

When Your Soul Cries

A Play in Two Acts

By Richard E. Bloom



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(Author's Notes: The 1963 crusade to break the back of segregation in Birmingham, Alabama was the turning point in the civil rights campaign. In the wake of Birmingham's violence, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy asked celebrated black writer James Baldwin to gather some of his influential friends for a meeting at the Kennedy family apartment in New York City to discuss civil rights and how best to attack the issues of inequality. Up until this meeting, Robert Kennedy – like his brother President John F. Kennedy – was more concerned with retaining the White House in 1964 than civil rights. Kennedy was upbeat about the meeting, expecting everyone to share ideas and perspectives with the same reasoned mind Kennedy exercised. It was a landmark collection of intellects and emotions with contributions from such attendees as Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne, playwright Lorraine Hansberry and Freedom Rider Jerome Smith. The dynamics of this little-known but historic meeting, in one participant's words, were "the most dramatic and exhausting experience I've ever had." Kennedy left the meeting emotionally bloodied, yet in less than three weeks he alone would press his brother to publicly take a moral stand in favor of civil rights - even if it cost Kennedy the White House..

(Dramatic notes: Since there is no full and complete transcript of this historic meeting, some of the dialogue has been created to capture the tenor and tone of those present. Other scenes and dialogue have been created to help set the stage for the pre-and post-meeting attitudes of RFK.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

THE REV. MARTIN LUTHER KING	Civil rights crusader
ROBERT F. KENNEDY	Attorney general of the United States
BULL CONNOR	Birmingham (Ala) police commissioner
JOHN SWINDLE	Birmingham (Ala.) fire chief
ART HANES	Mayor of Birmingham (Ala.)
BURKE MARSHALL	Assistant attorney general for civil rights
EDWARD GUTHMAN	Press secretary for Robert F. Kennedy
ANGIE NOVELLO	Secretary to Robert F. Kennedy
JOHN F. KENNEDY	President of the United States
ETHEL KENNEDY	Wife of Robert F. Kennedy
JAMES BALDWIN	Playwright, essayist and civil rights activist
RIP TORN	Actor, friend of James Baldwin
GERALDINE PAGE	Actress, girlfriend of Rip Torn
DAVID BALDWIN	Younger brother of James Baldwin
LORRAINE HANSBERRY	Playwright, friend of James Baldwin
HARRY BELAFONTE	Singer, civil rights advocate
LENA HORNE	Singer, civil rights advocate
CLARENCE JONES	Rev. King's attorney/confidante
JEROME SMITH	Freedom Rider, civil rights activist
JOHN LEWIS	Civil rights activist
TERRY BARNHILL	Reporter, NY Times
FANNIE LOU HAMER	Civil rights activist
WHITE MAN	Mississippi racist
UNNAMED NEGRO	Jail inmate
UNNAMED NEGRO	Jail inmate

(Note: Some of the roles can be doubled)

TIME and PLACE

Act 1, Scene 1

Late April. The Birmingham City jail/the office of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy

Act 1, Scene 2

The office of Bull Connor, the morning of May 3

Act 1, Scene 3

Early May, afternoon. James Baldwin's apartment/RFK'S office.

Act 1, Scene 4

RFK's office

Act 1, Scene 5

A week later, RFK's office

Act 1, Scene 6

The morning of May 23, 1963. Poolside at RFK'S home Hickory Hill in Virginia.

Act 1 Scene 7

Early morning of May 24, 1963. James Baldwin's apartment.

Act II, Scene 1

Late afternoon of May 24, 1963. The Kennedy family's New York City apartment.

Act II, Scene 2

The same day, Sardi's Restaurant, NYC

Act II, Scene 3

The next day, RFK'S office

Act II, Scene 4

Early June. RFK'S office

Act II, Scene 5

A Mississippi hospital room/Winona City jail

Act II, Scene 6

The Oval Office

ACT II, Scene 7

The White House

ACT ONE

PROLOGUE (VO)

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. arrived in Birmingham, Alabama in the spring of 1963 to add his prestige to an anemic civil rights crusade in what many called the most segregationist city in the South. King was promptly arrested and put in the Birmingham City jail after he violated a court order against protests. When he read an editorial by eight white ministers criticizing his methods, King responded with his historic “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” a lengthy but forceful call to arms against segregation. Meanwhile, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy was less concerned with racial equality and more concerned with President John F. Kennedy’s re-election in 1964. Bobby Kennedy placed little importance on King’s presence in Birmingham and fully expected the crusade to die from an acute case of apathy.

Scene 1

AT RISE:

THE REV. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. sits SL on a bench in the Birmingham City jail with pencil and envelopes, newspapers, scraps of paper. The bench sits DSL in front of a pre-set staging for the beginning of Act 1, Scene 2

MLK

(with some passion as he writes on the envelope)

Brothers and sisters, I come to you today with a full heart for the crusade you have so bravely undertaken. If not today, if not tomorrow, *(pause, thinking)* if not next week, soon a crack will appear in that glass wall of segregation here and it will grow and spread and someday, friends, *(pause, thinking)* that wall will shatter – and we will be free!

At the end of his speech SL goes dark and a single spot illuminates SR where Attorney General ROBERT F. KENNEDY sits behind his desk, in shirtsleeves, talking on the phone. NOTE: The spotlight and darkness will alternate between the two.

RFK

(dispassionate, matter-of-fact)

Yes, Senator, certainly 1964 is, uh, a critical year for this administration and the Democratic Party. I won't deny that party solidarity is threatened by the issue of civil rights in the Deep South, particularly in states such as, uh, Mississippi and Alabama. I am a firm advocate of rights for all under the law, but more importantly for us, right now, is the, uh, administration's ability to continue its policies and programs beyond 1964. We cannot, we must not, let the Negroes' crusade for equality take precedence.

MLK

To answer those who question my presence here, I say that I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as . . . the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own hometown *(pause, thinking)*. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere!

RFK

(doodling)

Any civil rights legislation we would consider putting before Congress would, we believe, impede the administration's progress on moving ahead on more important domestic issues such as health care and tax reform. We have, uh, stressed to various Negro leaders agitating for change that the best policy is to wait - wait and let justice run its course.

MLK

(with even more emotion)

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim . . . then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

RFK

(tossing a small football in the air)

What's that? Well, I'm not sure I said it in those exact words, you know, that I, uh, that I never gave a shit about civil rights, but I can tell you that we can no longer ignore the issue. And, at the same time, we cannot allow the Communists any edge, any leverage to undermine our efforts in global influence.. And besides, the protest going on now in Birmingham does not appear very effective. It should, uh, all be over soon.

MLK

(with building emotion and power)

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The Negro is moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are at present misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. We will turn America upside down in order that it turn right side up! We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands!

Scene 2

AT RISE:

Birmingham Police Commissioner Bull Connor sits at his desk writing. There are some books and a phone on the desk, other miscellanea. A large map of Birmingham hangs on the wall behind him with blue and red markings. There are two chairs, one to left and one to right of desk. SL is a table with coffee pot and cups. Connor's intercom buzzes).

CONNOR

(pushing a button)

Yah?

SECRETARY'S VOICE (OS)

They're here sir

CONNOR

Well, send 'em all in Effie. Send 'em right in.

(CONNOR settles back in his chair, hands behind his head. Momentarily two men enter SL – Fire Chief JOHN SWINDLE and Birmingham Mayor ART HANES.

CONNOR

C'mon on on in boys. C'mon in. Make yerselves ta home. Git a cup a Joe if ya want. *(Both cross to coffee urn, pour coffee, take seats. CONNOR leans back in his chair)* Now, ah ain't gotta tell ya we got us a sitch-i-a-shun developin' here that we gonna have to confront head-on an' put an' end to pretty damn quick. That Martin Luther Kiss My Lily White Ass King and his buddies have come into our city to agitate our negras and stir up a whole lot o' trouble. Well, it aain't gonna happen, ya'll hear me? Not on my watch! Everythin' was pretty quiet til they all showed up an' well, I aint gotta tell you how many we put behind bars already. How man 'zactly there Art?

HANES

Last count we had 959 of ‘em ‘hind bars, Bull, an’ we runnin’ outta room!

CONNOR

959, huh? An’ they still hain’t got the message? Now they’s planning on sendin’ more . . . all them kids from Parker High School to come a marchin’ down on us again in, uh, what the hell they callin’ it, Art?

HANES

This here Children’s Crusade

CONNOR

Yeah. This hyar Children’s Crusade. Them goddamn agitatin’ niggers is hiding behind these kids, gittin’ them to try an’ do what they couldn’t. Well, I’ll tell ya here an’ now, boys, kids or no kids, we gonna give ‘em what fer today, ya’ll hear? I’m goddamn tired of pussyfootin’ ‘round with these goddamn agitaters.. My pappy always said the best niggers is scared niggers. Well, we shore gonna scare ‘em today.

SWINDLE

Scare ‘em? How?

CONNOR

We gonna pull out all stops. We gonna use the dogs and water cannons on ‘em.

SWINDLE

Dogs? On kids?

CONNOR

(Connor pauses, picks up a book from his desk, and in a fit of rage throws it at the fire chief who ducks just in time)

What the hell, you some goddamn bleedin’ heart? Goddamn right the kids! If’n they gonna march as a-dults then they gonna take the consequences as a-dults. Now, lookee here. *(He moves to the map, pointing)*. All them kids comin’ from Parker High School, is cong-re-gatin’ at the 16th Street Baptist Church. Then they all gonna march – they think – down to Kelly Ingram Park ‘n

CONNOR (Cont'd)

Hall. 'Bout a half-mile. Well, they haint gonna git there, ya hear?. THEY HAIN'T GONNA GIT THERE! We gonna set up police and fire lines hyar, hyar and hyar (*he stabs a finger at the map*) and if one of 'em makes it to City Hall well, it'll be yer asses I'll be skinnin' in the mornin' – ya damn betcha on that score. No outside agitaters are comin' in to my city and tellin' me what we have to do. No siree. So both of you best be on the same page with this. We make a stand hyar and now, ya hear? And damn whatever else happens

SWINDLE

Ya know, them water cannons shoot out a pretty high pressure stream. Just how high ya want us to go?

CONNOR

You use as much pressure as it takes to scatter them goddamn pickannines to all corners – just not City Hall. We gonna show Dr. Martin Luther Queen that he don't come into our city and not pay a price! Now ya got yer orders. Best be gittin' to it. (*The two men begin to exit SL*)

CONNOR

Art

(*The mayor turns. CONNOR tosses him a package of brown wrapped paper*)

HANES

What's this?

CONNOR

Open it up an' see.

(*HANES does so, and holds up two hefty beefsteaks*)

HANES

Sirloin! Shit! Why thank ya Bull, that's mighty kind of ya. Mighty kind. ..the missuses will be mighty grateful . . .

CONNOR

Hell, them hain't for you and the family . . .

They ain't ?

CONNOR

No sireee.

HANES

Whal then, what they fer?

CONNOR

For the dogs, boy, for the dogs. Once they done they work, you tell 'em Bull thanks 'em. Holy Jesus, them kids gonna wisht they had stayed in class. Yesirree. They gonna wish they never heard the name Bull Connor. Now I'll be down there directin' things from the command car but you boys best be doin' your jobs! Now git!

Scene 3

AT RISE:

Playwright/essayist JAMES BALDWIN sits at his desk typing. His New York apartment is a dimly lit, two-room affair with a combination bedroom/living room. There is a bed against the US wall, a nightstand nearby. A small loveseat sits CS with four other chairs situated to sits left and right. A bookcase sits DSR. A floor lamp flanks the bookcase. A typewriter sits on a simple wooden desk SL. The desk holds lots of papers, a few books, a telephone. There is a stack of LP albums on the floor next to a phonograph. A small drinks caddy sits next to the desk. There is a knock on the door.)

BALDWIN

Enter! (*Playwright LORRAINE HANSBERRY enters coatless, holding a newspaper, visibly agitated, almost in tears. BALDWIN turns.*) Ah, sweet Lorraine, my muse, my Calliope, my . . .

