

Lights up.

A clearing in the woods.

It is the middle of the night. The moon is one day shy of full, and light filters down through the leaves of tall trees that surround the clearing. On the ground, small rocks, logs, and tree branches are scattered in rough line that runs offstage left. The dirt is torn up in behind this line. In front of it, splintered wood and bloody rags. At another part of the stage, a fire smolders. Beyond this scene, a group of soldiers lie sleeping. *

Slightly behind the fire, a soldier (Earl) stands guard. He is a younger man, 25 years old, but his movements suggest an older man. He wears a soiled gray uniform. *

Wind rustles the branches of the trees.

Earl drops his rifle to the ground and sits on a log near the fire. He reaches into the breast pocket of his uniform and pulls out a letter. He tears open the envelope and reads it. After finishing the letter, Earl grimaces slightly, then returns the letter to his breast pocket.

Earl stands up, takes his hat off his head, and yawns.

Earl goes over to a tree, where a pocketwatch hangs from a bough, near eye level. Earl then walks a short path to where the men sleep. He finds a younger soldier (Will) and wakes him.

EARL

Preacher. Wake up, son. It's your shift on the watch.

WILL

I ain't up. Watch the damn woods yourself.

EARL

Listen, here, son. You got watch, and I need my sleep.

WILL

So sleep. They ain't nobody coming.

EARL

No. It's your watch. Now get up.

Pause.

WILL

I could have sworn it was Jed's watch.

EARL

It's your watch. Get up.

WILL

I'm up already, don't get so fluffed.

EARL

All right. I'm going to hit the bed.

WILL

Go on then.

*

Pause. Will does not move.

EARL

I ain't going to bed until you're up.

Pause.

WILL

I told you I was up.

Pause. Will does not move.

EARL

Get the hell up, you damn fool.

Earl rattles some tin cookware in Will's ears. Will rolls over and leans on his elbows.

WILL

I'm up, you bastard.

Earl wanders over and begins to arrange his pallet for sleep.

A gunshot sounds and both men freeze briefly.

Will stands and paces the ground near the fire. He stutters and sighs, looking for something near the fire.

WILL

Is there coffee? I'll heat something up if I'm to do any bit of good at the watching.

*

EARL

There's a bit left in the pot over there.

He indicates the fire.

WILL

I appreciate it.

Will goes over to the pot as Earl settles down to sleep. Will tries to pour a drop of coffee from the a small pot.

WILL

Damn.

Will rattles the empty pot.

WILL

(louder)

I said Damn.

Earl rolls on his back.

EARL

What?

WILL

It's empty.

EARL

Well then make more, but try to keep quiet.

WILL

Yeah, yeah.

EARL

Good night, again.

WILL

Y'ain't said it the first time.

EARL

Well, I meant it.

Will begins the task of making coffee. He rattles around, pulling coffee from a big knapsack near the fire. He pours in water from his canteen. After a few moments of fussing, he sets the pot on the fire to percolate.

Earl sits up.

WILL

Can't sleep?

EARL

I'm trying my darndest. No help from you.

WILL

I'm on watch.

EARL

Watching damn close, ain't you?

WILL

Ease off, there wasn't no coffee.

EARL

You got it now, don't you.

WILL

Yeah. I could have sworn it wasn't my watch.

*

EARL

Well, it ain't mine anymore.

*

*

Will gets up and walks over to the edge of the camp.

Earl rolls over on his pallet, trying to get comfortable.

Long pause.

WILL

You asleep?

EARL

No.

WILL

I was out like a light.

EARL

I ain't all that tired.

WILL

It's hard to sleep. After.

EARL

Yep.

Pause. Earl sits up.

WILL

You going to bed?

EARL

Trying.

Pause.

WILL

Well, stoke that fire, if you're going to keep trying to sleep sitting up.

EARL

I thought you was supposed to put it out.

WILL

The lieutenant is sleeping. It's cold.

EARL

Shit, it ain't cold.

WILL

I'm cold.

Pause.

WILL

If we was home, it would be warmer.

EARL

Yep.

Long pause.

WILL

Hey, Earl.

EARL

What's that?

WILL

You ever eat yogurt?

EARL

Sure.

WILL

Yeah. That's good, ain't it.

EARL
Yep.

WILL
I like me some yogurt.

EARL
Yep.

WILL
And you get them blackberries from out the yard and mash 'em up on top.

EARL
Yeah.

WILL
Buddy, that's good.

EARL
I ain't your buddy.

WILL
What?

EARL
I ain't your buddy. Don't call me buddy.

WILL
Why not?

EARL
It's baby-talk.

WILL
Not really.

EARL
It connotes a blood relationship. Buddy means brother, which you ain't.

WILL
What crawled up you?

EARL
Nothing.

Pause.

WILL

I like that yogurt. Hey, what would you give for a big bowl of yogurt right now? Or just a biscuit. I'd give a toe for a bowl of yogurt whenever I wanted it. Pinky toe. Then I get yogurt to appear in a little bowl with honey in it whenever I wished it. Setting under the tree. That would be all right, wouldn't it?

EARL

You'd get sick of yogurt.

WILL

Yeah. But I ain't never got sick of biscuits. I eat them everyday at home and I don't get sick of 'em.

EARL

It's different with biscuits.

WILL

I know.

Pause.

EARL

Damn, now you got me all hungry.

WILL

You ever eat jerky?

Pause.

EARL

Like, jerked beef?

WILL

Yeah

EARL

Why, you got some?

*

WILL

Yeah.

EARL

You lie like a rug.

WILL

No. See yourself.

Will digs a strip of jerky out of a pack.

EARL

Where the hell did you get jerky?

WILL

It come off Delmus.

EARL

What?

WILL

Delmus said I could have it if he got killed.

EARL

Yeah?

WILL

Well, somebody ought to eat it.

EARL

Yeah, I reckon.

Pause.

WILL

What can I have if they kill you.

EARL

What?

WILL

What can I have?

EARL

You can't have nothing.

WILL

Well, somebody's got to do something with all yer personal effects and such.

EARL

Throw them in the god damn river.

WILL

Ease off on the blasphemy, now.

Pause.

EARL

I see you got a new belt. Who'd that come off?

WILL

This ain't come off nobody. I got it off the supply train.

Pause.

EARL

Oh yeah?

WILL

(hesitant)

Yeah.

EARL

Well, you looked like a dumb fool with a hank of rope. I guess it don't differ. Hell, I don't care. I ain't got nothing worth anything to anyone.

WILL

What?

EARL

I said I don't care what happens to my things. I just hope you treat my personal effects with a little more ceremony than poor Delmus's jerky.

WILL

What's the problem?

Pause.

EARL

I don't know, maybe we should say something over it, you know, to bless it or something.

WILL

I like that idea.

EARL

Yeah, I figured you would, Preacher.

WILL

I'll say a few words.

Dear heavenly father, bless this jerky that we have received today through your servant Delmus, who was brutally mowed down on the field of warfare against our aggressors. He was a good man with a loving wife and a little baby girl. I think it was a girl. He had two good horses and he hated niggers. I believe he had a farm up near High Point, but I ain't certain. He bequeathed this jerky to me and I have elected it to share it here with my good buddy Earl in his honor. Amen.

EARL

Well, that was nice.

They eat.

The sound of a whippoorwill is heard.

WILL

What's that?

EARL

Whippoorwill.

WILL

That's a damn spooky bird.

Pause. They chew jerky.

EARL

Yep.

Listen, if we're celebrating, I got some liquor I pulled off my brother down at the stone wall.

Pause.

WILL

Buddy, that was a little while ago.

EARL

Yeah, I'm getting sick of carrying it around.

Pause.

EARL
You a drinking man?

WILL
No.

Will looks hesitant.

EARL
You don't look so sure.

Earl digs the jar out of his pack.

WILL
I don't drink.

EARL
Never?

WILL
I ain't never had it. Don't aim to start tonight.

EARL
I see. You ain't had it because you ain't been offered, or because you don't believe in it.

WILL
Both.

EARL
I see. Well, you don't mind if I partake?

WILL
No.

Earl takes a sip.

EARL
I forgot how good that is.

Long pause.

*

WILL
You kill anyone today?

EARL
No, you?

WILL

No. Not much chance to.

Pause.

WILL

I thought I killed a nigger.

*

EARL

Oh yeah?

WILL

It weren't me that killed him. I shot after he keeled over. Jed told me I didn't get him.

EARL

Jed has good eyesight.

WILL

Yeah. I know.

Pause.

WILL

That was a hell of a march today, weren't it?

*

Pause.

EARL

Sure was.

WILL

Didn't seem to make much sense, marching damn near twelve miles and not form out of the column before dark.

EARL

No, it didn't. But them Virginia boys got it a little bit.

WILL

It ain't right to put you in the line of fire after a day like that, sweat pouring off you.

EARL

Didn't seem to differ. Federals didn't see it for nothing.

*

WILL

They whole end of the line was setting out there in the field waiting for Christmas.

