

BLACK BOY

The Autobiography of Richard Wright
Adapted for the Screen
by Lowell Bennett

FADE IN:

EXT. MISSISSIPPI - SHARECROPPER SHANTY TOWN - DAWN - 1914

This could be a third world country.

What was once a forest is now cut clear, mainly stumps and eroding red soil. Several shacks huddle near a dirt road going nowhere. Weak trails of smoke drift from tin-pipe chimneys. Thin steam oozes from a single roadside outhouse.

At the nearest shack a very old black man sits on a stump, the young sunrise dull in his cataract eyes. Near him is an ancient wagon; broken, rusted, dismembered.

At the end of the aimless road is a small, ramshackle shanty.

Framed in a single window, a silky white backdrop behind, is the face of an attractive black boy, about six.

INT. SHANTY - SAME TIME

The walls and furniture are made of rough, unpainted wood.

In a still dark bedroom, a large black man in his thirties, NATE WRIGHT, snores loudly amidst shabby linens.

In what passes for a kitchen, his wife, ELLA, about 30, toils at a pot-bellied stove.

In a living area, a small space, the faint light of dawn is piercing porous walls. A blaze smolders in a makeshift fireplace. A small boy about five, LEON WRIGHT, lays on his side and watches the fading fire.

In this dark interior there is only one bright element. Flowing with the breeze at the single window, long, white, silky curtains envelope the six-year-old boy, RICHARD WRIGHT.

He kneels, his arms crossed on the splintered sill, and looks out the window to the branch of a dying tree a few feet away.

Behind him, his younger brother speaks.

LEON

It ain't gonna come.

Richard ignores him.

LEON

It ain't.

RICHARD

You shut up.

LEON

You shut up.

Richard stares at the branch. In a flash of color, a cardinal lands. He is a beautiful, brilliant red bird with full, lustrous plumage. Richard's eyes and mouth go wide and he inhales sharply.

Leon stirs and joins Richard at the window. The boys just stare for a long moment.

RICHARD

(quiet)

Hello, birdy.

The cardinal, as if it heard him, turns to Richard. It peeps.

RICHARD

(continuing; gleeful)

Woooooooooooooh!

Leon backs away suddenly. Ella rushes into the room, hurries up to Richard, pulls him from the window and the bird flies.

ELLA

(whispering, urgent)

You hush-up! Do you want to wake your father?!

Richard, knowing the threat, shakes his head. Ella releases her grip and moves back to the kitchen. She stops short and whispers forcefully.

ELLA

And you keep your dirty-self away
from your granny's curtains. I
ain't gonna tell you again.

Ella returns to the kitchen.

Hereafter, when the boys speak they whisper.

LEON
Hah. You got in trouble.

Richard looks at his younger brother, but says nothing.

LEON
You got in trouble, ya, ya.

Now Richard begins to advance slowly towards his brother.
Leon's brow rises and he backs off.

LEON
(continuing;
exclaiming whisper)
Don't you start nothin'! You'll
get a whippin'!

Richard follows as Leon picks up speed and begins to move
here and there in the small room. He is backed into a
corner. Behind him leans a tattered broom, sparse in straw.
Leon snatches up the broom and holds it like a bat.

LEON
I'll hit ya'!

Richard readies himself, feints a leap, Leon takes a half-
hearted swing, Richard snatches the broom. Leon makes a
break but Richard cuts him off at the fireplace.

Richard holds the broom as if deciding what punishment to
meat out. Then he thrusts it into the fire and the few
remaining straws ignite. Richard looks to an aghast Leon.

RICHARD
Yeeeeeeaaaah.

Richard thrust the weak torch out as if to pin Leon, but
stops short. Wide-eyed, the smaller boy gasps and makes a

break. Richard cuts him off and gives another feint. Leon breaks again and again Richard heads him off.

Leon is backed up to the curtains. The thin fabric floats in the breeze, as if reaching out. The torch is now just a weak glow near the bundled base of straw.

Richard feints to the left, Leon jumps right. Leon dashes left, Richard swings the broom fast to follow. The movement of air ignites the bundled straw, it flares, the curtains reach and... Fwoooooom! The silky shear fabric inflames.

Richard drops the broom and both boys back away facing a billowing sheet of fire. The brothers are open mouthed, wide-eyed, in shock, but also fascinated.