HANSBERRY

(with some emotion)

Oh, can it Jimmy. Did you see the headlines in today's *Times* about what's going on in Birmingham? (*She crosses to one of the chairs flanking the DS table and collapses, agony telling in her voice, her face.*)

BALDWIN

Sadly, no.

HANSBERRY

That's because there aren't any! This damn elitist fourth estate continues to treat us as if we are invisible, Jimmy! When are they going to sit up and take notice?

BALDWIN

Now, now sweet Lorraine, perhaps a new hairdo would turn their heads.

HANSBERRY

I'm serious Jimmy. We cannot make any progress in civil rights if we do not have a certain segment of the white community behind us. But most white folks would rather turn their eyes – and their minds – away. What do we have to do to gain equality?

BALDWIN

(crosses to her, takes her hands in his)

My dear, you *did* gain equality when you sat down to write *A Raisin in the Sun*. Because it was the first play by a black woman ever- ever I mind you – produced on Broadway! And when that happened, you did gain equality with the likes of Lillian Hellman and Clare Booth and all the other damned white female playwrights. You made it, darling! Why, when *Raisin* went up, never in the history of the American theatre had so much of the truth of black people's lives been seen on the stage! And when all those folks crowded around you after, begging for an autograph, you weren't so much being admired as you were validated and confirmed. To them, you were a witness to their lives – and they loved you, as I do, sweet Lorraine.

HANSBERRY

(sitting, lighting a cigarette)

But Jimmy, art, has a purpose, and that is action; it should contain the energy to change things. But *Raisin* didn't change one damn thing. It didn't do a damn thing to stop the lynchings in the South or the midnight beatings. Not a damned thing! It's not enough, Jimmy, not by a long shot! Not for our people. They suffer, every day they suffer, and a damned play about a black man with dreams ain't gonna ease their sufferin' one damn bit!

BALDWIN

We are only two, sweetness, only two voices crying in the wilderness, as it were. And yet because of the strength of our voices, we can try to make a difference! We are on the same side of the barricades, listening to the accumulating thunder of the hooves of the enemy's horses. If we have to beat them over the head with it, we can try to make a difference. Now, be a dear and mix your favorite writer in the whole world a martini.

HANSBERRY

(moving toward the drinks caddy)

But Christ Jimmy, the only voice that matters – the only voice that people are listening to - is Dr. King's – and they've got him locked up in jail!

BALDWIN

And perhaps that is why we have to raise our voices even louder!

HANSBERRY

My God Jimmy, if you were straight, think what a pair we would be! Fire and smoke! Lightning and thunder! Sturm und drang!

BALDWIN

Yes, but we'd still argue over who'd do the cooking.

HANSBERRY

(crossing to BALDWIN with his drink)

You can cook. I'd do the decorating because this home of yours is . . . is . . . just this side of early French whorehouse.

BALDWIN

Why, just the place for a tart such as yourself! *(They both laugh)*. And besides, if I were straight, I wouldn't be pleeeeeding with you for Sidney Poitier's phone number.

HANSBERRY

Really Jimmy, you ain't right child. Sidney is straight, has been straight and will continue to be straight until your dying day.

BALDWIN

Ah, but to die in his arms, sweet Lorraine. Now that would be worth dying for!

HANSBERRY

What would be worth dying for is happening right there in Birmingham. That's worth dying for – the opportunity to be equal – to be someone, Jimmy – not just a playwright or an essayist but a man or a woman – without color but with pride and dignity. No more suffering, Jimmy, no more pain. That would be worth dying for. Why I . . . *(as she talks, she fiddles with the radio, hears the broadcaster's voice, pauses.)*

RADIO BROADCASTER VO

. . . in Birmingham, Alabama when Public Safety Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor turned police dogs and fire hoses on more than 1,000 black student demonstrators marching peacefully for civil rights.

HANSBERRY

(stepping back, her hand to her mouth)

Oh my God, did you hear that Jimmy? Oh my God, Jimmy, listen! This is the end, Jimmy, the end! Oh my God!

Scene 4

AT RISE:

BOBBY KENNEDY sits at his desk DSL, writing. His glasses are on his head, his shirtsleeves are rolled up to the elbows, his tie is askew. There is an American flag and a Treasury flag to the left of the desk. A few paintings hang on the wall along with his children's artwork. On the desk is a toy Teamsters truck, a bust of Winston Churchill and two telephones. There is a bookcase DSR and a TV/radio console sits to the right of the desk. A door SL opens and BURKE MARSHALL, assistant attorney general for civil rights, enters, obviously unnerved. He crosses toward the console.

MARSHALL

(turning on the TV).

Sir, we have trouble . . . with a capital C.

RFK

(without looking up)

Uh, as I remember. according to the song, that's, uh, trouble with a capital . . .

MARSHALL

C. As in Connor. Bull Connor. He has let slip the dogs of war . . . It's all over the news.

(MARSHALL finds a channel, steps back. RFK comes from behind his desk. He walks to front of it, half sits on the edge, legs extended, crossed at ankles, arms folded.)

TV BROADCASTER VO

The confrontation began at approximately 1 p.m. when hundreds of marchers, the majority of them students from Parker High School, emerged from the 16th Street Baptist Church for the one-half mile walk to city hall. Connor, who arrested more than 900 protestors yesterday, was waiting for them with the dogs and hoses . . .

(As the broadcast continues, a screen on the rear of the stage shows images of the march – police dogs biting at black marchers, other blacks cowering against a wall as they try to withstand the water pressure, etc. The newsreel ends and the action shifts to real time on stage. Two Negro teen-agers rush across the stage, soaking wet, stop, look behind them, rush off. BULL CONNOR enters from SR with a bullhorn. CONNOR: "Let them folks get closer, ya hear? I wanna let 'em see how the dogs work!" He exits SR. A black teen-age boy runs in from

SL with a torn pants leg. There is the sound of growling, barking dogs. He looks around quickly for someplace to hide, finds nothing, rushes off. Two fireman appear on SL with a firehose.

FIREMAN: "Can we get more pressure? Gimme me more pressure! Bull wants 'em to really feel it! Damn hose"! They exit SL. Two policemen enter SE carrying a screaming black teen-age girl who struggles against their hold. A group of black-teens run in from SL screaming as two other policemen appear behind them with billy clubs. The whole group runs off SL)

RFK

Jesus Christ, Bull Connor continues to give, uh, Southern hospitality a whole new meaning,

ANGIE NOVELLO (VO)

Sir, I have the President on Line 3.

(RFK picks up his phone as spot falls on SL where PRESIDENT KENNEDY sits at his desk, phone in hand.)

PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY

Bobby, what in the goddamn hell is going on in Birmingham? You know, just between you and me, sometimes I think President Lincoln made a big mistake by not letting the South secede.

RFK

Yes, think of it . . . no South, no Lyndon.

JFK

I don't have to tell you, Bobby, that we're, uh, well, this is damn critical. Attack dogs on kids? That makes me sick Bobby. And the Commies will have a field day with this one. But the hell of it is, this administration cannot afford to, we have to keep the Southern segregationists of the party in line. If we piss off the Dixiecrats, well, kiss '64 goodbye. But, uh, we cannot appear, you know, we have to support peaceful civil rights demonstrations. We cannot allow anything to undermine our trip to Berlin next month. Especially after the Cuban thing.

RFK

I . . . I think for the most part we have to . . .uh, Jack, have to remain at a distance and yet affect some sort of compromise.

JFK

Well, uh, I have Jackie waiting in the wings if all else fails. I would venture to guess not even Bull Connor could stand up to her charm and elegance. Keep me posted.

RFK

(pressing his intercom)

Angie, see if you can reach someone – *anyone* – in Birmingham. Someone who can put a stop to this insanity.

TV BROADCASTER VO

One source said the firemen were ordered to increase the water pressure to an unbelievable 100 pounds per square inch, which I understand, is force enough to peel paint . . . At least two firemen and a news photographer were injured by bricks and broken bottles thrown from the top of a Negro office building near 17th Street and Fifth Avenue North.

ANGIE NOVELLO VO

Uh, sir, I have the police commissioner on Line 1.

(BULL CONNOR enters with phone SR, steps into single spot)

RFK

(talking into his intercom)

Who?

ANGIE (OS)

Mr. Connor. The police commissioner.

RFK

(picking up the phone)

Thanks. Commissioner Connor . . .

CONNOR

Mr. Attorney General, what can I do ya for?

RFK

Well, commissioner, you can begin by, uh, calling off the police dogs and firehoses. I'm not sure those are the best ways to defuse the situation in Birmingham.

CONNOR

Mis-tuh Kennedy, the best way to defuse this here situation is to remove all these outside nigra agitators coming into my city to start trouble. I didn't invite 'em here and I don't believe anyone else did neither.

RFK

Well, commissioner, these outside agitators, as you call them, are American citizens who have the right to demonstrate. At least that's my reading of the Constitution.

CONNOR

Y'all must not be reading the Alabama constitution, ya hear? Cause the way I read his h'yar docu-ment is that we have a right hyar in Alabama to defend our homes and our way of life from disturbers of the peace in any way we see fit, ya hear?

RFK

I, uh, believe the American Constitution takes precedence in this case.

CONNOR

An' I believe you can blow that out yer ass. The Constitution talks about peaceable assembly and all these hundreds of agitators hain't what I call all that peaceable. Why, they just itchin' fer a fight, ya hear?

RFK

To the best of my knowledge, they are peaceably demonstrating without any so-called threat of violence.

CONNOR

Whal now, you hain't down here now, are ya? How y'all know there hain't no threat of violence? How y'all know these here nigras won't turn on us at any moment – and then where would we be? Why, if'n if were up to y'all, we would have our guard down and then they'd have their way with us. No siree, that hain't gonna happen by a long shot. No sir, hell will freeze over colder than the dam Arctic afore I let that happen in MY city.

RFK

Mr. Connor, the president would consider it a personal favor if we approached this situation in a much more reasoned and practical approach.

CONNOR

I don't need no favors from yer brother and I damn well don't care what he thinks. Cause you Kennedys are sittin' up there in your ivory towers enjoyin' yer luxuries while we poor folks down here gotta sleep with one eye open and both barrels loaded.

RFK

Really, commissioner, I think you are exaggerating. I cannot stress enough that these marchers are well within their rights to lawful and peaceable assembly.

CONNOR

Rights? Within their rights? Hell bells, these outside agitators and Commies hain't got no rights here, ya hear? All they gonna get is a load of buckshot where their rights oughta be, ya hear? The dogs is gittin' the job done, yessiree. They's workin' now. God, I love to see them animals work! I think we're done here.

RFK

Commissioner . . . Commissioner?

(RFK's press secretary ED GUTHMAN enters from SL carrying a legal pad)

GUTHMAN

I'm working up some comments for the press. They're gonna be all over you on this. I put together the standard response about how they have been victims of abuse and have basic rights, etc. etc. and end with something like, uh, like, "school children participating in street demonstrations is a dangerous business."

RFK

Good, good Ed. But something's missing, right there at the end. Something that really, uh, must hit home with everyone, regardless of skin color. *(He jots something down on paper)*. Something like, uh, like, an injured . . . an injured . . . or maimed or dead child is *(he pauses)* . . . is a price that none of us can afford to pay.

Scene 5

AT RISE:

It is a week later. RFK is seated at his desk. BURKE MARSHALL sits in a chair to the R. of desk, flipping through a handful of papers. RFK's secretary, ANGIE NOVELLO enters SL with a few telegrams, crosses to RFK.

RFK

(looking up as he's writing)

Uh, more fan mail?

NOVELLO

It appears your stock in Hollywood may have slipped a few percentage points, sir, judging from the telegrams. This one's from Paul Newman and Marlon Brando *(she hands him the telegram)* expressing dismay and outrage at what's going on in Birmingham. *(RFK glances at it as NOVELLO lays it on the desk)*. And here's one from the black writer James Baldwin. *(She starts to hand it to him)*.

RFK

(without looking up)

What does it say?

NOVELLO

Those who bear the greatest responsibility for the chaos in Birmingham are not in Birmingham. Among those responsible are J. Edgar Hoover, Senator Eastland, the power structure which has given Bull Connor such license and President Kennedy who has not used the great prestige of his office as the moral forum which it can be. This crisis is neither regional nor racial. It is a matter of the national life or death. . . *(She hands RFK the Baldwin telegram and exits SL)*.

