

**Phoenix**

by  
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First Draft

AFTER THE CIVIL WAR AND LONG BEFORE THE  
CIVIL RIGHTS STRUGGLE, A HANDFUL OF BLACK  
MEN ROSE BRIEFLY TO BECOME U.S.  
CONGRESSMEN. THEIR HISTORY HAS BEEN ALL  
BUT FORGOTTEN. THIS IS THEIR STORY.

**INT. FORT SUMTER - BUNKHOUSE - NIGHT**

Flint strike. An oil lantern flutters aglow. We find a pair of nervous eyes in the darkness. ROBERT SMALLS, 23.

CARD:

MAY 1862 -- FORT SUMTER, SOUTH CAROLINA

Sweat drips off Smalls' black face as he steps towards a METAL LOCK BOX, Confederate flag seal embossed on the lid, its imprint reads 'PROPERTY OF CONFEDERATE NAVY.'

A phlegmy 'snore' rattles the room. Smalls looks back at a Confederate navy OFFICER, passed out in a hammock, EMPTY BOTTLE OF BOURBON still in the man's hand.

Smalls quietly cracks open the lock box. Inside are GOLD INGOTS. He stuffs the box into a bag, heart thumping.

A jacket beside the sleeping officer -- rank insignia reads 'CAPTAIN' -- is whisked away. Smalls bundles it under his arm, then eyes a tougher target. Delicately, he lifts the hat right off the captain's head.

Captain stirs, latches onto his hat, half-awake. But Smalls, determined, will not let go. Tug of war, until... 'snore,' captain crashes back asleep.

**I/E. FORT SUMTER PORT - NIGHT**

Scrawny Smalls hurries past slumbering enlisted men in the soldiers' bunkhouse. Exits to the warm outside, when, 'click,' a CONFEDERATE GUARD aims a cocked rifle.

Smalls freezes. He pulls his MONEY BAG close.

SMALLS

Robert Smalls. Boat slave. Gotta rouse Negroes for night chores.

Guard eyes Smalls... lowers rifle, lets him pass. On high alert, Smalls races to his destination:

SIX CONFEDERATE FLAG-WAVING GUNBOATS docked at a wharf.

**INT. CSS PLANTER GUNBOAT - NIGHT**

Smalls boards the 150-foot steamship 'CSS PLANTER,' now WEARING THE CAPTAIN'S UNIFORM. He enters a crew hold-

A BLACK SLAVE SAILOR lunges at him with a club.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SMALLS

Elias, it's me!

The black slave (named ELIAS) catches himself, panting. Ten other ANXIOUS SLAVES crowd the compartment.

SLAVE ELIAS

You's look like Captain Relyea.

SMALLS

That's the idea! Christ, what if I'd been him?!

SLAVE ELIAS

Then I's be hung. At least get it over wit'.

SMALLS

*Over with?* Is that what you think -- that our plan is gonna fail?! Cause no one else here does.

Smalls looks to the others, realizes *they are all afraid*.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

Crap. (beat) Now look, we're committed. So let's get movin'.

No one moves. Their gaze drifts to Smalls' bag.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

(sensitive)  
My clothes.

Silence. Elias reaches for the heavy bag, Smalls pulls back. Another slave grabs at the bag.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

What do you want? It's dirty laundry. Stop!

A yank topples the bag, it lands with a 'clank'. All eyes now turn to Smalls. Smalls fortifies.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

Okay, let's not beat around the bush. You don't trust me. Think I'm keepin' secrets?

SLAVE ELIAS

Are you? What's in the bag?

Smalls steps in front of the bag, stealthily, skillfully, PUSHING IT OUT THE DOOR as he asserts himself.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

SMALLS

Of course I'm keepin' secrets! So our plan stays safe. Don't you see? Your lives are in my hands -- you can't rely on me if I'm touting every step. I feel your fear, I do. But this ain't no ham-handed play for freedom. What I'm offering is a guaranteed, one-way ticket to Elysia. We're at the door to liberation. Here, now. I have the strength to carry you through. Give me your trust, your faith. Dear God, let's claim our rights as men. Are we together?  
 (a few are inclined)  
 All of you, speak it to the angels! Are you with me?!