The flames are beautiful; moving with the flowing, consumed fabric. The fire reaches up and eats into the dry, bare wood of the ceiling. And still the boys stand. Their eyes rise with the fire. They watch the flames spread like liquid across the ceiling above.

LEON
(quiet, calm)
Ooh, Richard. You gonna git a spankin'.

Suddenly, they break, frantic, and run in opposite directions.

Ella is in the kitchen at the basin when Richard tears in. She snaps her head up.

He stops, turns and runs back into the living room as Leon runs past into the kitchen.

LEON
Mama-Mama-Mama-Mama...

Ella stares at the boy. Then her gaze turns up as a finger of smoke reaches into the kitchen. Her mouth drops.

EXT. SHANTY

Smoke is billowing from the roof-line.

Richard blasts from the front door. He starts for the road, stops, turns, starts for the house, stops, turns, starts for road, stops, turns, runs back to the house and dives underneath.

In perhaps a foot of crawl space, Richard propels himself back through dirt and debris. A cat hisses and scuttles away. Richard is frantic. Overhead, his mother screams.

ELLA (O.S.)
Fiiiiire!! Nate! Fiiiire!!

Richard gives a whimper and pushes farther back, nearly to the back of the house. Footsteps are booming through the planks above. From out front, shouts are heard down the road.

Directly above, footsteps hammer, a creaky screen door slams open and the legs and feet of Nate, Ella and Leon appear in the back yard. Others are joining them. The 25 other residents of the shanty town hurry onto the scene.

In the yard, Ella is beginning to turn, spinning, looking frantically for her son.

ELLA
Richard... Richard! Richard!!

She runs to the edge of the house and looks underneath. From under the house, Richard sees her face peering inward. He buries his head and grips a post. Not seeing him, she rises and backs into the yard.

ELLA
Richard! The house is on fire...
Oh, please, find my child!!

Under the house, Richard whimpers. Nate's face suddenly appears. He continues to stare and his eyes adjust.

NATE

There he is!

RICHARD

Naw!

NATE

Come here, boy!

RICHARD

Naw!

NATE

The house is on fire!

RICHARD

Leave me 'lone!

NATE

Git out of there! You gonna burn up!

RICHARD

No! Can't you hear? I told you, leave me 'lone!

NATE

Goddamn your little ass! Git out here!

RICHARD

No!

Cursing, Nate jams his big body under the house and grabs Richard by the leg. Nate pulls, but Richard hugs tight to the post, desperately fighting back. Nate pulls harder.

RICHARD

Leave me 'lone!!

Finally, Nate heaves and Richard's grip is broken. The boy is dragged backward as he grabs at the loose earth and screams.

NATE

Come outta there, you little fool!

RICHARD

Turn me loose!

Nate yanks Richard from under the house and throws him. The boy sails through the air for about seven feet and lands hard. He stays still, flat on the ground, whimpering.

The other black sharecroppers are watching the fire, entranced.

Ella grabs Richard hard by the ear and forces him to his feet. He is beyond crying out.

The mother hauls her son to a wooden barrel which lays on its side underneath a thin weeping willow. She strips off his shirt and forces him across the barrel.

She reaches up to the tree and begins to tear at a bare, low-hanging branch. The branch is tough and she must pull hard with both hands. Finally, it peels off; four-feet of hard, whip-like wood.

Two women stand just behind, ignoring the fire, watching Ella. Ella looks up at the women.

ELLA
(strangely calm)
Boy liked to scared us to death.

The branch rises high in the smoky, dawn sky and viciously flashes down... whiiip-slap! Richard screams. The branch rises again... whiiip-slap! Richard screams... whiiip-slap! Richard screams... whiiip-slap!

The house caves-in on itself with a flurry of sparks. Already, the old rotted wood a fast-burning fuel, it smolders.

The sun is full and fiery. The sharecroppers stand now as if warming themselves. The branch rises again... whiiip-slap! Richard no longer screams.

EXT. SHARECROPPER SHANTY TOWN - DUSK

What was once the Wright home is a black spot on the earth.

A wagon, pulled by an old mule and its wheels barely attached, is heading off down the rutted road toward a barren landscape. Nate is at the reins. Ella and Leon walk alongside. In the back, Richard is wrapped in an old blanket. He seems feverish, maybe delirious.

A few loitering children watch as the wagon creaks past.

NARRATOR

(an adult Richard)

I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses.

