



Georgia Douglas Johnson

A Sunday Morning in the South

one-act play, ca. 1925

Characters

SUE JONES, *grandmother, aged seventy*
TOM GRIGGS, *her grandson, aged nineteen*
BOSSIE GRIGGS, *her grandson, aged seven*
LIZA GRIGGS, *a friend, aged sixty*
MATILDA BROWN, *a friend, aged fifty*
WHITE GIRL
FIRST OFFICER
SECOND OFFICER

Place: *A town in the South.*

Time: *1924.*

Scene: *Kitchen in SUE JONES's two-room house. A window on left, a door leading to back yard and another leading to front room. A stove against the back wall, a table near it, four chairs, and old-time pie safe with dishes and two bottles — one clear and one dark — a wooden water bucket with shiny brass bales, and a tin dipper hanging near it on a nail.*

As the curtain rises Sue Jones is seen putting the breakfast on the kitchen table. She wears a red bandanna handkerchief on her grey head, a big blue gingham apron tied around her waist, and big wide old lady comfort shoes. She uses a stick as she has a sore leg, and moves about with a stoop and a limp as she goes back and forth from the stove to the table.

SUE: (*calling*) Tom, Tom, you and Bossie better come on out here and git your breakfast before it gets cold; I got good hot rolls this mornin'!

TOM: (*from next room*) All right grannie, we're coming.

SUE: You better ef you know what's good for you. (*opens stove door, looks at rolls, then begins humming and singing*)

Eugh . . . eu . . . eugh . . .

Jes look at the morning star

Eugh . . . eu . . . eugh . . .

We'll all git home bye and bye

(*As she finishes the song TOM and BOSSIE come hurrying into the kitchen, placing their chairs at the table; there is one already at the table for Sue. Sue takes rolls out of stove with her apron and brings them to the table.*) It's as hard to git yawll out of the bed on Sunday morning as it is to pull hen's teeth.

TOM: (*eating. The church bell next door is heard ringing*) Eugh — there's the church bell. I sho meant to



git out to meeting this morning but my back still hurts me. Remember I told you last night how I sprained it lifting them heavy boxes for Mr. John?

SUE: (*giving Bossie a roll and a piece of sausage*) You hadn't oughter done it; you oughter ast him to let somebody hep you — you aint no hoss!

TOM: I reckon I oughter had but I didn't know how heavy they was till I started and then he was gone.

SUE: You oughter had some of my snake oil linament on it last night, that's whut!

TOM: I wish I hader but I was so dead tired I got outer my clothes and went straight to bed. I muster been sleep by nin er clock I reckon.

SUE: Nine er clock! You is crazy! Twant no moren eight when I called you to go to the store and git me a yeast cake fur my light rolls and you was sleeping like a log of wood; I had to send Bossie fur it.

BOSSIE: Yes, and you snored so loud I thought you would a choked. (*holding out his plate and licking his lips*) Grannie kin I have some more?

SUE: Whut? Where is all thot I jest give you?

BOSSIE: (*rubbing his stomach with his other hand and smiling broadly*) It's gone down the red lane struttin'.

SUE: Well this is all you gointer git this mornin. (*helping him to more rolls and sausage*) When you git big and work like Tom you kin stuff all you wants to.

BOSSIE: I ain't never gointer break my back like Tom working hard — a gointer be a — a preacher that's whut and . . .

SUE: (*catching sight of someone passing the window as she approached the back door*) I bleve that's Liza Twiggs must be on her way to church and smelled these light rolls and coffee. (*a knock is heard at the bock door*) Let her in, Bossie!

(*Bossie jumps up from the table, hurries to the door and opens it.*)

LIZA: (*enters sniffing*) Mawning yawll.

SUE: Morning Liza — on your way to church?

LIZA: Yes the first bell just rung and I thought I'd drop in a minute. (*whiffs again*) Coffee sho smells good!

SUE: Tastes better'n it smells — Pull up a cheer and swaller a cupful with one of these light rolls.

