes. To the left of the window is a large console radio, and on the wall on the right a portrait of an attractive woman with silver hair, Max. On the walls there are several prints of Chinese landscapes, drawings by Claire and a reproduction of a painting by Giotto. The minimalist decoration—a reproduction of a Giacometti sculpture of a cat, a book of photographs by Atget on the coffee table in front of the sofa, etc.—suggests an erudite, cosmopolitan, politically engaged owner. The walls are made of wide panels of knotted pine, and sleek metal bookshelves filled with volumes cover a portion of the wall. In front of the bookshelves is a wooden table with two matching chairs, where Claire and Lexi read and eat. Upstage Right, seen through an open bar, is an elegant, minimalist country kitchen, with refrigerator, stove, etc. Downstage Left is Claire's office, which consists of an oblong worktable with a Remington manual typewriter in

the middle. Midstage Right is a door leading down to the basement.

For the scene at the ophthalmologist's office, Claire's worktable is removed and replaced by an examination table with tonometer. For the scene in which Claire testifies before the committee, the typewriter is replaced by a large metal microphone and the table becomes a witness table. The final scene requires two Adirondack chairs Downstage Right, which are set at angles on the deck of the house. Alongside the chairs Right is a period telescope on a tripod, covered with a cloth, that should be set before the scene.

"When he had spoken, all the twilight country
shook so violently, the terror of it
bathes me with sweat even in memory..."

- Dante
Divina Commedia
Canto III
(trans. John Ciardi)

"I have been trying all my life to identify
myself with the most illiterate and downtrodden."

- Mohandas Gandhi

SCENE ONE

(MUSIC UP ON THE CONSOLE RADIO IN CLAIRE'S LIVING ROOM. LIGHTS UP ON LEXI. A handsome, muscular woman with bright, eyes, and wearing a navy blue shift is seated at the dining room table intently reading a book. As she reads, SHE HUMS A FEW BARS OF THE TUNE ON THE RADIO. She stands and walks into the kitchen, where she takes a spatula and turns over two chicken breasts, which SIZZLE. PHONE RINGS IN THE LIVING ROOM)

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

And that was this week's number one hit, "Nature Boy," performed by Nat King Cole and his band...

(She TURNS DOWN THE RADIO and answers the phone)

LEXI

(Into phone)

McWhorter residence.

(Pause)

May I tell her who's calling?

(Pause)

She's not in at the moment. She's down to the book club in Asheville.

(Pause)

I expect she'll be here shortly.

(Pause)

I'm sorry, I can barely hear you. You callin' long distance?

(Pause)

Can you give me one second?

(She locates a pad and pencil)

Would you spell that out for me?

LEXI (Continued)

(She writes)

H-E-R-A-L-D. T-R-I-B-U-N-E. Okay, got it. Maybe she can go down to Asheville and see if they have a copy at the newsstand.

(Pause)

She'll be pleased to hear it, Mr. Pomeroy. When they're the other kind, she's not fit to live with.

(Pause)

I'll make sure to tell her that too.

(She turns the RADIO BACK UP and walks to the dining room table)

REPORTER'S VOICE (V.O.)

What do you think will be the most decisive issue in this year's presidential election, Senator Shackelford?

SENATOR SHACKELFORD (V.O.)

The main thing on most North Carolina voters' minds is federal interference in local sovereignty. We won't any more tolerate Harry Truman tellin' us to throw white and colored together like beef cubes and carrots in a stewpot than we'll allow these red labor organizers from up north to rile up our nigras in the textile mills. These are excellent jobs, and the colored are lucky to have 'em and..

LEXI

(TURNING OFF THE RADIO)

...you're lucky somebody don't kick you into next week.

(LEXI sits and picks up the book and continues reading. After several moments, CLAIRE enters through the unseen front door Left carrying a white wax-paper bag. She smells the chicken as she walks into the dining room)

CLAIRE

You've started dinner. I'm famished.

(LEXI replaces the book on the table, stands and walks into the kitchen)

LEXI

It's practically done. I was beginning to wonder where you were.

(She turns the chicken)

CLAIRE

(Placing the bag on the table)

I stopped by the Otis Street bakery to buy those cinnamon rolls you like.

LEXI

How was your lecture?

CLAIRE

It wasn't really a lecture. I was asked to judge a short story contest.

LEXI

Who won?

CLAIRE

Nobody.

LEXI

Nobody?

CLAIRE

None of the stories was any good.

LEXI

Contestants must've been pretty disappointed.

CLAIRE

Someone has to uphold the literary standards of the Asheville Ladies' Book Club. Suppose you were asked to judge a cooking contest, and every dish was inedible.

LEXI

Guess I'd share some of my mother's recipes with them.

CLAIRE

That's what I did. Except writing doesn't really have recipes.

LEXI

Maybe do a demonstration.

CLAIRE

I tried that too, but the effects are negligible on people who write sentences like "I was abashed when I descried my betrothed with his inamorata."

LEXI

What does that mean?

CLAIRE

Loosely translated, it means "When I found out my man was steppin' out on me I beat him to a pulp."

LEXI

Why don't they just say that then?

CLAIRE

Because they think literature's about putting on airs, finding a very complicated way to say something that's actually quite simple.

(She picks up the book and looks at it)

Sons and Lovers. Are you enjoying it?

LEXI

I like the parts about minin', but I could do with a little less drinkin' and... whatnot.

CLAIRE

Drinking and whatnot are Lawrence's two favorite subjects. They seem to go hand in hand in Nottinghamshire.

LEXI

And the younger son... he definitely got a thing about his mother.

CLAIRE

So did Lawrence. About women in general, though you can't fault him for that, can you?

(Sees the note beside the phone)

What's this?

LEXI

A Mr. Pomeroy called from New York City.

CLAIRE

(Reading the note aloud)

Herald Tribune.

LEXI

He said there's a piece about you in the paper today.

CLAIRE

A review?

LEXI

Of your new book.

(CLAIRE waits)

He said it's a good one.

CLAIRE

What else did he say?

LEXI

They thought these were your best stories since
"The Good Man."

CLAIRE

Oh.

LEXI

He didn't think you'd be too pleased to hear
that.

CLAIRE

Apparently I could write another *Anna Karenina*,
and they'd still identify me as the author of
"The Good Man."

LEXI

What is "The Good Man"?

CLAIRE

It's a story I wrote when I was young that sort
of made my reputation.

(Pause)

It's about two men. One white and one black... They
work at an auto repair shop.

LEXI

That's the story?

CLAIRE

They're... involved.

LEXI

In fixin' cars?

CLAIRE

With each other.

LEXI

Oh.

CLAIRE

The owner finds them one night out in the salvage yard in the back seat of a Studebaker. It caused quite a stir when it came out.

LEXI

Everybody run out and buy a Studebaker?

CLAIRE

It was banned in Boston, and my picture appeared in the papers with captions like "purveyor of interracial perversion." Max and I got so many crank calls we had to change our number three times.

LEXI

Beats bein' ignored, I suppose.

CLAIRE

That smells delicious. What is it?

LEXI

A special dish I'm making for the first time tonight. It's called Chicken Shackelford.

CLAIRE

Named after our illustrious senator?

LEXI

Up in West Virginia, we had us this game we played so we wouldn't feel so bad about killin' the chicken. We'd give it the name of somebody we

LEXI (Continued)

couldn't stand, and then we'd wring its neck, pluck it and throw it in the skillet.

CLAIRE

Sanders Shackelford certainly deserves to be fricasseed.

LEXI

I thought about replacing the breadcrumbs with crackers, but I didn't want to ruin the recipe just to make a point.

(LEXI arrives at the table and places the two plates on the dining room table)

CLAIRE

Aren't you afraid he might be a little tough?

LEXI

Don't worry, I sprinkled plenty of tenderizer on him.

(She sits across from CLAIRE and they eat)

CLAIRE

This is delicious. And knowing who we're ingesting makes it twice as enticing.

LEXI

That's what makes the game so much fun.

CLAIRE

I had no idea people in West Virginia were so creative.

LEXI

It ain't all sippin' moonshine and strummin' banjos up there. When I worked as events coordinator for the coal company we brought in all kinds of well-known people. Matt Henson, who was the only black man on Admiral Peary's expedition to the North Pole, and Lowell Thomas who interviewed Lawrence of Arabia, and Marian Anderson, who performed *Madame Butterfly*...

CLAIRE

Marian Anderson came to Craig?

LEXI

Thomas even got her autograph. You shoulda seen him when she sang that song at the end...

CLAIRE

"*Con onor muere.*"

LEXI

Before the show, all the white people were jokin' about a bunch of black folks sittin' around listenin' to some mulatto singing in Italian, like we ain't got ears too. Well, it turned out half the crowd was miners from Italy. You shoulda seen them cryin' and shoutin' "bella, bella." That sure shut those white folks up. And when Marian Anderson held that knife to her sons's throat, you coulda heard a pin drop. I remember Thomas turned to me with eyes big as cake plates and said, "I'm gonna do that too, sing in the opera." And he would have... if it hadn't been for the war and what happened afterward... I'm sorry, I don't know how we ended up talkin' about that.

CLAIRE

There's nothing to be sorry about. I wanted to be a concert pianist. I trained for three years at

the conservatory in Richmond, but the night of my final recital my mind went completely blank.

CLAIRE (Continued)

I sat there for five minutes, staring at the keys. Then I stood up and walked off the stage and never went back. Sometimes, when I'm having trouble writing...

(Holds up her two hands like claws)

...I play Scarlatti's sonata in B minor on my typewriter...

(Hums a few bars, crossing her left hand above her right as one does to play the piece)

...And the words flow like a waterfall. I couldn't forget that piece now if I tried.

LEXI

When Thomas was a boy, he used to wake up whistlin'. He could hear a song once and repeat it note for note. Always had a tune on his lips... 'til he came back from the war.

CLAIRE

You shouldn't have made Senator Shackelford so delicious, Lexi. Now I'm feeling guilty. I heard on the car radio that Gandhi's gone on another hunger strike.

(LEXI looks at her)

Gandhi is...

LEXI

I know who Gandhi is. George C. had all his books. He used to lecture me 'bout the Mahatma marchin' with the miners in South Africa and defendin' the untouchables and promotin' *satyagraha*... Standin' firm for the truth.

CLAIRE

Sounds like a very enlightened man, Thomas's father.

LEXI

George C.? He was a saint, everybody said so, except my bosses over at the coal company. They thought he was Satan incarnate 'cause he was trying to organize the mines.

CLAIRE

He was from Craig too?

LEXI

Virginia. His parents were slaves on Patrick Henry's plantation. They both died before he was fifteen, so he had to raise his two sisters by himself, workin' in a tannery. Never went to school a day in his life, but he knew more than most men I ever met.

CLAIRE

Where is he now?

LEXI

I don't really know. He moves around a lot.

(Beat)

So why's Gandhi refusin' to eat?

CLAIRE

He's protesting the British plan to divide his country in two, between Muslims and Hindus.

LEXI

Maybe we should wrap up a piece of this chicken and send it to him.

CLAIRE

India's quite a distance, Lexi, and the whole point of a hunger strike is to deprive himself of food... to shame the British.

LEXI

If they got any shame. That's the problem I got with the idea of non-violent resistance.

CLAIRE

Besides, Hindus are vegetarians. They don't eat meat.

LEXI

I know, but he so scrawny to begin with. Look like he could use a little protein.

CLAIRE

Maybe we could send him some of your macaroni and cheese...

(Takes a bite)

...which, by the way, is out of this world.

LEXI

I make it the way my momma did, with paprika and creamery butter. She was the real cook in the family.

CLAIRE

The chef at the missionary school where I worked in Guilin claimed the Chinese invented pasta. He said Marco Polo stole the recipe and took it back to Italy with him, but it must be the Italians that added the cheese.

LEXI

This recipe's from Roanoke.

CLAIRE

(Beat)

Did you see the snow this afternoon?

LEXI

(Startled)

Snow?

CLAIRE

It didn't last long. Just a few flurries on the road from Mount Crystal.

LEXI

Been clear skies all afternoon up here, Miss McWhorter.

(PHONE RINGS)

CLAIRE

I think telephones have magnets that make people call in the middle of dinner.

(Stands up and picks up the phone.
As she speaks into the phone, she
looks at the painting of a woman on
the wall behind her)

Hello.

(Pause)

This is she.

(Pause)

Hi, Sally.

(Pause)

Bill Pomeroy called to tell me.