The men cheer. Elias awkwardly overruled. And Smalls successful in averting attention from his money.

**EXT. CSS PLANTER GUNBOAT - A MOMENT LATER**

Tarry smoke belches out Planter's stacks, the heavy wood ship groans as the black sailors cast away lines.

**INT. CSS PLANTER GUNBOAT - WHEELHOUSE - CONTINUOUS**

Smalls, alone in the ship's wheelhouse, pries up an OFF-COLOR FLOOR PLANK. Hides his money under the floor, throws a kiss at the bag.

SLAVE ELIAS (O.S.)

Ship's adrift, Cap'n!

Smalls perks up, sees Elias approaching outside, drops the floor plank, but plank is stuck, will not go back down. Smalls, confused, pushes harder. No luck.

Elias nears. Smalls jumps on the plank, frantic.

Elias just outside, floor plank still wrenched up-

Elias enters. Finds Smalls... at the ship's wheel. With his wide trademark grin. No sight of the gold.

SMALLS

Whistle Dixie. We're on our way.

Smalls begins to hum (Battle Hymn of the Republic). The hum is infectious, spreads to men on deck, EVERYONE JOINS IN. Elias is skeptical.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

For *good reason*. Smalls money bag HANGS FROM A HOOK JUST ABOVE ELIAS' HEAD. Elias exits without ever looking up.

In this last moment of privacy, Smalls grabs his gold, shoves it under the floor, and forces the plank back into place. We TRACK OUT as the music swells.

**EXT. CSS PLANTER GUNBOAT - CONTINUOUS**

The tiny ship motors its way into harbor, red sun rising. The 10-inch guns of FORT SUMTER'S BATTERY emerge ahead.

We join Elias on the bow. His heart skips a beat as the guns appear. Suddenly, their boat turns right *for* them. He looks back to see Smalls confidently at the tiller.

SLAVE ELIAS

Where you goin'?! Sail by on the other side of the harbor!

SMALLS

Can't! Mines line the far side.

Distant sound, 'frrk,' as the fort's vile guns rotate, aim right at the Planter. Slaves' cheer fades.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

Boys, work! Like we planned. Just need to get past the fort.

**EXT. FORT SUMTER - BATTERY - CONTINUOUS**

And we join CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS' POV in towering Fort Sumter battery, puny Planter pulls closer below.

CONFEDERATE SOLDIER

That the *Planter*? So early? Signal them to stop.

Second soldier blows a 'steam whistle.' First soldier uses a spyglass, sees-

TELESCOPE POV: slaves labor on deck. Smalls at tiller, but he is FULLY DISGUISED UNDER STOLEN CAPTAIN'S UNIFORM.

CONFEDERATE SOLDIER (CONT'D)

Why aren't they stopping? Sound it again. (beat) Arm the 10-inch.

**EXT. CSS PLANTER GUNBOAT - CONTINUOUS**

'Horn.' On the Planter, Smalls' heart begins to thump.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Smalls slows their ship. Elias, confused, hurries over.

SMALLS

This isn't working.

SLAVE ELIAS

What *ain't working*'?! Don't stop.

All the slaves pause in their chores, petrified.

SMALLS

(clenched teeth)

Everyone, stay focused damn it!

THEY ARRIVE BELOW THE FORTRESS, Smalls idles the engine.

CONFEDERATE SOLDIER

(distant)

Captain, identify yourself! Which seaman is that?! (beat) Speak up! Where's your crew?!

Smalls sallows deep, steps outside. His men only pray. Finally, in a rehearsed voice, not his own...

SMALLS

(fake voice)

John Relyea! Captain, CSS Planter! On local ammo delivery! Only slaves aboard. Letting the hard workin' boys sleep.