LIZA: (*drawing up a chair*) Dont keer if I do. (*she is helped to coffee and rolls while Bossie looks at her disapprovingly. To Sue*) How is your leg gitting on?

SUE: Well as I kin expect. I won't never walk on it good no mo. It eats and eats. Sho is lucky I'm right here next door to church. (*to Tom*) Open that winder, Tom, so I kin hear the singing. (*Tom opens window. To Liza*) Folks don't like to set next to me in church no mo. Tinks its ketching — a cancer or somthin'. (*then brightly*) Whut you know good?

(*From the church next door is heard the hymn, drifting through the window: "Amazing grace how sweet the sound / That saves a wretch like me . . ."*)

LIZA: (*listening*) They done started "Amazing grace." (*music continues as a background for their talk. Still eating*) That music she is sweet but I got to finish eatin first, then I'll go . . .

SUE: I ast you whut you know good.

LIZA: Well, I don't know nothin tall good, but I did hear as how the police is all over now trying to run down some po Nigger they say that's tacked a white woman last night right up here near the Pine Street market. They says as how the white folks is shonuff mad too, and if they ketch him they gointer make short work of him.

SUE: (*still drinking coffee*) Eugh, eugh, eugh, you don't say. I don't hold wid no rascality and I bleves in meting out punishment to the guilty but they fust ought to fine out who done it tho and then let the

law hanel 'em. That's what I says.

LIZA: Me too, I thinks the law oughter hanel 'em too, but you know a sight of times they gits the wrong man and goes and strings him up and don't fin out who done it till it's too late!

SUE: That's so. And sometimes the white uns been knowed to blackin they faces and make you bleve some po Nigger done it.

TOM: They lynch you bout anything too, not jest women. They say Zeb Brooks was strung up because he and his boss had er argiment.

LIZA: Sho did. I says the law's the law and it ought er be er ark uv safty to perfect the weak and not some little old flimsy shack that a puff a wind can blow down.

TOM: I been thinking a whole lot about these things and I mean to go to night school and git a little book learning so as I can do something to help — help change the laws . . . make em strong . . . I some-times get right upset and wonder whut would I do if they ever tried to put something on me . . .

LIZA: Pshaw . . . everybody knows you . . . nobody would bother you . . .

SUE: No sonnie, you won't never hafter worry bout sich like that but you kin hep to save them po devels that they do git after.

(Singing comes from the church next door.)

Shine on me, shine on me.
Let the light from the lighthouse shine on me,
Shine on me, shine on me.
Let the light from the lighthouse shine on me.

TOM: It takes a sight of learning to understand the law and I'm a gointer . . . *(a quick rap is heard at the door and it is almost immediately pushed open and an OFFICER enters as the four at table look up at him in open-mouthed amazement)*

FIRST OFFICER: Tom Griggs live here?

Sue: *(starting up excitedly)* Yes sir. *(stammering)*

FIRST OFFICER: *(looking at Tom)* You Tom Griggs?

TOM: *(puzzled)* Yes sir.

FIRST OFFICER: *(roughly)* Where were you last night at ten o'clock?

SUE: *(answering quickly for Tom)* Right here sir, he was right here at home. Whut you want to know fer?

FIRST OFFICER: *(to Sue)* You keep quiet, old woman. *(to Tom)* Say, you answer up. Can't you talk? Where were you last night at ten o'clock.

TOM: *(uneasily)* Gramma told you. I was right here at home — in bed at eight o'clock.

FIRST OFFICER: That sounds fishy to me — in bed at eight o'clock! And who else knows you were here?

SUE: Say Mr. Officer, whut you tryin to do to my granson. Shore as God Amighty is up in them heabens he was right here in bed. I seed him and his little brother Bossie there saw him, didn't you Bossie?

BOSSIE: *(in a frightened whisper)* Yessum, I seed him and I heered him!