(Pause)

I *am* pleased. My mind's just on the new manuscript.

(Pause)

I've been working like a mule, though I wasted the whole afternoon down at the Asheville Ladies' Bookclub.

(Pause)

No, I don't think you'll find any budding authors there.

(Pause)

I hope it's not *too* controversial. I don't need any more scandal at my age.

CLAIRE (Continued)

(Pause)

That's perfect. Just drop it in the mail. That way I won't have to scrounge up a copy down here.

(Pause)

I'm hoping to send you the new book next week. I'm sure it'll raise a few hackles around here.

(Pause)

Senator Shackelford is already threatening to convene a congressional committee to expose me as a pink, miscegenist nymphomaniac. Fortunately, no one in North Carolina seems to know what that means.

(Pause)

No, you can not print that on the book jacket.

(Pause)

We'll talk on Friday.

(She hangs up. To LEXI, referring to the painting of the woman)

I never could get the eyes right. There's another one I did of her on her horse, right after we met... but it was destroyed in the fire.

LEXI

She's a nice lookin' woman.

CLAIRE

You should've seen her when she was young. She looked like Loretta Young. Long, wavy black hair, but when she turned thirty, it went silver in six months. Her mother's whole family had hair that color.

(Returning to the table)

Did you get the eggs from Mr. Rollins?

LEXI

He didn't have any. One of the hens passed day before yesterday, and he says the other one stopped layin'.

CLAIRE

She's in mourning?

LEXI

On strike, according to Mr. Rollins.

CLAIRE

That's the first time I've ever heard of a hen involved in a labor dispute.

LEXI

He said it happened the last time one died. He's got to buy another hen, but until he does we're gonna have to get our eggs from somewhere else.

CLAIRE

I guess we're both having cinnamon rolls from the Otis Street Bakery for breakfast.

LEXI

I remember once there was a wildcat strike in Craig that lasted forty-two days.

CLAIRE

I hope we don't have to wait that long for Mr. Rollins' hen.

LEXI

The whole town turned into a carnival. People bakin' blackberry pies, washin' each others clothes, takin' turns standin' watch in case the company thugs tried to sneak into the miners' camp. We kids was disappointed when it ended 'til my mama explained if daddy didn't go back to work wasn't any of us gonna eat.

CLAIRE

Your father was a miner?

LEXI

Electrician. He supervised a crew that kept the shafts lighted for almost twenty years. Last three he could barely breathe. Black lung got him.

CLAIRE

My mother cleaned cotton dust off spindles in the mill in Gastonia. She was fired in the strike in '29, so she went to work as a nurse's aide, but it was too late by then. She already had emphysema.

LEXI

That's where your school was? Gastonia?

CLAIRE

Outside, on the road to Hickory. Max found the land one day when she was horseback riding. She said, "It's the prettiest piece of Piedmont you even laid eyes on," and it was. A sloping ridge in a sea of green, surrounded by a stand of sycamore trees.

LEXI

You built it, just the two of you?

CLAIRE

Every stick. Our arms ached for a month from sawing, but we'd built our own little *scuola rustica*. The only one in the state that admitted everybody, regardless of race, age or disabilities.

LEXI

Your folks must've been mighty proud.

CLAIRE

My mother had passed away by then, and my father was a born engineer, but he had no respect for what he called "book learnin'." I remember when I won the scholarship to study in Florence, he asked me why I'd want to waste a year of my life looking at pictures in Italy.

LEXI

I loved studyin', but my mother had a bad back from pickin' tobacco so when my father passed somebody had to support us. I went to work in the house of Mrs. Riley, the wife of one of the superintendents. School in Craig didn't go past eighth grade, anyways.

CLAIRE

It's never too late, Lexi.

LEXI

That's what George C. used to tell me:
"Everything you need to know's in books. All you got to do is read 'em."

CLAIRE

He was brilliant, this George C., wasn't he?

LEXI

Yeah, he was.

CLAIRE

Looks like we've succeeded in devouring Senator Shackelford.

LEXI

Next time we'll make it with the entire chicken. Half the fun is debonin' him.

CLAIRE

Did you see that picture of him in the paper yesterday standing on his head? He said he drinks a quart of prune juice every morning so he'll stay regular.

LEXI

I imagine he's got a whole lot of waste he needs to flush out of his system.

(PHONE RINGS. CLAIRE stands)

CLAIRE

That must be Bill Pomeroy.
(She picks up the phone)
Hello... Hello... McWhorter residence.

LEXI

Who was that?

CLAIRE

Nobody.

LEXI

Been happenin' a lot lately. Somebody called twice this mornin' and hung up.

CLAIRE

It's probably just a wrong number.

LEXI

Wrong number doesn't sit there and say nothin'. You know they're there 'cause you can hear 'em on the other end.

CLAIRE

If it's important, they'll call back.
(Standing by the window)
Look at the mountains.

LEXI

Sun settin' and the moon risin' make a beautiful combination.

CLAIRE

See the color of that stand of pines?

LEXI

I didn't know there was such a thing as blue spruce 'til I moved down here.

CLAIRE

The first words I learned in Chinese were "evergreen tree."

LEXI

In West Virginia we got balsam fir and pitch pine, but they really are green.

CLAIRE

I didn't realize I was learning to paint *and* write at the same time.

LEXI

I love mist on the mountains. Me and my sister used to wake up at five AM to make my father breakfast. We'd watch him and the miners comin' down from the manway with lanterns shinin' on they heads, the coke ovens glowin' behind 'em.

CLAIRE

It's the hardest thing to paint: fog. Little wisps of texture. I must've practiced those strokes a thousand times.

LEXI

Somethin' soothin' about bein' up here.

CLAIRE

Enjoy it while it lasts. When my ecumenical convocation starts, you'll have to go down to Asheville to find some peace.

(Pause)

It was certainly a stroke of luck finding this place after the fire... and you.

LEXI

That goes double, Miss McWhorter. I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't walked into the Otis Street Bakery.

CLAIRE

We owe our relationship to cinnamon rolls and coconut cake.

LEXI

I sure wasn't plannin' on stayin' in North Carolina. I just knew I had to get out of Craig...

CLAIRE

When something horrible happens you have to put distance between you and it.

LEXI

I couldn't believe you knew about Thomas.

CLAIRE

The story was in the all the papers up North.

LEXI

I knew when George C. brought in those investigators from Philadelphia they're was gonna be more trouble. West Virginians don't exactly roll out the red carpet for outsiders.

CLAIRE

Unfortunately, he's not the only one it happened to. Dozens of black veterans have been attacked since the war ended. I can't even imagine it..

LEXI

We were all so proud of him.

CLAIRE

I remember during the War you'd see German POWs riding in the first-class car on the train while we were dragging Japanese-Americans off to concentration camps.

LEXI

He was the first colored Marine in the state. They awarded him the silver star for savin' his white buddies on Okinawa.

CLAIRE

They were your neighbors, the ones who did it? The people he grew up with?

LEXI

(She takes velvet case out of her pocket)

I can't even bring myself to open the case it came in.

(She puts it away)

CLAIRE

He was a real hero.

(Beat)

Looks like it's time to replace these blinds.

LEXI

Seem fine to me.

CLAIRE

The wood must've warped.

LEXI

Didn't notice anything when I dusted 'em on Tuesday.

CLAIRE

See the little squiggles in the wood.

LEXI

Which squiggles is that?

CLAIRE

The curves.

LEXI

They're straight as a plum line, Miss McWhorter.

CLAIRE

The wood's bowed, Lexi.

(She runs her fingers along the blinds, and it is obvious the wood is not curved)

You're right, they're straight.

LEXI

By the way, I checked the thermometer this afternoon. It was fifty-two degrees. There weren't no snow on the mountain.

CLAIRE

Of course there was snow.

LEXI

Maybe you ought to get your eyeglass prescription checked.

CLAIRE

There's nothing wrong with my eyes.

LEXI

If you want, I'll drive you down to Asheville to see the optometrist.

CLAIRE

I can see fine. I'll make an appointment when I finish my manuscript.

LEXI

I made us some peach cobbler for dessert.

CLAIRE

No thank you.

LEXI

Senator Shackelford give you indigestion?

CLAIRE

I'm watching my weight.

LEXI

So am I. And you know what? Every time I look, it goes up.

CLAIRE

Okay, I'll have slice.

LEXI

You want it à la mode?

CLAIRE

I believe that's what the devil asked Jesus after he'd fasted for forty days.

LEXI

We sure can't send any vanilla ice cream to Mr. Gandhi.

CLAIRE

Okay, but just one scoop.

(LIGHTS FADE ON LIVING ROOM. LIGHTS UP ON Claire's study Left. She sits at her typewriter, her hands raised in the air above the keyboard for several moments. MUSIC UP: "SONATA IN B MINOR," BY SCARLATTI. She begins to type rapidly on her manual typewriter, crossing her right hand over her left as Scarlatti's piece requires. THE MANUAL REMINGTON TYPEWRITER CLACKS IN COUNTERPOINT TO THE MUSIC. CLAIRE pulls out the paper, changes a sentence with a pencil and puts another piece of paper into the typewriter. MUSIC SLOWLY CROSSFADES INTO "SLOW BOAT TO CHINA," AS CLAIRE continues typing. LIGHTS FADE)

SCENE TWO

(MUSIC CONTINUES UP: "SLOW BOAT TO CHINA" ON THE RADIO IN CLAIRE'S LIVING ROOM. CLAIRE'S OFFICE IS NOW TRANSFORMED INTO AN OPHTHALMOLOGIST'S OFFICE IN ASHEVILLE by replacing her desk with an examination table with a tonometer to test for glaucoma on it. LIGHTS UP ON THE OFFICE and on LEXI, who is at the table reading *Sons and Lovers* on a BRIGHT AFTERNOON several days later. We simultaneously see LEXI and CLAIRE, who is calling out the letters from an eye test on the poster in front of her to her UNSEEN EYE DOCTOR)

CLAIRE

(Pause as she looks)

"L"? "B"...I think ..."E"?

(Another pause)

...maybe "O."

(PHONE RINGS. LEXI TURNS MUSIC DOWN. Answers phone)

LEXI

McWhorter residence.

CLAIRE

That looks like an "E" too, but I guess it can't be.

LEXI

Hello?

(Pause)

Why didn't you say somethin'? I was about to hang up.

CLAIRE

"Z"? It could also be an "S." It's not a five, is it? You don't use numbers, do you?

LEXI

I'm sorry to be short with you, Mr. Rollins. We're gettin' a lotta crank calls around here lately.

CLAIRE

E? ...B? ...P? I have no idea. I need my glasses... That was a joke, Doctor Reynolds.

(CLAIRE slides over and puts her chin on the chin-rest of the tonometer. She waits with her eyes wide open for puffs of air to be shot into her pupils)

LEXI

Reason I called is eggs. Miss McWhorter's having an ecumenical convocation next weekend, and I need at least seven dozen.

CLAIRE

(As the air is squirted into her wide open pupil)

I didn't feel anything. That's good, isn't it?

LEXI

Seem like she's invited everybody and his brother up here. She's havin' over a hundred and twenty-five people stayin' in the cabins at the summer camp... Rabbi from Atlanta, labor leader from Greenville, imam... or whatever... from over to Morocco, Baptist ministers from Mississippi. Even a lady monk from where Miss McWhorter was a missionary in China.

CLAIRE

I can't come back down tomorrow. I have a deadline, and I'm hosting a meeting up on the mountain. I'd love for you to come if you can.

LEXI

And thirty-two non-human guests. That's what she calls the critters. Half a dozen rabbits from the civil rights camp in Tennessee, coupla peacocks from South Carolina, a elephant from Arkansas that retired from the zoo. She said she wanted a skunk too, but Senator Shackelford wasn't available.

CLAIRE

There's nothing subversive about my meeting.

LEXI

The eggs is just for the humans. I promise you, Mr. Rollins.

(A BRIGHT LIGHT SHINES ON CLAIRE'S LEFT EYE, THEN HER RIGHT)

CLAIRE

It's been a bit blurry. Some of the letters in my manuscripts are smudged, but I just assumed I needed to clean my typewriter keys with a toothbrush.

LEXI

I need enough to make a couple of large platters of deviled eggs.

CLAIRE

Straight lines have a little zig-zag, and sometimes I see a hole where there isn't one. But that's just age, right?

LEXI

That's how you got her layin' eggs again? Lettin' her look at the TV?

CLAIRE

(Trying to laugh it off)

The other day I even thought it was snowing. When I got home Lexi said it was fifty degrees.