INTERCUT AS NECESSARY WITH...

THE BATTERY: guns aim at ship 100 meters away. Soldier's scope trained on Smalls, dim light makes it hard to see.

CONFEDERATE SOLDIER

We got an ammo drop scheduled?

Second soldier quickly checks a manifest.

THE PLANTER: slaves, sure of certain death. Smalls faces the open ocean, and then HIS MONEY. Elysia so close.

CONFEDERATE SOLDIER (CONT'D)

Captain, your voice sounds funny! After your delivery... you get some rest too. Pass the *Planter*!

Guns aim away. Slaves all simultaneously brighten.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

SLAVE ELIAS

You did it.

(Smalls shushes him)

We're out!

Smalls quickly throttles up. They pass the Fort. Out to sea. Past last spit of land, to reveal...

BLOCKADE OF UNION SHIPS. The slave sailors light up at their sight, break out singing the song they had hummed.

SLAVES

(singing)

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of  
the coming of the Lord...*

SMALLS

What the- (beat) Can't be. The bastards ain't getting us.

Smalls' emotion unclear, but not happiness. Glancing in the direction of his hidden gold, he turns his boat away.

SLAVE ELIAS

Jesus, Smalls, dem's Yankees. You got us north. We're saved!

SMALLS

Like hell we are.

'Boom,' Union cannon round lands abeam, boat rocks violently. Smalls rapidly throttles back. No choice.

SLAVE ELIAS

I think's they want us to stop.

Smalls, angry, eyes slave sailor: *you think?*

**EXT. UNION BLOCKADE - A MOMENT LATER**

On Union frigates, sailors at battle stations. Union dinghies motor to the Planter, a white flag off its bow.

We join a UNION FIRST OFFICER as he leads sailors aboard, tactically forcing slaves to their knees. The black men cannot help but grin. Slowly, sailors step back aghast. And from the first officer's POV, we realize why.

UNION FIRST OFFICER

Dear God... they're all slaves.

Smalls, captaining this ship of black men, back straight.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SMALLS

No, sir. We's free niggers now.

Rising sun off the bobbing deck hits the lens, becomes:

**WHITE SCREEN**

FILM TITLE:

PHOENIX

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S TARBORO HOME - DAWN - 33 YEARS LATER**

White screen slowly resolves into the familiar orange glow of a light bulb filament.

TITLE CARD:

NOVEMBER 1895 -- TARBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

33 YEARS LATER

WE TRACK OUT from a lone electric ceiling lamp into a turn-of-the-century North Carolina kitchen.

With electric bulb aglow, GEORGE WHITE, 43, blows out his oil lamp. George, a strikingly handsome African American in an expensive suit. He could be a movie star in another era. But he knows the limits of his own charisma and the backlash awaiting too-flashy a black man in any era. He will always be hyper-vigilant of his own appearance. Keeping a respectable, low-profile is key.

White follows his nose to the rich scent of breakfast cooking on a stove -- steak, eggs, grits, and coffee.

Back door flies open, horizontal rain blows. His wife CORA, 32, a black Amazonian beauty, hauls water buckets. White quickly shuts the door, kisses her on the lips.

'Ahem,' she nods at the heavy buckets in her hands. White smartens up, takes buckets, heads to a cistern.

CORA

It's a deluge. Stay another day.

WHITE

Got to earn you enough money to bring in some running water.

CORA

Don't want water. I want you.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Cora re-lights oil the lamp, turns off electric light.

WHITE

One of five women in all Tarboro  
with an electrified home and you  
insist on oil. Old-fashioned.

CORA

Not old-fashioned. Just no pride  
in being *one of five* women.

White strokes her face, bittersweet. She mouths, 'stay.'

WHITE

Be back in one month Mrs. White.  
(hand over her heart)  
Keep me close.