(pause)

For a long time after that day, I was chastened whenever I remembered that my mother had come close to killing me.

Beyond the shanty town, the family moves slowly forward.

EXT. MEMPHIS CITY STREETS - EARLY MORNING

In the hot humid haze the black section of this urban Southern city appears almost medieval. Buildings constructed in the 1800's decay, but there is life on the street.

A milk wagon grinds down the pot-holed, earthen avenue passing only black faces. Some residents linger on stoops and corners, others make their way to work. Mainly, the women who trudge along are dressed as maids or cooks; the men are in overalls and work boots.

The wagon rattles to a stop in front of a row of tenement houses. The driver drops to the street with a basket of milk, passes one house by and crosses an alley to deliver next door.

Down this garbage-filled, dead-end alley alongside the neglected house, there is a single window, filthy, barely transparent. But very close, on the other side of the dirty glass, a spindly, alien shape moves. A roach, seemingly

magnified, makes its way along the glass.

INT. WRIGHTS' TENEMENT - BOYS' BEDROOM - SAME TIME

Seen through the clearing fog of waking eyes, on a dirty window looking over an alley, a cockroach feels about. It's huge; a good two inches, moving slow, long feelers extended out, twitching.

It is Richard who watches the roach. It is just above where his head rests on a ragged pillow. He clears his eyes and watches as the roach flutters its membrane wings.

At either side of the small, dingy room, the boys, not much older, are on old, very small mattresses.

LEON
Kill it!

RICHARD
You shut up.

LEON
Kill that thing. It's dirty.

RICHARD
You dirty.

LEON
Ain't. You dirty.

The roach moves toward the crack between window and sill.

RICHARD
Shut up.

Richard reaches up and shuts the window before the roach can exit. It stops, then crawls along the sill.

LEON
You crazy, Richard.

Richard reaches to the floor next him, grabs an empty mason jar, moves to a kneeling position and slams the jar over the insect. The roach comes to life, popping about in the jar,

fluttering its wings.

Leon gets up and moves closer to examine the trapped bug.

LEON

That's a big one.

Richard watches the bug for a moment, then, suddenly, he jerks the jar up and moves to clap his hand over the opening.

But the roach is too fast. It goes airborne, flying. Leon scrambles back.

ROACH'S POV:

-- Flying, closing fast on Leon. Leon's eyes go wide, his mouth opens to scream...

Plop. The fat bug lands square on Leon's forehead.

LEON

Ahhhhhhhhh!!

Leon leaps into the air, swiping furiously at his face, yanks open the door and runs screaming from the room.

INT. LIVING ROOM

Leon tears into the small and dingy space screaming, spinning about, swiping at his face.

LEON

Mama-Mama-Mama-Mama-Mama!!

Ella runs from the kitchen and moves to the boy.

ELLA

Boy! What is it?

LEON

A roach, a roach... Richard threw a roach on me!

NATE (O.S.)

Gooooddammmmmn! What's that
fuuuuuckin' noise out there?!

Leon shudders and immediately goes quiet.

The door to the parents room slams open. Nate stands there
in old pajama bottoms, his gut hanging out.

NATE

I'm sleepin' damn ya'! What're you
makin' that noise for, you little
sonofabitch?!

Leon looks to his father. The boy is terrified, speechless.
His mother says nothing.

NATE

Boy, I ain't gonna ask you again!

LEON

Uh-uh-I-Richard-Richard-I...

Nate turns to the boys' room.

NATE

Richard! Get your ass out here!

Richard appears from around the bedroom doorway. He stays
quiet, but moves determinedly into the room.

NATE

Get over here!

Ella and Leon stand together, knowing what's coming.

Richard
moves closer to his father.

NATE

You know I'm sleepin'!

RICHARD

Yeah.

NATE

Don't you yeah me, boy!

RICHARD
Yes, sir.

NATE
Turn 'round!

Richard turns around. His face shows he's steeling for the blow. Nate kicks out hard, strikes Richard in the rear. A squelching gasp escapes the boy as he is catapulted off the ground. He falls hard into the wall and crumples.

NATE

Next time you be makin' a fuss
'round here, you jest think 'bout
that sore ass you gonna have!

Nate starts back for his bedroom, stops and turns to his wife.

NATE

Get me my breakfast.

He enters the room and slams the door.

Richard rises from the floor. Behind him, Leon and his mother watch. Stoic, Richard walks into his room.