MARSHALL

Well, he's right about Senator Eastland, anyway.

RFK

Mr. Baldwin has become quite the articulate spokesman for the, uh, movement – something of a Thomas Paine for our age. Even this week's *Time Magazine* seems to think so (*he holds up a copy with JAMES BALDWIN pictured on the cover*).

(The door SL opens and ED GUTHMAN enters and crosses to chair at SR).

GUTHMAN

Any word yet on how the bombings will affect the agreement?

MARSHALL

(sorting through a handful of phone messages)

The Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and his colleagues are trying to hold everyone in check despite the bombings. I don't think the black population wants to risk losing what they've gained in Birmingham - desegregating the lunch counters and fitting rooms within 90 days, hiring black people in stores as salesmen and clerks and releasing those in jail on bond or their own recognizance by adding fuel to the fire. So all we can do now is hope the situation does not escalate. By the way, speaking of Baldwin, here's a message from the comedian Dick Gregory. He says if we want to get a handle on the Negro frame of mind, especially in the North, we should sit down and talk to none other than. . . .

GUTHMAN

Let me guess. James Baldwin.

MARSHALL

The same.

RFK

He seems to be everybody's answer.

MARSHALL

Well, I'm, sure it couldn't hurt. After all, he is well respected and admired among the blacks and has certainly explored the minds and motivations of both the militants and pacifists.

RFK

Well, if you think so, why don't you, uh, try and set up a meeting, maybe a breakfast meeting? Invite him, you know, ask him to, uh, come out to Hickory Hill. Make it sometime later in May . . . after the 20th.

MARSHALL

As for Birmingham, I think all that can be said right now is what President Lincoln said some years ago. "Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other."

GUTHMAN

Yah, well, try telling the Klan that. They appear to have their own resolution to succeed.

RFK

Not according to, uh, Director Hoover. He says there is no direct evidence to tie the, uh, bombings to the Klan and naturally reminded me that the, uh, Negroes are mightily influenced by the Communists.

GUTHMAN

I swear, I'll bet that old fairy sees red when it snows. So tell me, Burke, how many new friends did you make down in Birmingham?

MARSHALL

Let's just say I don't think I'll be invited to any Sunday dinners. By the way, here's a little gem courtesy of our Southern friends. Why does Alabama have so many Negroes and all the Kennedys are in Massachusetts? (*KENNEDY and GUTHMAN are non-responsive*). Alabama had first choice.

NOVELLO VO

The President on Line 1.

(*RFK picks up Line 1*).

JFK (VO)

Bobby, I don't have to tell you, uh, make you aware that this administration cannot tolerate, won't abide the combat mentality unfolding in Birmingham. Listen, I'm calling a meeting this evening to discuss our options. Bring Burke with you. But you should be aware I've asked certain military members to attend. I don't think I have any other choice. At this point I have decided to order federal troops into Birmingham.

RFK

Absolutely, Jack. We cannot let the administration crumble under the weight of a race war.

MARSHALL

(standing)

I need to man the phones. But in the meantime, sleep with one eye open – and beware of wolves in . . . sleep’s . . . clothing. *(He picks up his briefcase and exits).*

GUTHMAN

(looking at RFK)

Wolves in sleep’s clothing?

RFK

Burke thinks the KKK needs to improve its dress code.

(The lights fade as a radio broadcast begins)

RADIO BROADCASTER VO

An uneasy calm settled over riot-torn Birmingham with more than 3,000 federal troops stationed nearby to ensure against the collapse of the historic integration settlement reached last week in what many call the most racist city in America. The agreement, hammered out over a week of tough negotiations between Negro and white business leaders, appears to be holding fast.

Scene 6

AT RISE:

It is the morning of May 23, 1963 on the Kennedys' patio at Hickory Hill, their Virginia home. There is a glass-topped table with chairs CS and a smaller table USR with a telephone and radio. There are some toys and pool equipment (flippers, masks, snorkel tubes, etc.) lying nearby. A very pregnant ETHEL KENNEDY enters from SL pushing a cart of dishes, fruit, glasses, orange juice, bowls, etc. RFK enters from SR just as the phone starts to ring. He is carrying a briefcase and a newspaper.

ETHEL

Morning dear.

RFK

Morning(*He kisses her quickly on the cheek as he crosses to the phone R and picks up the receiver*). Hello? Uh huh. Not yet, huh? *Well (he glances at his wristwatch)* I have a meeting this morning at 9:30 so the very minute he lands get him here as quickly as possible. Ok, thanks.

ETHEL

Mr. Baldwin running late?

RFK

(sitting at table)

Apparently. I'm not sure we'll have much of a chance to talk.

ETHEL

(pouring BOBBY'S orange juice)

About?

RFK

Well, Mr. Baldwin appears to be the voice of disaffected Negroes in America and, I believe, has the ear of both the radicals, you know, those that listen to people like Malcom X, and the more conservative leaders like Dr. King. I'm hoping Mr. Baldwin can, uh, provide some meaningful insight into the, uh, mindset and temperament of Northern Negroes. Yet I can't help but feel there may be extreme issues to come. By the way, *(he begins to open he paper)* speaking of extreme issues, Dad was asking me to discuss your shopping bills. He thinks *they* may be a bit extreme.

ETHEL

Oh Bobby. How could they be extreme? I simply buy what I need – nothing more.

RFK

Six belts of the same style in different colors from. . .where was it? Mrs. . . . Mrs. Paul's? Why in the world would you buy belts from a fish company?

ETHEL

Not Mrs. Paul's, Bobby, *Ma-dame Paul's*, Madame Paul's.

RFK

OK, Madame Paul's. But you really need six of the same belt?

ETHEL

Now Bobby, for every outfit one must have the right accessories. I am six times over in need as your wife, a mother, a party hostess, your ambassador, a daughter-in-law and sister-in-law of the President of the United States, no less. Now you couldn't expect me to wear the exact same belt with each outfit, could you? Why, the columnists would have a field day!

RFK

Remember what Henry David Thoreau once said, "Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes."

ETHEL

(rising, crossing to breakfast cart)

Well, you just remember what Edith Wharton wrote in the *House of Mirth*: "We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed until we drop." And besides, I'll bet your father doesn't chastise *(she assumes Jackie Kennedy's breathy delivery)* Jacqu-leen about her spending. You know Jacqu-leen don't you? The name, as she says it, rhymes with queen *(she laughs)*. You know Bobby, I think she's had it in for me ever since we were all sitting around, you know me, Joan, Jaccq-leen, talking about our goals in life and she mentioned that she once thought of being a ballerina. Well, all I could do was look at those size 11 feet of hers and say, with those clodhoppers of yours? You'd be better off going in for soccer!

RFK

Well, after all Ethel, she is the wife of the president, while you are the wife of just . . .

ETHEL

. . .the second most powerful man in America! And if anyone disagrees, have them contact Jimmy Hoffa's social secretary! *(There is the sound of a car approaching. ETHEL turns to the sound).* I think your breakfast guest has finally arrived. *(She rises, pushes the breakfast cart as she kisses BOBBY on the cheek and exits SL. BOBBY follows. Moments later, BOBBY re-enters SL followed by JAMES BALDWIN).*

BALDWIN

My sincere apologies, Mr. Kennedy, for my tardiness. I don't think the pilot knew who was on board. *(He laughs, looks about the property.)* Vous avez une belle maison, monsieur.

RFK

Merci. But you should be here when all the kids are scrambling about. Might change your opinion. And please call me Bobby. Unfortunately, I have a meeting at 9:30 so we don't have as much time to chat as I thought. Hungry?

BALDWIN

(sitting)

Not as hungry as the millions of oppressed blacks in this country.

RFK

Yes, well, certainly, I am, uh, we are aware of that and what transpired in Birmingham is one of the reasons I wanted to talk with you. We are, the, er, the administration is concerned that the sentiments of Birmingham may spread beyond Alabama's borders and take root in other cities, especially in the North where . . .

(ETHEL enters SL with the cart, holding plates of bacon, poached eggs and toast, jelly. She places plates in front of RFK and BALDWIN, then exits SL).

BALDWIN

. . . .Where people like Elijah Muhammad and Malcom X are doing their best to stir up the flames of discontent among the urban blacks? I completely understand your concern and I hope you understand ours. The white race has to come to terms with its own hypocrisy regarding blacks before we can come to terms with racial harmony. We really only have to look as far as the ghettos of Chicago or Detroit, to the sub- standard housing projects, as whites like to call them, to see where some improvement can be made.

RFK

I believe the, uh, the administration is monitoring sentiments in Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York and is determined to try and understand what the Negroes exactly want.

BALDWIN

(with some emotion)

What do they want? They want to be treated equally under the law! They want freedom to walk the streets and not be accosted! They want peace of mind to sleep without the specter of the KKK or the police waking them in the middle of the night to face a burning cross or an interrogation room simply – and I emphasize simply – because their skin is a different color! They want what all of you have – the freedom every American citizen enjoys.

RFK

(getting up, pacing)

Those concerns, uh, are our concerns. But please remember the, uh, delicate political situation we are in. We won six of 11 states south of the Mason Dixon line in 1960 and, uh, if we start to upset the apple cart now, well, we stand a good chance of losing all those apples in 1964 and you, in turn, then lose our, uh, support and aggressive advocacy.

BALDWIN

With all due respect, Mr. Attorney General, lives are at stake here and you're talking politics? I believe Dr. King put it best: the biggest stumbling block in our stride for freedom is not the white Southerner or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate – like yourself and your brother - who are more devoted to order than justice. They always say, I agree with your goals, but disagree with your direct action to achieve them

ETHEL

(enters from SL)

Excuse me Bobby, but your driver says you need to leave soon to make your meeting.

RFK.

I'm sorry we have to cut this short. But, you know, I have to be in New York tomorrow. Do you think you could gather a group of your friends, you know, friends and acquaintances who might help, uh, crystallize the perspective on all this? People who can help us, uh, the administration, formulate a strong and long-range policy, a plan toward resolving the issue of civil rights?

BALDWIN.

A group of friends, huh? *(He thinks for a few moments.)* I suppose so. *(He smiles.)* Yes, I'm sure of it.

RFK

Good. Now, uh, my family has an apartment on Central Park South, Number 24, so let's say we meet there, say, about 4 o'clock?

BALDWIN

Yes, I think that will work. And I think tomorrow's meeting will . . . will more than open your eyes to the tempest brewing within the Negro population. You will, I hope, be extremely enlightened. *(They exit SL together).*

Scene 7

AT RISE:

The apartment of writer JAMES BALDWIN, set as in Scene 2. The door opens and playwright LORRAINE HANSBERRY enters, followed by JAMES BALDWIN'S brother, DAVID BALDWIN; RIP TORN and his date, actress GERALDINE PAGE, who are laughing; and JAMES BALDWIN.

RIP TORN

(laughing as he enters)

Christ, that was funny. But did you hear the one about the three guys in a bar? Well, there's a millionaire, a hardhat and a drunk sitting at a bar and they all order beers. When the beers come, there's a fly in each one. Well, the millionaire simply orders another beer. The hardhat drinks the part of the beer without the fly in it. But the drunk reaches his hand into the beer, yanks out the fly by the neck and yells, Spit it out! Spit it out!

(Everyone laughs as they wander about the room, finding a place to relax)

J. BALDWIN

Make yourselves at home everyone. Drinks are on the house – especially Rip's. We've got a lot to talk about. *(He moves toward the drinks caddy, starts to mix a drink)*

PAGE

(sitting with TORN on the loveseat)

My God, Rip, how many times are you going to tell that old joke?

TORN

Until they stop laughing – and buying me drinks! Make mine Scotch on the rocks, James. Gerry?

PAGE

I've had too much already. I'll just smell yours *(She musses TORN'S hair)*.

HANSBERRY

(walking about the room, taking it all in)

Gin and tonic, Jimmy.

J. BALDWIN

Yours simply for the asking my dear.

HANSBERRY

(lighting a cigarette)

So now Jimmy, tell me again about this meeting you've roped us into? With the attorney general of the United States, no less. Are you kidding?

