

ACT I

SETTING: *The stage is divided into several playing areas representing various locations in and around the town of Listre, North Carolina. The year is 1950. The playing areas are: The Prison, represented by a wooden electric chair; Train's Place, a service station represented by a counter on which resides a cigar box full of change and a broken radio; the Grill, represented by a barstool and counter, the Toomey Kitchen, represented by two red-vinyl dinette chairs; the Church Office, represented by a small couch; Crenshaw's Office, represented by a desk, a desk chair, a smaller chair, a safe and a trashcan; Blaine's Store, represented by a wooden rocking chair and a small counter on top of which resides a jar of licorice sticks and an oil lamp; The Settle Inn, represented by a cot; Listre Grocery represented by an old wooden cracker-barrel. On top of the cracker barrel is a display of candy cigarettes. Directly downstage of Listre Grocery is the Porch, represented by a simple wooden bench. Directly downstage of Train's Place is the Gas Pumps, represented by a bench and a sign that reads "Redding Bros. Gulf Service Station, Train Redding, Proprietor. Train's Place and Listre Grocery should be on opposite ends of the stage. Between the Church Office and Crenshaw's Office is a small hallway. Each office has a doorway leading to this hallway. Downstage center of all these playing areas is a common area representing various other outdoor locations in town. Over this area, a Blinker Light hangs.*

AT RISE: *The stage is dark. As we hear the old Bessie Smith standard "Send Me to the Electric Chair", the Blinker Light starts blinking yellow. As the song ends, the Blinker light stops blinking and the lights come up on The Prison. SERGEANT FLOYD enters.*

FLOYD

This is it. Over here, Miz Toomey.

(ALEASE enters.)

ALEASE

I really appreciate you taking time for us, Sergeant Floyd.

FLOYD

My pleasure, ma'am. Come on, Stephen. C'mon Terry.

(STEPHEN and TERRY enter.)

Don't be afraid, boys.

TERRY

I ain't afraid.

ALEASE

Terry, remember what your mama said. You mind your manners.

TERRY

Yes, Miz Toomey.

FLOYD

Now then, boys – this here is the electric chair. Let me show you how it works. The prisoner is brought in this room and strapped into this chair with these here straps. See how they do? They go around each leg and arm like so... And then, once the prisoner is secured, the executioner pulls the switch. See that switch over there?

(He points off.)

There's three different colored markings on it. White means "off," green means "ready" and red means... ZAP!

*(He grabs Stephen's arm. STEPHEN hides behind ALEASE.
FLOYD laughs.)*

TERRY

What this bag for?

FLOYD

That's what they put over the prisoner's head so you can't see his face when he gets fried. Believe me, that is something you do not want to see.

(FLOYD turns to ALEASE.)

FLOYD (cont.)

Yes, ma'am, you can't beat the electric chair for putting a mean man to death. The gas is too easy.

ALEASE

Do you boys see now what'll happen if you ever let the Devil lead you into bad sin? They'll put you in the electric chair and electrocute you.

TERRY

I seen a picture of a naked woman on the wall over at Train's Place. Is that a sin?

ALEASE

Terry! Good gracious.

FLOYD

Train's Place?

ALEASE

That's the service station back in town run by Mr. Train Redding.

FLOYD

Oh, sure. The Gulf Station. Down there by the blinker light.

(Lights up on Train's Place. TRAIN wheels himself on in his wheelchair. He grabs the radio off the counter and starts repairing it.)

TERRY

Is it a sin?

ALEASE

Yes, Terry, it's a sin. It's a *big* sin.

TERRY

Is Mr. Train gonna go to the electric chair?

FLOYD

He's already in a wheelchair, son. Ain't that bad enough?

(Lights down in the Prison. BLAKE enters Trains Place.)

BLAKE

Hey, Train...

Where's Trouble?
TRAIN

Sleepin' on the porch.
BLAKE

You feed him this morning?
TRAIN

Sure thing. Listen...
BLAKE

Did you give him fresh water? He's sleeping outside. That means it's gonna be a hot one.
TRAIN

Yeah, it's fresh. Hey, listen...
BLAKE

You done changing the oil on Claude T.'s Cadillac?
TRAIN

He just picked it up.
BLAKE

That new shipment of tires come in yet?
TRAIN

Not yet...
BLAKE

You might want to give them a call. See what the hold up is.
TRAIN

I will. Listen, Train – guess what Claude T. told me when he come by just now to pick up his car. His wife done moved into the church!
BLAKE

I thought his wife was dead.
TRAIN

No, not that wife. She *is* dead. I'm talking about his new wife – Dorothea – the one he married last year. Bea Blaine's sister? They used to run their daddy's store together?
BLAKE

TRAIN

Oh, right.

BLAKE

Anyways, Claude T. says his wife, his *new* wife – *Dorothea* – just moved right into Listre Baptist.

TRAIN

Why would anyone want to live in a church?

BLAKE

Well, it ain't like she's living in the sanctuary. She's church secretary over there – made herself a bed in her office.

(Lights up on DOROTHEA in the Church Office, sitting on the couch, opening an envelope marked "discretionary fund.")

TRAIN

She leaving Claude T.?

BLAKE

Nah. Claude T. says she sprained her ankle. Says it's easier for her to stay there than go back and forth.

(DOROTHEA, propping her foot up on the couch. We see an ace bandage wrapped around her ankle. A cane rests against the couch. She pulls money out of the envelope and starts counting it.)

Tell you what – if I'd of hurt myself, I'd rather stay at home where I wouldn't have to do nothing.