LEXI

She really thinks he's a chicken too? I hope they keep showin' 'The Phil Silvers Show' every evenin' then. Don't no one's eggs taste like your hen's do.

CLAIRE

That's impossible. The timing is terrible.

LEXI

I'll take as many as you can give me.

CLAIRE

You said in October I had three years, not six months.

LEXI

Seven dozen. Eight if she can lay 'em. Okay, we'll talk on Tuesday.

(She hangs up)

CLAIRE

How will I write?

(LIGHTS DOWN ABRUPTLY ON CLAIRE. LIGHTS REMAIN UP ON LEXI, who is WHISTLING "SLOW BOAT TO CHINA" as she dusts books, stopping from time to time to look inside them. She

sits and continues reading *Sons and*

Lovers. After a minute, she reaches over to the radio to turn on the music)

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

...a live overseas telephone connection to Delhi, India. Speaking now is the recently elected president of the new state of India, Jawaharal Nehru...

NEHRU (V.O.)

Friends and comrades, the light has gone out of our lives, and there is darkness everywhere, and I do not quite know what to tell you or how to say it. Our beloved leader, Bapu as we called him, the father of the nation, is no more.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

There you've heard the confirmation from India's president. The country's revolutionary hero, Mahatma Gandhi, is dead, apparently shot at point blank range...

LEXI

Oh, my god.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

...this morning in Delhi by a Hindu radical. We will update you as more details become available.

(ORCHESTRAL MUSIC FROM THE RADIO.
LEXI puts the book down, obviously perturbed. PHONE RINGS. SHE TURNS DOWN MUSIC ON THE RADIO)

LEXI

(Into phone)

McWhorter residence. Hello? Mr. Rollins?

(Pause)

Oh, you.

(She quickly hangs up, tries to read but has trouble concentrating. After a few moments, CLAIRE, who appears agitated, enters from the front door Left)

CLAIRE

I forgot to order the cakes from the Otis Street Bakery.

LEXI

No rush. We've still got time.

CLAIRE

How many do we need? Exactly.

LEXI

I figure about six coconut cakes, four pineapple upside-down, three German chocolate. People love those.

CLAIRE

I'll order five. What about pies?

LEXI

Half a dozen egg custard, four cherry pies, three strawberry rhubarb..

CLAIRE

I don't want to take a chance we'll run out of food.

LEXI

We'll order some pecan pies then. They go good with coffee.

CLAIRE

Have you made a list?

LEXI

I'm on top of it, Miss McWhorter. I was the events coordinator for the Pocahontas coal company for fifteen years.

CLAIRE

I can stop at the bakery in the morning and give them the order.

LEXI

So can I. I live in Asheville.

CLAIRE

I have to go back down tomorrow for another appointment.

LEXI

Another appointment?

CLAIRE

Did anyone call?

LEXI

Nobody... except the... breathin' fella. And Mr. Rollins about eggs. His hen's layin' again. He's got her watchin' TV.

CLAIRE

TV?

LEXI

She's mistakin' some bald fella on television for another chicken. He says she's layin' mornin', noon and night now, and he didn't even have to get another hen. I ordered eight dozen.

CLAIRE

Shouldn't we get more?

LEXI

Ninety-six is a lot of deviled eggs, Miss McWhorter. I told him we might could use ten dozen. What's wrong?

CLAIRE

Wrong?

LEXI

You heard about Mr. Gandhi, didn't you?

(Pause)

He's been shot dead.

CLAIRE

Oh, no. When?

LEXI

Just now. President of India, Nehru, made the announcement on the radio.

CLAIRE

How horrible. What happened? Who did it?

LEXI

Somebody shot him. Another Hindu, they think.

CLAIRE

His own people killed him?

LEXI

That's what they said on the radio.

CLAIRE

You disagree with peaceful protest against hatred, so you murder Mahatma Gandhi?

LEXI

I told you, there's some folks who got no shame at all. You didn't hear?

CLAIRE

I wasn't listening to the radio.

LEXI

What is it, your book?

CLAIRE

My book?

LEXI

You got a bad review, didn't you?

CLAIRE

I didn't get a bad review.

(Beat)

Will you drive me to town tomorrow?

LEXI

Of course. What did the eye doctor say?

CLAIRE

You were right, as always. My prescription's no good.

LEXI

He give you a new one?

CLAIRE

I'm going to talk to him about it tomorrow.

LEXI

Tomorrow?

CLAIRE

What are you planning for the main course?

LEXI

There's five turkeys, ten roast chickens, mushroom stuffin', black-eyed peas, yams, collards, cornbread and buttermilk biscuits.

CLAIRE

What about accommodations and the set-up for the banquet?

LEXI

Lucille and her cousin are gonna sweep out the cabins down at the camp on Tuesday and clean out the picnic shelter, and her brother, Maurice, is gonna deliver the tables, chairs and silverware.

CLAIRE

I need to work some on my manuscript.

LEXI

Just go on into your study. I'll let you know when supper's on.

CLAIRE

The end came to me driving up from Asheville.

LEXI

The end of what?

CLAIRE

My novel. It's never happened before.

LEXI

You better go write it down before you forget it then.

CLAIRE

I couldn't forget it if I tried. It's as if Molly were sitting there beside me.

LEXI

Who's Molly?

CLAIRE

The main character in my book. She's a slave who refuses her master's advances. His revenge is to sell her daughter. When she finds out, she doesn't even think about it. She leaps on him, grabs him by the throat and chokes him to death. In the car on the way up from Asheville, she delivered her final speech to me word for word, the one she gives just before they hang her.

LEXI

She spoke to you?

CLAIRE

Just like you're speaking to me now. Do you believe in maternal instinct, Lexi?

LEXI

Maternal instinct?

CLAIRE

I've taught dozens of children, raised them as if they were my own, but I've never had one from my flesh and blood. Can you literally feel what your child's feeling?

LEXI

You mean like a mountain lion knowin' when her cub's in trouble?

CLAIRE

Does it exist, or is it just something we pretend is true to each other?

LEXI

I don't know, but I know the mornin' my sister told me they threw Thomas off that train trestle, I started fallin' too, and I been fallin' ever since.

CLAIRE

(Looking out at the mountains)

My eyes are dying, Lexi.

LEXI

Dyin'?

CLAIRE

I'm going blind. That's what Dr. Reynolds told me this morning.

LEXI

Blind?

CLAIRE

In both eyes.

LEXI

Can't you do a operation or somethin'?

CLAIRE

My grandmother had it. And so did her sister. I noticed last summer my peripheral vision was fading. When I told Dr. Reynolds, he said I had several years before the onset. Unfortunately, it came on much faster.

LEXI

Maybe there's some kind of medicine. What doctors are doin' these days is a miracle, Miss McWhorter.

CLAIRE

The rods and cones on my retina are disappearing. In a month the light will be gone forever.

LEXI

I'm terribly sorry.

CLAIRE

I don't want anyone to know.

LEXI

Of course. Whatever you want, you just say it.

CLAIRE

I'm counting on you to help me through the convocation. This meeting is very important to me.

LEXI

You're invitin' handicapped, hard o' hearin', wheelchair-bound, people who have polio. There's no reason for you to hide your own infirmity.

CLAIRE

I've been fighting hate for thirty years. I don't want the movement to be reduced to some sort of personal tragedy.

(She looks at the books on the shelf)

How will I read?

LEXI

You can hire a typist. She can read back what you wrote.

CLAIRE

I mean read... my books. It's like eating. I'll starve without them.

LEXI

I'm sure one of the ladies from down to the book club would love to read to you.

CLAIRE

Can you imagine one of them reading D.H. Lawrence out loud? We'd have to call an ambulance.

LEXI

(Pause)

I could read to you.

CLAIRE

You?

LEXI

I know how to read.

CLAIRE

Of course you do.

LEXI

I been readin' more than ever since I started workin' for you. And I read lots of recipes. I don't follow 'em necessarily, but I like to see what other cooks are doin' in the kitchen. I've got a pleasin' voice, too, least folks say I do.

CLAIRE

We'll see. Can I ask you one more favor?

LEXI

Anything.

CLAIRE

Call me Claire. Unless you want me to start calling you Miss Ferguson, like we're two old British biddies taking tea.

LEXI

All right.

CLAIRE

(Looking out at the mountains)

It's terrible, isn't it... what they did to Gandhi.

(LIGHTS FADE. MUSIC UP: "DEEP RIVER," SUNG BY MARIAN ANDERSON)

SCENE THREE

(MUSIC REMAINS UP ON RADIO IN CLAIRES LIVING ROOM. LIGHTS UP ON CLAIRES LIVING ROOM AND OFFICE on a bright spring morning a couple of weeks later. CLAIRE walks from the office to the chair beside the window that looks out on the mountains, using her hand once or twice on the doorframe and arm of the chair to guide her path. LEXI is in the kitchen trimming the fat off of a piece of beef for the stew she is preparing for lunch. She rinses her hands and dries them on her apron. MUSIC DOWN)

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

And now for the latest headlines. President Truman has sent a special message to Congress this morning calling for civil rights legislation with anti-lynching and anti-poll tax provisions. He has called for an end to segregation on interstate transportation and instructed the Secretary of Defense to come up with a plan to eliminate discrimination in the armed forces. In other news...

(CLAIRE TURNS OFF THE RADIO)

CLAIRE

Looks like our president has finally grown a backbone.

LEXI

Now the cows is out of the barn, he gonna close the door.

CLAIRE

As Winston Churchill said, Harry Truman is a very modest man... with a lot to be modest about.

LEXI

Better late than never, I guess. I wasn't gonna vote for him anyway.

CLAIRE

Who are you planning to vote for?

LEXI

I was raised Republican.

CLAIRE

Republican?

LEXI

Both my parents were slaves, Lincoln was a Republican, and he freed the slaves, so they were Republicans.

CLAIRE

That was a long time ago.

LEXI

Being a slave's not something you're likely to forget. What about you?

CLAIRE

I'm a Democrat. It's the party of FDR.

LEXI

It's also the party of Sanders Shackelford.

CLAIRE

That's a very unfortunate coincidence.

LEXI

And FDR's dead, so that's gonna make it harder to vote for him.

CLAIRE

What time it is?

LEXI

Quarter past ten.

CLAIRE

Is the mist still on the mountains?

LEXI

Clear as a bell this morning.

CLAIRE

No snow?

LEXI

No snow. Just a few wildflowers peekin' up out of the pinestraw.

CLAIRE

Thank goodness the rain didn't' spoil our convocation.

LEXI

It couldn't have gone much smoother.

CLAIRE

Do you think anyone noticed my... situation?

LEXI

Nobody had a clue.

CLAIRE

Some man at the next table kept breathing in my face, saying, "You have no idea what you mean to me, Miss McWhorter." I didn't have the heart to tell him, "I have no idea who you are."

LEXI

I think he was that labor organizer from Greenville, Mr. Greer.

CLAIRE

I could feel his beard against my shoulder, so I thought he was Rabbi Arnold from Atlanta.

LEXI

No, that wasn't him. He spent the afternoon goin' round with your friend that Imam from Morocco you met in Italy.

CLAIRE

Karim Abdelkader? He's the gentlest man I've ever met.

LEXI

He look like he was gonna take a swing at the rabbi.

CLAIRE

That would've been unfortunate at an ecumenical convocation.

LEXI

Professor Cole from Morehouse had to step in and separate 'em.

CLAIRE

They must've been fighting over Palestine.

LEXI

Whatever it was, they was actin' like Joe Louis and Jersey Joe Walcott at the weigh-in.

CLAIRE

Did we have enough food for everybody?

LEXI

I must admit, I had my doubts. That chemistry teacher in the wheelchair from Charlotte devoured a dozen deviled eggs, and Reverend Mayfield from Mississippi ate a whole roast turkey by himself.

CLAIRE

I can't point any fingers. It was the worst week of my life, and I still couldn't stop eating.

LEXI

I was afraid if you couldn't see the food you'd lose your appetite.

CLAIRE

I remember thinking 'What good can come out of something this horrible?' And then I thought... 'I'll eat less, I'll lose weight.' That idea didn't survive the first helping of your mushroom stuffing.

LEXI

I'm glad you're still able to enjoy my cookin'.

CLAIRE

I enjoyed it so much I couldn't fit into my dress this morning. Is there anything left?

LEXI

There's some candied yams and a bowl of black-eyed peas.

CLAIRE

That's it?