*

Pause.

EARL

Why don't you have some of this liquor?

WILL

No.

EARL

I know you want some. You ought to try it before you decide you don't like it.

WILL

I'm alright.

*

EARL

You sure?

*

*

WILL

Yeah.

*

*

Pause.

WILL

Who would you put your money on? Stonewall versus Lee?

EARL

What?

WILL

I mean if it was, like, head to head. Hypoguessically speaking.

EARL

I don't know.

WILL

You don't want to guess?

EARL

I don't know. Jackson's younger. I figure he could take Lee.

WILL

No, I mean army versus army.

EARL

Oh. Well this is a dumb question. But strictly speaking, it would depend on the size, the terrain...

WILL

Three divisions. And the terrain is back home, like Clinch River bottom over in Dickson County.

EARL

Oh, I get you. I say Stonewall could take him.

WILL

Why you say?

EARL

Well, Lee. Lee's a commander. But Stonewall, I mean, when he tore through that valley last year, there wasn't nobody who didn't notice. The men fight under him; they fight smart. He's good at getting them riled up. Lee gets generals riled up, and that's fine, but Lee can't work without a Jackson and a Hill and a Stuart with him.

WILL

OK, I hear that. What about Stonewall versus McClellan, Hooker, and Thomas.

EARL

Where?

WILL

Don't matter. Bull Run.

EARL

How many?

WILL

Four regiments and a cavalry brigade.

EARL

Sonewall kills.

Will is pleased.

WILL

I thought so too. Delmus figured he'd get whipped. Delmus was an idiot.

EARL

Don't say that.

*

Silence. The whippoorwill sings.

WILL

They say we're on our way, don't they.

EARL

Yeah. That's what they say.

WILL

I heard if we win this battle, they're going to march North, maybe into Pennsylvania.

EARL

Maybe. Don't make sense.

WILL

What do you mean? If we get north of Washington, it's through. That's what they say. How many more times do we have to lick them?

Pause.

WILL

You don't think so?

EARL

I don't know.

WILL

We've won every battle. Near every battle.

*

EARL

Yeah, three years of winning battles don't make much sense does it?

WILL

What? What's wrong with you.

EARL

Listen I don't want to talk about it.

WILL

Good. Because I hate a pessimist.

Earl Stokes the fire.

EARL

Why don't you have some of this. For Jarvis's sake.

Will looks hesitant.

EARL

I can't drink it all and I don't want to carry it around no more.

Will shakes his head.

*

EARL

Jarvis would appreciate it.

Will relents.

WILL

Well, give it over.

Pause.

EARL

I knew you'd come around. Say, how old are you?

WILL

Seventeen.

Earl laughs.

EARL

I wouldn't have figured that. I would a figured you was older. Maybe I should write your mother's permission 'fore I give you some.

WILL

My mother's dead.

Earl ponders this.

EARL

Well, then you and me both will drink to our dead kin.

Will nods. Silence.

Will almost takes a swig.

WILL

You want to say something? I mean, it wouldn't feel right given Delmus the honor of the ceremony and you not give your brother a few words.

EARL

I guess so. Funny to pray over liquor, ain't it?

WILL

Not so much, considering.

Pause.

EARL

Dear Lord, bless my brother and if he ain't in heaven, you best go down to hell and fish him out, because he was a good brother to me and you know it. I miss him. I been saving this liquor to remember him, but it weighs me down.

Pause.

EARL

I just want your will to be done in this war. Amen.

Earl takes a sip.

WILL

Amen.

Earl passes the jar to Will.

Will drinks, chokes.

EARL

Come on, boy, that's good for you.

WILL

Tastes like manure. *

EARL

You'll get used to it.

WILL

Hope not. *

He drinks. *

WILL

Tell you honestly, I'm glad it didn't get too hot in there today.

EARL

Wasn't more than a skirmish, for us.

WILL

No, not really.

WILL

Hell, I couldn't have killed that nigger, because he was too far away.

Pause.

WILL

You think we'll get it tomorrow?

EARL

I imagine they'll give the Virginia boys a rest. I reckon we're freshest.

WILL

You think we'll fight here?

EARL

I couldn't say. It ain't good ground. Just backcountry wilderness. Don't seem like much nearby, but I don't know. Yanks don't know shit about the woods.

A shot is heard in the distance. Both men freeze.

WILL

Seems like we ought to just stay put and duke it out once and for all, instead of marching all around Virginia at a whim.

*

EARL

Too many generals, not enough battles, you ask me.

WILL

Someday I reckon that's how we'll fight. A man fights for himself and his god. And that will be war. None of this line up and get shot at business.

Pause.

WILL

Did you holler when Jackson rode by?

EARL

I gave him his due.

WILL

He can sure talk, can't he?

EARL

Yeah. I'll tell you what, I could go without all that talk about freedom and so forth. I don't need them speeches to get the job done. When he starts talking, you don't know if you're in a battle or the church-house.

WILL

He's a good Christian man.

EARL

That's what they say.

WILL

Lets you know where the good Lord stands on all this.

*

Pause.

EARL

Maybe.

Pause.

EARL

To tell it honestly, I'm sick of people telling me what to do. You get me? I don't care who you are.

WILL

Yeah.

Pause.

EARL

I ain't used to following orders.

WILL

Me neither.

EARL

I don't care for it.

WILL

Me neither.

EARL

And if I was in Stonewall's Brigade, I wouldn't much care to take orders from him, even if he had angels flying behind him.

Pause.

EARL

Yes, If I had my way, I'd stop shooting yanks and draw a bead on one of our own generals. Pick him off when no one was looking. Might force a reckoning. Generals drag this whole thing out.

WILL

You ought to watch what you say, soldier.

EARL

Why's that?

WILL

Someone might think that was you talking instead of the liquor.

EARL

If it was, what would you do?

WILL

I'd shoot you.

EARL

I don't think you would.

WILL

Oh no?

EARL

No.

WILL

Why.

EARL

Because you don't think I'm serious.

Earl stirs the fire. Will looks distressed.

EARL

I'm just talking, Preacher, calm down.

WILL

Why don't you go back to bed before you talk your way into trouble.

EARL

I can't sleep.

Pause.

WILL

Then why did you wake me up in the first place?

EARL

Because my watch was over.

Long pause. Earl stokes the fire.

Will takes a long swig of moonshine.

WILL

I bet people taste like pork.

EARL

Why you say that?

WILL

Down at the stone wall, after things got tough over in Fredricksburg, all them soldiers just lay out there in the field. Didn't clean 'em up before the next day. Started to get a little ripe there in the sun, you know, and I was thinking that it smelled like when you got a little pork meat or bacon or something that's been around, it's got a odor, you get me? I cut up enough pigs in my day. It's funny. A rotten man smells more like a pig than beef. I wonder why that is?

EARL

I couldn't say.

WILL

I bet people bacon tastes pretty good.

EARL

I bet it don't.

WILL

A person is what, two times bigger than a good-sized pig? Can you imagine a piece of people bacon? Buddy, that rasher would be like...like this wide and that long.

Will shows Earl using his hands.

EARL

Boy, you better lay off that moonshine.

WILL

I'm all right.

EARL

Well, it ain't for the faint hearted.

WILL

No, I don't guess it is. You feeling light?

EARL

Tolerable.

WILL

I'm feeling light, sure as sugar.

WILL

Hey Earl?

EARL

Yeah?

WILL

Can you take the watch for about five minutes?

EARL

What for?

WILL

I gotta "Boone."

EARL

What's that?

WILL

Like, I gotta go "Boone" in the latrine.

EARL

You mean, uh, defecate?

Will erupts in nervous laughter.

WILL

Yeah, buddy.

EARL

Why do you say “Boone” when you mean to say shit?

WILL

I don’t know. You ain’t never been to Boone?

EARL

No.

WILL

Well, you’d figure it out if you ever been to Boone.

EARL

Oh.

WILL

Y’ain’t supposed to say “shit.” Up around Black Mountain, we just say Boone and everyone knows what we mean.

EARL

Oh.

WILL

I figured everybody said Boone.

EARL

No.

WILL

Law.

*

Pause.

WILL

So will you take the watch?

EARL

Yeah.

WILL

I'd appreciate it.

Will gets up and walks back into the woods. Earl sits quietly, sipping moonshine.

WILL

(screams from off stage)

I can't get my britches down!

EARL

What's the matter?

WILL

My belt is stuck.

Pause.

WILL

Problem solved.

Pause. The whippoorwill sings.

WILL

Law!

EARL

What?

WILL

Buddy, these woods give me the willies.

EARL

You're all right.

WILL

I got a thing about getting it on the latrine.

EARL

It would be a hell of way to go.

WILL

I just don't care to do it in the woods.

EARL

Me neither.

WILL

These woods aren't safe.

EARL

Son, pull together. You're all right.

Pause.

Long pause. Earl throws another log on the fire and bundles up.

EARL

You fall in, boy?