FIRST OFFICER: *(to Bossie)* Shut up. Your word's nothing. *(looking at Sue)* Nor yours either. Both of you'd lie for him. *(steps to back door and makes a sign to someone outside, then comes back into the room taking a piece of paper from his vest pocket and reads slowly, looking at Tom critically as he checks each item)* Age around twenty, five feet five or six, brown skin . . . *(he folds up the paper and puts it back into his vest)* Yep! fits like a glove. *(Sue, Liza, and Tom look from one to the other with growing amazement and terror as SECOND OFFICER pushes open the door and stands there supporting a young WHITE GIRL on his arm.)*

SECOND OFFICER: *(to girl)* Is this the man?

WHITE GIRL: (*hesitatingly*) I — I'm not sure . . . but . . . but he looks something like him . . . (*holding back*)

FIRST OFFICER: (*encouragingly*) Take a good look, Miss. He fits our description perfect. Color, size, age, everything. Pine Street Market ain't no where from here, and he surely did pass that way last night. He was there all right, all right! We got it figgered all out. (*to Girl, who looks down at her feet*) You say he looks like him?

WHITE GIRL: (*looking at him again quickly*) Y-e-s (*slowly and undecidedly*) I think so. I . . . I . . . (*then she covers her face with her arm and turns quickly and moves away from the door, supported by Second Officer. First Officer makes a step toward Tom and slips handcuffs on him before any one is aware what is happening*)

SUE: (*holding on to her chair and shaking her cane at the officer, while Bossie comes up close to her and snivels in her apron*) Whut you doing? Whut you doing? You can't rest my granson — he ain't done nothing — you can't rest him!

FIRST OFFICER: Be quiet, old woman. I'm just going to take him along to the sheriff to question him and if he's telling the truth he'll be right back home here in no time.

SUE: But you can't rest him; he don't know no mo bout that po little white chile than I do — You can't take him!

TOM: (*utterly bewildered*) Granma, don't take on so. I'll go long with him to the sheriff. I'll splain to him how I couldn't a done it when I was here sleep all the time — I never laid eyes on that white lady before in all my life.

SUE: (*to Tom*) Course you ain't. (*to officer*) Mr. Officer, that white chile ain't never seed my granson before — All Niggers looks alike to her; she so upset she don't know whut she's saying.

FIRST OFFICER: (*to Sue as he pulls Tom along*) You just keep cool Grannie, he'll be right back — if he's innocent. (*to Tom*) And the quieter you comes along the better it will be for you.

TOM: (*looking back at his grandma from the doorway with terror in his eyes*) I'll be right back granny — don't cry — don't cry — Jest as soon as I see — (*The officer pulls him out of the doorway.*)

LIZA: (*standing with her hands clasped together, her head bowed and swaying from side to side with emotion. She prays*) Sweet Jesus, do come down and hep us this mornin. You knows our hearts and you knows this po boy ain't done nothing wrong. You said you would hep the fatherless and the motherless; do Jesus bring this po orphan back to his ole cripple grannie safe and sound, do Jesus!

BOSSIE: (*crying and pulling at his grandma's apron*) Grannie, grannie, whut they gointer do to my brother? Whut they gointer do to him?

SUE: (*brokenly*) The good Jesus only knows, but I'm a talking to the Lord now asting Him to . . . (*a rap is heard at the door; it is almost immediately pushed open and MATILDA BROWN enters hurriedly and excitedly.*)

MATILDA: (*breathlessly*) Miss Liza, as I was coming long I seed Tom wid the police and there was some white mens wid guns a trying to take him away from the police — said he'd done been identified and they want gointer be cheated outen they Nigger this time. I, I flew on down here to tell you, you better do somethin'.

SUE: (*shaking nervously from side to side as she leans on her cane for support*) Oh my God, whut kin I do?

LIZA: (*alertly*) You got to git word to some of your good white folks, that's whut and git em to save him.

SUE: Yes . . . That's whut . . . Lemme see . . . (*she stands tense thinking a moment*) I got it . . . Miss Vilet . . . I got to git to Miss Vilet . . . I nused her when she was a baby and she'll do it . . . Her pa's the Jedge.

LIZA: That's right! I'll go. You can't go quick.

MATILDA: No. Lemme go; I kin move in a hurry, lemme go!