LEXI

And part of a pineapple upside-down cake.

CLAIRE

We've been descended upon by a plague of left-wing locusts, Lexi.

LEXI

You know what the most beautiful moment was? Right at the end of Miss Chunguang's speech when she be was talkin' about how Gandhi's passin' means folks got to re-dedicate themselves to standin' firm for the truth, and that peacock wandered into the picnic shelter. The whole meetin' people was tryin' to coax that pea-brained bird into showin' his tail feathers, and he wouldn't give 'em the time of day. Then all of a sudden, he opens up right there, just like a rainbow, all brown and green and turquoise. Some folks was actually cryin'.

CLAIRE

I appreciate your helping me through it.

LEXI

Guess I better get started with the stew.

CLAIRE

I thought you were going to read to me.

LEXI

Right now?

CLAIRE

It's either that or more news about Harry Truman.

LEXI

What do you want me to read?

CLAIRE

Why don't you pick something.

(LEXI searches for a book)

LEXI

How 'bout this one? It's not too big. It's called... *Kim*.

CLAIRE

That's a good choice.

LEXI

What's it about?

CLAIRE

It's about two friends. A boy and a wise man, in India, by Rudyard Kipling. He grew up there. If Senator Shackelford wrote wonderful novels they'd be like Rudyard Kipling's.

LEXI

Let's pick somethin' else, then. What is this? *Paradoxes*, by Unamuno.

CLAIRE

It means contradictions. He's Spanish, and very intelligent, but it's not really a story.

LEXI

There's *The Magic Mountain*, by Thomas Mann.

CLAIRE

That would be perfect, but I just read it.

LEXI

Crime and Punishment. What's that about?

CLAIRE

It's about a man in Russia who murders an old lady with a hatchet for no reason.

LEXI

That's probably not the best thing for you to be
readin' right now.

LEXI (Continued)

(Selects another book)

There's this one.

(Reading)

The Function of the Orgasm.

CLAIRE

That's not a novel either.

LEXI

I didn't think it was. You've read it already?

CLAIRE

I skimmed it when it came out.

LEXI

You aren't gonna tell me what it's about?

CLAIRE

I don't want to spoil the ending.

LEXI

I bet I can guess.

CLAIRE

Republicans aren't opposed to orgasms, are they?

LEXI

Course not. It's in our party platform. We support them whether they've got a function or not.

(Picks up another book)

How 'bout this one? *The Divine Comedy*, by Dante.

CLAIRE

That's an excellent choice.

LEXI

Sounds like it might cheer you up.

CLAIRE

Maybe I can even teach you a little Italian.

LEXI

Let's see how I do with the English first. Should I just start from the beginning?

CLAIRE

No, let's jump right in. Why don't you begin at the end of Canto III.

LEXI

Don't I need to know how it begins?

CLAIRE

I'll fill you in as we go along. See if you can find the part where Virgil says, "all who die in the shadow of God's wrath..." I may have actually marked it.

LEXI

(Turns the pages, searching)

This looks like it.

(Reading)

"My son," the courteous master said to me.

CLAIRE

That's it. Virgil's speaking. He's Dante's guide, and he's a poet too. They're together on a quest.

LEXI

(Reading)

all who die in the shadow of God's wrath
converge to this from every clime and
country.

And all pass over eagerly, for here
Divine Justice transforms and spurs them so
their dread turns wish: they yearn for what

they fear

LEXI (Continued)

(Speaking)

Sounds a bit like scripture. What does it mean?

CLAIRE

It means people get what they wish for... which becomes their punishment.

LEXI

That's kinda confusin'.

CLAIRE

It's a paradox, like the ones in Unamuno's book.

LEXI

(Reading)

No soul in Grace comes ever to this crossing;
therefore if...

(She pronounces the name with a
"ch, as in "choose")

Charon...

CLAIRE

(Pronouncing it correctly)

Ka-ron. He's the boatman, who's taking them
across the river in his ferry.

LEXI

(Reading, this time with a "K")

...if Charon rages at your presence
you will understand the reason for his
cursing.

When he had spoken, all the twilight country
shook so violently, the terror of it
bathes me with sweat even in memory;

CLAIRE

Frightening image, isn't it?

LEXI

It is sort of spooky.

(Reading)

...the tear-soaked ground gave out a sigh of
wind...

(Speaking)

That's a pretty line. Reminds me of a Paul
Robeson song.

CLAIRE

Dante's fond of personifications too.

LEXI

(Reading)

...that spewed itself in flame on a red sky.
and all my shattered senses left me. Blind...

CLAIRE

Go on, please.

LEXI

(Reading)

...Blind, like one whom sleep comes over in a
swoon...
I stumbled into darkness and went down.

CLAIRE

Brava, that was beautiful.

LEXI

You liked it?

CLAIRE

You are a wonderful reader.

LEXI

Thank you.

CLAIRE

You have such a sense of drama. If they ever invite me back to the book club, I'm taking you with me.

LEXI

So, where exactly is it they're goin' down to?

CLAIRE

Hell.

LEXI

Hell?

CLAIRE

That's where the story takes place.

LEXI

Why do you want to read somethin' like this now?

CLAIRE

I like how it sounds, don't you?

LEXI

I suppose, but couldn't we choose somethin' a bit more upliftin'?

CLAIRE

It helps to hear about people who are worse off than you are. I don't want to start feeling sorry for myself.

LEXI

There's no need to rub your nose in it.

CLAIRE

We'll read some more tomorrow. If you still think it's too grim, we'll find something else.

LEXI

I better get started with the stew.

(PHONE RINGS. CLAIRE reaches over the tabletop with her hand and finds the phone as LEXI walks toward the kitchen)

CLAIRE

Hello?

(Pause)

Hi, Bill.

(Pause)

I'm all right. How are you?

(Pause)

Really? What did you think?

(Long pause)

That's good to hear.

(Pause)

When will that be?

(Pause)

I could certainly use it. I just spent eight hundred dollars on chicken and pecan pies for my ecumenical convocation.

(Pause)

It was a big success. We're planning a civil rights conference in October in Birmingham.

(Pause)

Not a lot. Life's slow down here in the Smokies.

(Pause)

Fine, we'll talk on Friday.

(Hangs up. To LEXI)

That was Mr. Pomeroy. He loved my new novel. They're publishing an excerpt in *Manhattan Journal* next week, and they're paying me a thousand dollars.

LEXI

That's wonderful.

(Pause)

So, when are you gonna start tellin' people about what happened?

CLAIRE

I'm not ready yet.

LEXI

They gonna figure out somethin's wrong soon enough.

CLAIRE

I'll tell them then.

LEXI

I could see could I help you find that typist we were talkin' about.

CLAIRE

There's nothing to type. I'm not writing anymore.

LEXI

You could just tell me what's in your head, and I could write it down for you.

CLAIRE

What's in my head, Lexi, I can't begin to find the words for.

(She stands and walks back into her office, guiding herself with her hands. MUSIC UP: "SONATA IN B MINOR," BY SCARLATTI)

SCENE FOUR

(MUSIC CONTINUES UP. LIGHTS UP ON CLAIRE, EARLY MORNING. She is sitting at her typewriter, hands raised above the keyboard, several ripped pages on the floor beside her. She hesitates, then begins to type IN COUNTERPOINT TO THE MUSIC. MUSIC STOPS ABRUPTLY. She sits with her hands above the keyboard, hesitating. MUSIC UP AGAIN AS SHE SUDDENLY BEGINS TYPING. She types several lines and STOPS ABRUPTLY. THE MUSIC STOPS IN MID-NOTE. She yanks the paper out of the typewriter and rips it down the middle, throwing a piece on either side. As she inserts another page, LEXI opens the back door, carrying a bag with a newspaper sticking out in one hand and a small suitcase in the other. She puts the suitcase on the floor and the bag on the table)

LEXI

(She takes the newspaper out of the bag)

Claire?

CLAIRE

I'm in here.

LEXI

(Pleased)

You gettin' some work done this mornin'?

(LEXI, with the newspaper under her arm, enters CLAIRE'S office)

CLAIRE

I've finished five pages.

LEXI

That's wonderful.

(LEXI looks down and surveys the
torn pages on the floor. She picks
them up)

Guess you gotta start somewhere.

CLAIRE

How about the bottom?

LEXI

You feelin' sorta blue this mornin'?

CLAIRE

Downright indigo. Not even Scarlatti's sonata is
working.

LEXI

I brought you a box of cinnamon rolls.

CLAIRE

I ate already, black coffee and a banana.

LEXI

No wonder no words are flowin' out of your brain.
You're starvin'. Let me make you a proper
breakfast.

CLAIRE

I'm not hungry.

LEXI

That's ashamed 'cause we're havin' those chicken
livers with green onions you like so much for
lunch.

CLAIRE

Even your cooking can't lift me out of my gloom today, Lexi.

LEXI

I brought you the newspaper.

(Beat)

You're in it, on the front page.

CLAIRE

So I've heard. Mr. Rollins called last night to tell me I was also on the TV. He was so excited I had to hold the phone two feet from my ear. I don't think he would've cared if I'd been charged with an ax murder.

LEXI

The headline says "Local Writer Called to Testify," and there's a picture of you right beside it.

CLAIRE

According to Sally Winters, who phoned from New York, I've been subpoenaed to appear before Senator Shackelford's committee.

LEXI

What exactly are you supposed to testify about?

CLAIRE

Subversion. Our benevolent solon says he has proof the ecumenical convocation was actually a training camp for treason.

LEXI

Training camp for treason?

CLAIRE

Sally's friend in Washington says Shackelford has a picture of Chunguang with Mao Tse Tung.

LEXI

The communist leader from China?

CLAIRE

Shackelford claims she's a spy.

LEXI

Sounds like he stood on his head so long some of that waste seeped down into his brain.

CLAIRE

Other senators suggested a closed session, but he's demanding a public interrogation.

LEXI

Accordin' to the newspaper, they're gonna put it on television.

CLAIRE

The loonies will love it. An electronic star chamber with a subversive, sex-crazed, lady scribbler.

LEXI

Why don't you just tell 'em the truth?

CLAIRE

You mean that the event coordinator was a secret Republican?

LEXI

No secret about it. Besides, all most folks did was eat.

CLAIRE

Maybe gluttony is seditious now too. Fortunately there was no Chinese food on the menu.

LEXI

And as far as the speeches, I've heard fierier sermons at the Destiny Baptist Church in Craig.

CLAIRE

By the time Shackelford and his crew get through, it'll sound like the sequel to Dostoevsky's *Possessed*. They'll read a list of foreign names, show the picture of Chunguang and the communists and quote the most lurid passages from my fiction.

LEXI

You mean like that scene in "The Good Man"?

CLAIRE

You read it?

LEXI

I borrowed it from your bookshelf.

CLAIRE

What did you think?

LEXI

I learned a lot.

CLAIRE

Learned a lot?

LEXI

About what it is two men do with each other.

CLAIRE

It's a literary text not a hydraulics manual.

LEXI

Well, I sure won't be ridin' in the backseat of no Studebakers anytime soon.

CLAIRE

What did you think of the words?

LEXI

You definitely got a way with 'em. I learned a couple I didn't even know existed. When I went lookin' for 'em in the dictionary I couldn't find the definition.

CLAIRE

They're what Dante calls the *volgare illustre*, the noble vernacular. He was one of the first writers to use the language people actually speak.

LEXI

I don't recall hearin' anyone use those words. If I'd said 'em in my house, my momma would've washed my mouth out with soap.

CLAIRE

Lovers use words in private that aren't intended for public consumption.

LEXI

How did they end up in your book then?

CLAIRE

It's called poetic license. It's what writers do.

LEXI

That's what you're afraid they're gonna read on TV... the noble vernacular?

CLAIRE

Yes.

LEXI

Maybe it would be better if you just sat there and said nothin'.

CLAIRE

If I do that, they'll claim I have something to hide. They'll accuse me of covering up for my subversive comrades.

LEXI

No wonder you're feelin' down.

CLAIRE

I'm not worried about myself. Shackelford has a list of other witnesses he's planning to call. He'll try to force them to finger their friends. If they don't, they'll lose their jobs, they'll be shunned at church, their houses will mysteriously burn down.

LEXI

I guess you ain't in the mood for any readin' this mornin'.

CLAIRE

On the contrary, I'd welcome the diversion.

(She stands and the two of them walk into the living room, CLAIRE placing her hand on LEXI's back)

LEXI

You want to keep on with Dante?