WILL

I'm all right. Them beans didn't sit well with me.

He emerges from the woods.

WILL

Buddy, I would have been up a shit creek literally if I hadn't gotten my britches down.

EARL

Trousers.

WILL

What?

EARL

They ain't britches, they're trousers.

WILL

What's the difference?

EARL

Trousers is like, nice britches.

Will thinks about it.

WILL

I think these are britches.

He sits by the fire. Will takes a sip of moonshine, holds onto the jar.

The whippoorwill calls.

WILL

Would somebody quiet down that damn bird!

Pause.

EARL

It's just a bird.

Pause.

EARL

Where's that moonshine, son?

Will passes the jar to Earl.

WILL

Let's see what Delmus has for us to play with.

Earl ignores him.

WILL

Little pocket knife here. That's nice to have.

Will pulls out the knife exploring all the blades.

WILL

You need a knife, I'll sell it to you.

Earl ignores him.

WILL

Somebody will want it.

(eager to get a reaction)

We got like, ten pairs of drawers. He must have been hoarding these like a damn squirrel.

Pause.

WILL

Here's a damn apple.

WILL

It's rotted.

Will tosses the apple away.

Earl looks after the apple.

EARL

It looked fine to me.

WILL

I don't trust apples from unknown trees. That's what got Adam in trouble.

EARL

Who?

WILL

The bible, buddy. Ain't you read the bible?

EARL

Yeah, I read it.

Pause.

Will rummages some more.

WILL

Lookit.

EARL

What?

WILL

Delmus had himself some clean hankies.

EARL

So?

WILL

Well, I ain't seen a clean hankie in two or three months.

War makes my nose run, see?

Will pulls out a greenish-brown handkerchief.

*

WILL

You want one?

EARL

No.

WILL

Good.

Will blows his nose.

Earl snatches the satchel from Will.

Pause.

WILL

What was that for?

EARL

You're being disrespectful. You can go through your haul on your own time.

Pause.

WILL

It's my watch. You don't like it, Buddy, you can go to bed, where you're supposed to be.

Earl glares at Will.

EARL

Don't call me buddy.

A gunshot is heard, far away.

Silence.

WILL

I never met Jarvis.

EARL

What's that?

WILL

I said I ain't never met Jarvis.

EARL

What do you mean?

WILL

I never sat down and talked with him, like this. I wished I had.

EARL

Well, I appreciate it.

WILL

Don't mention it.

EARL

Yeah. He was a good brother.

WILL

He seemed like a decent feller. You never really know some people
and then others you know too well. It's like I was almost glad that
Delmus got killed. I bet almost any yankee would be better than him.

*
*

Hell, I bet any nigger would be better than him.

EARL

Quit that. You ought to respect the dead.

Pause.

WILL

Listen, buddy, I don't mean no disrespect to Jarvis. I just wished I'd
knowed him better.

EARL

You're all right. He was a good brother.

WILL

And a good soldier.

EARL

Dumb fool, though.

WILL

Don't say that.

EARL

He was a damn fool hothead. Couldn't shoot a horse if he was three
feet away from it.

WILL

The Lieutenant thought well of him.

EARL

Well, that don't buy much now, does it?

WILL

No, I don't guess so.

EARL

One day Jarvis comes home and up and claims he's walking off to volunteer. I told him he was too young and too stupid and to let it be. I didn't pay much mind until one day Momma comes walking up my yard. I reckoned if she was coming up to me, that either Daddy died or Jarvis done up and left. Turns out, I was right either way.

Will sips the moonshine. He hands a sip back to Earl.

WILL

People look foolish when they die. Like they been anticipating it for so long and then it ain't like what they thought it was going to be, and he just prays his last prayer hoping that it will be enough to get him into heaven.

Pause.

WILL

You think you'll die out there?

EARL

I don't think on it.

Pause.

WILL

I pray a lot.

EARL

Oh yeah?

WILL

Ain't you a Christian?

EARL

I am.

WILL

Don't you pray?

EARL

I do.

WILL

Jesus makes it easy to get through.

Long Pause. Earl stokes the fire.

*

Pause.

WILL

Why don't you pass that moonshine, buddy? *

EARL

Quit calling me buddy.

Pause.

WILL

I wished I'd killed that nigger.

EARL

Why?

WILL

No reason. *

EARL

I'll bet you never even seen a nigger until you shipped out. *

WILL

What difference would it make if I didn't? Anyway, I seen plenty of niggers. First time I was sixteen. My Daddy's sister, Bess, she showed me one on a trip to Winston Salem to go buy clothes. And when we was there, we stopped in this big mansion in town, and they had them a couple of house niggers. And they was just like regular people. Bess made it seem like we was going to see the booger man, but they was just normal folks. You can't tell how wicked they are, but I guess that's how they are trained. *

I figure niggers would be all right if they didn't do all their hoo-doo and devil worshipping. *

EARL

Yeah. *

WILL

Daddy says they worship the devil. And a dead heathen nigger can't do his wickedness no more. *

Pause.

EARL

Is that it?

WILL

I don't know. Niggers is for rich people, and the bible says rich people can't fit through the eye of a needle unless they get to heaven, so I pity them, you see? I pity rich folks and I pity niggers, too.

I do what the Lord tells me to do, and he sent me here to these woods. So that's why I pick up my gun each morning. That's the way I see it.

Pause. A series of shots ring out in the night..

EARL

They're getting rowdy over there.

WILL

Man when I get home, I'm going to lay in that bed for days.

EARL

I'm going to unclench my ass cheeks.

WILL

What?

EARL

Son, it wears your nerves, turning all them beans to gut water. Or worse, you hear a shot ring and your tail gets tight waiting for the zing. Because if you don't hear a zing, there's a thud.

WILL

Yeah.

EARL

But either way, I got to keep it taut, if you get me.

WILL

Yeah.

Pause.

WILL

We call that, "wet boone."

They smile.

WILL

You're drunker than a skunk, ain't you?

EARL

No, I'm all right. A little light, is all.

WILL

Buddy, I'm getting drunk.

Pause.

The whippoorwill calls again. Will grabs his gun and aims it in the air.

WILL

I'll fix that bird once and for all.

EARL

Don't shoot that bird!

WILL

I'll kill it.

Will fires. The bird flies away.

EARL

You missed him, dipshit. Probably woke up half the camp.

WILL

They're all right. That bird needed to shut itself up.

EARL

Well, just keep the gun quiet.

Pause. Will reloads his gun.

EARL

How's that moonshine doing?

WILL

Near done. You want it?

EARL

Yeah, give it over.

Will passes the moonshine.

EARL

I had this big plan before the war. Jarvis lives on the other side of Cran Branch. That creek divides our land ever since Papaw got it back, shoot, back I don't know when.

(MORE)

EARL (cont'd)

Well, Cran Branch runs into Clear Fork. Clear Fork runs straight into the Clinch River, which then runs into the Tennessee, which runs into the Ohio, which runs into the Mississippi, which runs into the ocean. I done thought about me and Jarvis getting on a raft down at the confluence and ridin' our way on down to New Orleans. Wouldn't have much way to get back though, so we ain't done it. But I did dream on that one or two times. Figured we'd put away some of our army pay and see we couldn't do that one time.

I figured I'd get to see the ocean. I ain't never seen that. Just a page in a book I got, but it's not a good drawing.

Pause.

EARL

I don't guess I'll do that no more. I figure I done seen pretty much all this country I need to see. Once I get back to my bed, I reckon I'll lay in it a good long while, just as you say.

Pause. A shot is heard in the distance. Both men note it, and then relax.

EARL

Listen, I don't mind telling you something because we're out here and we're saying things on our mind.

When my brother Jarvis done up and got that bullet stuck in him, my whole reason for being in this God-forsaken war bled out all over the place. Got piled in a ditch down behind a Baptist church over in Fredricksburg. So I been doing some pondering on this whole thing.

I reckoned I'd die for that farm and the woman I keep on it. And that's what they tell me I'm doing out here. But hell, I don't know. I ain't so sure that my farm is better of with me dead. So that's what I'm telling you is that I don't know.

*
*

WILL

Buddy, we all have them thoughts. But you gotta not think that way.

EARL

If I don't, I may be dead.

WILL

Well, they'll shoot you if you desert.

EARL

I'm not thinking of deserting.

Earl digs out the letter.

EARL

I got a baby coming.

WILL

What?

EARL

I got a note after Fredricksburg. Darla says it will be along in September. Letter didn't get to me for a month.

*

WILL

Well, congratulations. Doing some business on leave, weren't you.

EARL

I ain't been on leave.

Earl hands the letter to Will.

*

WILL

Oh.

EARL

So I'm telling you that I got problems in my house, and while we're away, everything back home is going to hell.

WILL

I'm sorry about your wife.

EARL

I am too.

WILL

Will you leave her?

EARL

She don't want me to. She said it was a sin, and she wants me to forgive her.

Will hands the letter back to Earl.

*

WILL

I can't read it.