TRAIN

You don't do nothing here.

BLAKE

Huh?

TRAIN

Go check on them tires.

(BLAKE exits. Lights out on Train's Place. Lights stay up on the Church Office and come up on Crenshaw's Office as well. CRENSHAW is sitting at his desk. He gets up, crosses to the Church Office and knocks on the door.)

DOROTHEA

Come in.

(CRENSHAW enters. Lights down in Crenshaw's office.)

Hello, Preacher Crenshaw.

CRENSHAW

That ankle of yours feeling any better, Mrs. Clark?

DOROTHEA

Some. But I best stay here a while yet. I'd hate not to be able to get in to work.

CRENSHAW

That couch can't be too comfortable.

DOROTHEA

Oh, it does me just fine. And being in this place makes me feel that much closer to the Lord. Why, I expect to see Jesus himself walk through that door any day now. Wouldn't that be something?

CRENSHAW

It sure would. I came by to ask how the Lottie Moon offering was coming along.

DOROTHEA

So far we've collected twenty-seven hundred dollars. I locked it up in your safe. I'm just now counting up your discretionary fund.

CRENSHAW

Twenty-seven hundred dollars. I do declare... Thank you, Mrs. Clark.

DOROTHEA

You're welcome.

(CRENSHAW heads for the door then stops and turns back.)

CRENSHAW

Mrs. Clark?

DOROTHEA

Yes?

CRENSHAW

Does it ever seem strange to you that we send the Lottie Moon offering to the folks way over in China?

DOROTHEA

Where else would we send it?

CRENSHAW

We could keep it here. There's some folks around these parts who could use the help, folks like... well, like Andrew, for instance.

DOROTHEA

The janitor? He has a job. A good-paying, fifty-cents an hour job. Besides, Lottie Moon was a *foreign* missionary. She went to China to convert the heathen. To *China*, Preacher Crenshaw. Andrew ain't a Chinaman. He's a... well, you know.

CRENSHAW

A Negro, yes...

DOROTHEA

Ain't no one in this congregation going to be willing to give the Lottie Moon offering to one of his kind.

CRENSHAW

How about Cheryl Daniels, then?

DOROTHEA

That girl working over at The Pendergrass Grill? Johnny Daniels' daughter?

(Lights come up in The Grill. CHERYL is wiping the counter.)

CRENSHAW

She accepted Jesus a few months ago. She could take that money, go to college, make something of herself.

DOROTHEA

Preacher Crenshaw, Johnny Daniels is the town drunk. If you give his daughter that money, he'd find a way to get it from her and use it to buy more of the demon liquor. Let's just send that money over to China where it belongs.

CRENSHAW

Yes. I suppose you're right. Well... good-bye, Mrs. Clark.

DOROTHEA

Goodbye, Preacher Crenshaw. Give Mrs. Crenshaw my best.

(CRENSHAW exits. Lights down on the Church Office. TERRY enters the grill and sits on a stool.)

CHERYL

Hey. Where you been?

TERRY

Up to the Prison.

CHERYL

Daddy get arrested again?

TERRY

Nah. I went with Stephen and his mama to see the electric chair. Hey, you got a nickel? I want to get a pack of them candy cigarettes they got over at the grocery. Stephen has him a pack – he showed ‘em to me.

CHERYL

Nah, I ain’t got a nickel.

TERRY

Ah, c’mon, Cheryl...

CHERYL

Why don’t you ask Mama?

TERRY

She and Daddy are fighting again.

CHERYL

Oh. You want a Pepsi?

TERRY

I want a nickel.

CHERYL

I told you I ain’t got a nickel.

TERRY

Dang it!

CHERYL

Listen, Terry – it ain't always gonna be this way. Someday I'm gonna meet a man, a handsome, rich man – a movie star, maybe – and we're gonna get married and when we do we'll leave this place and take you with us. Okay?

TERRY

Stephen says he's going to Heaven when he dies. Am I gonna go to Heaven?

CHERYL

Preacher Crenshaw says anyone who accepts Jesus as their Savior gets to go to Heaven.

TERRY

Would I have to go to church?

CHERYL

Yes.

TERRY

Well, I ain't doing that...

(TERRY suddenly pounds his fist on the counter.)

It ain't fair! Why does Stephen get to have *everything*?

CHERYL

What's he got so all-fired important that you don't got?

TERRY

Candy cigarettes. *Heaven*. Miss Bea even give him his very own kitty! *Inky*...

CHERYL

That all?

TERRY

He's got a mama and daddy what don't fight.

(Lights come up in The Toomey Kitchen. ALEASE and HARVEY are sitting in the chairs, facing forward, sipping coffee.)

CHERYL

Yeah. He's got that all right.

(She pulls out a nickel out of her pocket and places it on the counter.)

CHERYL (cont.)

Here.

(Lights go out on the Grill. HARVEY and ALEASE remain facing forward. HARVEY takes a sip of his coffee, then ALEASE, then, after a moment, HARVEY again. Finally...)

ALEASE

Harvey, I want you to build a flowerbed over there beside the garage.

HARVEY

I don't know when I'll have time.

ALEASE

You can use posts for the two corners then fill it in with topsoil.

HARVEY

I just said...

ALEASE

I bet you could find some posts behind the store. If there aren't any there, you could look behind the smokehouse.

HARVEY

Fine.

ALEASE

You'll build it?

HARVEY

That's what I said.

ALEASE

Maybe Stephen could help you.

(HARVEY makes no response.)

I took him to see the electric chair yesterday. Terry Daniels, too.

HARVEY

Why'd you take Terry?