J BALDWIN

(still fixing drinks)

Not at all, darling. Why, I just had breakfast with him yesterday morning. At Hickory Hill. Lovely home.

PAGE

Breakfast with Bobby Kennedy? With seven children underfoot, he couldn't be that hard up for company. Why you?

J. BALDWIN

(He turns, crosses to PAGE and TORN DSR with TORN'S drink, hands it to him)

Because, my dear, I happen to be the voice of the your tired, your poor, your disaffected, your disadvantaged - which you would know if you had read my *New Yorker* article . . .

PAGE

Oh Jimmy, the *New Yorker* is just so dry...there aren't all *that* many pictures *(She laughs)*.

TORN

You have to remember, James, that Gerry is a visual person...after all, look at me! She certainly had to be visual when she picked me out.

J. BALDWIN

In addition to her dyslexia, I think she may be myopic! Anyway, Bobby Kennedy wanted to speak with me about the needs and wants of the Negro population in this country – as if I had to tell him – and what can be done to deal with them – before anymore Birmingham firestorms spread to the North.

HANSBERRY

(crossing to SR, sitting on arm of loveseat)

It may be too late for that if Elijah Muhammad and Malcom X have their way. Every day their preaching is diametrically opposed to Dr. King's nonviolence doctrine. They think the short answer to a long problem . . . is the point of a gun.

D. BALDWIN

(He sits by the record player, thumbing through a stack of albums)

So, what did you tell him?

J. BALDWIN

(crossing DSR to D. BALDWIN, handing him a glass of wine)

Well, I pretty much said what we all know and have discussed before – the Negro is tired of not being a second-class citizen but rather, of not being a citizen at all! We are all Americans and deserve to enjoy the same basic rights that all Americans enjoy.

D. BALDWIN

Yah, like the right to yank niggers out of bed in the middle of the night and string ‘em up. And he said?

J. BALDWIN

Well, he didn’t have time to say very much. My plane was late and he had a meeting. That’s why he asked me to gather a group of friends and acquaintances who could share their perspectives and help the administration address the spread of civil rights demands.

TORN

And, these friends and acquaintances, are . . .

J. BALDWIN

(standing by the couch)

Well, I’ve already contacted Harry Belafonte and he’s in. And of course there’s you, Rip, our token white liberal, and I’m hoping to lure Lena Horne into this web of intrigue . . .

HANSBERRY

(interrupting)

Lena Horne? *(She turns suddenly from stubbing out her cigarette)*. Are you serious? She’s not exactly what I’d call among the disaffected . .

TORN

Ah, yes, quite right. But she is lovely to look at. And maybe she’ll sing *Stormy Weather* as a sort of sign of the times – for Bobby.

PAGE

Anyone else?

J. BALDWIN

My baby brother over there (*he nods toward* D. BALDWIN), Dr. King's attorney, Clarence Jones...

HANSBERRY

(*She rises, begins pacing*)

Okay, let's see, you've got two singers, a playwright, an actor – and a white actor at that. Not exactly what I would call representative of the black masses yearning to be free.

J. BALDWIN

Uh, well, I didn't have many options given the short notice. And besides, you have all been witness in some manner, shape or form to the outrageous racism that exists in this country.

HANSBERRY

Well, let's hope Harry doesn't show up and bitch about why he didn't get the role of Willie Lee in *Raisin* instead of Sidney.

J. BALDWIN

(*with feeling*)

My dear, either choice would have been simply dee-licious. Ooooooh, the bodies on those black Adonises. . .

TORN

. . .Uh, Jimmy, let's not detour into the bedroom. How about another detour to the drinks?

J. BALDWIN

At your service. (*He crosses to the drinks caddy again, begins pouring TORN'S Scotch*).

HANSBERRY

(*Lighting another cigarette*)

I'm serious, Jimmy, do you really think the attorney general is going to consider the opinions of a group of artists and one psychologist, an attorney and a few others? We don't live in the South, we don't live in tarpaper shacks or go to sleep with a pitchfork handy. How can we speak to those issues?

J. BALDWIN

Ah, sweet Lorraine, it's not as if you were attending with blinders on. You advocate for equal treatment under the law, you've witnessed the depredations in the South. So has Lena. She's marched with the Rev. King. Harry's had many discussions about civil rights with Bobby at his home.

HANSBERRY

(crossing to BALDWIN)

It just seems to me it's like sending a reporter to do a story on what it's like to be a coal miner. He could stand at the entrance to the mine and interview those coming out or he could get a job as a coal miner and experience it for himself!

D. BALDWIN

So, are we meeting at the White House?

J. BALDWIN

We should be so fortunate. No, the Kennedys have an apartment at 24 Central Park South. That's where we're going. 4 o'clock.

HANSBERRY

Jimmy, we have to have something to say, some cohesive viewpoint that we all agree on. Something that will open the eyes of the attorney general. Cause it seems to me the Kennedys have been much more reactive than proactive. Fact is, if you ask me, I don't think either one of them gives a shit about civil rights!

TORN

She does have a point. Take that crisis at Ole Miss last year. The government only intervened when James Meredith's life was in danger and those good ol' boys brought out the weapons. You know how it played out. The Kennedys didn't encourage Meredith to enroll at the university and then stand behind him. They came into it after the fact.

D. BALDWIN

(rising, crossing DSR toward the loveseat)

That's right. And the same thing was true of the Freedom Riders in '61. Hell, I've heard that the president yelled at his civil rights advisor, Harris Wofford, to get those damned people off the buses, stop them now! Doesn't sound as if he's exactly in our corner.

PAGE

And I'm sure the same could be said of Birmingham. The present administration, despite what they'd like you to believe, tried to persuade Dr. King *not* to open that can of worms. My guess is they would all have slept a lot better during the past three years if the Negroes had not raised their voices – and their expectations.

D. BALDWIN

I think we're all in agreement that the Kennedys would much rather keep civil rights on the back burner – if at all. Oh, they toss out, you know, throw us a few crumbs every once in a while to appease us, then turn their attention to education or health reform. It's taken men like Dr. King to move the campaign to the front burner and turn up the heat. It's the only way!

HANSBERRY

Wait a minute. I think I've got it. Yes, this might make a difference. There's a young man in the city – he's here getting treatment for injuries he received down South fighting segregation. His name is Jerome Smith and he has gone down into the coal mine, and choked on the coal dust of oppression. He – if we can reach him – he can certainly put a face to this extreme crisis. He can speak first-hand to Mr. Robert Kennedy. Maybe, just maybe, that will make a difference.

PAGE

Smith? Jerome Smith? I think I've read something about him. He's. . .

HANSBERRY

. . . He was among the initial Freedom Riders back in '61. He was beaten pretty badly trying to desegregate the bus station down in McComb, Mississippi and they even threw him in Parchman Prison for a spell. As I said, he's walked over the hot coals – and survived.

J. BALDWIN

Do you think he'll agree?

HANSBERRY

What do we have to lose? But he has suffered so much that the chance to address the most powerful law enforcement officer in the country might just be the right carrot to dangle on our stick. Hell, there's no harm in trying.

PAGE

You're absolutely right, Lorraine. Someone of his experience could make this meeting meaningful, you know, important enough that Bobby Kennedy will pay more than lip service to his concern.

J. BALDWIN

A toast then (*everyone grabs a drink*). To Fraternite, egalite, liberte – and Sidney Poitier's phone number!

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

Scene 1

AT RISE:

The Kennedys' Central Park South apartment drawing room in New York City. It is spacious, expensively decorated— art, tapestries, etc. There are two couches CS angled, two club chairs, four arm chairs, a coffee table, a couple of end tables, lamps, a buffet set SR. One door SL is the entry door, another set of doors SR lead to the dining room. As the scene opens, we hear voices beyond the dining room doors. The door opens and ROBERT KENNEDY enters, followed by JAMES BALDWIN and BURKE MARSHALL. RFK crosses to a chair SL, takes off his coat, rolls up his sleeves, sits. MARSHALL crosses to another chair SL and sits. BALDWIN stands at the doorway, waiting, as HARRY BELAFONTE and LENA HORNE enter. BELAFONTE carries a cup of coffee and HORNE holds out a cigarette which BALDWIN lights. BELAFONTE stands SR, watching, as BALDWIN and HORNE cross to the couch SR, schmoozing. LORRAINE HANSBERRY enters through the DR doors, followed by DAVID BALDWIN and RIP TORN. HANSBERRY immediately lights up, looks about for an ashtray. DAVID BALDWIN follows her. TORN crosses to the couch with BALDWIN and HORNE. He carries a plate with a piece of cake. He sits. CLARENCE JONES follows them. He stops, looks about, finds a chair SL. JEROME SMITH, a 24-year-old CORE worker, is the last to enter. He appears uncomfortable, somewhat angry, agitated. He, too, lights up a cigarette and stands apart DSR. All the whites are SL, the blacks SR.

RFK

Well, I hope everyone had enough to eat. I want to, uh, thank you all for coming on such short notice. As I said earlier at dinner, the administration is genuinely concerned about, uh, the advancement of civil rights, especially when it comes to preventing any other Birminghams. But also we have a party in revolt and we have to be somewhat considerate about how to keep them on board if the Democratic party is going to prevail in the next elections.

HANSBERRY

Excuse me sir, but you talked at dinner about working within the legal and political parameters, but I didn't hear any mention of *moral* parameters. I would think any commitment on your part would have to spring from a moral imperative – the desire and necessity to do the right thing.

RFK

Yes, certainly, yes, you have a good point, Miss Hansberry. And I think, uh, based on what we have accomplished so far that there has been a move in that direction, to underscore the human element . . .

SMITH

(interrupting)

Mr. Kennedy, I want you to know right now I don't give a damn about you or your brother. And I don't know what I'm doing here listening to all this cocktail-party patter. Being in this room with you makes me want to puke. *(Everyone freezes, caught off-guard by SMITH'S comment.)*

RFK

(startled, reddening)

Ex . . .Excuse me?

SMITH

(angrily)

Don't talk to me about statistics and voting rights cases. That's bullshit when you consider what my people have been enduring for hundreds of years! You go down to my house and live! You change places with me and see how you like it!

RFK

(raising his voice)

I don't have to sit here and listen to that kind of talk.

JONES

I think what Mr. Smith is saying, sir, is that he finds it very difficult to be here almost begging for equal treatment under the law – when that is a right he should have enjoyed since birth.

RFK

The, uh, the sentiment you express Mr. Jones . . .

SMITH

(interrupting)

Can you really tell me man-to-man that this so-called administration has done everything in its power to advocate for the black man?

RFK

There is, uh, much to be said . .

SMITH

(interrupting again)

'Cause from where I sit I ain't seein' anything different between this administration and all the others.

RFK

(perturbed)

Can I say something here?

SMITH

(dismissively)

Okay, but this time say something that means something. So far you haven't said a damn thing!

RFK

(turning away from SMITH)

As I was trying to say

HANSBERRY

(interrupting firmly)

You have a great many very accomplished people in this room, Mr. Attorney General, but the only man you should be listening to is that man over there *(She points to SMITH)*. That is the voice of 22 million people. *(RFK remains still, silent, staring at her)*

MARSHALL

If I may, I believe the attorney general is well aware of the social inequities existing in this country, as well as the president, and as we have tried to point out . . .

D. BALDWIN

(standing)

What you have pointed out are the token gestures you have paid to addressing civil rights without any personal commitment, man! Voting rights, transportation, drinking fountains? Is that what you think this man *(he points at Smith)* was considering when they were beating him senseless down in Mississippi? Jesus Christ, don't you understand anything about this crusade?

JONES

(crossing toward RFK)

If I may be blunt, sir, we feel this administration has considered civil rights secondary to all other considerations on its agenda. There are numerous examples of the president distancing himself from any personal involvement in our cause. Now, do you really expect us to stand here and accept that you and your brother really care about what happens to the Negro?

D. BALDWIN

(mockingly)

Oh, they care what happens – but always after the fact. Did they encourage the Freedom Riders? Did they encourage James Meredith to enter Ole Miss? Did they encourage Dr. King in his crusade to de-segregate Birmingham? Hell no they didn't! They'd rather it all hadn't happened!