INT. WRIGHT HOME - KITCHEN - LATER

Leon and Nate are at the table. Nate is dressed in the uniform of a hotel janitor. Ella is cooking. Four eggs pop-away sunny-side-up in a cast-iron pan full of bacon grease.

Sweating, Ella turns from the old stove, walks to Nate and ladles the greasy eggs out to join his huge plate of bacon and grits. She goes to the stove then returns to spoon some grits to Leon's plate.

Nate breaks the eggs into his grits, crumbles the bacon and begins to chop at the yellow-brown mass with a fork. He begins to heap great gobs of the slurry into his mouth.

EXT. BACK ALLEY OF WRIGHTS' TENEMENT - SAME TIME

Dressed in ragged clothes and cinching his belt, Richard is nearly to the back door of the home. He wipes his hands on his shorts.

INT. WRIGHT HOME - KITCHEN

Richard does not quite enter the room. He leans against the door frame and watches his father, hunched over, piling food into his mouth. Stuffing the last of a biscuit into his face, Nate glances up at the boy, then goes back to his food.

RICHARD
Can I have some milk?

ELLA
Sit down, boy.

Richard moves to the table and sits across from his father. Nate reaches for another biscuit.

RICHARD
Can I get some milk?

ELLA
We ain't got no milk. The man stopped deliverin'.

RICHARD
Why?

Ella doesn't respond as she ladles some grits into a bowl.

RICHARD

Why the milk man don't come?

Through a mouthful of food, Nate speaks.

NATE
Never you mind, boy.

Ella puts the bowl of grits in front of Richard. Richard looks up, as if expecting more.

RICHARD

Can I have some eggs and bacon?

Ella is at the sink, her head turned away. She turns and gives Richard a stern look before answering.

ELLA

(quiet)

Ain't no more.

Nate is shoveling hard at the last few bites of his food.

NATE

Boy, you want to eat in this house, you make sure to get your shufflin' black ass to the table at meal time. Ain't nobody gonna come lookin' for you to eat.

Richard looks hard at his father for a moment.

RICHARD

But I'm hungry.

Nate laughs.

NATE

Boy, look at the size of you! Now look at the size of me. You get to be my size and a workin' man, you need food.

Nate reaches for the last biscuit, tears it in half and throws a part to the table in front of Richard.

NATE

You don't need but a little. You just a skinny thing, don't need much of nothin'.

RICHARD

But I'm hungry.

Nate glares.

RICHARD

I'm always hungry.

Nate's stern look drops and he laughs; a guffaw.

NATE

Well you just best get out and get yourself a job then, boy. Ain't no free rides in this world.

Richard looks grimly back at his father. The man gobbles a few last bites, pops the biscuit into his mouth, pushes back from the table and runs a hand across his bulging gut. He belches, gets up, takes his hat from the table and starts for the front room.

ELLA

Nate?

NATE

Yeah?

ELLA

You got bread money?

Nate ignores Ella, walks from the room. Ella drops a dishrag, grabs a hand towel and follows, drying her hands.

INT. LIVING ROOM

Nate is almost to the door when Ella catches up to him.

ELLA

When you gonna' be home?

NATE

I dunno. What business it of yours?

There's a long pause as Ella registers hurt, maybe anger.

INT. KITCHEN

Richard and Leon overhear the voices of their parents.

Richard looks disturbed, but also resigned.

ELLA (O.S.)

You ain't been home before
midnight for three days. And you
all liquored-up.

NATE (O.S.)

Woman, I got me a hard job and I
need me some time.

ELLA

What do you do after work?

NATE

You know better than to ax me
questions. What gettin' into you,
woman?

ELLA

Don't leave when I'm talkin' to
you.

NATE

Who you think you talking to? You
don't give me no orders, bitch.

ELLA

You... You... You nothin' but a
whorein' 'round drunk!

Richard's face registers pain even before the blow comes...
a chair overturns, a body hits the floor. The front door
slams.

The boys sit, silent. From the other room, the brothers can
hear their mother sobbing softly.

NARRATOR

We did not understand what had
happened between our father and
our mother.

(pause)

Whenever we asked why father had
left, she would tell us that we
were too young to know.

EXT. MEMPHIS - BLACK SECTION - CITY STREET - DAY

A group of ten boys, including Richard, are running down the sidewalk. They weave between pedestrians, leap to the street, dodge an old truck, startle a horse and leap back on the walks.