**EXT. TARBORO TRAIN DEPOT - MORNING**

Bustling train station, passengers brave the downpour. A  
station sign identifies it as 'TARBORO, NORTH CAROLINA.'

BLACK PORTERS use umbrellas to shelter some Caucasians.  
As well as George White: *black man with a black servant.*

**INT. PULLMAN CAR - ATLANTIC COAST - DAY**

Train at speed. White, in decadent Pullman car, reviews  
paperwork. Pulls a cigar, checks jacket for a match.  
CAUCASIAN BUSINESSMAN offers a light. White, convivial,  
offers a cigar in return.

WHITE

George White, county solicitor.

CAUCASIAN BUSINESSMAN

I know, I voted for you. My first  
for a black man. And proud I did.  
(beat) Got a case out of state?

WHITE

South Carolina. Man on the lam.

CAUCASIAN BUSINESSMAN

Hmm. Watch your back down there.  
'Dem Carolinians ain't done so  
well *reconciling* with their  
Negroes, if you know what I mean.

WHITE

Thanks. Not worried. Palmetto  
boys always figure things out...

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WHITE (CONT'D)

(jokes)

After finding every conceivable way to get it wrong *first*.

Businessman smiles, they puff their cigars.

**EXT. COLOMBIA TRAIN STATION - AFTERNOON**

White disembarks the train in South Carolina, nods to businessman as they part.

**INT. LAW OFFICES - COLOMBIA, SOUTH CAROLINA - DAY**

Cold tension. White and a LAW CLERK in a small office.

WHITE

Your boss and I have a meeting.  
This is unacceptable.

LAW CLERK

Sir, you don't understand,  
*everyone's* at the Convention. New  
state constitution being voted on.  
White-man assembly is tryin' to...  
(as if unspeakable)  
*Take black voting rights away.*

Clerk points out window to STATE CAPITOL, huge crowds.

**INT. SOUTH CAROLINA STATE HOUSE - AFTERNOON**

White enters state house viewing gallery. Stifling heat, horde of strident ASSEMBLYMEN on chamber floor below. 'Gavel' from dais barely heard, so ASSEMBLY LEADER yells.

ASSEMBLY LEADER

Amendment on deck imposes a \$1.50  
tax on all South Carolina voters!

'Ayes' roar from all-Caucasian assemblymen.

But not from the NEGRO SECTION of the gallery. Gathered BLACKS bellow in response. Assembly leader pounds gavel.

ASSEMBLY LEADER (CONT'D)

Negros in the gallery will be  
silent! Voice vote is in the  
affirmative. Amendment agreed to.

Blacks 'gasp' and cry. Centered in the group is a hefty BLACK ATTORNEY. He sees White, leaps up, races over.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BLACK ATTORNEY

George? Dear God. I was sure you  
wouldn't make it in. So sorry!

Attorney obsequiously shakes White's hand as he arrives.

BLACK ATTORNEY (CONT'D)

It's a travesty. Democrats signed  
with dumb, white mountain folk,  
ran the election. Gonna strip my  
state constitution of every right  
we fought for. What can we do?

WHITE

How about *leave*. You've a client  
to defend.

BLACK ATTORNEY

Excuse me?

WHITE

You're wasting our time. (beat) I  
see blowhards here preening for  
the press -- what do you see?  
Trust a wise man, this will all  
blow over by next week.

BLACK ATTORNEY

What're you talking about? Which  
wise man says that -- *you*?

WHITE

Two years of travel in the South,  
meeting governors, aldermen, and  
all between. I promise, they'll  
bellow in public, but behind  
closed doors they know there's no  
going back. See the soul of your  
enemy and he can be your enemy no  
more. How do we hold our rights?  
Let them know us. Do our work.  
Prove we're as worthy as the next  
man. So please, let's go.

Attorney, stunned. White, empathetic, waves him along.

BLACK ATTORNEY

You're running for Congress again.  
(White takes pause)  
Got the stump speech down. That's  
why you don't want be seen here.