SUE: All right Tildy. Tell Miss Vilet her ole nuse Sue is callin on her and don't fail me; tell her they done took Tom and he is perfect innercent, and they gointer take him away from the police, and ax her to ax her pa the Jedge to go git Tom and save him fur God's sake. Now hurry, Tildy, fly!

BOSSIE: *(to Sue)* Lemme go long; I knows how to git there quick cutting through the ole field.

LIZA: Yes they knows Bossie and he kin hep tell.

SUE: Yes Bossie, gone, yawll hurry, hurry! *(Matilda and Bossie hurry out of the back door and Sue sinks down into a chair exhausted while Liza comes over to her and pats her on the back.)*

LIZA: Now, now evrything's gointer be all right . . . Miss Vilet'll fix it . . . she ain't gointer let her ole mammy call on her for nothing . . . she'll make her pa save him.

SUE: Yes, she's a good chile . . . I knows she'll save him.

(Sue moves her lips in prayer. From the church next door comes the sounds of singing; the two women listen to the words with emotion.)

Alas, and did my savior bleed
And did my sovereign die
Would he devote his sacred head
For such a worm as I.
Must Jesus bear the cross alone
And all the world go free,
No, there's a cross for every one
And there's a cross for me.

(Sue rocks back and forth in chair, head buried in her apron. Liza walks up and down the floor, throws her hands up imploringly now and then.)

LIZA: Oh Lord, hep us to bear our cross! Hep us!

SUE: *(drooping)* Liza, I'm feeling sorter fainty lack; git me my bottle of camphor out of the safe yonder.

LIZA: *(going to safe)* Yes chile, I'll git it. You done gone through a whole lot this morning, God knows. *(takes up a bottle and holds it up for Sue to see)* This it?

SUE: *(shaking her head)* Eugh eugh, that's my sweet oil. It's the yuther one in the black bottle . . . see it?

LIZA: *(taking out bottle and smelling it)* Yes, here it is. Strong too. It'll do you good. I has them sinking spells too sometimes. *(comes over to Sue with stopper out of bottle and holds it to her nose)* There, draw a deep bref of it; feel better?

SUE: I'll feel better tereckly. My old heart is gittin weak.

LIZA: Set back comfortable in your cheer and listen to the singin; they also sho talkin to the Lord fur you in that church this mornin. Listen! *(the church is singing)*

I must tell Jesus, I cannot bear my burdens alone
In my distress he surely will help me
I cannot bear my burdens alone.

I must tell Jesus, I cannot bear my burdens alone
Jesus my Lord he surely will help me
Jesus will help me, Jesus alone.

LIZA: That's all, that's all we kin do jes tell Jesus! Jesus! Jesus please bow down your ear! *(walks up and down mumbling a soft prayer as the singing continues mournfully)*

SUE: I reckon Tildy's bout on her way back now. I knows Miss Vilet done got her pa by now, don't you reckon, Liza.

LIZA: (*sympathetically*) Course; I spects Tom'll be coming back too any minit now. Everybody knows he ain't done no harm.

SUE: (*listening to running feet at the door and sitting up straight in chair*) Who dat coming? (*Matilda pushes open the door and comes in all excited and panting while Bossie follows her crying*) Whut's the matter? Didn't you find Miss Vilet?

MATILDA: (*reluctantly*) It want no use.

SUE: No use?

LIZA: Whut you mean?

MATILDA: I mean — I mean —

LIZA: For God's sake, Tildy, whut's happened?

MATILDA: They — they done lynched him.

SUE: (*screams*) Jesus! (*gasps and falls limp in her chair. Singing from church begins. Bossie runs to her, crying afresh. Liza puts the camphor bottle to her nose again as Matilda feels her heart; they work over her a few minutes, shake their heads and with drooping shoulders, wring their hands. While this action takes place the words of this song pour forth from the church:*)

Lord have mercy.
Lord have mercy,
Lord have mercy over me.

(*Sung first time with words and repeated in a low hum as curtain slowly falls.*)