*

*

EARL

I don't guess you'd want to.

*

*

WILL

Well, it ain't my business, but when you start talking about questioning your resolve to fight this fight, then it becomes my business.

EARL

I'm just thinking.

WILL

Yeah, well, don't think too hard, it ain't soldierly.

EARL

Maybe. I been thinking about me and mine back in North Carolina. I'm thinking about my adulterous wife and my bastard baby. I'm thinking about dead Jarvis over by the stone wall.

WILL

Listen, I never knew Jarvis.

EARL

So maybe then you don't know what I'm talking about? I mean, I'm asking you to hear me out before you figure one way or the other.

Pause.

EARL

Will you do that?

WILL

All right.

EARL

So I got to thinking about a bunch of damn politicians come around telling us that we got to protect North Carolina from people who don't know nothing about it. Them rich people come around preching nigger this and nigger that and get kids like you and Jarvis up there throwing bullets all over Virginia. I don't reckon I need to go tossing my life in with all these others to be slaughtered so some rich people can keep their niggers and their taxes and their land while my wife is getting visited one too many times by the preacher.

*

WILL

Well, if you want me to look the other way while you walk off, you got he wrong soldier, buddy.

EARL

Oh, I don't intend to walk. If I wanted to do that, I'd a done it. I think there's a lot of other soldiers who have let their own go to ruin, while they up and fight for someone else's. I'll not walk and leave them to do the same.

WILL

What then?

Pause.

EARL

I'm just talking to you, Jesus.

WILL

You talk too much, soldier.

Pause.

EARL

Listen, son.

WILL

Don't call me son.

EARL

You're getting a little red.

WILL

I can't call you Buddy, you can't call me son.

EARL

Fine.

WILL

I ain't your damn boy.

EARL

I know.

Pause.

WILL

Listen, I'm younger than you. So it don't seem right for me to say this. But you got to buck up get right with God. You ever thought to pray on it?

Pause.

EARL

I'm saved if that's what you're driving at.

WILL

Well, it don't sound like it.

EARL

Well, fourteen years old, I was baptized in the Clear Fork.

WILL

Sounds to me like sin has found you out.

EARL

Well. Me and somebody else. Maybe you are right. Maybe it has.

WILL

So, I'm going to pray.

EARL

Well.

WILL

Because this is gnawing at me, and it would makes me feel a sight better about all this.

EARL

Pray away, son. I got no quarrel with prayer.

WILL

Dear Father.

Pause.

EARL

Go on.

WILL

I think I'm too drunk to pray.

EARL

Well, God might appreciate the honesty.

WILL

Pass that moonshine.

Will takes a sip.

WILL

Good heavenly father above us. Have mercy on the soul of your servant, Earl, as he contemplates his duty on the field of battle.

Earl has taken a perilous walk down the valley of the shadow of death, and he has come out afraid. He needs you, Lord, the good shepherd, to show him that Yankees are your enemy and that it ain't right to let niggers walk around like they are better than good white Christians.

EARL

What is that shit?

WILL

Don't interrupt me when I'm talking to the Lord.

EARL

Well I changed my mind. I don't want your prayers on my account.

WILL

Why's that?

EARL

Because you ain't listened to a word I said.

Pause.

WILL

Look at you, talking about running off like you're so righteous because you don't care about nothing and your wife is whoring in your own house.

Pause.

EARL

Son, don't you get red on that liquor.

WILL

Is that what it is?

EARL

I told you not to get red.

WILL

I am getting a little red. I might be more than a little red. I never should have touched your damn liquor. You must have hoo-dood me into it.

EARL

Listen to yourself. Don't wake the men.

WILL

I think the Lord has asked me to raise my voice just a little bit so you'll quit acting like a yellow-bellied woman.

EARL

Calm down, boy.

WILL

Well, I ain't going to sit here and listen to you run your damn mouth like a coward. And I'll have no business with the devil.

EARL

That ain't it.

WILL

I reckon it sounds like it.

EARL

Listen here, son. I'm trying to talk to you like a man.

WILL

Well, Buddy, I am a soldier and I'll not have you run my business into the mud, just because your wife would rather do it with a preacher than a coward.

Earl lunges at Will.

EARL

Listen, boy, I ain't scared to whip you.

WILL

You can't whip shit old man. Now stand down before this gets further.

Earl backs off.

Pause.

EARL

All right. All right.

Earl takes a long drink of moonshine.

EARL

Listen here, son. I may be getting a little drunk, but I'm also getting a little clear. Do you get me? I can't sleep. Night after night since Jarvis got himself licked, I can't sleep for fear I might die with nothing to show for it. And my bastard boy would grow up in a bastard confederacy where he'd be sent to die because a politician told him to do it. They pay us to do their bloodwork, they keep their slaves and their free labor, while we mountain men sweat it out for nothing.

WILL

Stop it.

EARL

What?

WILL

You've turned into a nigger-loving coward.

EARL

I swear to god, it's niggers or Jesus with you all the time ain't it? You don't listen, but then you hear one of them words and you gnash your teeth.

WILL

Well, that's why we're in the war, way I see it.

EARL

Sure it is. Them politicians come around preaching niggers and Jesus to rile you up. Listen, I hate niggers too. I'd rather someone send 'em back to wherever they come from. A heathen is a heathen and someone ought to do something about it. That is true. But it ain't no reason to let blood, much less lose sleep.

WILL

I wish you could hear yourself.

EARL

Oh I hear it. Do you?

Pause.

EARL

I'll not die for no heathen niggers. That's what's being said.

Listen, I got my affairs back home to get right. And I got a dead brother in a box. Conviction is a luxury afforded to fools and rich people. But I'll no longer fight for this war as a fool. I won't risk my neck for niggers. I won't risk my neck so everybody knows which rich people can tell me what to do.

Ain't nobody told me what to do until this war, and I don't figure it suits me too well. And I don't imagine they going to come up the Clear Fork after this war and tell me what to do. Ain't nobody give a shit about us mountain people anyway and I can't see killing a bunch of fellers in blue coats is going to make much difference.

See I'd rather be alive than righteous. That's the sum of it.

WILL

You think someone is a fool for fighting in a war?

EARL

No, I think you're a genius that you're fighting in a war. Smart is in the eyes. Smart is not getting killed day in day out. Smart is not acting like a lunatic just because somebody gives you a musket.

But smart is not a man who puts honor before courage --who puts the quality of his life over the value of his life, is not a man at all, but a dog who serves a master. These generals who throw out words make honor like a bone to be lapped up by strays. If we wanted to fight this war, we'd see that the dogs, the ones with courage, bit that hand that fed them.

WILL

What do you mean?

EARL

I'm talking about doing what must be done to end this war. I'm talking about what a soldier can do to save his fellow soldier.

WILL

Desertion is a capital offense.

EARL

That's not what I'm talking about. I wish you'd see that.

WILL

Well, what then?

Beat.

EARL

I'm talking about picking off a general.

WILL

What?

EARL

When they least expect it. Lee, Jackson, Longstreet, Early. Stuart would be a good one.

Pause.

EARL

Draw a bead on one, if the time is right.

WILL

You mean kill one of our own generals?

EARL

I do. Absolutely, that's what I mean to tell you. And it's what I aim to do before my hack at this life is done.

WILL

Why you telling me this?

EARL

Because I can't do it alone. And you're persuadable.

WILL

You got the wrong soldier.

EARL

I've seen you. I've seen you out there on the battlefield. You can't fool me with all your talk about shooting niggers. When the bullets get going, your eyes glaze over, you fire at anything. I know that look, and I admire it. It means you've lost that thing that makes men stupid. You train a bead on a horizon of men and fire, reload, mechanical. But you've lost the conviction.

WILL

Don't you talk about me like you know me.

EARL

You hear what I'm saying. You're not dumb. We soldiers play dumb because it makes the evil tolerable. But you're not dumb.

EARL

You know what I say is true.

WILL

No!

EARL

I've seen you out there? What is that, then?

WILL

YOU DON'T KNOW ME!

EARL

The hell I don't.

Will grabs Earl and punches him.

WILL

I'm going to whip the shit out of you. I'm sick of listening to you talk treason out here, making a mockery of me and these men who have saved your own pathetic skin more than once.

EARL

Watch yourself.

The tousel.

WILL

And while it is one thing to be a coward, it's another entirely to call Will Ward a coward, because that is just asking to get whopped. Is that what you're doing? Are you asking to get whipped?

They tousel briefly. Earl gains the advantage, but Will holds him down.

WILL

And I ought to shoot you for treason, right here, but I don't believe the Lord would allow you to be so evil. So instead, I'm going to be lenient and whip you right here so hard I'll knock your organs loose.

EARL

Get off me.

They fight. Will starts to wail on Earl mercilessly. The scene is gruesome.

WILL

You think that knowing about everything will make you right. That ain't it. You smart asses think you got war figured out. Well, I think you're a dumb ass because war is belief and faith and all those things that you can't get because you think too hard from both sides. Faith lets you kill without remorse.