WHITE

You're crafty. Should've had you  
on my last campaign.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

BLACK ATTORNEY

Seriously. I heard about that race riot you settled, *ex-Reb generals* calling you a hero. Let me help. I've a man I been dying to introduce you to for years.

CAUCASIAN ASSEMBLYMAN (O.S.)

Damn it, Smalls!

BLACK ATTORNEY

(glances back)

Speak of the devil, Robert Smalls.

And we see him, for the first time in decades. Gunboat escapee SMALLS, now 56, looks horrible, fat and grey, like a feral rodent. He reaches down from the gallery balcony with a cane, knocks the hat off a boyish CAUCASIAN ASSEMBLYMAN. Assemblyman bats the stick away.

SMALLS (B.G.)

Is the assembly speaker gonna let me talk to him or not?

CAUCASIAN ASSEMBLYMAN (B.G.)

You're not getting the harbor job! Don't make me call the constable.

BLACK ATTORNEY

(leans in)

They took his state job away last week, gave it to a fat cat. He's a Civil War hero, *ex-four-term* congressmen. He needs a new gig.

WHITE

You're forgetting 'corrupt.' I know who Robert Smalls is. Now get off it. I'm not running.

BLACK ATTORNEY

But he built a tighter political machine than any Negro since -- you must agree with that. Look, you're a pain in my ass as a prosecutor, George. But pleading our case in Washington... you'd be an even mightier pain in *theirs*.

Attorney waves White along. White eyes Smalls from afar.

WE JOIN SMALLS: as he shoves across the gallery, heads to a spiral stairway descending to Assembly floor.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

BLACK ATTORNEY (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Bob, look who I brought!

Smalls slows, sees attorney leading White, clearly wary.

BLACK ATTORNEY (CONT'D)

The young Turk I told you about.  
George White, North Carolina  
solicitor. *Caucasians* flock to  
his private law practice. And  
he's a proud father of two. Lost  
last year's nomination only cause  
of some nasty back room politics.  
He could use a *campaign manager*.

A momentary silence. So White reaches to shake hands.

WHITE

All exaggerations. But an honor  
to meet an old lion. Sorry it's  
to the backdrop of this assembly.

Smalls ignores the gesture, ignores White altogether.  
Black attorney grows worried.

SMALLS

Your suit is silk.

WHITE

Uh, from a nice Parisian tailor in  
Pittsburgh. I can introduce you.

SMALLS

I wear a cotton suit. Made a mile  
from home. By a black tailor.  
(direct to attorney)  
Answer is no, I ain't gonna mentor  
him. Democrat-run Congress will  
hang this twit by the scrotum.

Smalls continues for stairway, White's hand in mid-air.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

Let's see *him* try and get my  
clerkship back.

Attorney tries to stop Smalls. Too late.

BLACK ATTORNEY

Oh, George, that was... I'm so...

White turns for the exit.

BLACK ATTORNEY (CONT'D)

George, wait. Robert. Gentlemen!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

WE JOIN SMALLS: Smalls descends to the Assembly floor. The young assemblyman sees him, timidly blocks his path. Smalls lurches threateningly -- assemblyman leaps back.

Now a CONSTABLE stops Smalls. So Smalls calls out.

SMALLS

Mr. Speaker! I wish to submit an amendment!

(cool response)

Rules allow citizen initiatives. Aren't I still a citizen?!

Murmurs and catcalls. Leader sighs, pounds gavel.

ASSEMBLY LEADER

Fine. Present the damn amendment.

White hears this by the exit, slows. Ears perk across hall. White sees attorney hurrying to him.

SMALLS (B.G.)

It seems patently clear your new constitution aims to strip voting rights from Negroes of this state.

(Caucasians hoot)

And I say to that, fine, let it be. Take our vote!

Caucasians fall silent, confused. Now black audience lurches, *what is Smalls doing?* White waits at the door, annoyed but increasingly curious. Attorney arrives.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

But I offer this in addition.