CLAIRE

I've been enjoying it, haven't you?

LEXI

Don't reckon it gets a lot more cheerful.

CLAIRE

Not immediately, but it starts looking up as soon as they get to purgatory.

(LEXI takes the book off the shelf.
CLAIRE sits)

LEXI
You remember where we left off?

CLAIRE
I believe we were in the second circle. They've just seen Cleopatra and Helen of Troy.

LEXI
It is amazin' how many people there are down there. Makes you wonder if anybody's in the other place.

(LEXI sits)

CLAIRE
And we haven't even gotten to his enemies yet.

LEXI
Here it is... they're lookin' at the lost souls swirlin' around like birds.

CLAIRE
Those who betrayed reason for lust. Francesca is about to tell Dante why she and her lover, Paolo, are there.

LEXI
You want me to start?

CLAIRE
Please.

LEXI

(Reading)

Love, which in gentlest hearts will soonest bloom
seized my lover with passion for that sweet
body
from which I was torn unshriven from my
doom.

CLAIR

She died without confessing her sins.

LEXI

(Continues reading)

Love, which permits no loved one not to love,
took me so strongly with delight in him
that we are one in Hell, as we were above.

Love led us to one death. In the depths of Hell
Caïna...

CLAIRE

Ca-eena. It's another part of hell. Paolo's
brother, her husband, who killed them, ends up
there with the murderers.

LEXI

(Reading)

Caïna waits for him who took our lives.

CLAIRE

Brava, that was beautiful.

LEXI

So, what exactly did they do to end up down
there?

CLAIRE

She tells Dante a few lines below. It begins:

(Reciting)

*Noi leggiavamo un giorno per diletto di
Lancialotto...*

CLAIRE (Continued)

(Translating)

On a day for dalliance we read the rhyme
of Lancelot...

(Speaking)

Lancelot is...

LEXI

A knight in shinin' armor. We read about King
Arthur and the round table in grammar school.

CLAIRE

He had an affair with Guinevere, King Arthur's
wife, which is what Paolo and Francesca are
reading about.

LEXI

(Speaking)

Guess they left that part of the book out.

(Reading)

...we read the rhyme
of Lancelot how love had mastered him.
We were alone with innocence and dim time.

Pause after pause that high old story drew
our eyes together while we blushed and
paled;
but it was one soft passage overthrew

our caution and our hearts. For when we read
how her fond smile was kissed by such a
lover,
he who is one with me alive and dead

breathed on my lips the tremor of his kiss.
That book, and he wrote it, was a pander...

CLAIRE

A pander is...

LEXI

...a pimp.

CLAIRE

Look who's using the noble vernacular now. A matchmaker.

LEXI

(Reading)

That book, and he wrote it, was a pander
That day we read no further...

(Speaking)

So they...?

CLAIRE

Precisely.

LEXI

And she's claimin' it wasn't the devil made her
do it...

CLAIRE

It was the book.

LEXI

Little far-fetched, don't you think?

CLAIRE

Far-fetched? Dante?

LEXI

Sound to me like she got sweet-talked into
droppin' her drawers and now she's tryin' to
point the finger somewhere else.

CLAIRE

It's never happened to you?

LEXI

Been over the moon for a man?

CLAIRE

For anyone.

LEXI

I definitely admired George C.

CLAIRE

Dante's not talking about admiration. He's inventing a new kind of literature, modern Western literature, based on adoration. The *dolce stil nuovo*.. "sweet talk" in Italian.. which comes from the Provençal poets who worshipped women as earthly manifestations of the divine. It was a form of heresy, for which people were burned at the stake.

LEXI

Sound to me a lot like some tobacco planter puttin' his lily-white wife on a pedestal while he's foolin' around back behind the slave shack.

CLAIRE

No one has ever brought you to your knees?

LEXI

Not by readin' some story about Sir Lancelot and the knights of the roundtable.

LEXI

How did George C. woo you?

LEXI

There wasn't much wooin'. We just sorta slid into it. I met him at a Jelly Roll Morton concert, the first event I coordinated after Mrs. Riley helped me get the job at the coal company. I was twenty-two, and he was pushin' forty, but he had fire in

his eyes that shined like mornin' dew and I loved the way he talked.

CLAIRE

Did you love him?

LEXI

I respected him. He was a man of principle, willin' to put his life on the line for what he believed in. We didn't always agree... he didn't spend a lot of time in church, and he sure wasn't a Republican... but he taught me more than any man I ever met, includin' my father.

CLAIRE

But you didn't love him.

LEXI

I loved havin' a home of my own and not havin' to wash white folks' dirty drawers to support my momma. And I loved the baby boy we had together. But what was between us... love, or whatever you want to call it... didn't last, not that such things ever do.

CLAIRE

Dante's book has certainly lasted quite a while.

LEXI

We talkin' about literature or life? You ain't suggestin' Paolo and Francesca are still gettin' it on down in the second circle, are you?

CLAIRE

Their punishment is what most people think they want: eternal love.

LEXI

That's their mistake then.

CLAIRE

And Dante's, too. He looks at this couple and thinks at least they consummated their love. Whereas he's wandering through hell looking for his beloved, Beatrice, a woman he saw a couple of times on the streets of Florence.

LEXI

You mean they never...?

CLAIRE

Got it on? No, never. She died at twenty-seven, long before he wrote the *Commedia*. But their love endures in the monument he built for her... this book.

LEXI

That's a strange idea of love.

CLAIRE

What's your idea of love?

LEXI

It's what a mother feels for a child, which can hurt much worse than any other, but it definitely don't diminish. It grows whether you want it to or not. What do you think it is?

CLAIRE

Friendship.

LEXI

I'm talkin' about deep, lastin' bonds.

CLAIRE

So am I.

LEXI

Which one of you friends has brought you to your knees?

CLAIRE

Max.

LEXI

Max?

CLAIRE

That's why we don't speak anymore.

LEXI

I thought that was because of the fire.

CLAIRE

It is because of the fire. When the school burned down there was no more reason for us to go on living together. We weren't directors of the Gastonia Academy anymore, so the façade evaporated. We were just two old unmarried ladies who shared a house and hated segregation. Max insisted I acknowledge what we were to each other. "You do it for everyone else. You make them feel whole: epileptics and black folks and Japanese. All I'm asking is for you to do the same for me." When I told her I wasn't ready, she said I was a hypocrite. It was the last time we spoke.

LEXI

Why don't you give her a call?

CLAIRE

What would I say?

LEXI

Tell her things have changed. You're goin' through a hard time.

CLAIRE

Plead self-pity?

LEXI

No, just tell her you could use a hand.

(CLAIRE stands and looks out the window beside the portrait of Max)

CLAIRE

I dreamed of her last night. Her hair was still black, long and wavy like Loretta Young. I could see again, and we were riding horses together through a meadow full of flowers... and then I woke up.

(Pause)

I had an art teacher in Florence who used to say, "Looking at a painting is just like touching it." I didn't understand what she was talking about then.

(PHONE RINGS. LEXI answers it)

LEXI

Hello. Hello.

(She hangs up)

CLAIRE

Who was that?

LEXI

Nobody.

CLAIRE

He's calling a lot lately.

LEXI

Yeah, he is.

CLAIRE

What else is in the paper?

LEXI

(Looks at the newspaper)

Headline says they're plannin' to widen Hiwassee Boulevard... to relieve the traffic.

CLAIRE

Traffic? In Asheville? Must be a contractor who gave the mayor a campaign contribution.

LEXI

Police are also lookin' for the person that backed into Reverend Milligan's Buick.

CLAIRE

That's on the front page?

LEXI

Right next to your picture.

CLAIRE

I definitely didn't do it. Is there anything else?

LEXI

There's this, down at the bottom: "Dutch Scientist Discovers New Moon of Uranus."

CLAIRE

That's good news. Does it have a name?

LEXI

Miranda.

CLAIRE

Prospero's daughter. What else does it say?

LEXI

It's pretty cold up there.

(Reading)

"The moon is believed to have a surface temperature of more than three hundred degrees below zero with ice volcanoes and gorges twenty times deeper than the Grand Canyon."

CLAIRE

Miranda! I'll think of her as I'm drifting off to sleep tonight, up there circling Uranus with her volcanoes erupting ice.

LEXI

Can I make us lunch?

CLAIRE

I'd love it.

LEXI

I brought my suitcase with me. I thought I'd stay up here with you for a while, if you don't mind.

CLAIRE

Of course I don't mind. I'm tired of burning my fingers making coffee.

LEXI

I'll put my things in the other bedroom while I'm fryin' the livers.

CLAIRE

You and Dante are the only ones who can still cheer me up, Lexi.

LEXI

Dante?

CLAIRE

He reminds me I still believe in love. And I believe you do too.

LEXI

I believe if you don't start eating a decent breakfast, you're gonna tear up all the paper in the house.

(MUSIC UP: "ALL OF ME," SUNG BY
FRANK SINATRA)

SCENE FIVE

(LIGHTS UP ON CLAIRE in her office, which has now been CONVERTED INTO A HEARING ROOM. Her typewriter has been replaced by a large microphone that is placed in front of her. She sits behind a witness table, facing Downstage, BRIGHT TELEVISION LIGHTS shining directly in her face. MUSIC FADES)

CLAIRE

I would like to thank Senator Shackelford and the members of the committee for affording me the opportunity to present an opening statement. Before they ask me questions about the ecumenical convocation I recently held at my home, I have a couple of questions I'd like to ask them. Do you think it's right, gentlemen, that some of our boys who fought so bravely in the war against fascism have come home and been attacked, beaten and murdered because of the color of their skin? Do you think it's right that veterans who won medals fighting the Germans and Japanese have been forced to sit in the back of the bus as they returned to their loved ones, been thrown in prison though they committed no crime, assaulted, lynched and maimed in the communities they grew up in? Do you think it's right that their children study at inferior schools, that they and their spouses are denied entrance to our universities and barred from hotels, stores and restaurants? The meeting I held was open to everyone—women, children, clergy, cats, dogs, pigs and peacocks, white, black and yellow, people with polio, the hard of hearing and those wounded in the war. Creatures from every corner of the planet ate, talked, sang, held hands,

barked, snorted and smiled. Do you think that's subversive? I'd like to look you in the eye and

CLAIRE (Continued)

ask you why you hide your hatred behind words like "states rights," and how much longer you think this sick obsession with skin color can go on, but I can't. Because a month ago, just before my meeting, I lost my eyesight. I can barely see my own hand in front of my face, so, unfortunately, I can't tell you precisely who was at my meeting or what they said or whether any of them are subversives. I can tell you that the last thing I saw before I lost my vision was a sign over the water fountain in my ophthalmologist's office in Asheville, which was so blurry I could barely make it out, that said: "Whites Only." I ask you, gentlemen, do you think it matters to anyone who goes blind whether someone of another color drinks from the same water fountain? Now I'll be happy to answer any questions you have about my ecumenical convocation, and I promise to testify truthfully about everything I saw.

(GAVEL BANGS. MUSIC UP: "CABIN HOME
IN CAROLINE," BY THE ARMSTRONG
TWINNS)

SCENE SIX

(MUSIC CONTINUES UP ON THE RADIO IN CLAIRES LIVING ROOM. LIGHTS UP ON CLAIRES HOME. LEXI stands Center, engrossed in *Sons and Lovers*. CLAIRE sits by the window in her living room, concluding a phone interview. MUSIC FADES)

CLAIRE

(Into phone)

Turgenev, Conrad... I'm also fond of Flaubert...

(Pause)

Br'er Rabbit? Yes, I read that every night before I go to bed, right after *Gone With the Wind* and *Tobacco Road*.

(Pause)

What is the main difference now?

(Pause)

The main difference is... I can't see.

(Pause)

I *am* serious. I can't paint, I can't draw, I can't read what I've written and I can barely see the mountains right outside my window.

(Pause)

I'm pleased to hear you enjoyed it. Certainly, send me a copy of the review when it comes out.

(Hangs up)

Is there any more tea, Lexi?

(LEXI doesn't answer immediately)

Lexi?

LEXI

I'll put water on to boil right this minute. My mind was elsewhere.

CLAIRE

In the green valleys of England?

(She puts down the novel)

LEXI

(As she walks into the kitchen to
boil the water)

He and his mother don't actually..

CLAIRE

Get it on?

LEXI

Yeah.

CLAIRE

It's all implied. Lawrence doesn't become
explicit until the next novel.

LEXI

Who was that you were talkin' to?