RFK

If I may, this administration did everything necessary to minimize violence in Birmingham and when necessary, used the force of the, uh, national government to protect Negro citizens. We worked with Dr. King, not against him . . .

HANSBERRY

(shouting)

That's not true!

D. BALDWIN

(laughing)

Who are you kidding?

JONES

It certainly isn't true! We . . .

RFK

(peeved)

As I was saying, we worked with Dr. King although we may have disagreed on his timing in Birmingham.

HORNE

If you did so much for Dr. King in Birmingham, Mr. Attorney General, why couldn't you protect those poor children from the dogs and firehoses? I didn't see any of you lily white liberals down there shielding them from all harm!

RFK

(standing)

That was certainly unfortunate, Ms. Horne, and I wish we could have done that. I'm not sure we can agree with Dr. King's tactics to involve the children, but the administration took steps to contain . . . I believe you are, uh, laying blame at the feet of the administration for all the injustices the Negroes suffer in this country which is, uh, patently unfair. The president has done more for the Negro than any of his predecessors – save perhaps Abraham Lincoln – and continues to push for more aggressive measures.

SMITH

(taking a menacing step toward RFK)

Aggressive measures? Ha! Quit blowin' smoke up our ass. Taking Southern voter registrars to court while men, women and children are being beaten and degraded down South? Is that what you call aggressive measures? The Negroes know what's on the line, and the real trouble's gonna come if those, like me, who are willing to die, become disgusted with non-violence!

HANSBERRY

(standing up, pointing at SMITH)

There's no one here that speaks more forcefully than that young man because he has been on the front lines, he has seen and suffered the humiliation of our people in all its ugliness. Sir, when was the last time you suffered because of the color of your skin? When was the last time you woke up in the middle of the night to the words, "Git yer ass out here, boy! You got a lesson to be learned 'bout mixin' with white folk!" When, Mr. Attorney General, was the last time you were stopped by a white cop and ordered out of your car and on the ground, knowing full well you had done nothing wrong? And then hauled off to jail on some trumped up charge just because you are black? Don't sit there and pontificate about aggressive measures and understanding our plight. You *have* no understanding!

RFK

(sitting back down)

My, uh, family is certainly no stranger to prejudice. The, the, uh, Irish were certainly not welcome in most circles. My grandfather John T. Fitzgerald and others faced a difficult – a very difficult struggle to be accepted here. He was an Irish immigrant and now, now my brother, the grandson of an Irish immigrant, is president of the United States. That sort of prejudice, well, you know, it can be overcome. You should understand that this is possible – that in the next forty years or so, a Negro can be President.

J. BALDWIN

(standing, angry)

With all due respect, Mr. Kennedy, those statements are absurd! Your family has been here for three generations. My family has been here a whole lot longer – and why is your brother at the top and we are still so far away? We live in a world where a black man is still required to supplicate and beg you for justice! Are you going to sit there and tell me, a black man, that the prejudices encountered by your family were anything close to what the black race has had to endure for centuries? The deprivations. The hate. The insults, The deaths . . . young black men screaming to high heaven when acid is poured on their balls? Is that . . .

HORNE

(interrupting loudly)

Remember Emmet Till, Mr. Kennedy? Emmet Till, the 14-year-old boy from Chicago? Why, before he was killed he was beaten so horrifically his own mama could barely recognize him!

RFK

(somewhat apologetically)

Well, yes, I . . . I realize that injustices forced upon and endured by the black population in this – in the South especially . . .

D. BALDWIN

. . . So you think you understand our pain, do you? Well let's see. Bring me a bottle of acid and step right up!

MARSHALL

(standing up, walking forward)

Please, ladies and gentlemen, let's not let emotion override reason here. You're . . .

HANSBERRY

(near tears)

But don't you see? Are you that blind? It's all about emotion, about how you feel! When what happens to another human being makes your soul cry, that's when you cross the line! That's when your commitment evolves from pragmatic to moral. When you're emotionally invested, that's when change occurs. And no amount of voter registration cases in court is ever – EVER – going to change that!

HORNE

(with emotion)

How many more Emmet Tills will have to die, Mr. Kennedy, how many more, before you, your brother and all the other white liberals cry enough? How many more must suffer at the hands of white policemen! Police who shoot first and don't even bother to ask questions later! Tell me Mr. Kennedy, how many more?

RFK

I . . . I can only speak for myself, and I implore you to wait, be patient, and recognize what we are trying to do, within the limits set forth. We . . .

SMITH

(in a loud voice)

Wait? Wait? We've been waiting for 300 years to break free of these chains you white folks wrapped around us. Dr. King says we can't wait. Ralph Abernathy says we shouldn't wait. And I say we won't wait – no sir, we will not wait. We deserve freedom now!

RFK

The uh, president has, uh . . .

SMITH

(interrupting)

Your brother, the president, has been in office since 1961 and what has he done – tell me, what has he done to address these injustices, these deprivations? Hell man, down there those crackers are stringin' us up right now for doin' somethin' that everyone else does and should be guaranteed to us and isn't – just tryin' to buy a chicken salad sandwich and a Coke at a lunch counter.

RFK

I, uh, completely understand your, your frustration . . .

SMITH

(approaching RFK)

You got no understanding – no idea at all of what we have to endure day in and day out – not knowin' if we're gonna live or die! Hell man, it's no wonder that blacks are listenin' more and more to men like Malcolm X! Why, you don't have no idea what trouble is. Because I'm close to the moment where I'm ready to take up a gun. When I pull the trigger, kiss it goodbye!

J. BALDWIN
(looking at SMITH)

If this country went to war in Cuba or Vietnam, would you fight?

SMITH

Never!

J. BALDWIN

Under any circumstances?

SMITH

I said never!

RFK
(slides forward in his chair)

You will not fight for your country? How . . .how can you say that?

SMITH

Because I can't identify with a country where my people are beaten!

RFK

But . . .but defending your country, regardless of what else has transpired, well, that's an obligation that no one should shirk. It's important that all Americans do their duty when confronted by a common enemy. To preserve the freedoms we have. I don't see how anyone who calls himself an American could refuse to fight for our country. Why . . .

SMITH
(shouting at RFK)

Freedoms we have? Ha! Freedoms you may have. Not me. Why do I want to take up arms against a bunch of people in Cuba or Asia when they ain't done anything to me? Hell, they're more my brothers than you are! I'd be better off takin' up against those Southern crackers who've done everything to me!

HORNE

Mr. Attorney General, you can take all of those pious statements and stuff them up your ass! And if you're so proud of your record, Mr. Attorney General, you go up into Harlem into those churches and barber shops and pool halls, and you tell the people. We ain't goin' because we don't want to get shot!

JONES

(pointing at SMITH)

Sir, do you know why this young man is in New York? He's here so doctors can check him out for head and jaw injuries he received down South after he was beaten up trying to peacefully crusade for those same freedoms you talk about.

BELAFONTE

(stepping forward)

If I may interject, I've known the attorney general for some time, now, and have been to his home, Hickory Hill, on numerous occasions. We have at times engaged in some serious discussions about civil rights and the plight of the Negro race in this country, and I can tell you that Mr. Kennedy understands the battle we have been fighting. And I believe, in his heart, he wants do everything he can to help.

D. BALDWIN

Now, these conversations, Harry, were they before or after you taught all these white liberal elitists how to Twist?

BELAFONTE

(angrily)

That has absolutely nothing . . .

J. BALDWIN

Oh Christ, Harry, we're not saying the attorney general isn't concerned about civil rights and the fate of the Negro, but his intentions and his influence on this administration, on his own brother, are two very different commodities. If the Kennedys were so deeply concerned about 22 million Americans, why haven't they affected any significant change? Because they need Southern voters to retain the White House in 1964, that's why!

MARSHALL

(rising)

I don't know that it's fair or realistic to just toss out any of the steps the administration has taken to advance civil rights simply because we are working within a legal framework established long before we came into office . . .

HANSBERRY

(pacing)

There you go again, talking about a legal framework. What about a moral framework? What about something concrete? Something from the heart to show the entire country the president is solidly behind the cause?

JONES

She has a point, you know. There are meaningful steps he could take. For instance, what about holding a series of fireside chats, like FDR used to do? He could talk to the nation about civil rights and educate the general populace. A recent New York Times editorial suggested, and perhaps rightly so, that in order to avoid what happened at Oxford with James Meredith, perhaps President Kennedy could escort the two black students scheduled to enter the University of Alabama next month. Then, if the segregationist thugs defy him and spit on him, they would be spitting on the very moral fiber of this country, spitting on the country itself!

(KENNEDY and MARSHALL laugh at the suggestion).

RFK

Those . . . those, I'm afraid, would be meaningless moral gestures. An act. And we don't need acts. We need results. I think the dedication and service of our Justice Department lawyers, men like John Doar and Gerald Stern, in trying to correct the wrongs through the courts will deliver much better results.

(Most of the Negroes, except SMITH, laugh dismissively).

HORNE

(emphatically)

But that's just what we want – an act! You may see it as an exhibitionist stunt, but we, and millions like us, see it as an affirmation of the common decency and respect that we, as American citizens, are entitled to.

SMITH

This is useless.

RFK

I will not continue to . . .

J. BALDWIN

You can't feel our pain. None of you can. Why . . .

RFK

Is anyone going to let me say something?

TORN

(standing up)

I don't know exactly why I'm here, but maybe it's because I'm a Southerner. I grew up in East

TORN (cont'd)

Texas and can bear witness to the rampant and excessive racism in those parts. It sickened me, but I felt I was powerless to stop it. I did what I could, when I could, in treating the Negroes fairly and decently, but most folks down there worked, slept and ate segregation. There is a revolution underway and every man has to be counted. I am prepared to be counted! Now if you'll excuse me, I need to leave for the theater.

(TORN gets up, waves to all, shakes hands with BALDWIN and RFK, and exits SR).

MARSHALL

Once again, folks, we're letting emotion cloud the reason that should be applied here in reaching a consensus . . .

JONES

As long as the white establishment is going to turn a blind eye to the suffering of 22 million people, I just don't see any consensus coming out of this meeting.

MARSHALL

(perturbed)

How can you say we're turning a blind eye to all that? Did you listen to the attorney general earlier, really listen, to the positive actions that administration has taken to advance the cause you are so dedicated to? And are you aware that a new civil rights bill is being prepared to put before Congress?

SMITH

Yah, we listened and it all added up to lip service and token gestures to appease a population that is tired of being appeased! We want that same administration to take a stand for what's right. For what's morally right!

RFK

Are you, do you know what gains we have made just, say, in voter registration? For instance, in Bullock County, Alabama Negro registration has risen from 5 in September of 1961 to more than 1,000! In Macon County, registration has gone from 1,000 to more than 3,000! Don't you see what change that entails? Don't you see that in time those voters will make a difference for everyone?

D.BALDWIN

And just when will that change happen – two years, five years, ten years? Ten more years of our folks shufflin' 'round saying Yas suh an' no suh and yas suh, boss *(he starts smiling and shuffling)*, my missus shore nuf do like her pickaninnies an' that's why she keeps a poppin' 'em out like watermelons!

HORNE

And how many more years of mothers and wives cryin' over beaten and dead husbands and sons who did nothing except try to be a man!

RFK

I certainly understand your sentiment and in many of ,uh, those cases, the FBI has. . .

(All the Negroes begin to laugh, guffaw or snicker which catches RFK off-guard).

JONES

The FBI? Are you kidding?

D. BALDWIN

Don't make us laugh.

HANSBERRY

Please don't insult us any further.

RFK

Why, how can you say that? The FBI has

J. BALDWIN

Let me give you an example of what we're talking about. If I'm walking down Main Street in, let's say, Montgomery, Alabama, and three white men come up to me and beat me up and castrate me, the FBI might be assigned to the case. And the odds are that the FBI man who investigates the case will be one of those three who castrated me.

RFK

I find that . . .that's very hard to believe . . .

HORNE

But Mr. Attorney General, you've never been a Negro being questioned by the FBI in the deep South . . . have you?