That no man more than one-eighth Negro, or person who cohabits with someone more than one-eighth Negro be allowed to hold public office.

'Cries' from blacks in gallery. Gavel 'pounds.'

ASSEMBLY LEADER

Quiet! Mr. Smalls, do I hear right, you ask to block Negroes from ever holding public office?

SMALLS

All men even *part* Negro, yes. And men who'd dare live with a Negro.

CAUCASIAN ASSEMBLYMEN (VARIOUS)

Nigger's lost his mind! (another)  
Fine, let him give up his hide!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (5)

But White, brow furrowed, is now completely engrossed.

WHITE  
Tricky son of a bitch.

BLACK ATTORNEY  
What's he doing?

SMALLS  
See, if a colored ever improperly  
approached a white woman, his  
body'd be hangin' from a tree by  
morn'. Perhaps rightfully so.  
But shouldn't the same apply on  
the other side? Can any of us  
entrust leadership to white men  
who'd... bed a Negro dame?

Sudden silence amongst Caucasians.

SMALLS (CONT'D)  
(drips sarcasm)  
Oh wait. Do some of you got black  
belly-warmers? Maybe even a black  
woman slave, secretly, as your  
grandma? Course you do. There's  
no man in this room, no man in the  
entire South 100% pure blood.

Unanimous screams of anger, Smalls yells to be heard.

SMALLS (CONT'D)  
You're hypocrites! We's all part-  
Negro! Apply your hatred equally,  
and this convention would adjourn  
*sine die* for lack of a quorum!

Nearby Caucasian lunges violently at Smalls, is held  
back. Smalls points at young assemblyman nemesis.

SMALLS (CONT'D)  
I want my clerkship back, shitbag.

White wears a look of amazement.

**INT. PULLMAN CAR - ATLANTIC COAST - AFTERNOON**

'Train whistle.' White reclines in his seat as Pullman  
car barrels north. Lost in thought, no work this time.

A 10-year-old NEWSBOY passes in the aisle, calls out.

NEWSIE  
Disgraced ex-congressman causes  
uproar at convention!

White glances, sees the headline:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

NEW STATE CONSTITUTION RATIFIED

NEWSIE (CONT'D)

Carolina blacks... lost the vote.

White sits back, heavy heart, feels it in his bones.

CONDUCTOR (B.G.)

Richmond. Richmond, Virginia.  
You're on the Atlantic Zephyr to  
Washington -- all aboard!

Train enters station. White drags himself to the exit.  
Nearly out, the young newsie tugs on his shirt.

NEWSIE

Mr., aren't you going to  
Washington? For the funeral? All  
the rest of us on the train are.

White, confused. So newsie points at newspaper:

FREDERICK DOUGLASS DEAD; FAMOUS NEGRO  
ABOLITIONIST TO BE BURIED IN DC

**EXT. BLACK ATTORNEY'S HOUSE - NIGHT**

'Knock' at the front door. South Carolina black attorney  
glances out, opens up, finds Smalls on the craggy porch.

SMALLS

Dark tonight, isn't it? We lose  
our vote. Now I find out, they're  
keeping my clerkship.

BLACK ATTORNEY

I heard, I'm sorry. (beat) I's  
tryin' to help with George White.  
You say you want back in politics.

SMALLS

I want in politics. Why would I  
tie my sail to some greenhorn?!

BLACK ATTORNEY

You're a bit long in the tooth to  
be doing it on your own, Bob.

SMALLS

(put off)  
Want to help? I'll tell you how.  
A law matter. I had a boat, long  
ago. C.S.S. Planter. Captured  
from the Confederate Navy in '62.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BLACK ATTORNEY

The ship from your famous escape.

SMALLS

Union commandeered it. Stole it.  
Now I recall hearing once that  
cause *I* captured it, by law of the  
sea, I'm still its rightful owner.

(guarded)

Been a rough spell recently. I  
could use my boat back. I'm off  
to DC for the Douglas memorial.  
Thought I might stop at the War  
Department. So... got any advice?