CLAIRE

A writer from *The New York Chronicle*. He's doing
a review of my new book. He loved it.

LEXI

Seems like everybody's lovin' it. I can't wait to
read it myself.

CLAIRE

And he didn't ask me a single question about "The
Good Man."

LEXI

You mean like how two grown men manage to remove
their trousers in the backseat of a Studebaker.

CLAIRE

You're a real stickler for verisimilitude, aren't
you?

LEXI

What's verisimilitude?

CLAIRE

Plausibility. The appearance of reality.

LEXI

If you don't believe somethin' coulda happened, how are you gonna care what did happen?

CLAIRE

Conrad makes the same point in the introduction to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*.

LEXI

(Turning)

The *who* of the *what*?

CLAIRE

I'm sorry, it's an infelicitous title, but it's an excellent description of what a writer needs to do: to make the reader hear, smell and see the world she's created.

LEXI

Dante definitely knows how to do that.

CLAIRE

Yes, but stories also exist on a symbolic level... As we were just discussing, Paul Morel doesn't actually marry his mother. And this reviewer, for example, thinks in my novel Molly represents a threat to white male authority.

LEXI

You're sayin' she symbolically strangles her master?

CLAIRE

I'm suggesting there are other deeper ways of reading.

LEXI

I don't know about you, but if I don't accept on the face of it that she actually throttled him, it doesn't go any deeper. I just shut the book.

CLAIRE

So you think Dante actually went to hell?

LEXI

Sure, why not?

CLAIRE

Some people don't even believe there is a hell, and some people think we're already in it.

LEXI

They're the ones most likely to have the fear of god put in 'em by readin' it. He just set down who he saw down there and what's happenin' to 'em. Sort of reminds me of a newspaper.

CLAIRE

I see, *The Infernal Times*, news from the netherworld, from your fearless correspondent Dante Alighieri. I've heard him described as many things, Lexi, but never a newspaper reporter.

(She returns from the kitchen with two cups of tea)

LEXI

(Pouring the tea)

You hear anymore out of Senator Shackelford?

CLAIRE

Not a peep.

LEXI

I never seen anybody bang their gavel so fast.

CLAIRE

Apparently he's decided to conclude his investigation of the convocation.

LEXI

Mr. Rollins like to fall off his chair when you let those senators have it. When you told 'em about losin' you eyesight, he thought you were bluffin', and then it dawned on him that it was real.

CLAIRE

Attacking blind ladies, it seems, won't get you votes even in North Carolina.

LEXI

He was just upset the show ended so quick. He'd canceled all his egg deliveries because he was plannin' on watchin' your testimony on TV.

CLAIRE

Tell him I'm sorry to disappoint, but I'm sure there'll be plenty more inquisitions on the airwaves soon enough.

(Beat)

Do you mind if we read?

LEXI

Of course not. We could put it off 'til this evening if you want to go on writing.

CLAIRE

I'm done for the day.

LEXI

It's sure a relief to hear that typewriter clackin' again.

CLAIRE

As Homer said, "The gods weave misfortune, so mortals will have tales to tell."

LEXI

Homer who?

CLAIRE

I don't actually know what Homer's last name was. He was a Greek writer... the first, in the West... that we know about. He was blind too. There've been other blind writers since. Milton wrote all of *Paradise Lost* after he lost his sight.

LEXI

I saw that one up on the shelf. What's it about?

CLAIRE

It's the story of Lucifer's rebellion against god.

LEXI

I hope you're not planning on readin' another book about goin' to hell.

CLAIRE

I promise, we'll choose something more uplifting next time.

(Beat)

They say Milton could compose forty verses in his head and remember them verbatim when he dictated them to his daughter. My memory's not that good.

LEXI

You thought any more about gettin' that typist?

CLAIRE

I don't need a typist. I have you.

LEXI

I can't type.

CLAIRE

You can read. That's all I need. If I make mistakes typing, you can tell me and I'll correct them.

LEXI

You don't mind me readin' what you're writin' while you writin' it?

CLAIRE

You know everything else about me. You comb my hair, you bathe me like a baby, you even figured out my eyes were going before I did.

LEXI

I had no idea they was...

CLAIRE

According to Milton, god gives you something in compensation for losing your sight. It's not true.

LEXI

When something's taken from you, sometimes all you can see is what you lost. It takes a while to figure out what it is you gained.

CLAIRE

I believe we were reading about the violent against themselves. Jacomo da Sant' Andrea and Lano da Siena, encased in thorny trees in the wood of suicides, their leaves eaten by odious harpies.

LEXI

I marked where we were.

(Reading)

And there on the left, running so violently
they broke off every twig in the dark wood,
two torn and naked wraiths...

CLAIRE

Specters... ghosts.

LEXI

(Reading)

...went plunging by me.

The leader cried, "Come now, O Death! Come now!"
And the other, seeing that he was outrun
cried out: "Your legs were not so ready,
Lano,

in the jousts at Toppo..."

CLAIRE

Lano killed himself in battle by refusing to run
because he'd lost all his money.

LEXI

(Reading)

...And suddenly in his rush,
perhaps because his breath was failing him,
he hid himself inside a thorny bush and
cowered...

CLAIRE

Shrank with fear.

LEXI

I know what cower is. It's what cowards do.

(Reading)

...among its leaves. Then at his back,
the wood leaped with black bitches, swift as
greyhounds
escaping from their leash, and all the pack

sprang on him; with their fangs they opened him
and tore him savagely...

(She falters)

CLAIRE

Go on.

(A long pause)

LEXI

(Reading)

and tore him savage...

(Speaking)

I'm sorry, I can't.

CLAIRE

Why not?

LEXI

It's...

CLAIRE

What?

LEXI

George C. use to tell us stories about his uncle
runnin' from the plantation with a pack of
bloodhounds on his tail.

CLAIRE

It must've been horrible. I read about the underground railroad for my novel. It ran right through here.

LEXI

First time he escaped, the dogs got him. He lived, but he almost didn't survive the whippin' they give him when he got back to the plantation. Next time the other slaves told him if he could just make it to the mountains, he'd be safe. That's how he ended up in West Virginia. He just hid in the hills, tried to blend in, claimin' he was Portuguese. George C.'s uncle was the one that told him later they weren't no Portuguese in their family.

CLAIRE

We'll read something else then. Whatever you'd like.

LEXI

I like the writin'. It's just too real.

CLAIRE

Choose another canto. Maybe we'll even try a little Italian.

LEXI

I can't read Italian.

CLAIRE

Sure you can. It sounds just like it looks.

LEXI

(Looks through remainder of book)
How 'bout Canto XIV? The Blasphemers.

CLAIRE

Let's skip that. I don't even know what blasphemy is.

LEXI

(Continues turning pages of book)
Canto XV? The Sodomites. The violent against
nature and art.

CLAIRE

There wouldn't be any art without the sodomites,
as Dante well knows. Let's keep going.

(LEXI flips the pages)

LEXI

Canto XXIII? The Hypocrites. Monks in golden
robes weighted down with their own deceit.

(To CLAIRE)

I like the sound of that.

CLAIRE

So would my mother. She was a lapsed Catholic.

LEXI

Remind me of Senator Shackelford and his
committee. Maybe we should make up a ring of hell
just for them.

CLAIRE

I think you've come up with the plot of your
first novel.

LEXI

I might even have to learn to type for that one.

CLAIRE

You could put them all down there together in a
swamp of sticky marshmallow...

LEXI

...standin' on they jabberin' jackass heads for
eternity...

CLAIRE

...pontificating to each other about preserving the white race...

LEXI

...chokin' on their own words and coughin' up all those marshmallows.

CLAIRE

I think you've done Dante one better, Lexi.

LEXI

Would you like me to read?

CLAIRE

Please.

LEXI

(Reading)

Jovial Friars and Bolognese were we...

CLAIRE

Natives of Bologna.

LEXI

Like the spaghetti sauce.

CLAIRE

Exactly.

LEXI

(Reading)

We were chosen jointly by your Florentines to keep the peace, an office usually

held by a single man; near Gardingo one still may see the sort of peace we kept

CLAIRE

They incited riots between the Blacks and Whites.

LEXI

Blacks and Whites?

CLAIRE

Two political groups in Florence. Dante, unfortunately, ended up on the wrong side of a civil war, which is why he died in exile.

LEXI

(Reading)

I was called Catalano, he, Loderingo.

I began: "O Friars, your evil..."—and then I saw a figure crucified upon the ground by three great stakes, and I fell still in awe.

When he saw me there, he began to puff great sighs

into his beard, convulsing all his body: and Friar Catalano, following my eyes,

said to me: "That one nailed across the road counseled the Pharisees that it was fitting one man be tortured for the public good.

Naked he lies fixed there...

CLAIRE

(Interrupting)

That's enough.

LEXI

It's just gettin' good.

CLAIRE

Let's call it a morning.

LEXI

This is what I meant when I was talkin' 'bout
puttin' the fear of god into unbelievers.

CLAIRE

I think I'll lie down.

LEXI

Lie down?

CLAIRE

I'm tired.

LEXI

Like you said, Claire, I comb your hair in the
mornin'. You can't put one past me.

CLAIRE

I'm not in the mood to hear about hypocrites.

LEXI

I know it's hard to accept certain things 'bout
ourselves. Don't make us hypocrites.

(As CLAIRE stands to face the
window, she feels along the wall)

CLAIRE

I remember when the fire started I was sitting in
a swing under the sycamore tree eating a pimiento
cheese sandwich. The children were all running
around the schoolyard, playing hopscotch and
pulling each other's pigtails... I thought it was
all of them. I saw a puff of gray come out of the
window beside the custodian's closet on the
second floor, and all of a sudden something
orange began to shoot out of the chemistry lab.
At first I thought it was an explosion. I yelled
to the children to stand back from the building,
and I ran to the side entrance. My office was at

the head of the stairs, and I kept my manuscripts in a file cabinet next to my desk. When I opened the door, there was so much smoke I couldn't even

CLAIRE (Continued)

see the window, but I grabbed my papers and cradled them in my arms like a baby and ran down the stairs. Max had been in town buying supplies, and she drove up just before the fire engines arrived. The first thing she said was, "Is everyone out?" I said, "Yes," because I was certain they were. She looked at the schoolyard for a minute and said, "Where's Katy?" I looked up and saw the whole second floor burst into flames. Katy was nine years old, and apparently after lunch she'd gone to look through the microscope in the biology lab, which was right down the hall from my office. She was such a serious little girl, with huge brown eyes the color of walnuts and leg braces buckled behind her knees. She wanted to be a neurologist to help other children like her. I saved my manuscripts and I forgot about Katy.

LEXI

You didn't forget her. You didn't even know she was there.

CLAIRE

That was my job, to take care of those children, to check every nook and cranny in the school, not to save my own writing. That's the real reason Max called me a hypocrite. She spit the word out at me like venom. "You don't care about the weak. You only care about yourself and your manuscripts. You don't have a maternal bone in your body." That's what she said while everything we'd worked for, twenty years of our lives, was turning into ash.

LEXI

It could've happened to anyone Claire. Folks say things they don't mean in extreme situations.

CLAIRE

She meant it.

LEXI

She was wrong. You proved that in your testimony on TV.

CLAIRE

I couldn't write a word for three years. Can you imagine what it was like for that child, trying to get out of there? She must've heard me on the stairs and thought I was running up to the lab to save her.

LEXI

Will you help me try to read a little bit of Italian?

CLAIRE

I'm going to lie down.

LEXI

Just a sentence, to hear what it sounds like. Here at the beginning...

(Stumbling as she reads)

*Nel mezzo del camin de nostra vita
mi ritrovai...*

(Speaking)

How am I doin'?

CLAIRE

Midway on our life's journey, I found myself...

LEXI

(Continues to stumble along)

...per una selva oscura

CLAIRE

...in a dark forest

LEXI

(Continues reading)

che la diritta via era smarrita

(Speaking)

What does that mean, real smart?

CLAIRE

It means, "because the path that led aright was lost."

LEXI

How is my Italian?

CLAIRE

You know what the most beautiful thing I saw in Florence was? It wasn't Brunelleschi's Duomo, the cathedral blooming like orange mushrooms in the middle of the city, or Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" in the Galleria Uffizi, or Michelangelo's David, which looks like it just that moment erupted from white marble. It was the *Giardino di Bobboli*, behind the Pitti Palace with fountains full of nymphs and goddesses and Neptune brandishing his trident, the whole garden populated with more cats than I've ever seen in my life... *migliaia di gatti*... striped and calico and mottled... hiding behind the obelisk, leaping onto the shoulders of dwarves and sleeping beside the cherubs' faces.