They tear through fruit carts and white vendors. Richard is one of the smaller and younger of the boys by a couple of years. His face shows some exhilaration at the play, and the power of numbers.

They slow and begin to loiter near a group of about six carts. The vendors may be Jewish. The gang, including Richard, sing-out in unison.

BOYS

Red, white and blue, your pa was
a Jew! Your ma a dirty Dago, what
the hell is you!

The boys laugh. The vendors just stare.

The larger of the boys dashes up to a cart, grabs an apple and runs. The rest of the gang howls and suddenly a line of screaming vendors is under assault. The boys scramble around a cart, grab apples and oranges and tear off to the next cart.

Richard, still at the curb, has stopped in his tracks. He watches as the gang pillages, moving in and out like fast little animals dodging the reeling vendors. A few boys grab too much and fruit falls to the ground.

The gang runs. Richard hesitates, unsure, then he follows.

EXT. ALLEY - LATER

The boys sit on crates and cans and lean against the wall eating their loot. Apples crunch between teeth, orange pulp oozes from greedy mouths.

Richard, not eating, seems apart. He tosses small rocks a

few feet to nowhere and looks down. The larger boy, BOOTH, gives Richard a long look.

BOOTH
Hey!

Richard looks up with a start, realizing the older boy is speaking to him.

BOOTH

How come you got nothin'?

Richard pauses, not sure how to answer.

RICHARD
I dunno.

BOOTH
You don't know?! Shit boy, we all got somethin' to eat, why didn't you?

Richard seems like he might respond, but changes his mind.

RICHARD
I dunno.

Booth takes the last bite of his apple and stares at Richard.
The larger boy throws the core down the alley.

BOOTH
You best talk, boy, you want to be part of my gang.

Richard turns and stares up at Booth about ten feet away.

RICHARD
I just didn't want to, that's all.

BOOTH
You didn't want to?! What you problem, nigger, don't you eat?! That why you such a skinny thang?

The gang laughs.

GANG BOY

Get on that boy, Booth!

RICHARD

I just didn't want to steal.

Booth and the gang force a jeering laugh.

BOOTH

Oh, you Miss-ippi boys don't like to steal! Tha's right, you don't like to steal and you fuck your grannies, too!

Richard springs to his feet, but Booth is already moving for him. The other boys have come to their feet and are crowding around. Taller and heavier, Booth leans into Richard.

BOOTH

You want to take up against me, boy, come on!

Richard looks up into the boy's mean eyes and knows it is hopeless. Booth gives a hard push and Richard stumbles backward. Booth rolls shoulders like a fighter loosening-up.

BOOTH

Come on girlie, I'll fix you up good!

Richard looks from Booth to the expectant, excited faces of the gang. Slowly, he turns and walks to the alley exit.

In unison, the boys half taunt and half groan their disappointment.

BOOTH

Yeaaaaa-yeaaaaa! Go on Miss-ippi!
Go on home to your mama!

EXT. MEMPHIS CITY STREETS - NIGHT

It may be Saturday night. A good number of pedestrians and vehicles fill the streets and walks.

Richard wanders the sidewalk. Black people, as well as working-class whites, exit and enter bars and diners. Richard, a young boy alone, is out of place.

He pauses near the open doors of a particularly noisy saloon.

He leans to the wall and peers around the frame to the inside. The dark, smoky interior is filled with shadowy figures. They bring glasses to mouths, talk and laugh loudly. Most are drunk.

Richard is wary, but fascinated.

Just inside the door, a few feet to the side of Richard's view, a large round black face turns and stares at the boy.

BAR MAN
(drunk)
Heyyyyy, younnngin'!

Richard gives a start, sees the man and freezes.

BAR MAN

Come on innnn! I got somethin'
for ya'!

Richard bolts.

He is a block away before he turns and slows to a walk.

He nears the bright facade of an ice cream parlour. He looks into the ornate windows. Inside, a red-haired boy, about ten, sits in a booth across from his parents. The freckle-faced boy is devouring an enormous ice cream sundae. He shovels great spoonfuls into his mouth.

As if attempting to eat vicariously, Richard leans against the building and watches the boy consume. Richard seems close to drooling. He holds his stomach. After a long moment he turns and continues, aimlessly, down the street.