And I ought to punish you for heresy.

Will rears back for a devastating blow, then drops his hand.

WILL

But I'm a different man than that. I see an opportunity here.

Because you've got demons where the Lord should be, and I aim to get you set right with God. Because the Lord is working through me. And he's telling me you got to get saved. So that's what I'm going to do, while you nurse your wounds, we're going to talk about Jesus. Because in my good book it says to love your enemies. And sometimes, that means to you have to kill them, because their hearts are so impure that there's no salvation for them. That's what I see when I look out in battle. But I don't believe that your heart is impure, Earl. So I'm going to save you right here tonight.

Earl nods. Earl tries to stand. Will grabs him and throws him to the ground.

WILL

Easy, Earl. I'M TRYING TO DO YOU A FAVOR.

Earl nods, defeated.

WILL

Most men would beat you and leave you to stew in your own juices. But I got a calling, you see? To bring you right with the Lord.

You see this battlefield, and you see fools. But I see the battlefield and I see souls. Some are going to heaven, and some are going to hell. And I see a chance. Because this war is hell on earth, and by God in heaven, I'll not fool no more with hell. Because when I get to heaven, I'll let old St. Peter know I done served my time in hell.

Will stands above Earl. He's just getting started.

WILL

Yes, sir. I see an opportunity to get you on the right side of the Lord. And to get you on your way to the Kingdom. Because that's where I'm headed.

EARL

Yeah?

WILL

Make no mistake, buddy. I'm glory-bound. When I walk across that Jordan river, I'll set up my camp in Zion, with the angels on the other side. I'm headed for that promised land, and nothing on this earth is going to change that you hear me, so you can kill me right now, buddy, and you'd be doing me a favor. Because I'm on my way to Beulah, where the grace and glory of the Lord are like the light of the sun on a summer day. Where the lion and the lamb, and the soldier and his foe walk down the center aisle of that great cathedral of God's hand, flanked by great oaks and led by a little child. And all their sins of shame, and fear, and liquor and women, and hatefulness, and cowardliness, and violence, they shall be washed clean by blood, the blood of Jesus, the lamb of grace, who is killed for you and me.

Listen to me, soldier. Because I'm Willing salvation, which is something you are in dire need of. Listen to my words. There is no fear in heaven. There is no war in Jesus Christ. There are no niggers and no heathens up there.

We're are all God's children. And it's a gift we stand to inherit, buddy, you and me. If you'll let me help you.

Do you believe in God?

EARL

Yes, of course I do.

WILL

Do you believe you are going to heaven?

EARL

I don't know.

WILL

Well I'll tell you that tonight you are. Most men on this earth, they are born, you know, and then they cease to be. But in Jesus, you can be born, and you die, but it's just like the blink of an eye because you go right on living up in heaven. That's what I'm telling you.

(MORE)

WILL (cont'd)

Eternal life is the only kind of immortality you can get. These generals, they think it's getting their names in the history book, but you and I know that ain't worth nothing if you end up in the furnace.

Jesus said, "Blessed are ye who are weak and heavy laden, for I will give you rest." That's what you and I got coming to us, buddy. So you and I, we'll have no more talk of desertion. Because the Lord is looking out for you and yours a lot better than you can, and you best put it in his hands.

Pause.

WILL

You believe in God. Now that's the first half of eternal life. But the second is giving your life to him. Will you do that? Will you give your life to the service of the Lord?

EARL

(humbly)

Yes.

WILL

Will you do his work on the battlefield?

EARL

I'll do what I am told to do.

WILL

Well, then you gotta listen for his voice. It's a voice that comes in many different ways, through the violent flames of the burning bush to Moses, to the tender persistence of the Lord, calling quietly to Samuel in the quiet of the night. It's the writing on the wall and it's in the dreams of David in the court of Nebuchanezzar. How will he speak to you? Will it come through me? Will it come through your brother in heaven? Will it come from angels?

EARL

It's hard to know.

WILL

You just got to amplify your spiritual sense of hearing.

EARL

How do I do that?

WILL

First you got to say your piece, so you can listen for a response. So what I want you to do, is say your piece. I want you to testify as to the Lord's worth in your life.

Will you do that? Will you testify, here in front of the hoot-owls and the squirrels and crickets? Will you tell them what the Lord is doing for you?

EARL

All right. You want to hear me say what's happening to me. I'll tell you. I've questioned the Lord. I'm losing my faith. That is true. But let it be known here and now, that I am a Christian, I believe in him. And not in a practical way, but the same way you feel it in your bones before the thunderstorm. So get that straight. Let there be no doubt.

WILL

Go on. Say what you mean to say.

EARL

All right. I'll testify. I got a piece to say here, in front of the hoot-owls and squirrels and angels, and that is that I done lost a piece of myself and I want him to know that it hurts me.

But it's made me see that my life and the war and my Lord are all Willing from three different churches, and I can't figure which door I'm a wanting to knock on. Because I hear their choirs singing to me in my dreams. And I'll pray here, at the suggestion of my friend Will, who is drunk as me, but we're both clear for a change, under heaven. So I say tonight, Lord, help me to make a choice, or better, burn down the church of self-righteousness, burn down the church of killing, and burn down the church of false prophesy, and in their place, build the church of your will.

In that church will be a sacrament, and that sacrament will be the truth, and the Will will be Christ Jesus, and his choir will be angels, and their music will drift over the hollers and valleys toward the sea, where the brave Mississippi, full of a few drops of water from the Clear Fork, empties into the sea.

I pray for courage, but not honor. I pray for hope, but not optimism. I pray for salvation, but not safety. Do you get me?

WILL

Hallelujah.

EARL

That's right, Will. We're praising here, not mourning. We're rejoicing, not arguing. We're saying we feel a certain release in laying down our burdens at the cross.

WILL

That's right.

EARL

(meekly)

Hallelujah.

WILL

Hallelujah!

EARL

Hallelujah.

WILL

Hallelujah!

Silence.

WILL

Tonight, I'm going to rebaptize you in the name of Jesus Christ. Because you've come to the precipice, you looked down into the valley of sin, and you said I'll not fear evil. And I believe he's appointed me to bring you back from the edge, to set you on a course back to him. It's a rocky road. It's a tough climb, but salvation is worth the struggle. Will you join me?

EARL

I will, Buddy.

WILL

Where's your canteen?

EARL

What?

WILL

You can't baptize with good intentions, brother, you need holy water.

EARL

Oh. We're being literal tonight.

Earl fishes around in his pack.

EARL

I ain't got much left. Where's yours?

WILL

I gotta go get it in my pack.

EARL

OK.

Will leaves. There is a sudden quiet.

Will reaches around in his pack and pulls out a canteen of water. He returns to his post, carrying a canteen.

WILL

This is good, right?

EARL

Yes.

WILL

I mean, what's happening here.

EARL

Yeah.

WILL

Well, then I think you're ready for the Lord.

Do you agree to be re-baptized in the name of the Lord?

EARL

I do.

WILL

Do you renounce Satan and the evil that plagues mankind?

EARL

I do.

WILL

Then you shall inherit eternal life. Are you ready for that? Are you ready for the kingdom?

EARL

I am.

WILL

I baptize you in the name of the father, the son, and the holy ghost.

Will empties the canteen on Earl's head. A little too much water, perhaps.

EARL

Quit it now!

Earl continues to pour.

EARL

You don't have to pour the whole bottle on my head.

WILL

Oh, I think you need it. You can't have too much of Jesus.

Earl stands up and wrings out his hat.

EARL

A sprinkling would have done the trick.

WILL

Well, you never can be too sure. Never hurts to go all out.

Will looks up into the trees.

WILL

You see that?

Earl looks up?

EARL

What?

WILL

That dove.

EARL

No.

WILL

Is that what was making that sound earlier?

EARL

The whippoorwill?

WILL

Yeah.

EARL

No. I see a pigeon.

WILL

No, buddy that's a dove. Do you know what that is? It's a sign of the Holy Ghost descending.

EARL

Maybe. Maybe it is.

WILL

Just like when John the Baptist took Jesus himself and dunked him in the river.

A cannon fires in the distance.

EARL

It's a good omen.

WILL

I don't believe in omens. I believe in the word of the lord and the work of the devil, and I believe that this bird is a very clear sign to us, that the will of the Lord is being done here tonight.

Silence.

WILL

We should sing!

EARL

What?

WILL

We should sing us a song--a hymn.

EARL

Law, I don't know about all that.

WILL

That's what's done at a proper baptism. It consecrates the act.

EARL

Oh, all right.

Pause.

EARL

Well, sing, son, I ain't holding you back.

WILL

I ain't sure what you're supposed to sing.

EARL

Well, shit I don't know.

WILL

Watch you mouth now, you're saved.

EARL

Sorry.

Pause. Both men seem deep in thought.

WILL

How about "A Mighty Fortress is our God?"

EARL

Uh, I don't know that one.