(cuts attorney off)

*Pro bono*, damn it.

Attorney smiles, amused by the prescient penny-pinching.

**EXT. WASHINGTON DC - DAY**

We soar above 19th Century Washington DC, still half  
swampland. TRACK IN ON...

**I/E. METROPOLITAN AFRICAN METHODIST CHURCH - CONTINUOUS**

A massive Methodist cathedral. George White exits a  
carriage. Line of MOURNERS extends around the block.  
White greets black VIPs outside, knows many of them. He  
lights up as he sees old friend TOM FORTUNE.

WHITE

Miracle of miracles. The editor  
steps out of the newsroom and the  
presses keep running.

TOM FORTUNE

I do got a life outside work.  
Good to see you, George.

(glances aside)

Lord, look who else had to come.  
The whole damn Supreme Court.

Both men watch FIVE JUSTICES exit ornate carriages.

INSIDE: White and Tom enter the packed church. Mourners  
surround the open casket. About to sit, White sees...

Robert Smalls. Smalls enters alone, awkward. He focuses  
on Fredrick Douglas' WIDOW by the casket, slithers over.  
Supreme Court Justices a few steps behind.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

TOM FORTUNE (CONT'D)

(re: Smalls)

You're staring like you know him.  
(beat) Is he who I think he is?  
First class of Negro congressmen?

White nods. Suddenly, ushers stop Smalls. He signals Mrs. Douglas. She glances, and surprisingly IGNORES HIM, greets Justices instead.

TOM FORTUNE (CONT'D)

Damn how they age. Don't ever  
become such a has-been, George.

White frowns, feels a tinge of sympathy as Smalls bruised ego burns bright. 'Thunder clap' rings out, and-

**EXT. METROPOLITAN AFRICAN METHODIST CHURCH - AFTERNOON**

We find ourselves in a rainstorm. White on the corner, tires to flag a livery.

He notices across the street, Smalls doing the same. Gazes connect. But both men quickly look away. Downpour worsens. A carriage nears. White 'whistles,' cart stops. White climbs in as he calls to the DRIVER.

WHITE

Going to Union Station-

SMALLS (O.S.)

Union Station and a stop on  
the way-

Smalls, opposite side of the coach, climbing in as well.  
Driver not sure what to do.

**EXT. WASHINGTON DC - STREETS - A MOMENT LATER**

The pair share a ride, sit silently opposite each other. Smalls stares out the window, White 'drums' his fingers.

SMALLS

(re: White drumming)

You moonlighting as a musician?

White balls a fist. Again, no one speaks.

WHITE

Did you sleep with her?

Now Smalls turns.

SMALLS

*Come again.*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WHITE

Did you *sleep* with Mrs. Douglas?  
I saw that wounded cold shoulder  
she gave, I know you early  
congressmen were a bunch of hound  
dogs. Come on, spill the beans.

SMALLS

Kid, you're crossing a line. If  
anyone needs pitying... it was fat  
fart Frederick. *No one* slept with  
Helena. She was wadded up tighter  
than Joan of Arc.

Smalls smiles. Suddenly, he 'pounds' to alert DRIVER.  
They stop at 'U.S. DEPARTMENT OF WAR.' White, surprised.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

Gotta make a stop, as I said.  
Bureaucrats keeps lousy business  
hours. Come in if you like.  
(beat) You know, I think I *enjoy*  
seeing you speak truth to power.

**INT. DEPARTMENT OF WAR - EVENING**

FILE PHOTOGRAPH OF CSS PLANTER (the boat Smalls stole)  
lies on the desk of a VETERAN AFFAIRS ACCOUNTANT.

VA ACCOUNTANT

(reviews file)

CSS Planter. Delivered to Union  
Navy, 1862. Currently, mothballed  
at the Norfolk naval station.

Smalls sits across the desk. White, awkward in rear.