MARSHALL

Well, be that as it may, the FBI's agents are crack investigators. For example, last summer, four Georgia churches used as centers for Negro registration were burned and burnings were attempted at two others. The FBI investigated immediately. In one case, the FBI turned its

MARSHALL (Cont'd)

findings over to local authorities, who arrested four men in connection with one burning They were convicted and sentenced. In the second case, two men were arrested and face federal charges. But keep in mind that certain “special men” from the Justice Department are sent into areas where the FBI seems delinquent.

(All the Negroes laugh out loud, almost hysterically so).

HANSBERRY

What a joke!

RFK

I just don't believe . . .

D. BALDWIN

(looking up and shaking his fist, yelling)

By God, you'd better damn well believe it!

RFK

There is no need to use such language!

JONES

But there is a need – a very pressing need – for a moral commitment on the part of the administration. That's what civil rights is all about – a moral issue. Not political. Not pragmatism. It's about what's right!

HORNE

He's right, you know. Rhetoric is cheap. The president has been paying lip service to civil rights throughout his administration. His attention is on Russia, the Berlin Wall, Vietnam, the economy. His attention is not on us.

BELAFONTE

Look, Bobby, we are concerned as much about Negroes in the North as we are in the South. But we need to be concerned with the damages threatening the character of Negro men subjected to beatings and God knows what else from their passive resistance during sit-ins, marches and the like.

HANSBERRY

(standing up, crying out)

We need to be more concerned with the so-called specimens of white manhood, like the cops photographed with their knees dug into the breast of a Negro woman pinned to the ground. I'm not worried about Negro men!

SMITH

(approaching RFK again)

You want to know what's going to happen if you and brother don't do something to counteract the Muslims? All hell's gonna break loose in this country – that's what. And it's gonna make what's happening in places like Mississippi and Alabama look like a Sunday picnic.

JONES

You talk about working through the courts. Well, let me tell you something Mr. Kennedy. Some of the Federal judges appointed by your brother have been disastrous – just miserable. The worst is the honorable Harold Cox down in Mississippi. Are you aware, sir, that from the bench he calls us niggers and chimpanzees and baboons? And you're telling us we can expect a square deal from men like that?

MARSHALL

But may I remind you that one of the jurists that seems to fall into that category – from what I've heard – had local NAACP approval!

HANSBERRY

Look, if you don't understand what this young man and the rest of us are saying then we are without any hope at all because you and your brother are the representatives of the best that a white America can offer, and if you are insensitive to this, then there's no alternative except our going to the streets – and chaos! The whites are castrating the Negroes and the only answer is to give them guns and turn them loose!*(HANSBERRY stands, collects her things and crosses to RFK, extending her hand.) Thank you, Mr. Attorney General (She turns and exits SR. The others, sensing the meeting has come to end, begin to follow. JONES crosses from SR to SL toward KENNEDY and MARSHALL as he starts to leave.)*

JONES

Sir, I just want to say that Dr. King deeply appreciates the way you handled the Birmingham affair.

RFK

(perturbed)

You watched these people attack me over Birmingham for forty minutes and you didn't say a word! There is no point in your saying this to me now. *(RFK turns his back on him and JONES, somewhat surprised, turns on his heel and exits SR. As he does, BELAFONTE approaches RFK.)*

BELAFONTE

Bobby, of course I know you have done more for civil rights than anyone else. I think . . .

RFK

Why do you say this to me? Why didn't you say this to the others?

BELAFONTE

I . . . I couldn't say this to the others. It would affect my relationship with them. If I were to defend you, they would conclude that I had gone over to the other side.

RFK

You know us better than that. Why don't you tell these people who we are?

BELAFONTE

Why do you assume I don't? Maybe if we were not telling them who you are, things would not be as calm as they are.

RFK

Calm? With what's going on in the streets?

BELAFONTE

Yes. You may think you're doing enough, but you don't live with us, you don't even visit our pain. Obviously, progress in America is in the eyes of the beholder. What you observe, Bobby, I- and what you want to see of us, is based upon the needs of the political machine. What we need is well beyond that. The problem is the failure of the power players to see us for who we really are and what we are really experiencing. Those children of Birmingham are our children, not yours.

RFK

Enough!

(KENNEDY again turns his back on BELAFONTE, motions to MARSHALL and they exit SL. BELAFONTE lingers for a moment, then turns, crosses to SR and exits).

NOTE: Blocking for this scene is left to the discretion of the director. Jerome Smith stammered when he was excited or emotional, so his lines should be delivered accordingly.

Scene 2

AT RISE:

Sardi's Restaurant in New York City soon after the RFK meeting. There is a table DSC with six chairs. LORRAINE HASNBERRY enters from SL, stone-faced, followed by LENA HORNE, CLARENCE JONES and DAVID BALDWIN. They are silent as they take seats at the table. Momentarily a WAITER appears from SR, crosses to table.

WAITER

Good evening and welcome to Sardi's. May I start you all off with something to drink?

(There is a momentary silence, then HANSBERRY looks up, smiles).

HANSBERRY

Yes, I'll have a glass of arsenic and give them each a jigger of cyanide.

D. BALDWIN

Uh, just make mine plain ol' rat poison.

(The waiter is momentarily taken aback until JONES speaks up).

JONES

You'll have to excuse my ebullient guests, but joy and happiness are not their strong suits at the moment. Let's see . . . I'll have a dirty martini, the gorgeous Ms. Horne will have . . .

HORNE

Scotch, straight

JONES

Scotch, straight up while this young man *(he points to D. BALDWIN)* will have . . .

D. BALDWIN

A glass of chardonnay

JONES

Chardonnay for him and this forlorn playwright (*he nods toward HANSBERRY*) will still have arsenic. On the rocks. (*Beat.*) No, just kidding, a gin and tonic. And thank you.

WAITER

My pleasure. Nice to see you again, Ms. Horne. (*She smiles, lights a cigarette as does HANSBERRY.*)

HORNE

Well, I guess we can all agree that was an exercise in futility – especially since no one put in a request for *Stormy Weather*.

HANSBERRY

The weather inside that apartment was stormy enough without your warbling, my dear. I just don't see how we are ever going to succeed if we can't even get through to Bobby Kennedy. Can you believe him? No matter what we said, if we spoke from our brains or our hearts, he was fuckin' oblivious to our pain. It was a waste of time.

D. BALDWIN

Oh, I don't know. We got a free meal out of it. (*He starts to laugh, sees no one else is, stops.*) Sorry, but we can't beat ourselves up over it. We did our best.

HANSBERRY

Did we? Did we really? Christ, if we had done our best Bobby would have left singing "Jubilee" and asking to carry a placard in the next sit-in.

JONES

Lorraine's right. I think his heart is in the right place, but his mind is in the wrong place. Like his brother, the president, he is hamstrung by political realities. I looked at the attorney general and understood that he did not understand us and just for a minute I felt for him.

HORNE

Let's face it, the attorney general had blinders on, simple as that. I think he wanted, perhaps expected, based on the administration's accomplishments, to be made an honorary Negro. And that was not about to happen.

D. BALDWIN

Not in a million years it ain't gonna happen. Why, you could tell he had a difficult time handling our energy, our emotion. Did you notice how he grew more silent and tense, and just sat immobile in his chair? He no longer continued to defend himself. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry or both

HANSBERRY

Jerome Smith *should have* made a difference. Hell, he, more than anyone of us represents the day-to-day suffering of 22 million people. Why couldn't he get that through to Bobby Kennedy? Why . . .

HORNE

Speaking of Mr. Smith . . .

(JEROME SMITH *enters from SL, sees the group, crosses to the table, sits down*).

D. BALDWIN

Jerome, I'm so sorry . . .

SMITH

Don't be sorry. Be anything but sorry. We been feelin' sorry for too long, now. Now's the time to be angry.

JONES

And we are young man, believe me. We thought for sure that including you, someone you has suffered the cracker mentality, would have impacted Bobby Kennedy beyond anything we could say.

(The WAITER *enters from SL with a tray of glasses, hands each one their drink*).

WAITER

And what can I get for you young man?

SMITH

Beer. Any kind. (The WAITER *nods, turns and exits SL*). Hell, I seen too many white folks like Bobby Kennedy. They say they care, they say they understand, but when the crosses start burning and the castratin' begins, hell, they ain't nowhere to be found!

HANSBERRY

When we left the Kennedys' apartment, I had a feeling of complete futility, and as we got on the elevator I wondered if there was any way to make the white people in this country understand . . .

SMITH

I know what the hell they'll understand. (*He pulls out a .38 and lays it on the table*). They'll damn well understand THIS!

HANSBERRY

Jesus Christ, Jerome, put that away! That's all we need – to get hauled in on a weapons charge! The papers would have a field day with us!

HORNE

I thought your nickname was Gandhi Two because of your pacifism. That there ain't exactly a peace offering - if you want my opinion.

SMITH

Those days are growing few and far between, ma'am. Do you know when I started thinking about this? When they were beatin' us up down in Mississippi and my friend Ike Reynolds almost died That's when I realized that the white man is insulated – unless HIS life is on the line.

JONES

You have a point, son. But the gun isn't the answer we're looking for.

SMITH

Well, I don't intend on getting beat up anymore – and this (*he pats the gun*) is the answer I'm looking for.

D. BALDWIN

If we have all have to resort to guns, well I'll tell you . . .

(*At that moment JAMES BALDWIN enters from SL, somewhat excited, sees the group*)

HORNE

Jimmy, I thought we were going to have to drink without you!

J. BALDWIN

Not on your life dear. Unfortunately, I won't have time. And neither will the rest of you. I've just come from WABC and we're booked for a taping on Anthony Spencer's show (*he looks at his watch*) in just about a half-hour. So everyone drink up.

JONES

Anthony Spencer's *In My Opinion*?

J. BALDWIN

The very same. And I'll give you three guesses as to tonight's topic.

HORNE

Sex and the single homosexual.

J. BALDWIN

Cute dear, very cute. But only if Sidney Poitier is going to be there (*he looks expectantly at HANSBERRY*).

HANSBERRY

Jimmy, if I've told you once . . .

J. BALDWIN

I know, I know. But one can always hope. Anyway, we have a chance to skewer Bobby Kennedy, John F. Kennedy, the whole damn Kennedy administration with an audience beyond RFK and his assistant. This is a forum for us to speak out against what the administration *isn't* doing, and what the administration is doing. Which is virtually nothing.

D. BALDWIN

But if we skewer them on air, won't that piss them off enough to accelerate their do-nothing attitude?

J. BALDWIN

I don't think so. I think we've opened a dialogue and perhaps made Bobby Kennedy think just a bit. Maybe not enough, but perhaps . . .

HORNE

Well, then, in *my* opinion, I think it's time to go. And let's all give Bobby Kennedy a good second dose of commitment. (*They laugh and exit SR*)

Scene 3

AT RISE:

RFK sits at his desk, in shirtsleeves, writing when BURKE MARSHALL enters from the shadows of SL. He crosses to a chair near RFK's desk and sits.

MARSHALL

You, uh, missed some?

RFK

Huh? (*Looking up*). Missed some?

MARSHALL

Uh, yes sir, right there on your chin. From here it looks like . . . (*he pauses*) blood.

RFK

Very funny Burke.

MARSHALL

Well, I guess we have to laugh in the wake of it all. That's about the only emotion that wasn't expended yesterday.

RFK

Can you imagine them all saying those things? And laughing at us? At the administration? They don't understand, they just don't get it. If I had known we were going to be ambushed, well, I might not have agreed to meet in the first place.

MARSHALL

Well, just remember what they say, the safest risk is the one you didn't take.

RFK

Easy for you to say. That fairy Baldwin set us up, probably trying to reassure himself he had balls. And Jones is a hypocrite. Just to show the others he hasn't forgotten where he came from, he joins the others in berating me and the United States government. I wouldn't be surprised if he turned out to be a pimp for the good Rev. King. Christ, we were expecting experts who could reasonably discuss solutions, and all we got were artists and activists who were mad. You can't

RFK (cont'd)

talk to them like you can talk to Dr. King or Ralph Abernathy. They're all emotion! (*RFK presses an intercom button*).

RFK

Angie, get me the FBI.

MARSHALL

Have you seen the papers yet?

RFK

Only the *Times*. Pretty straightforward piece.