WILL

Well, I figured it was appropriate. How about "Onward Christian Soldiers?"

EARL

Yeah, I know that one.

Pause.

EARL

You start.

WILL

(sings)

Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war. Onward Christian la,
da, la, di da...

Pause. Will looks ashamed.

WILL

Let's try another one.

EARL

I know "Be Thou my Vision."

WILL

Oh, good. That's a good Irish song. My mother used to sing it to us.

EARL

You start.

WILL

(Earl joins in after first line)

Be thou my vision oh lord of my heart, naught be all else to me save
that thou art. Thou my best thought by day or by night. Waking or
sleeping, thy presence my light.

There is something heartwarming about the two men trying to stumble through the hymn. Neither can sing too well, but Earl occasionally hits the harmony instead of the melody, which has a nice effect.

WILL

(singing)

Be thou my battle shield, sword for my fight, be thou my dignity thou
my delight. Thou my soul's shelter thou my high tower. Raise thou
me heavenward, oh power of my power.

Earl knows this verse less, but hums along with his tenor line.

WILL

(still singing, more confident)

High King of heaven, my victory won, may I reach heaven's joys oh
bright heaven's sun. Heart of my own heart, whatever be fall, still be
my vision Oh ruler of all.

Silence.

EARL

Jarvis liked that song.

WILL

Yeah.

Pause.

WILL

I think the Lord is real happy we done that.

EARL

Yeah, it's a nice song.

WILL

No, I mean baptizing you...getting saved.

EARL

Oh yeah, that's good.

WILL

I mean, I do believe that something meaningful was done here.

EARL

Yeah, you ought to give yourself a good smack on the back.

WILL

What?

EARL

Well, you done the Lord proud.

WILL

Well, I did, didn't I?

EARL

Yeah, you did.

Pause.

WILL

What's this, then?

EARL

Well, it's a good thing to save somebody. There's a lot of virtue in that. Keeping a man from sin.

WILL

A sinner is hell-bound.

EARL

Is that it?

WILL

Yes.

EARL

What about your soul?

WILL

What?

EARL

That's awful easy to scrutinize other souls without giving much thought to your own.

WILL

What are you saying?

EARL

I'm saying it's easy to be righteous, but it's another thing to say brother, I'm a sinner, too.

WILL

Are you telling me I'm a sinner? What are you trying to say?

EARL

Listen, I ain't saying nothing other than I just gutted my heart over there and I thought you might owe God a little confession yourself. Or are you blameless?

WILL

I never said I ain't sinned.

EARL

Well, let's hear it. Your turn, soldier.

WILL

I never said I ain't sinned.

EARL

Surely you got words you want to get said out loud. Will you testify?

WILL

Well, I told you about my faith.

EARL

Will you confess?

WILL

What?

EARL

It's pretty easy to save a man, but when I ask you to confess one transgression, you falter? Lately, I hear a lot of pointing fingers, a lot of virtue and hollering, but not a whole lot of confession. I reckon it was just a good time to say what was on your mind.

WILL

You reckon a lot.

EARL

Listen, I'm not trying to criticize. I'm asking you to deepen your own faith. Join me in coming to God.

WILL

Well, I ain't thought on it.

EARL

It's a good time to do it.

WILL

I never said I didn't sin.

EARL

Don't think of it. Just testify.

WILL

Well, I guess I ain't been praying as much as I should. I ain't been to church in a little while, but that ain't my fault. I said that Delmus was no better than a nigger, and that was wrong. He was a good feller, I think he was definitely better than a nigger. I drank some liquor tonight. And that was bad.

Long Pause.

EARL

That's it?

WILL

No. Give me a minute.

Pause.

EARL

Have you sinned in anger, in pride? Have you lost faith. Have you felt shame on the battlefield.

WILL
DON'T PROVOKE ME.

EARL
I'm no trying to provoke you.

WILL
Yes you are.

EARL
Well.

WILL
I guess things ain't been going as I'd hoped, and that has caused a certain amount of, well sadness.

I feel sadness. And then I think of my father and I feel ashamed. For no reason. I feel like I lack humility and generosity. I think those are flaws in my character. And maybe that all gets exaggerated during war. And I let it go, because it's so hard to be decent out here. You know. Not polite. That's what I mean.

EARL
Go on.

WILL
I mean to say that I feel like you and the fellas are brothers to me. I swear to you I think that. And I've never known a woman. So, this is about as close to another person I can get. And yet, it seems false. It don't fill me, spiritually.

Pause.

EARL
What?

WILL
I didn't mean to say that.

Pause.

EARL
You don't feel full.

WILL
I don't know. Is that what you want me to say?

EARL

I want you to tell me why you stole Jarvis's belt.

WILL

What?

EARL

You heard me.

WILL

It ain't what you think.

EARL

What is it then, Preacher?

WILL

All right, all right.

EARL

Now you got something to say.

Pause.

WILL

You know how I said I didn't know Jarvis. That ain't true. I did know him, pretty well. I was there at the stonewall.

I was with him.

Earl looks up, curious.

WILL

This is a confession, if that's what you want. It's not treason, but if we're coming clean for the Lord, then this ought to even it out. Being as we're out here coming clean for the Lord.

EARL

Go on. You were down at the stonewall.

WILL

Yeah. But we wasn't at the stonewall when it happened. We was down about 200 yards or so, over in the woods. Jarvis had to go Boone, and this was before it got all raw in there, so I figured I'd go with him and cover him. We was in a pretty good spot, you know, but it was still out in the open woods. And I was just setting there, waiting. And Jarvis reels up, sucking in air quick like, and I think he's been hit.

(MORE)

WILL (cont'd)

I'm looking around, you know, but I don't see nobody.

And then I look over, and there's this little bitty garter snake, tearing off into the woods. And ol Jarvis, he's done been sicked on the shin. It wasn't but a harmless bite, but Jarvis was pretty upset and stood up, you know. And I tried to whack it with a rock, but I missed it. Was pretty far away then anyway.

So Jarvis, he's nursing his wound and I'm saying let's go get the medic, but he won't fool with it. Says he doesn't want you to know. I guess he figured you'd ride him, and he just wanted to do good in your estimation or whatnot.

Well all this time Jarvis had his pants around his ankles. Jarvis is still pretty worked up, but I told him to pull his britches up. Trousers, you know whatever. So he finally gets around to it, but just as he pulls up I hear that sound. I look up and Jarvis and see his cheek running with blood. I mean, half his face was tore off, really. But Jarvis was so worked up over that snake and getting his pants up, that he didn't know he'd been hit. But I couldn't pull him because my trousers was falling down.

So he's kind of got hitched on his knee and he falls over a little bit. And he starts to leak blood on himself. He's got it on his hand, you know, but he still don't know where it come from. I point up to his face, and he starts to grab where his beard should have been and he feels a piece of skin hanging where it didn't belong and that was pretty much it.

Pause.

WILL

I set up with him while he was dying.

Pause.

WILL

I prayed over him, and I think he appreciated it. But part of me was thinking of his meat and how it's gonna rot like any other, like a pig in the sun. And I prayed, but it didn't ease me. I'm telling you Jarvis, that there are times when prayer fails to ease you. And that's a dark hour.

And I saw Jarvis laying there, and I was filled with an evil spirit. My eyes were hot with fury, and I couldn't concentrate.

(MORE)

WILL (cont'd)

I started to take off running trying to drag Jarvis back toward the boys, you know. I guess it was stupid, if you think on it, but it seemed like the decent thing to do.

It started to get pretty hot in there and I tried to repeat the Lord's prayer over and over again in my mind. I was out of cartridges, because I hadn't brought my box to go cover Jarvis and I could see them coming to me. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. And then I'd start to worry about my cartridges. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Jarvis is going to rot like a pig in the sun. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts. My pants are falling down. As we forgive our debtors. Jarvis is dead. And lead us not into temptation. Get his belt and wear it. Put it on. What's the rest? Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Artillery is hitting hard. I'm going to get blown up. What's the next part? Hallowed by thy name. Thy Kingdom come? Get his belt.

Will starts tugging at his belt.

WILL

I took his belt.

EARL

Why?

WILL

I took it. I took his God damn belt.

EARL

I know.

WILL

I didn't ask for it. I took it.

EARL

I know.

WILL

Do you get what I'm saying? I ain't right. In the middle of prayer, with Jarvis dead. You understand me? You're not listening to me or you'd be furious right now. I'm telling you I ain't right to be talking to you right now. Because I sinned against Jarvis in the evil hour.

EARL

Calm down, son.

WILL

Don't say that to me! You don't feel the weight.

EARL

I feel every ounce of it.

WILL

The Lord has saved us both here tonight.

Pause.

EARL

He has.

WILL

But there's more than that.

Because I don't figure we see things all that different. My Daddy's a drunk and his sister's a whore. My whole family is meat and mud, in the eyes of war.

Pause. He throws the belt on the ground near Earl.

EARL

Keep the belt.

WILL

I'd rather keep my britches up with a copperhead.

