

Excerpts: Don't Let The Nightmares Keep You From Dreamin'

Excerpt I

A city in the deep South, August 29th, 1963. Projected onto different places above or to the side of the stage are pictures evocative of the civil rights era and those events that led up to it: Rosa Parks, segregated troops from WWII, integrated troops from Korea, the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, marches, newspaper headlines, signs saying "whites only", dog attacks and water hoses in Birmingham, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington Carver, Harriet Tubman, slave ships, etc., etc.

As house lights begin to dim, Dr. Martin Luther King's speech "I Have a Dream" comes up, gradually filling the theatre. House lights are completely down for that part of the speech that begins the theme of "I Have A Dream" and lights gradually come up on the stage revealing two different households.

On one side is the interior and front porch of the working-class home of Clarence Ethridge and his daughter Annie—Rae, who sit watching the speech on a very old (even for 1963) black and white television. On the other side of the stage is the living room and front porch of the Roberts family, who listen to the speech on an old radio. Leda is ironing while her husband Joseph sits on the sofa, together with their two children, Augustus (Gus) and Telitha.

Everyone sits in rapt attention, awestruck by the power and beauty of what they are hearing. There is a moment of astonishment as the speech ends and the Roberts look at each other in various reactions of amazement except for Leda, who continues ironing. Annie—Rae looks to her father who is fixated on the screen and wrapped in his own thoughts produced by the speech. He is obviously moved, but there is something else in his reaction; something that causes Annie Rae to slide over to him and lean on him in order to get his attention. He puts his arm around her and half—smiles, but it is evident that he is still preoccupied. Lights go down on their side of the stage.

In the Roberts' household, Joseph is the first to gain the power of speech.

JOSEPH

(He turns off the radio) Thank...GOD

Almighty for you, Reverend King!

AUGUSTUS

Man alive, that's like... Like...

JOSEPH

That is the glorious, penetratin' light of the sun reachin' out and blastin' away the shadows of dark night, boy!

AUGUSTUS

Yeah! I never heard anything make me feel so...

JOSEPH

Hopeful?

AUGUSTUS

Yeah!

JOSEPH

(to Leda) Woman, what' re you doin', ironin' like that? Didn't you hear what the man just said?

LEDA

Yeah, I heard. Does that mean your shirts aren't gonna wrinkle anymore? That's my dream, anyway.

JOSEPH

Oh now Leda, why you got to be so...

AUGUSTUS

Cynical?

JOSEPH

Say what?

LEDA

He's truly dreamin', talkin' about black children & white children holdin hands, walkin' down the street. Might as well say the lion's gonna lay down with the lamb. And I ain't being anything except realistic. We' re gonna' get our slice of the pie. We're gonna cash that check a justice, however much blood got to be spilled. But this hopin' for black & white comin' together might be all right in dreams & fairytale books. But we better not set ourselves up fer a time that' s never gonna come.

AUGUSTUS

Out come the dark clouds to swallow up the sun.

JOSEPH

Watch your mouth, boy.

AUGUSTUS

Yes, sir. I just think we gotta' find a way to... I don't know, to—

LEDA

No, boy, you don't think at all! You just dream. You get out in that world for a few years & see what it's like before you have an opinion has any thought in it. You waste your life away with

your mindless dreamin'. And there is nothin' on this earth more dangerous than a foolish dream and a foolish dreamer.

JOSEPH

Leda, they's no harm in dreamin'. Dreamin' is what starts change; not thinkin' 'bout how things are, but how they should be. Dreamin' is reachin' out with you mind and heart — reachin' out far enough to touch them stars that brighten this world. That's the first step.

LEDA

Yeah, you reach for that sun & watch it burn your hand off. Dreams are what destroy you when they don't come true. They suck you in, make you believe in them, let you see them, almost touch them. And just when you're there, ready to claim them for your own, they turn to the ugliest, darkest nightmares right before your eyes.

(momentary silence as everyone is surprised at her tone)

JOSEPH

(he goes behind her and gently holds her in his arms) My dream's comin' true. Only months from now a miracle will descend on this family; the greatest miracle on earth or heaven. A child will be born — the dazzlin' light of life will bless this house; and you, Leda Roberts, will be a thousand times blessed for bein' the bearer of that miracle. And i, Joseph Roberts, will be a million times blessed, for that child, that miracle of heaven, will be mine.

LEDA

Let go me, Joseph. I got work to do here.

JOSEPH

(he holds on tight) And I' LI tell you this, Miss Leda "Contrary" Roberts, I'm gonna teach that child inside you to dream. I'm gonna teach that bundle of joyous starlight to reach for the hand of the Lord Almighty.

(She tries to extricate herself, but her holds her tighter)

And someday, woman, someday I'm gonna teach you to dream again, too.

Excerpt II

(As lights slowly go down on the Roberts' porch, they slowly rise on the Ethridge porch, Clarence still deep in prayer. Annie—Rae then enters and starts to come out the screen door to the porch when she sees her father and stops, not wishing to disturb him. She watches him a moment, needing to talk to him but unwilling to interrupt his prayer. She is about to leave when he finally rises and sits on porch swing.)

ANNIE-RAE

Papa...?

CLARENCE
(looks at her a moment)

Hey, Rosebud.

ANN -RAE

Are you all right?

CLARENCE Yeah. How

'bout you?

ANNIE-RAE

I'm okay.

(an awkward pause, Annie—Rae no knowing whether it's okay to stay)

CLARENCE

D'you like to join me out here?

ANNIE-RAE

Is it okay?

CLARENCE

Of course.

(making room for her on the swing)

Come on, sit.

(they swing quietly for a moment)

Oh Lord, if you looked any more like your mama, I'd swear you were a ghost. (pause) I wish you could be fer just a minute, so I could ask her what to do, what to say, what to think... how to live in a world so turned on its head like this.

ANNIE-RAE

I wish I could help, Papa. I don't mean to...

CLARENCE I know,
sweetheart. I know.
(pause) Gus is a nice boy?

ANNIE-RAE

As nice as I've ever met. (pause) Papa...

CLARENCE It's all right.

It's all right.

(pause) You know, since I lost yer Mama, Rae, I've never felt as... It's Like her bein' there gave me courage; the courage to face...things. That's how I made it through the war just knowin' she was here.

That time I told you about, Rae, when I was lost in Italy... After I'd been with those boys for a while, I had to look at myself & how I'd lived my life 'til that time, and... And I was ashamed. I was ashamed. I never felt shame Like that again...until now.

ANNIE-RAE Papa...

CLARENCE No, Rae,
please. Just listen.

I never thought I'd ever talk to you the way I did. I never imagined I'd be apologizin' to my own daughter.

ANNIE-RAE Papa, please
don't...

(he raises his hand to stop her)

CLARENCE
I'm... I'm sorry, Rae. You just... This just caught me by surprise. I don' t...

Those things I told you about the war... I changed, Rae. I did. But Lord Almighty, how much does a man have to change in one lifetime? How much of himself does he have to face before...before he can finally just...rest?

ANNIE-RAE
(after a moment, as gently as she can)
Papa...I don't know, but do we ever get to stop changin'? I mean, are we alive if we're not changin'...growin'?

CLARENCE
(he looks at her long and deep)

Must be your mama' s genes.

ANNIE-RAE What?

CLARENCE
I can't figure out how else you got to be so darn smart... with the mule of an old man you got.

ANNIE-RAE
(she holds herself tight against him)

I think you' re the smartest man in the world.