INT. WRIGHT TENEMENT - BOYS' ROOM - MORNING

Richard is tying up decayed boots. He doesn't look well; weak, a yellow cast beneath his dark skin. He finishes lacing his boots, slowly gets to his feet. He pauses. His stomach grumbles loudly. He heads into the living area.

INT. WRIGHTS' LIVING ROOM

Richard walks to where his mother is ironing. Leon is tinkering at her feet.

RICHARD
Mama, I'm hungry.

ELLA
(chuckling)
Then you best jump up and grab a kungry.

RICHARD
(pause; puzzled)
What's a kungry?

ELLA
It's what little boys eat when they get hungry.

RICHARD
What's it taste like?

ELLA
I don't know.

RICHARD
Then why you tell me to catch one?

ELLA
(smiling)
Because you said that you were hungry.

Richard is dismayed, becoming angry.

RICHARD
Mama, I'm hungry! I wanna eat!

ELLA

There's nothing to eat.

RICHARD

Why?

ELLA

Just because there's none.

Richards eyes are beginning to well-up.

RICHARD

But I wanna' eat!

ELLA

You'll just have to wait.

RICHARD

For what?

ELLA

For God to send some food.

RICHARD

(pause)

But I'm hungry!

Ella stops her ironing. She turns to Richard. She wipes tears from her eyes, sighs.

ELLA

Where's your father?

RICHARD

I dunno.

ELLA

Who always brought food into this house?

RICHARD

(pause)

Papa.

ELLA

Well, your father isn't here now.

RICHARD

Where is he?

Ella gives a great heave and stifles a sob.

ELLA

I don't know.

RICHARD

(whimpers)

But I'm hungry.

ELLA

You'll just have to wait for the
Good Lord to provide.

Richard stares at his mother.

INT. MEMPHIS COURTROOM - DAY

Flags hang from staffs at either side of the bench -- one
is
the Stars and Stripes; the other is the Confederate.

A smattering of people fill the rows of wooden chairs.
Blacks sit on one side of the room, whites on the other.
This segregation includes some ten or twelve mainly black
defendants.

A uniformed bailiff stands at the front of the room near
the
bench. A prim, female court stenographer sits a level below
and near the judge.

The JUDGE is young, about 30. He is a choir boy; too clean-
cut, baby-faced with his hair slicked and parted. He could
be the mayor's son-in-law.

Ella, with her sons clutched at either side, faces the
bench
at the front of the room.

Nate, slouching, with a stupid grin on his face, stands a
few
feet away also facing the Judge. He could be half-drunk.

Perhaps idly, the Judge scratches a feather pen across
something on his desk. Seeming bored, he raises his gaze to
Nate, a man several years older.

JUDGE

Now see here, son. Your wifey here says you up 'n left her with two hungry boys to feed. What you got to say for yourself?

Nate doesn't seem to understand. He shuffles his feet for a pause. When he speaks, it is fluent Uncle Tom.

NATE

Whas' that, Sah?

JUDGE

Hey now! You address this here bench as 'Your Honour', boy!

NATE

Yes, sir... you honor.

There is a pause as the Judge gives Nate a stern look.

JUDGE

Well?

NATE

You honor?

JUDGE

(losing patience)
This your wife and boys?

NATE

Yes 'em, you honor.

JUDGE

Well, did you up 'n leave?

NATE

Yes 'em, you honor.

JUDGE

You got some kind of good reason why you would desert your wife and children?

NATE

Sah?

JUDGE

Why did you leave your wife?

NATE

Oh! 'cause you honor, I got me a new gal!

Seeming to stew, the Judge looks like he might let Nate have it. Then, suddenly, the soft-faced man grins wide, he throws back his head and guffaws loud and long.

The Judge turns to the now grinning bailiff as if to share in the dirty joke between men. Then the man quiets and again looks down at Nate, a smiling fool.

JUDGE

You get yourself a pretty one?

NATE

Oh, yeah, you honor, she's a good'n!

Ella is totally degraded. She looks close to vomiting. Richard is completely bewildered, perhaps filling with rage.

The Judge settles back and resumes business.

JUDGE

See here now... you workin'?

NATE

Yes, you honor.

JUDGE

Doin' what?

NATE

You honor?

JUDGE

Your job. Where you work, boy?

NATE

Oh, at the Carlton Arms, you honor.

JUDGE

What do you do there?

NATE

I's the day clean-up man... the head clean-up man.