EARL

Trousers.

Pause.

The whippoorwill calls, mournfully.

WILL

That damn bird is back.

Light has begun to creep in at the edges of the forest.

EARL

Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory.

Pause.

WILL
That wasn't so hard.

Pause.

EARL
Amen.

WILL
What kind of trees is these?

EARL
Sycamore.

WILL
That's what Zacheus climbed up. Funny to see them here. Wonder what old Zacheus would say today. Wonder what he would see out there.

Pause.

WILL
It's getting light. The generals ought to be by here soon on the morning scout.

Pause.

EARL
Will.

WILL
What?

EARL
You owe me.

WILL
What?

EARL
For what you done to Jarvis.

WILL
For taking his belt?

EARL
 FOR LEAVING HIM TO DIE WHILE YOU BABBLED THAT GOD
 DAMNED PRAYER.

Pause.

WILL
 What do you want me to do?

EARL
 There's a part of this night that ain't yet been said, and I'm coming
 clean because we're coming clean. That's what we're doing

WILL
 What do you mean?

EARL
 I have been plagued with a recurring dream.

WILL
 A dream?

EARL
 Yes. A nocturnal vision that is mighty disturbing to me. Or rather, it
 was before tonight.

WILL
 What has changed?

EARL
 I can see how I fit into the plan.

WILL
 What plan?

EARL
 The plan for me and for you. The sum of this jar of moonshine, this
 grove of sycamores, this prayer we prayed tonight.

WILL
 Well tell me your dream, buddy. You earned the right to preach. I
 guess I ain't fit for so much after all.

EARL
 I didn't think much of it when I first dreamed it. I think I first
 dreamed it after Fredricksburg. But I didn't remember it. But pieces
 of it have traveled to me again and again.

(MORE)

EARL (cont'd)

Until lately, when it repeats damn near every time I sleep.

Today, I saw an angel in the woods. Maybe I was just exhausted, from the heat of the day...and I recalled her from my dream. This figure haunts me. Waking or sleeping, I cannot escape her eyes.

But perhaps I'm getting ahead of myself. This is, after all, just a recurring dream. A dream that follows, more or less, the same story night after night.

I find myself on the field of battle. I can't quite place it, but I believe it is Antietam. Maybe it's somewhere in the valley. The generals are riding around in circles, on white horses behind a small rise of naked earth. A storm cloud looms over head. The horses become uneasy, whinnying cries of anguish as the generals pull the bits tighter into the hinge of their jaw. Lightning strikes and the soldiers reappear. We fix bayonets for a charge.

It is a gruesome battle. It becomes the road at Fredricksburg, and the bodies pile around. And out of the sky, a great silvery bird soars toward us. The men continue to fire their weapons, oblivious to the beating of white wings, like a swan's, that descends above our field of conflict from the North.

Gradually, the army begins to notice. A general, wearing full battlefield gray, charges into the field. He rides on a dappled horse, and parades in front of the line of men, aiming his pistol at the bird. He shoots and misses. I look around amongst my fellow men to see that they take note of this scene, but they do not appear to see.

The general turns to me, imploring my action to shoot down this bird, but she is so beautiful, so pure, that I cannot fire. The general starts discharging his pistol, and I fire, not at the bird, but at the general. My bullet lodges in his chest, and he falls from his horse, a boot still lodged in the stirrup.

I look down, and on the field, there is a little girl, maybe eight years old, standing in the middle of it all. She wears a white pinafore and a white dress. And Jarvis is with me, standing there holding his heart with his hand. And all of us soldiers, we stand around like it's a picnic, shaking hands and smiling relief. She looks at me and smiles.

And I rise up, above the field, and beyond it, I can see the ocean for the first time in my life.

Pause.

WILL

Well, what do you figure it means?

EARL

I don't know. Maybe it means that I should not worry, because the Lord has his angels watching over me. Or maybe it means that I should act as a child, letting innocence guide me. Or maybe the bird is peace, and it is on the rise.

Or maybe it means that God is not on our side.

WILL

What?

EARL

I believe that everything gets sorted out in the kingdom.

WILL

It does.

EARL

I believe mercy will be apportioned to the strong. Mercy will be given at the day of reckoning.

WILL

What do you mean God is not on our side?

EARL

And we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Pause.

WILL

What did you mean?

EARL

I didn't mean to say that. Forgive me. What I mean to say is that I think that these dreams are a part of this thing that is happening tonight.

WILL

What?

EARL

I believe the Lord is working in us.

WILL

Yes.

EARL

Do you not deny that the Lord is working here?

WILL

I believe the Lord is working.

EARL

Well, I believe my dream is a part of it.

Pause.

EARL

I've seen you on the battlefield. The Lord is working in us. We are his sheep, just as you've said.

WILL

The Lord will call me to do as he sees fit.

EARL

I see a brother in you, buddy. I understand that you can see my way. Now let me tell you about what I aim to do.

WILL

What's that?

EARL

I aim to get out of this mess, but I'll not be a fool and let it rage while wives stay up at night praying to Jesus to bring their men home safe. Desertion says I won't fight no more. But the way I see it, there's call to fight now. But the battle is not with the enemy. The battle is amongst us. To fight you that you might be saved. The Yankee is my enemy and Johnny Reb is my enemy because he can't get over niggers and Jesus. So I must wage war against you, in my quiet way.

WILL

You want to fight me?

EARL

No, I want to save you. Just as you saved me. And save the best of these men on both sides who care about virtute and privacy, and the sanctity of life. You understand?

WILL

Saving each other, is that it?

EARL

It would seem that way.

When there are no sides, the fight is simply this: to end the aggression. To end the violence against fellow men and strangers. To end the slaughter of the young for the sake of the old.

WILL

Don't you say it.

EARL

Say what?

WILL

If you say treason one more time, I swear...

EARL

Hear me out, boy you owe it to me. You owe it to Jarvis.

I'm sitting here in front of you, as a prophet, and I'm telling you that history is written by the small men. The men who get by, for the sake of their wives. The men who act dishonorably because they can and no one will be the wiser.

People like Lincoln and Lee live at the grace of God. And when men take the grace of God into their own hands, at his will, then you begin to understand what a man can do. What courage is. Courage is saying that Lincoln and Lee are men like you and me, no more and no less. And the power to throw men like you and me to the dogs because of our own stupid hatred of each other, is something the Lord has called on me to take away.

WILL

Don't do it.

EARL

You see I been thinking about being a coward, like you said tonight. History gets written by the cowards just as much as the courageous. By people who say, Lord no, I'll not die today for this. By those who say, I'd better stab this feller in the back because I got no more powder on me and if he turns, he'll shoot. I'm starting to believe in the righteousness of the coward. Of cowardice so severe that it becomes a kind of courage in its own right. The Lord's ordained way. Because this war is justified. I mean, we know it is by the blood in our eyes. I believe wars are justified so long as there are fools to fight them. But I'm aiming not to be a fool.

WILL

I see. You got this from your dream?

EARL

This thing is going to go on forever lest somebody get in there and start to settle this thing. And if the good lord appoints me to arbitrate this squabble, then so be it. Because someday, someday very soon, people are going to take justice into their own hands. There will be no more armies and no more wars, just naked aggression. The saboteur soldier is the future. That is what I saw in my dream.

WILL

You're talking about shooting generals again.

EARL

Just as a rich man has great difficulty with heaven, so I believe a general has great difficulty with honor. The honor that you and I know so well.

EARL

Stonewall, in particular. After what he done today, there's no stopping him.

WILL

And then what?

EARL

Keep doing it...until there's no one left to do it, and we give up. And you and I go home to our wives, shamed to all but ourselves and our Lord.

WILL

It won't work. You think you can just go wander over to their tent, ask for an audience with one of 'em and up and open fire, right there?

EARL

I don't know what. I figure the Lord will show me the way. More likely try to peg 'em down in battle with a stray bullet. Keep it so I could do it again.

WILL

Well why are you telling me?

EARL

I think you're going to do it because God is talking to us.

Pause.

EARL

Or do you deny everything that has happened, just like Peter on the morning of Jesus's death.

WILL

Why me?

EARL

Because you kill without remorse. Because your faith is strongest. And for other reasons that will be made clear.

WILL

I think you put a lot of faith in me. What did you think that I would do?

EARL

I don't know. Join me, shoot me...force a reckoning somehow. I just wanted to say it out loud, you know. Because I've thought on it, and it burns in me, itching to manifest as the work of God. And I know that through what happened between us and the Lord here tonight, that this is his will.

WILL

And all of this come from a dream?

EARL

Yes.

WILL

How come you dream if you can't sleep?

Pause.

EARL

The Lord works in mysterious ways.

WILL

Answer my question. How come you dream if you can't sleep?

EARL

I told you the truth. I saw a vision!

WILL

See, I think I don't owe you shit. I think you're trying to con me into something.

EARL

If I conned you, then it came from the Lord.

WILL

See I think you are full of shit.

Will grabs Earl's rifle.