MARSHALL

Well, the *New York World-Telegram* called the meeting a flop. And get this. They quoted a woman participant who declined to be named so she, and I quote, might speak more freely about what took place at the session. And right there with the story there's a picture of none other than Lorraine Hansberry. Now, who do you think that unnamed participant was? And if you need any more clues, this is what she said: There was absolutely no doubt in the minds of everyone who was there that the attorney general has no real conception of the moral issues involved in the Negro's fight to gain equal footing in this country. It was a terrible meeting and everyone was upset when it was over. Need I say more?

NOVELLO VO

Sir, the FBI is on line one.

RFK

(He picks up line one)

This is the attorney general. I want whatever files you have on James Baldwin, Diana Baldwin, Rip Torn, Clarence Jones, Lena Horne, the playwright Lorraine Hansberry and one Jerome Smith. Yes, that's right. All of them. Send them over as soon as possible. Now transfer me to the wiretap division.

Scene 4

AT RISE:

The time is early June. The curtain rises on RFK'S office. He is seated at his desk SL, writing. BURKE MARSHALL enters from SL, crosses, sits in chair to L. of desk.

MARSHALL

I had occasion to speak with that Clarence Jones yesterday. He wanted me to convey his grave disappointment at your characterizing him as a hypocrite. He said your arrogance interferes with your reasoning in that the administration's secret role in Birmingham was all positive. He said the real problem is that you and I labor under, how did he phrase it, the mad illusion that we, and not the Negroes, won the Birmingham battle.

RFK

And that coming from the man who would say nothing in our defense at the meeting, even though he knew full well we worked in concert with Dr. King to resolve Birmingham.

MARSHALL

I'm just the messenger.

RFK

Let me ask you this, now that we've both had time to digest what transpired. Do you agree with them, I mean, do you agree with anything that was said?

MARSHALL

Well, there were some things that were emphasized and regardless if they came from Baldwin or Jones or Hansberry, there was some truth to them.

RFK

Such as?

MARSHALL

Well, sir, for instance, hiring 40 blacks in the administration really doesn't help the Negro in Mississippi who can't sit at a lunch counter or go to the pool or who has to go to sleep with a loaded shotgun for fear of the KKK showing up on his doorstep.

RFK

But do you realize what they're asking, what they're demanding, is that a whole culture that's been evolving for more than 200 years suddenly change overnight?

MARSHALL

Yes, I of all people realize that, having been in the thick of the Birmingham negotiations. But we have to ask ourselves, as they asked us, can we do more? Do you know that when I was in Birmingham, I couldn't even find a black sweeping the floor in the federal building? Now what does that say about us and our clarion call for equality and justice? Just for a moment, consider the perversity of justice in the South for the Negro. You have blacks trying to exercise their constitutional rights being beaten by police and then they're arrested for disturbing the peace! So, can we speak to the morality of racial equality minus any consideration of politics?

RFK

I, uh, suppose we can, here in this office. *(He pauses, rises, walks to the window, turns to MARSHALL)*. I guess you know I told Nick Katzenbach that if I were in that young man shoes, you know, Smith's, if I had gone through what he's gone through, I might feel differently about this country. Still, it seems they won't be satisfied until the president speaks to all this publicly. And I'm not sure that's prudent or wise.

MARSHALL

Because?

RFK

Well, because there are certain sensibilities that would be offended . . .

MARSHALL

But see, we're doing it again. Putting white sensibilities before black sensibilities simply to maintain the status quo. Well, I think we both know the status quo is no longer valid. Not after Birmingham. So, can we have it both ways or do we have to draw a line in the sand? Remember what you said at the University of Georgia Law Day speech? As I remember, you said something like, if we are to make progress, if we are to be truly great as a nation, then we must make sure nobody is denied an opportunity because of race, creed or color. And after Birmingham, you said

MARSHALL (cont'd)

continued refusal to grant equal rights to Negroes will only result in inevitable turmoil. I do think one thing that came out of that meeting is crystal clear - if something beyond what the administration has done, something of conscience, isn't done, then we are going to see Birmingham all over this country.

(The lights fade during a RADIO BROADCASTER'S VO)

RADIO BROADCASTER VO

Nation of Islam Minister Malcolm X once again lashed out against the nation's struggle with racial equality, saying token gestures are no longer acceptable for the Negro population. An integrated cup of coffee isn't sufficient pay for four hundred years of slave labor, he said early today.

(When the lights come up, RFK stops writing, leans back, starts to put his feet up on the desk, changes his mind, gets up, crosses to the window SR, looks out. A moment later, he crosses back to the desk, sorts through a stack of papers, looks in a couple of desk drawers, appears frustrated. He pushes the intercom.)

RFK

Angie, do you have a copy of that TV broadcast, you know, the Anthony Spencer interview show those people appeared on after our meeting?

NOVELLO VO

Yes sir, right here on my desk.

RFK

Can you bring it in here? I can't find mine.

NOVELLO VO

Yes sir.

(RFK gets up, starts to cross to the TV/radio console when ANGIE NOVELLO enters SL.)

NOVELLO

Here you are, sir. *(She crosses to RFK, hands him the copy, exits SL. He returns to his desk, sits down, starts to read.)*

HORNE VO

Mr. Kennedy had blinders on, simple as that. I think he wanted, perhaps expected, based on the administration's accomplishments, to be made an honorary Negro. And that was not about to happen.

JONES VO

Their message of violence should be a wake-up call for the Kennedys and all the other white liberals who think voter registration and drinking fountain water is the answer to the racial strife tearing this country apart.

HANSBERRY VO

It would be sophomoric of us to assume that Northern Negroes are content simply because they do not suffer in the same way. They suffer in housing, they suffer in education, they suffer in unemployment. When are the Kennedys going to learn that?

SMITH VO

You want to know what's going to happen if the Kennedys don't do something to counteract the Muslims? All hell's gonna break loose in this country – that's what. It will be a bloodbath...and you can bet all the blood won't be black!

(RFK puts down the transcript, gets up crosses to the radio/TV console, turns it on. As the radio broadcast begins, the lights dim to black)

Scene 5

AT RISE:

A hospital room somewhere in Mississippi. FANNIE LOU HAMER, a black woman, lies in bed, bandages on her face, an IV running into her arm. She is half-asleep when the door opens. JOHN LEWIS, a young black activist enters SR, accompanied by reporter TERRY BARNHILL. The two cross to the bed.

LEWIS

Ms Hamer?

FANNIE
(*somewhat in a daze*)

Yessir. I'm Fannie Lou Hamer

LEWIS

I'm truly sorry to bother you during your, uh, recovery, but my name is John Lewis, with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and this is Terry Barnhill, a reporter with the *New York Times*.

FANNIE

Mr. Barnhill (she reaches out her hand, BARNHILL take its momentarily)

LEWIS

Well now Ms Fannie, we were just devastated to hear about your treatment in Winona, I mean, I shouldn't be surprised given what our people have had to endure in Mississippi and elsewhere, and yet each new incident opens again the same wound which seemingly will never heal but continue to fester and bleed and become putrid as long as this goes on. Just when you think it might improve, them Southern crackers rip it all open again. And we all suffer, Ms. Hamer, we all suffer.

FANNIE

Yessir, we shore do.

LEWIS

Well, Ms. Hamer, if you're up to it, Terry here wanted to talk to you specifically about what happened – from beginning to end – to help build a case against those who violated you so maliciously. We will not let this pass unnoticed or unpunished, Fannie. We cannot let this pass. Do you feel up to talking with him?

FANNIE

Yessir Mr. Lewis, I think so. Just hand me some water, if you will. (BARNHILL picks up a pitcher, pours water into a glass, hands it to her. FANNIE drinks.) Thank you sir. Now I'm ready. (BARNHILL pulls up a chair beside the bed as LEWIS, with no other chairs, sits on the floor).

BARNHILL

So, let's start at the beginning, OK? You are Fannie Lou Hamer, correct? Is that Fannie with two ns?

FANNIE

Yessir.

BARNHILL

And you are how old?

FANNIE

45

BARNHILL

From?

FANNIE

Ruleville, Ms.

BARNHILL

Married?

FANNIE

Yessir. Goin' on 18 years now, I reckon. Folks calls him Pap but his Christian name is Perry Hamer.

BARNHILL

Now then, Ms. Fannie, on the day of this particular incident you were . . .

FANNIE

A group of us had attended a voter registration conference sponsored by the SCLC?

BARNHILL

SCLC?

LEWIS

That's the Southern Christina Leadership Conference.

BARNHILL

Oh, OK. Got it. Now, All of you were on a bus . . .

FANNIE

Yessir, headed toward Greenville, Mississippi. Ten of us was traveling by the Continental Trailway bus. When we got to Winona, Mississippi, four of the people got off to use the washroom and two of the people – the restaurant – two of the people wanted to use the washroom. Well sir, the four people who that had gone in to use the restaurant was ordered out. During this time I was on the bus.

BARNHILL

What then?

FANNIE

When I looked through the window and saw that they had rushed out, I got off the bus to see what had happened, And one of the ladies said, "It was a State Highway Patrolman and a Chief of Police that ordered us out."

BARNHILL

And then?

FANNIE

Well, I got back on the bus and one of the four people that had used the washroom got back on too. As soon as I was seated on the bus, I saw when they began to get the five people in a highway patrolman's car. I stepped off the bus to see what was happening and somebody screamed from the car that the five people was in and said, "get that one there." When I went to get in the car, when the man told me I was under arrest, the man kicked me.

BARNHILL

So all you had done up to that point was just to observe, not intervene or protest, just lookin' to see what was going on?

FANIE

Yessirr, that's right.

FANNIE

On the way back to the bus, Anell starts to write down the license plate of the patrolman's car. In the meantime the police chief and a patrolman show up. Well, I got off the bus just to see what all was going on when they up and arrested me. For what? I hadn't done anything! But they put me in cuffs and took me off to jail.

BARNHILL

So let me get this straight. You simply walked off the bus to see what was taking place, didn't do anything. And they arrest you?

FANNIE

Yessir, that's about right. I was carried to the county jail and put in the booking room. They left some of the people in the booking room and began to place us in cells. I was placed in a cell with a young woman called Miss Ivesta Simpson. After I was placed in the cell I began to hear sounds of licks and screams, I could hear the sounds of licks and horrible screams. And I could hear somebody say, "Can you say, 'yes, sir,' nigger? Can you say 'yes, sir'?" And they would say other horrible names. She would say, "Yes, I can say 'yes, sir.'" "So, well, say it." She said, "I don't know you well enough." They beat her, I don't know how long. And after a while she began to pray, and asked God to have mercy on those people.

LEWIS

They were apparently beating up 15-year-old June Johnson, who wouldn't say 'sir'. They went after her pretty bad.

BARNHILL

And what about you?

FANNIE

Well, And it wasn't too long before three white men came to my cell. One of these men was a State Highway Patrolman and he asked me where I was from. I told him Ruleville and he said, "We are going to check this." They left my cell and it wasn't too long before they came back. He said, "You are from Ruleville all right," and he used a curse word. I was carried out of that cell into another cell where they had two Negro prisoners . . . And then the one man, the one without a uniform, well he says to me . . .

(The lights on SL go dim and come up on SR where the scene just described by FANNIE LOU is being played out)

WHITE MAN

You're gonna wish you was dead. Ya'll know what happens to nigger protesters 'round here? *(He turns to the two NEGROES in the corner, both looking nervous, scared.)* Why, we give 'em our best Mississippi welcome. And lookee here, y'all's got yer own personal welcomin' committee. *(He motions the two NEGROES forward with his finger)*

STATE PATROLMAN

(He pulls out a long wide blackjack, hands it to the closest NEGRO)

Take this

NEGRO #1

This is what you want me to use?

STATE PATROLMAN

That's right. and if you don't use it on her you know what I'll use on you. Then mebbe y'all want to stay with us a while longer...couple years mebbe.

NEGRO #1

Yassirr boss. I's know. Shore don't wan' none o dat.

FANNIE

Hold on a minute. Whatchu intendin' to do? I didn't do anything . . .