JUDGE

Oh, you the head clean-up man.

NATE

Yes 'em.

JUDGE

Okay, how much you give the misses so far to help feed these youngins?

Nate shuffles his feet and smiles like an idiot.

NATE

Well, I been meanin' to give somthin', but I had me some e-spenses.

The Judge scribbles a note.

JUDGE

Okay, boy, I don't want to see you back in here again. You see that you start providing for these youngins.

NATE

Yes, Judge. I'll do all I can.

Ella's jaw is dropping. Richard looks confused.

JUDGE

Alright, then...

The judge hammers his gavel.

JUDGE

Next case!

Nate turns to leave.

ELLA

But my boys are hungry! I ain't

got no money!

The Judge turns to the bailiff.

JUDGE
Next case.

The bailiff moves towards Ella. She turns, gives a start and shrinks back from the uniformed white man. She pulls her boys close and starts from the room.

The Judge turns to the court stenographer.

JUDGE
(continuing; quiet)
There ain't a buck alive who can keep his gun in one holster for very long.

The woman smiles.

EXT. COURTHOUSE STEPS - DAY

Ella walks slowly down the steps with her boys. At the curb, Nate stands taking a pull from a pint bottle. Ella walks to within six feet of her husband and calls out.

ELLA
How can you do this to your children?

Nate turns to face his family.

NATE
You got no call to bring the law into this.

ELLA
What else can I do, you're starving your children.

NATE
Shee-it woman! I ain't doin' nothin'.

Nate turns and walks away down the sidewalk. Ella and the boys can only watch him leave.

EXT. WRIGHT HOME - MORNING

The front door opens and Ella exits. She wears a uniform. She could be a cook or a maid. She walks down the steps and trudges off.

After a moment, the door opens again. It stays open as Richard leans against the frame. Leon walks past Richard holding a small ball. He plops down on the top step.

Richard watches him.

A group of children walk by with school books under their arms. Richard watches them pass, then turns back to Leon.

MONTAGE - A WAISTED DAY

A) In the living room, nothing is happening... nothing. Richard sits on the floor, his back to the wall. He is glum, completely bored. Leon is pacing. He marches back and forth, pointlessly. He is a small animal in a cage.

B) In the kitchen, Richard spreads what looks like lard over a rough chunk of white bread. Leon sits at the table. Richard puts two plates on the table, one in front of Leon. Leon looks up at Richard, like he might complain, but he seems to understand. He takes a bite and grimaces.

C) Richard and Leon sit on the front steps. The earlier group of children again pass, heading home, books under their arms, talking. Richard watches them go by.

EXT. WRIGHT HOME - LATER

It is getting dark. Richard and Leon still sit. Their heads are down.

Unseen by the boys, Ella walks to the steps. For a moment she just watches the boys. She could be pitying them,

herself; likely the three of them.

Leon looks up.

LEON
Mama!

Richard jerks his head up. The boys run down the steps to clutch their mother. She wraps her arms around them.

EXT. STREET FRONTING WRIGHT HOME - DAY

Richard exits the house with an empty burlap bag and starts down the street.

EXT. CITY STREET NEAR STORE - LATER

Booth's gang is hanging around on a stoop near a corner. A few push and jostle each other. An older man, who could be BOOTH'S FATHER, is at the top of the stoop, near his front door.

The boys spot Richard approaching with the bag. They pile down the steps and encircle Richard. He's trapped.

Booth's Father watches, smiling.

BOOTH
Hey Miss-ippi, what ya' doin' with
the potato bag, nigger?

Richard hesitates.

RICHARD
Goin' shoppin'.

They boys burst into laughter.

BOOTH
Shoppin?! Boy, that's woman work!
You a woman?

Richard's fear is rising.

GANG BOY

He ain't no woman, he jest a
little girl.

Richard doesn't know how to answer.

At the top of the steps, Booth's Father, chuckles
approvingly.

BOOTH

Say boy, if you's goin' shoppin',
you got some money.

Richard is silent.

BOOTH

Gimme that money, boy.

Richard backs away, but a boy behind pushes him forward.
Booth pushes him back, another boy pushes him forward and
Richard is knocked to the ground.

Laughing and jeering, the boys fall upon him. Hands tear at
his pockets. The money is taken. Richard scrambles up and
runs for home.

INT. WRIGHT HOME - LATER

Richard is sitting on the floor, distraught.