LEXI

Sounds like where you got the idea for your ecumenical convocation.

(She laughs. CLAIRE manages a laugh too. PHONE RINGS)

Probably another one of your admirers.

(CLAIRE reaches over and answers the

phone)

CLAIRE

(Into the phone)

Hello... Hello.

(A long pause)

What?

(A long pause)

Who are you?

(She puts down the receiver)

LEXI

Who was that?

CLAIRE

Him.

LEXI

You mean the breather?

CLAIRE

He did more than breathe this time.

LEXI

He say somethin'?

CLAIRE

He said he's sending me a present compliments of Senator Shackelford. Apparently he saw me on TV.

LEXI

What is it?

CLAIRE

A Molotov cocktail.

LEXI

A Molotov cocktail?

CLAIRE

A fire bomb.

LEXI

You think he's serious?

CLAIRE

Dead serious.

(LIGHTS DOWN. MUSIC UP: "UN BEL DI
VEDROMO," SUNG BY ELEANOR STEBER)

SCENE SEVEN

(MUSIC CONTINUES UP ON THE RADIO IN CLAIRES LIVING ROOM. LIGHTS UP ON CLAIRES, who stands Downstage Right, looking out at the front porch. LEXI is in the kitchen behind her, preparing food. MUSIC FADES)

ANNOUNCER ON RADIO (V.O.)

That was Helen Steber from Wheeling, West Virginia, performing "Un Bel di Vedromo," by Giacomo Puccini. And now for the latest headlines. The Air Force has announced the launch of a V-2 rocket into outer space today with a rhesus monkey along for the ride. The rocket returned safely, but its primate pilot, Albert, died of asphyxiation.

(CLAIRE walks toward the radio)

LEXI

What's that, asphyxiation?

CLAIRE

Suffocation.

ANNOUNCER ON RADIO (V.O.)

In South Africa, newly elected President D. F. Malan has announced steps to implement his Nationalist Party's program of apartheid, the legal separation of the races...

(CLAIRE CLICKS OFF THE RADIO. Enter LEXI)

CLAIRE

Do you think he's watching us?

LEXI

I don't see anything.

CLAIRE
Nothing's moving out there?

LEXI
There are a couple of deer chewin' on the bushes
down by the cabins.

CLAIRE
He knows you're here. He mentioned you on the
phone.

LEXI
What did he say?

CLAIRE
I don't want to repeat it.

LEXI
Give me a hint then.

CLAIRE
He used a vulgar expression to refer to both us.

LEXI
The not-so-noble cracker vernacular?

CLAIRE
He thinks we're... involved.

LEXI
With each other?

CLAIRE
Yes.

LEXI
We are involved. We're fixin' to have lunch
together.

CLAIRE

Lunch?

LEXI

I already put the chicken in the oven.

CLAIRE

You're hungry?

LEXI

We have to eat eventually.

CLAIRE

I couldn't eat if I had to. My stomach's tied in knots.

LEXI

You'll change your tune once you get a whiff of my mother's sweet potato pie.

CLAIRE

You don't believe he was serious?

LEXI

I didn't talk to him, you did.

CLAIRE

He certainly sounded like he meant it to me. He's been calling here for weeks.

LEXI

If it's the same fella.

CLAIRE

You think it's someone else?

LEXI

Hard to tell since all he does is breathe.

CLAIRE

You think I should call the police?

LEXI

What are they gonna do?

CLAIRE

Investigate. Find out who's behind this.

LEXI

How they gonna find out who called and hung up?

CLAIRE

What do you suggest we do? Wait until he hurls a firebomb through the front window.

LEXI

I suggest you sit down while I check the chicken. That way if he does throw something through the window we can douse it. Or better yet, I can pick it up and throw it back at him.

(She walks into the kitchen and looks in the oven)

CLAIRE

Did you hear this business on the radio about the new government in South Africa? It's Jim Crow by another name.

LEXI

Mr. Gandhi must be rollin' over in his grave.

CLAIRE

Hindus don't bury dead bodies, they burn them.

LEXI

His ashes must be rollin' over then.

(LEXI returns from the kitchen)

CLAIRE

Do you think he has accomplices?

LEXI

It doesn't seem too likely that somebody who spends his life breathin' into telephones has got a whole lot of friends.

CLAIRE

He mentioned Shackelford.

LEXI

That sounds like a relationship based on adoration. Maybe they're involved... with each other.

CLAIRE

I think we should call the police.

LEXI

Go ahead if it makes you feel better.

(CLAIRE picks up the phone. She clicks it and clicks it again)

CLAIRE

It's not working.

LEXI

Phone's dead?

(LEXI picks up the phone and clicks it)

You're right, there's no dial tone.

CLAIRE

Do you think he cut the line?

LEXI

Hard to tell.

CLAIRE

Maybe you should drive down to the police station in Asheville.

LEXI

And leave you here by yourself?

CLAIRE

I guess that's not a good idea.

LEXI

I don't suppose you have any weapons in the house.

CLAIRE

I'm opposed to firearms.

LEXI

So am I, but I'm also opposed to sittin' here while some jackass burns the house down.

CLAIRE

I think there's a shotgun in Max's things downstairs. She used to hunt deer. It was a source of friction between us.

(LEXI walks to the basement door and opens it)

LEXI

(As she disappears)

Is there a light here somewhere?

CLAIRE

There's a flashlight on the wall to your left.

(LEXI opens the door. She finds the flashlight and turns it on. THE LIGHT FLASHES IN FRONT OF HER BELOW, as she descends the stairs)

CLAIRE

Can you see anything?

LEXI

(Off, from basement)

Bicycle... hedge clippers... birdcage... two rakes...
bridle... dog's leash.

CLAIRE

Anything else?

LEXI

(Off, from basement)

Garden hose... telescope... bag of horse feed... straw
hat...

CLAIRE

Is that it?

LEXI

Looks like a storage closet in the zoo down here.
Rope... coupla bird feeders... two saddles.

CLAIRE

Those are Max's. You must be getting warm.

LEXI

(Off from the basement)

Dog dish, rat trap, chicken coop... That must be
what smells so nasty. There are a lotta books
too. Looks like you got more down here than you
do up there.

CLAIRE

What about the gun?

LEXI

(Off from the basement)

I think this is it in the corner with the fishing
rods.

(The light shines up from the

basement)

LEXI (Continued)

There's a box of ammunition here too.

(She reappears from the basement with a shotgun and a box of ammunition. She closes the basement door and begins to dust herself off)

CLAIRE

What do you intend to do with it?

LEXI

Load it.

CLAIRE

What good is that going to do?

LEXI

(She checks the barrel and opens it to load it)

Definitely not gonna do any harm. If this peckerwood's watchin' us it'll give him a good idea of who he's dealing with.

(She loads the shotgun and closes the barrel)

CLAIRE

What do we do now?

LEXI

Wait for the chicken to cook, I suppose.

(Beat)

You want me to read?

CLAIRE

I couldn't possibly concentrate.

LEXI

Might take your mind off things. If the phone line doesn't come back, we'll drive down to Asheville together after lunch to the police station.

CLAIRE

What if he decides to burn the house down while we're gone?

LEXI

At least we won't be in it.

(She picks up the book and looks at the marker)

I think I'll go ahead and read the endin' so we can start on something new tomorrow.

CLAIRE

Don't worry about spoiling it for me. I know how it ends.

LEXI

(Reading)

Canto XXXIV. "The Treacherous to Their Masters."

(Beat)

I stood now where the souls of the last class
(with fear my verses tell it) were covered
wholly;
they shone below the ice like straws in
glass.

(Speaking)

The bottom of hell is a frozen lake?

CLAIRE

I told you, he likes paradoxes.

LEXI

(Reading)

When we had gone so far across the ice
that it pleased my Guide to show me the foul
creature
which once had worn the grace of Paradise,

he made me stop, and, stepping aside, he said:
"Now see the face of Dis!

CLAIRE

Dis is the devil.

LEXI

(Speaking)

I figured that out by myself.

(Reading)

...This is the place
where you must arm your soul against all
dread."

Do not ask, Reader, how my blood ran cold
and my voice choked up with fear. I cannot
write it;
this is a terror that cannot be told.

CLAIRE

But of course, he does tell it.

LEXI

(Reading)

I did not die, and yet I lost life's breath:
imagine for yourself what I became,
deprived at once of both my life and death.

CLAIRE

Paradoxes piled upon paradoxes.

LEXI

(Reading)

The Emperor of the Universe of Pain...

(Speaking)

Now, there's a name that'll send shivers up your spine.

(Reading)

jutted his chest above the ice;
and I am closer in size to the great
mountain

the Titans make around the central pit
than they to his arms...

CLAIRE

We're so small and evil is so enormous.

LEXI

(Reading)

With what a sense of awe I saw his head
towering above me! for it had three faces;
one was in front, and it was fiery red;

the other two, as weirdly wonderful
merged with it from the middle of each
shoulder

Under each face two wings rose terribly

(Speaking)

How does he know what the devil looks like?

CLAIRE

He imagined it. That's what writers do.

LEXI

That isn't just his imagination.

CLAIRE

He certainly saw his share of real malevolence: treacherous allies, corrupt politicians, a murderous pope, vindictive enemies who let him die alone in exile.

LEXI

He also saw the face of Satan.

CLAIRE

Yes, figuratively speaking, he did.

LEXI

I mean saw him. Looked him in the eye, just like I'm lookin' at you. I know, because I've seen him too.

CLAIRE

You've seen the face Satan?

LEXI

Faces. The devil has a lot of guises, and every one of them is terrible. I saw them all the day Thomas died. Everybody just assumed it was the Purdy brothers that threw him off that train trestle. They was this worthless family from up on the mountain, never served a day in the military, any of 'em. And when Thomas came home from California, he had some words with Floyd Purdy, who claimed he was uppity 'cause he was slow doffin' his hat in the dry goods store.

CLAIRE

I can't imagine it. Risking your life overseas and coming home to that.

LEXI

But they didn't do it, Claire. It was me. I killed him.

CLAIRE

You didn't kill him.

LEXI

I'm tryin' to tell you, I did it same as if I have pulled a straight razor across his throat myself. Lord God, forgive me.

CLAIRE

There's nothing to forgive you for.

(A long pause. She tries, but does not succeed, in collecting herself)

LEXI

If you only knew. He was such a beautiful boy, and I'm not just sayin' that 'cause he was mine. I remember right after he turned twelve, his father announced he was adoptin' all of Gandhi's strategies... defendin' the untouchables and savin' his sacred energy by not expendin' his seed. I asked him straight out, "What about me, George C.? Am I untouchable too?," but he didn't have a good answer for that. They sent him up to Waynesburg to help organize a strike right after that, and somebody shot two company dicks, and they arrested him as a material witness and beat him within an inch of his life. When I went to see him, his jaw was wired and he was eatin' through a straw, but he was more worried about what the coal company would do to me when they found out he was in prison for union organizin', so he made me swear I wouldn't come back. They held him for two months in there, and he must've lost forty pounds, but he didn't name no names. The Sunday after I got back from Waynesburg, this gospel singer named Charles Lane came to the

Destiny Baptist Church in Craig. He had big,
broad shoulders like Clark Gable and lashes

LEXI (Continued)

longer than any girl I ever seen, and when he started singin' he came down the aisle and stood right by my pew. You asked me was I ever over the moon for a man. Yes, for Charles Lane, from the moment I laid eyes on him. But I fought that feelin', oh, how I fought it, thinkin' 'bout my righteous husband in jail bein' beaten to a pulp and my boy who needed me to stand firm now more than ever. But Charles Lane knew just how to break down my defenses. He started givin' Thomas singin' lessons and bringin' me fresh-baked pies and tellin' me how much he adored me, and I could tell he meant it, and one Saturday he came knocking when no one else was there, and...

CLAIRE

That day you read no more.

LEXI

That day we read no more. I don't know how George C. found out, but when he did he packed up and walked out without a word. Never told Thomas, and neither did I. And from that moment on, Thomas turned on him like milk left overnight on the kitchen counter. Whatever George C. stood for, he despised. He started gettin' into fistfights with boys twice his size, beat most of 'em up pretty bad. When I told him his father didn't countenance violence, he said, "All I'm doin' is standin' ' firm for the truth, mama." After the war started this recruiter came through Craig, a cracker with a crew cut name of Sergeant Byrnes, sayin' the Marines was now acceptin' colored men. I begged Thomas not to sign up, but he believed Byrnes when he said there weren't no black or white in the U.S. Marines, just military green. When he got off the train in North Carolina, he changed his tune, but by then it was too late.