WHITE MAN

Didn't I tell y'all to shut up *(He slaps her on the side of the head)* Go ahead boy. Do your work. You boy, *(he motions to the second NEGRO)* y'all git there and sit on her feet. Now, you best be about it.

NEGRO #1

I's ter-ib-ly sorry ma'am. I's don't wanna do this, but I's just gotta, I gotta. I hope youse understand. Now, lay on yer stomach fer me ma'am . . . please *(FANNIE remains still)*

NEGRO #1 (Pleading)

I said lay on yer stomach. Not gonna be as bad dat way. *(FANNIE turns on her stomach, puts her hands behind her).*

WHITE MAN

Get to it goddammit!

(NEGRO #1 then starts to beat her about the head and the back time and time again. FANNIE cries out, then screams. The white man walks to her slaps her in the head.)

WHITE MAN

Shut the hell up you nigger whore.

(NEGRO #1 continues to beat her, mumbling apologies, and as he does, her dress rides up on her body. FANNIE *tries to pull it down, but HIRAM walks over and pulls it back up over her hips, exposing herself. She tries to yank it down, HIRAM pulls it up again.*)

WHITE MAN

Harder boy. Make her think 'bot What she's been doin! (*He hits her harder and harder. FANNIE cries, screams again.*)

NEGRO # 1

No more boss, please no more . . .I's . .

WHITE MAN

Y'll been told to stop? (NEGRO #1 *continues. Finally he stops, exhausted.*)

NEGRO#1

I can't hit her no more boss. I's spent.

WHITE MAN

You boy (He looks at the NEGRO *siting on her feet*). Your turn. (*The two NEGROES switch places. The second NEGRO is crying. FANNIE moans as they take their places*)

WHITE MAN

Git to it boy. Lay it on.

NEGRO #2

Yessir boss. I's will. (*He too beats her until the WHITE MAN intercedes*)

WHITE MAN

That's 'nuff now boys. Y'all go on now, git back ta yer cells. (*The NEGROES exit SL. FANNIE moans, turns, cries out as the WHITE MAN bends down to her ear*). Well now Ms Fannie Lou Hamer, how'd y'all like our Mississippi welcome? Sorry we didn't have a gift basket or the like but it was such short notice. But hey, we did give ya'll somethin' to remember us by, now didn't we?

(WHITE MAN *exits SL. Lights dim SR, come up SL*)

FANNIE

They shorely did give me somethin' to 'member' em by. The doctors says I suffered perm'nent damage to my kidney, there's a blood clot in the artery to my left eye and I probably won't walk the same ever again.

BARNHILL

I am so sorry, Ms. Hamer. Was it worth it, you know, the activism that brought all this on?

FANNIE

Well sir, You can pray until you faint, but if you don't get up and try to do something, God is not going to put it in your lap.

Scene 6

AT RISE:

The lights come up to suggest another day. RFK is seated at his desk DSC writing when ANGIE NOVELLO enters SL, notepad in hand, and crosses to the desk)

RFK

Angie, do you know what the businessmen in Birmingham said when we pushed for more Negro hiring?

NOVELLO

No sir.

RFK

They said why should we hire Negroes? *You* don't hire Negroes. And it's true. How can they be expected to comply when we don't? *(He pauses, gets up, crosses to window DS of desk, turns).* You know, I was thinking the other day, suppose God is black. What if we go to Heaven and we, all our lives, have treated the Negro as an inferior, and God is there, and we look up and He is not white? What then is our response? *(He pauses again, crosses back to his desk, sits).* I want memos – in the strongest language possible - sent to all agency heads and department heads that Negro hiring, especially in the South, from this point on is a priority. We will not trade quality for color, but we must make an all-out effort to find skilled Negroes in all quarters.

RADIO BROADCASTER VO

President John F. Kennedy outmuscled Alabama Governor George Wallace today when the avowed segregationist reluctantly stepped aside and allowed two black students to register for summer classes at the University of Alabama. Kennedy federalized about 100 troops of the Alabama National Guard to assist officials in forcing Wallace to comply with a federal court order calling for integration of the Tuscaloosa campus.

BLACKOUT

(When the lights come up, JOHN F. KENNEDY sits at his desk in the Oval Office reading a report. RFK enters from SL.

JFK

Well, Bobby, just in time. *(JFK pushes the intercom).* Mrs. Lincoln, would you show Mr. Baldwin in? *(The words stop BOBBY in his tracks. A look of incredulity crosses his face. He starts to speak.)* Oh, relax Bobby, just a joke. I think you've had enough of the architect of the angry for a while. *(BOBBY sits).* Do you, do you think we're doing the right thing by sending this bill up? You know the heat, the, uh, trouble it will bring?

RFK

I, uh, don't think we have any choice. Not after Birmingham. But more than that, we have an obligation, a moral obligation, to follow through on this, Jack, to bring the whole weight of the administration to bear. After all Jack, how can we say to a Negro in Jackson, when war comes you will be an American citizen, but in the meantime you're a citizen of Mississippi and we can't help you?

JFK

I had, uh, occasion to speak to Ed briefly and he told me you weren't going to use his comments on your Voice of America broadcast.

RFK

I don't think I'll need them.

JFK

No?

RFK

No, I have a pretty good idea of what I'm going to say.

JFK

And that would be?

RFK

It's time to be honest Jack. I plan to admit that this administration has fallen far short of achieving any substantial civil rights advances. And if the question should arise why Negroes are protesting so vigorously for their rights, well, that's where the truth matters. I guess my response would be that they have lived for several hundred years in the United States without any rights in some quarters. I feel that the, the progress that should have been made has not been made.

(There is a moment of silence between the two brothers.)

JFK

Apparently there was more than emotion expressed at your meeting.

RFK

We have been reactive, Jack. That's the bottom line. We have been content to sit back and forego morality for political expediency. And in doing so, we haven't accomplished what we should have accomplished. I think the record is bad. We should have done much more. I'd like to think we intend to do much more.

JFK

I, uh, think this bill, you know, banning discrimination in all public places throughout the country, will certainly underscore a new commitment on this administration's part to support civil rights. But you know the Southerners will fight like hell on the floor to gut it. You know, Kenny O'Donnell, Ted Sorenson, Larry O'Brien, they all think this bill will be the last best gasp from the Kennedy administration. They are all against it. They tell me the political liabilities of a public accommodations bill are critical. They favor giving the Justice Department broader powers.

RFK

Have you given any more thought to my suggestion?

JFK

You mean, uh, about speaking to the nation?

RFK

Yes.

JFK

I have, but they've all advised against that too. They're calling it political suicide. And when they come back in here, they'll still be trying to talk me out of it.

RFK

I think it would be helpful and I, uh, don't think you can get by without it. That, uh, that seems to me the only right thing to do. We cannot avoid it any longer Jack – we have to make a moral commitment or this bill will be just like any other – words on a piece of paper, but words without a voice or a heart.

JFK

I suppose if we have to go down, we should go down standing for something. Perhaps we need to remind the nation that we all – regardless of race, color, or creed – are Americans and consequently should be accorded the same rights – everywhere. Meaning public accommodations. That speaks to having a personal impact on their daily lives. (JFK's *intercom buzzes*) Yes? Thank you. Please send them in. (To BOBBY) Well, Larry, Kenny and Ted are back, so brace yourself. The issue is still in doubt.

Scene 7

AT RISE:

A single spotlight illuminates PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY seated at a desk with a slightly raised platform DSC. There are two table-top microphones on either side of the platform. An American flag stands USL. ROBERT KENNEDY stands in the half-shadows of SR.

VO

Okay, we are ready in four, three, two, one . . . Ladies and gentlemen, the president of the United States.

JFK.

Good evening my fellow citizens . . . This nation was founded on the principle that all men are created equal, and that the rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened. Today, we are committed to a worldwide struggle to promote and protect the rights of all who wish to be free. It ought to be possible, in short, for every American to enjoy the privileges of being American without regard to his race or his color. This is not even a legal or legislative issue. We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution. The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated. If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place? Who among us would then be content with the counsels of patience and delay? . . .

(JFK's voice fades as BURKE MARSHALL approaches RFK.)

MARSHALL

(in a slight whisper)

I would imagine the good ol' boys in Alabama are gagging on their grits just about now.

RFK

Well, they can all thank Bull Connor for that.

(MARSHALL remains standing with RFK as JFK'S speech resumes).

JFK

We face, therefore, a moral crisis as a country and a people. It cannot be met by repressive police action. It cannot be left to increased demonstrations in the streets. It is a time to act in the Congress, in your State and local legislative body and, above all, in all of our daily lives. A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all. Next week I shall ask the Congress of the United States to act, to make a commitment it has not fully made in this century to the proposition that race has no place in American life or law

(JFK freezes as the lights go down. THE REV. MARTIN LUTHER KING enters on SL into a single spot. He crosses to a pre-set table with a phone. He picks up the receiver, dials.)

MLK

Yes, this is Dr. King. I'd like to send a telegram. To the president at the White House. Yes, I'll wait. Ready? Dear Mr. President. I have just listened to your speech to the nation. It was one of the most eloquent, profound and unequivocal pleas for justice and freedom for all men ever made by any president. You spoke passionately to the moral issues involved in the integration struggle. I am sure that your encouraging words will bring a new sense of hope to the millions of disinherited people of our country. Your message will become a hallmark in the annals of American history.

(He hangs up the phone, smiles and exits SL. The lights come up and JFK, gathering his papers, gets up as RFK crosses to DSC and extends his hand.)

JFK

So, uh, what did you think?

RFK

It was the only, uh, the moral thing to do. And on a scale of one to 10, uh, I'd say it was a 39.

39?

JFK

RFK

Uh huh. It probably cost us 39 electoral votes and the White House in '64.

JFK

Well, as I told you before, if we're going to go down, let's go down on a matter of principle. Now, why don't you and I go upstairs and begin working on our resumes.

RFK

I'd rather have some ice cream.

JFK

I, uh, think we can do both. After all (*beat*) I *am* the president. (*They begin to exit SR*). By the way, I hear there's an opening for a police commissioner . . . in Birmingham (*They exit SR*)

(The stage is dark momentarily, then a single spotlight is on to illuminate the REV. KING as he emerges from SL to DSC). About halfway through his speech, the characters/actors from the play walk down each aisle separately and mount the stage in a single line behind KING and join hands)

MLK

(with building feeling)

There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity. We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal." I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning, "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrims' pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring." And when this happens, and when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from

MLK (cont'd)

every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

BLACKOUT

(A few moments after KING finishes his speech and the audience reaction has ceased, we hear a GUNSHOT. Then, moments later, we hear RFK's voice delivering the following speech. Low lights are brought up and as the speech continues, the actors re-emerge on stage, one by one, and form a line stretching across DSC. As each one joins the line, they extend their hands to the actors on either side).

RFK

I have saved this one opportunity to speak briefly to you about the mindless menace of violence in America which again stains our land and every one of our lives. It's not the concern of any one race. The victims of the violence are black and white, rich and poor, young and old, famous and unknown. They are most important of all, human beings whom other human beings loved and needed. No one – no matter where he lives or what he does – can be certain whom next will suffer from some senseless act of bloodshed. And yet it goes on and on and on in this country of ours. Why? What has violence ever accomplished? What has it ever created? No martyr's cause has ever been stilled by an assassin's bullet. No wrongs have ever been righted by riots . . . Whenever any American's life is taken by another American unnecessarily. . . whenever we tear at the fabric of our lives . . . then the whole nation is degraded. Yet we seemingly tolerate a rising level of violence that ignores our common humanity and our claims to civilization alike. Violence breeds violence; repression breeds retaliation; and only a cleansing of our whole society can remove this sickness from our souls. We must recognize that this short life of ours cannot be ennobled or enriched by hatred or by revenge. Our lives on this planet are too short, the work to be done is too great to let this spirit flourish any longer in this land of ours. Of course we cannot banish it with a program or a resolution. But we can perhaps remember – if only for a time – that those who live with us are our brothers, that they share with us the same short moment of life. Surely this bond of common fate . . . can begin to teach us something. Surely we can begin to work a little harder to bind up the wounds among us and to become in our hearts brothers and countrymen once again. Thank you and God bless America.

Blackout

End of Show