The front door opens and Ella, in a maid's uniform, enters
with Leon. She closes the door and sees Richard.

ELLA

What's the matter?

Richard hesitates.

RICHARD

Some boys took the grocery money.

ELLA

What do you mean, boy?

RICHARD

The boys that are always down by
the corner. They pushed me down

and took the money.

Ella just stares for a moment. Then she marches over to a table. She removes a small pouch from her handbag and counts out some money. She walks back to Richard.

ELLA
Stand up, boy.

Richard gets to his feet. Ella takes his hand and pushes the money into it.

ELLA
You get yourself back down there and get the shoppin' done.

RICHARD
But...

ELLA
No butts. Git.

Richard scrambles from the room.

EXT. STREET - LATER

Wary, Richard is walking toward the grocery again. He slows and stops. The boys are ahead about a half-block. Richard starts for the other side of the street. About half-way across he's spotted.

GANG BOY
There he is 'gain!

Richard turns for home and runs. The boys pursue. A block later they catch up with him. Booth throws a punch and pops Richard in the head. He goes down.

The boys laugh as they tear at Richard's pockets. The money is gone again. Richard is pulled up, slapped and pushed away. He runs for home.

EXT. WRIGHTS' HOME - LATER

Richard starts up the steps. The door opens and his mother is standing above. Richard stops.

RICHARD

They b-beat m-me...

He starts up the steps again.

ELLA

Don't you come in here.

Richard freezes.

RICHARD

B-but they b-beat me up.

ELLA

(cold)

You stay right where you are.
This night I'm going to teach you
to stand up and fight for yourself!

Ella turns and goes into the house. Richard stands,
dismayed
and hurt.

A moment later, she returns with more money and... a hard-
wood ax handle. She grabs Richard's hand and puts the money
in it.

ELLA

You take this money and this
stick...

She places the four-foot stick in his hand.

ELLA

Now go to the store and buy those
groceries. If those boys bother
you again, fight.

RICHARD

But I'm scared.

ELLA

Don't you come into this house
until you've gotten those
groceries.

RICHARD

But they'll beat me up.

ELLA

Then stay in the streets! Don't
come back here!

Richard starts up the steps, trying to get by his mother.
She slaps him hard and he freezes; stunned.

RICHARD

Please Mama... I don't wanna!

ELLA

Go now! If you come back into
this house without those
groceries, I'll whip you!

Ella turns, enters the house and slams the door. The lock
turns.

Richard wobbles down the steps. He turns, looks once more
to
his home, then starts down the now darkening street.

EXT. STREET NEAR STORE - LATER

Richard, carrying the ax handle, heads to the corner. He is
afraid, full of energy and loathing.

GANG BOY

Here he comes again!

The boys shout and whoop and are on him again, encircling
him. They start to grab out, like hyenas at wounded prey.

Richard is afraid, but angry and desperate.

RICHARD

I'll kill ya!

They laugh and close in. Richard closes his eyes and lets
fly with the stick... whooomph... crack! The wood connects

with a skull and a boy screams.

The boys are taken aback, stunned motionless. Richard swings again... whooomph... crack! Another boy, Booth, screams and falls to the ground.

Richard is crying, but still swinging. He nails another boy in the chest, one across the knee. The boys back off, now in fear of Richard's frenzied state. A few run.

Richard lands a blow on a shoulder and the boy screams and scurries away. Richard stalks after those that remain.

RICHARD

Come on, you sum-bitches!! I'll kill ya'!! I'll kill ya', you try to touch me again!!

Richard jumps forward, swings, cracks a boy in the back as he turns to run. Now all the boys are in flight, running to their homes, scrambling around the corner. Richard is a maniac, pursuing Booth to the steps of his home. The boy scrambles inside. Richard pants, sweats, looks insane.

The front door opens and Booth's Father steps out. He looks down at Richard ten feet away.

FATHER

What did you do to my boy, you little nigger?!

Panting, adrenaline racing, Richard looks to the larger man at the top of the stoop. He readies the ax handle.

RICHARD

Go to hell!! You want to do somthin' 'bout it, come on!!

Booth's Father stares down at this crazy, dangerous boy. He raises his brow, astonished, even afraid.

BOOTH'S FATHER

(under his breath)
That boy's touched.

The man turns, muttering to himself, and returns to his house.

(continue)