They sent him to a separate camp for black Marines in the middle of a swamp full of

LEXI (Continued)

mosquitoes and water moccasins. The D.I.'s... they was all black too... and accordin' to his letters they was... pardon my noble vernacular... the meanest motherfuckers that every lived. And when they shipped him off to the Pacific, they put him in a separate black unit that delivered ammo to the white boys that didn't want nothin' to do with no colored Marines. But even so, he saved three of 'em by blowin' up a machine gun nest with one of those hand grenades he was deliverin'.

(She reaches into her pocket and pulls out the velvet case with the medal)

I remember the mornin' it happened, I asked why was he so blue since he come back, and I told him we was all so proud of him for winnin' that medal for killin' all those Japs. And he screamed at me... only time I ever heard him raise his voice... "They ain't Japs, mama. They Japanese. They human beings just like you and me."

(Beat)

I killed him, Claire.

CLAIRE

You didn't kill him.

LEXI

Why didn't I just tell him why his father'd gone?

CLAIRE

Because there are things we can't tell anyone.

LEXI

But that ain't even the worst of it. The afternoon it happened, I went into his bedroom and opened up the case with his silver star, and I found this inside:

LEXI (Continued)

(She takes a piece of paper out of
the case and reads)

"Dear Mama, Since I came home, I feel it
everywhere. It's like those dandelions in the
spring that blow all over your clothes. No matter
what you do, you can't get them off of you.
They're in the air, everywhere, all that hate
sticking to you. I'm sorry, I wanted to stand
firm for you, but I can't take it any more. I
love you, Thomas."

(Beat)

I killed him.

CLAIRE

You didn't kill him.

LEXI

All the hate they tried to beat into that boy,
and still he had love in his heart.

CLAIRE

What he saw in the war must have been horrific.

LEXI

That's why I couldn't read about those people
that harmed themselves.

CLAIRE

And then to come back home and be treated like a
boy.

LEXI

I killed him, Claire. My own flesh and blood.

CLAIRE

You didn't kill him.

LEXI

I keep wonderin' why I opened the door that day Charles Lane came knockin'. It's like I'm frozen forever in that moment.

CLAIRE

I keep wondering too why I turned left to my office when I got to the top of the stairs.

LEXI

What scares me most is if I had it to do over again, I don't know whether I'd open that door or not.

CLAIRE

I'd give up every word I've ever written to turn the other way. But I guess that's exactly what a hypocrite would say.

(SILENCE. PHONE RINGS. CLAIRE reaches around for the phone and picks up receiver)

CLAIRE

Hello.

(Pause)

Mr. Rollins.

(Pause)

You couldn't reach us because the phone was dead.

(Pause. To LEXI)

They were repairing the line down by Mount Crystal.

(Long pause. Into phone)

When did that happen?

(To LEXI)

Mr. Rollins was making a delivery down the road and saw a man looking at our house from the woods, so he called the police. They just took him in for questioning.

CLAIRE (Continued)

(Long pause. Into phone)

Thank you, Mr. Rollins. And thank you for calling.

(Hangs up. To LEXI)

The police found six liquor bottles in the backseat of his car filled with gasoline and stuffed with dirty rags.

LEXI

You think it was him?

CLAIRE

It would be quite a coincidence if it weren't.

(Beat, smells something)

I think you better check the chicken.

(LEXI goes quickly into the kitchen.
LIGHTS FADE. MUSIC UP: "THIS COLD
WAR WITH YOU," SUNG BY FLOYD
TILLMAN)

SCENE EIGHT

(MUSIC CONTINUES UP ON THE RADIO IN CLAIRE'S LIVING ROOM. LIGHTS UP on the living room at twilight. CLAIRE is seated at the table, finishing a slice of coconut cake on the plate in front of her. LEXI, who has cleared the other dishes returns from the kitchen to the living room. MUSIC FADES. THE NEWS REPORT THAT FOLLOWS IT OVERLAPS WITH THE OPENING DIALOGUE OF THE SCENE)

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

That was Floyd Tillman singing "This Cold War With You." This afternoon President Truman, impatient with the slow pace of change among top military leaders, decreed by executive order that the Armed Forces of the United States will be integrated immediately.

CLAIRE

(Eating the last bite of cake)

This coconut cake you made's delicious.

LEXI

It's my mother's recipe too.

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

His challenger, the newly nominated Republican candidate for president, New York governor Thomas Dewey, was out this morning for his first day of campaigning. He had this to say to a group of reporters...

LEXI (Contd)

You want to sit out on the porch?

(CLAIRE walks with the plate into

the kitchen)

CLAIRE

I need to rinse my plate first. Remember, that's the bargain you agreed to. You cook, and I do the dishes.

(CLAIRE rinses off the plate)

THOMAS DEWEY (V.O.)

I want to remind the American people that your future is still ahead of you!

(LEXI TURNS OFF THE RADIO)

CLAIRE

Looks like your party has nominated the Emperor of Painful Clichés.

LEXI

Ain't much of a speaker, is he?

CLAIRE

What does he look like?

LEXI

I saw him on Mr. Rollins' TV. He looks like one of those little men on top of a weddin' cake.

CLAIRE

He won't get many votes in North Carolina... except for yours.

LEXI

Who said I'm votin' for him?

CLAIRE

You've changed your party affiliation?

LEXI

Let's just say, I'm keeping an open mind.

CLAIRE

(As she re-enters living room)

Is it dark yet?

(LEXI takes her arm and leads her Downstage to the porch)

LEXI

Top of the sun's still above the horizon.

(They look Downstage in the direction of the mountains. Right, covered by a cloth, is a telescope)

CLAIRE

I remember when we arrived in China, it was dusk and I could barely see a thing, so the next morning as soon as I woke up I went to the window and looked out. There was a lake next to the missionary school, surrounded by mountains... thin, jagged ridges of limestone jutting up into the clouds, green peaks that used to be under the ocean five hundred million years ago... I can't tell you how many times I tried to paint those mountains... There were paths of wooden planks that curved out from the edge of the lake into gazebos, and all along them lilted figures that looked like nymphs, though I had no idea what they were... I found out later they were doing Tai-chi, Chinese gymnastics... Families clad in silk pajamas, rows of girls in pigtailed, ancient ladies with perfect posture, twisting in the mist rising up from the lake. I remember thinking, 'What can a twenty year-old girl from Gastonia possibly teach people who wake up dancing on the water'?

(Beat)
How are you doing?

LEXI
I wrote George C. a letter. So he'd know what really happened to Thomas. I figured I owe him that much.

CLAIRE
What about you?

LEXI
I'm still going 'round in circles. I keep tryin' to figure out what I could've done to prevent it.

CLAIRE
You know why you can't figure it out? Because there isn't anything.

LEXI
I know, but...

CLAIRE
You're the most impressive woman I know, Lexi, but even you couldn't prevent World War Two.

(Beat)
Max called while you were in town.

LEXI
What did she want?

CLAIRE
She saw the story in the paper about the man with the Molotov cocktails. She said the police think he was also responsible for the fire at our school.

LEXI
I told you it wasn't your fault.

CLAIRE

You'll never convince me of that, even if he was involved.

LEXI

Sounds like Shackelford and his crew have had their eye on you for quite a while.

CLAIRE

He claims he has no connection to this guy.

LEXI

And the Pope doesn't wear little red shoes either.

(Beat)

What else did Max say?

CLAIRE

She saw me testify on TV.

LEXI

What did she think?

CLAIRE

She said I was very convincing. I treated it as a compliment.

LEXI

So you two back to bein' friends?

CLAIRE

We're talking at least.

LEXI

I read your novel last night.

CLAIRE

Don't keep me in suspense.

LEXI

How did you figure out what it is to lose a child?

CLAIRE

You thought it was plausible?

LEXI

It wasn't plausible, Claire. It was the feelin'. I could barely bear to read it.

CLAIRE

I'll take that as a compliment too. Mr. Pomeroy said it's been nominated for some sort of prize. Apparently that's one thing I've gained: respectability.

LEXI

My sister wrote. She wants me to come back to Craig.

CLAIRE

Is that what you want?

LEXI

I told her I'm happy where I am.

CLAIRE

I'm glad to hear it. I wouldn't know what to do without you.

LEXI

I talked to Mr. Barnes down at the Otis Street Bakery. He said they might be needin' an events coordinator. You know, weddings, birthdays, that sort of thing.

CLAIRE

He'd be lucky to have you. And your recipe for coconut cake is certainly better than theirs. Why didn't you mention it before the convocation?

LEXI

Because I didn't want to have to bake six of 'em.
But don't worry, no matter what happens, I'll
keep on cookin'.

CLAIRE

And reading too, I hope. You're an exemplary
reader.

LEXI

What does that mean, "exemplary"?

CLAIRE

It means... you're what I've really gained.

LEXI

Guess I gained something I wasn't suspecting
either. Friends, a whole shelf full of 'em.

CLAIRE

(Beat)

Should we try to find Miranda?

(Gesturing in the direction of the
telescope)

When Mr. Rollins was here delivering eggs this
morning, I asked him to bring the telescope up
from the basement.

(LEXI removes the cloth from the
telescope)

LEXI

(Looking through the telescope)

I wouldn't know where to begin.

CLAIRE

Uranus is somewhere between Pegasus and Pisces. I
know that much. You have to find the Big Dipper,
which should be that way...

(Gestures)
...and go straight up from the North Star.

LEXI
(Looking through the telescope)
There is one real bright star in the Big Dipper...
But up above is a whole batch of little ones.

CLAIRE
We probably need a more powerful telescope.

LEXI
It is amazin' what you can see through this. You know, if they shoot another rocket up there, they oughta put Senator Shackelford on it instead of a monkey.

CLAIRE
That's a brilliant idea. Maybe they can fit the entire committee on it.

(Beat)
So what should we read tomorrow?

LEXI
Whatever you want.

CLAIRE
The Commedia has two more parts.

LEXI
I think I'm done with Dante for a while. And D.H. Lawrence too, for that matter.

CLAIRE
How about *Moby Dick*?

LEXI
What's that about?

CLAIRE

It's about a sea captain who's obsessed with
killing a whale.

LEXI

Can't we choose somethin' a bit more cheerful?

CLAIRE

I guess you're right. The world's grim enough as it is. We could read the *Quijote*?

LEXI

What's the *Quijote*?

CLAIRE

It's about a man who thinks he's a knight and his squire Sancho. They try to save the world.

LEXI

Sounds fine with me, as long as they don't go to hell doin' it.

CLAIRE

It's a long book.

LEXI

I'm not goin' anywhere.

CLAIRE

(Pause)

Do you mind if I take a look?

LEXI

Through the telescope?

CLAIRE

I can still see a little bit out of my left eye.

(CLAIRE twists her head so she can see through the telescope)

LEXI

Can you make anything out?

CLAIRE

The moon looks like a big, blurry orange egg.

LEXI

I had no idea you could still see anything.

CLAIRE

You know, at the end of the *Commedia* Dante joins Beatrice for eternity in the skies.

LEXI

So they do finally get together?

CLAIRE

Yes, they just don't get it on. The whole sky is full of stars, isn't it?

LEXI

Can you tell any of 'em apart?

CLAIRE

There's a golden one, very bright, right above the moon. I wonder if it's Gandhi.

LEXI

Gandhi?

CLAIRE

According to the Hindus, we're born over and over again until we rid ourselves of harmful energy through intelligent action. And when we do, the universe sets us free.

LEXI

I wonder if Thomas is up there too.

CLAIRE

I'm sure he is, wearing his silver star.

(She takes her eye from the telescope and sits back down)

LEXI

What about Miranda?

CLAIRE

I'm afraid our only hope of finding her's a sky map. She's so tiny, and no one even knew she existed until a month ago.

LEXI

After you're done with your writin' tomorrow, we'll go down and buy one at the bookstore.

CLAIRE

We can also stop by the bakery and pick up some cinnamon buns. Is it dark yet?

LEXI

The sun's completely disappeared, but there's still a streak of pink on the mountaintops.

(MUSIC UP: SCARLATTI'S SONATA IN B MINOR. LIGHTS FADE SLOWLY TO BLACK)

- THE END -