WILL

See, I think your sense is slipping.

EARL

Maybe it is. I think the good Lord may have took every last bit of sense that I once cherished. And I think the way to get it back is to do my piece in this war. Because I been a sheep, looking for the shepherd, and I found him here tonight and I said show me Lord, what to do, so I can do your will. I've seen too much bloodshed and I want to be your servant.

WILL

You lie!

EARL

Ask him. Pray to him. If you believe in him. If you've been truly saved like I have. If you are washed in the blood of the lamb, then you too will understand that the Lord asked me to do this. He asked you to hear me. He asked me to test your faith.

WILL

You lie!

EARL

I prayed to him and he told me that our cause ain't his.

Will raises his rifle.

WILL

Shut up, shut up. SHUT YOUR MOUTH YOU SNAKE. Or I'll kill you just as easy as you was a yankee, crawled up to me on my line, near death, begging for water. I'd shoot you with no more care than I'd give to a spider in a shithouse. For the Lord's will is not to be toyed with.

EARL

I believe he will not make a martyr out of me.

WILL

I'll shoot you here, and nobody would miss you. I'll tell them I shot you, for threatening treason. I'll tell them everything you told me here tonight.

EARL

I don't think they'd believe you.

WILL

Well that will be some consolation to you in the grave, now won't it?

I've spilt enough blood by now to know that you're just meat like every other man. And the difference between you and meat is the grace of God.

How do you feel about the Lord's grace?

Is it with you?

Will lifts the gun away.

WILL

Or against you?

Will aims back at Earl.

EARL

It's with me.

WILL

Now we're going to pray together. We're going to pray for a sign, for he will save you, if you're telling the truth.

You going to pray with me?

EARL

Yes, yes.

WILL

Dear Heavenly Father.

Excuse me for not closing my eyes, but I'm afraid that if I do, this man before me may try to kill me.

Lord, I come to you tonight with a dilemma. There is a man sitting before me who says he is Willing your will. But I don't know.

(MORE)

WILL (cont'd)

I can't tell if he is a prophet sent to me from the great arch of heaven that hangs above the sky or a demon from the black caves of hell.

You have sent him here to test me. And I pray tonight for judgment. I pray for the Lord's judgment, the same judgment that led Solomon and David, the same judgment that led Peter and Paul, the same judgment with which I wield this weapon in the great conflict in which we find ourselves.

This man wishes ill upon my friends and victory upon mine enemies. And he does it in your name. But I have taken to weigh his wishes against your will, as you choose between he who is just, and he who is empty.

I have the barrel of my rifle poised to kill him Lord, for treason against this army in a war where judgment and vengeance is yours.

But you see I've come to a crossroads, though this man. Earlier, I thought I had saved him, and through the valley of the shadow of death we walked, and I truly believed that we had emerged victorious. But he has asked me to join him in a crusade against my own fellow soldiers, to kill innocent men who lead others in a war they did not bring upon themselves.

I was sick of fighting this war. And I'd like to believe this man, who offers a salve to the raging part of me that would like to vanquish that evil that permeates the field of war. And I'd like to believe that he is working for you, and if that is true, then I vow to join him in his crusade.

But if he is not from you, then he is from the devil. And Satan's army works day and night to tear apart the righteous. Well, Satan will not work with me. And I'll have no part of his work.

And at this crossroads Lord, in this wilderness of trees and scrub brush, briars and thorns, you are here to cut away through the undergrowth, to cut down the barbs that would cut you and cause you to suffer, just as you did on that cross, and show the way to life. It's a path that is rocky and steep, but I'll take it. I ask that you show me a sign.

Pause.

WILL

Show me a sign that would lead me to save this man from an untimely death at my hand.

(MORE)

WILL (cont'd)

For he has summoned you, and now must be held accountable. For I am a believer, and I'll not act in your name without the hand of God behind me and my deeds. And I'll not be made a fool of by those who would seek to exploit my conviction for Satan's intents. Show me a sign Lord.

Pause.

WILL

I've not asked for much from you in my life. I've prayed for your blessing more than once, but I do not petition your spirit lightly. I've lived a good life, Lord. I pray I did. I was saved, through your grace, at six young years of age, at my own baptism, I felt your warmth. Down in my daddy's own arms, as he pushed me down into the river. He is a good man, my father. He has a gentle heart. He has led me to be the man I am, but you baptized me with fire, even as my father submerged my head in the Clinch River.

How you must have felt on your cross, crying out to your own father. Why hast thou forsaken me? And he saved you then, just as you will show me the path to salvation, through you. This man must live or die. Show me a sign Lord.

Pause.

WILL

Lord, I don't want to fire. I don't want to kill this man.

You see, I want to believe him. I want to believe that war is rich men playing checkers with innocent men. I want to believe that niggers are good Christian souls. I want to believe that my blood is worth more than this Virginia dirt.

Don't make me shoot him, Lord.

Show me a sign.

Pause.

WILL

Show me a sign. Jacob saw a ladder, festooned with angels. Show me something like that. Show me a host of angels saying spare this man, your footsoldier in the fight for righteousness. Show me something like that.

Pause.

WILL

Spare this man. I'd settle for just one angel.

Pause.

WILL

Lord, you're putting me in a tough position.

EARL

Will.

Will swings the rifle around, aiming at Earl's head. He cocks the action.

WILL

Don't you start! YOUR LIFE IS NOT YOURS NO MORE. I'll kill you for interrupting.

EARL

Do it quickly.

WILL

I must do as I have been commanded.

EARL

May I say a few words?

WILL

You are not a martyr.

EARL

You got your prayer, now give me mine.

WILL

You'll pray for mercy! You better come clean or taste this bullet for the rest of your days in hell.

EARL

Dear Lord,

WILL

You are not a martyr!

EARL

If you must take my life, then I was wrong. But you can save me.

WILL

You won't be a martyr.

EARL

Just show him a sign, Lord. Don't betray your servant.

WILL

Shut your mouth!

EARL

Into thy hands I commend my spirit.

Pause.

Will reluctantly aims his rifle, near point blank range, at Earl.

Quiet. A faint rustle in the distance.

Pause.

The rustle continues.

Quiet.

Faint voices accompany the rustle.

Earl looks up.

EARL

What's that?

Will keeps the gun trained on Earl.

WILL

What's what?

The rustle gets louder. Voices become more audible.

EARL

There's voices over there.

WILL

No, there's not.

The voices are obvious.

EARL

Don't you hear it?

The rustle dies down briefly.

WILL

I don't hear nothing.

A voice shouts "hello."

EARL

You ain't deaf boy. It's coming from over there.

Earl points into the woods.

EARL

It's coming from our line.

WILL

Shut up!

Silence.

WILL

It's the general. It's Stonewall.

Slight rustle.

WILL

It's a sign, ain't it?

Earl nods.

WILL

It's a sign, ain't it?

Will takes his rifle away from Earl and aims toward the line.

Earl nods. Raises his rifle.

They are poised to fire.

Will looks over to Earl, eyes pleading.

WILL

Shoot?

Earl looks away.

Will fires into the woods and immediately begins to reload.

Silence as Earl works.

Will looks at Earl, wild eyed.

WILL

Say something!

Earl looks away.

EARL

You got his arm.

WILL

Why don't you fire?

Earl looks away, ashamed.

Will finishes reloading and aims back toward the woods. Silence.

WILL

You coward.

Will swings his rifle away from the woods and fires at Earl, killing him.

Earl slumps into a shrug.

WILL

(quietly)

May God damn you to hell.

Will reloads. He shoots without aiming.

WILL

(screaming)

Wake up boys, it's the yanks comin' over the hill. Wake up and shoot. Fire! Fire!

Guns sound at close range, coming from the woods.

A man appears next to Earl, in his underclothes, carrying a rifle, tugging on a uniform jacket.

WILL

Wake up and form a line. The federals are comin' over the hill.
Fire...Fire...Fire!

Will, now crouched and reloading. Another man enters from the direction of the tents.

WILL

Fire! Fire! Fire!

An offstage voice faintly says audibly "hold your fire."

Men come out of the woods, firing, reloading.

The offstage voice is louder:

OFFSTAGE VOICE

Hold your fire!

Will fires wildly.

WILL

God damn yanks are over the hill, boys. Fire. Fire.

OFFSTAGE VOICE

Stop shooting, men! Cease fire. We're Virginians.

One of Will's comrades stops firing.

WILL

Fire! Fire! Pour it on them boys.

OFFSTAGE VOICE

You're firing on your own men! Stop shooting.

Gradually, Will's comrades stop firing. He persists.

OFFSTAGE VOICE

You've shot the general.

Will keeps firing.

SOLDIER

Stop it, God damn you.

He pulls Will's weapon out of his hands.

Silence.

OFFSTAGE VOICE

You've shot the general..

Will places his head in his hands and bows.

OFFSTAGE VOICE

You've shot General Jackson.

The soldiers sit silently with their weapons down looking into the woods.

Curtain.