SMALLS

George, come see. It's everything  
you read about in history books.

WHITE

The books aren't going anywhere.  
My *train* is.

SMALLS

Forget the train. Wait a few  
days, and I'll sail you home.

VA ACCOUNTANT

You say you're owed... *custody*?

Smalls proudly offers a legal memo from his bag.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SMALLS

*The Union Navy shall bequeath  
defectors any arms delivered.*  
U.S. Code, section two. You gave  
white defectors the property they  
arrived with, but *for some reason*,  
not me. I's told to come back  
with legal standing. Here I am.

VA ACCOUNTANT

The VA stopped processing section  
two claims 10 years ago.

SMALLS

Right. I been askin' for 30.

VA ACCOUNTANT

But the claims process is over.  
You see? Nothing I can do.

SMALLS

(guarded from White)  
Enough of this. I'm owed. Want  
to play tough? Dare me to sic my  
lawyer on your office, dare me.  
(accountant unmoved)  
Okay, alright, just let me see my  
boat. That too much? Been so  
*long*, I just want on board, c'mon.

VA ACCOUNTANT

(putting file away)  
You can file a standard grievance.

SMALLS

Are you deaf -- it's my ship. I'm  
a war hero. Buffalo soldiers sing  
songs about me. If I can't be  
treated fairly, no one can.

VA ACCOUNTANT

Us fighting a four-year war for  
y'all wasn't fair enough?

A moment. Smalls lunges, grabs accountant. White leaps  
to pull him back... Smalls storms out. White, stunned.

**EXT. DEPARTMENT OF WAR - A MOMENT LATER**

White finds Smalls outside in the plaza. Smalls pushes  
him away as he approaches.

WHITE

Not exactly the 'art of politic.'

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Smalls, overcome, loses his balance -- White catches him. The old man slinks, the first time revealing fragility.

WHITE (CONT'D)

It's about fairness. I get it.

Smalls, a sense of tragic self-pity, *the boat worth so much more than White knows.*

He sits himself on a bench. Gazes off at the misty U.S. CAPITOL BUILDING, electric lights flickering aglow.

SMALLS

Meet a goal in life and you want to move onto the next one... who knew, 60 years on, I'd be pining for the same thing, over and over.

(eyes the Capitol)

My first steps under that rotunda, staid politicians eyed us like whales walking on land. Us Negro congressmen we're vanguards. Where's the honor now? Think I'll ever command a funeral as large as Frederick's?

WHITE

That's not your fault. Leaders rise in times that demand them. Mr. Douglas had us in the War. If our lives have been good since then, I only say, thank God.

SMALLS

Son, you're blind. I came to DC with seven blacks. How many serve today? Not a one. Don't tell me all's fine. I was born a slave, I'll die one too. White America left our pockets inside-out.

WHITE

Cause they saw blacks like you in power.

Silence as Smalls faces White. White knows he just went too far. But he has to get this off his chest.

WHITE (CONT'D)

I'm sorry, but you had your shot. You pissed it away. My peers all believed you had a vision once. But sold it for an easy dollar.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

SMALLS

(honestly curious)

*What* do your peers say?

WHITE

Really want to know? They say, *I* say, a better future is ours to win. Want to talk history? Don't look back 30 years, look back 300. Black men sailed to America on the same ships as Columbus. Pilgrims barely survived their first winter while we tilled green fields in Florida. We aren't some foreign people clamoring for aid. We are America. What we need is a generation to stand up and act like it. Gain two college degrees like I did. Work 14 hours a day instead of begging for our acres and a mule. I'll serve beside whites not because I want to be *liked* by them, but so they see I'm *like them*. Emancipation is had, the country is united, but the people aren't. Want a vision for leadership? Harmony. Show a man who offers that, who can guide us to the Jericho ahead, and he'll *deserve* the finest funeral.

White pounds the bench, as though possessed.

SMALLS

Run for Congress, I misjudged you.  
(White scoffs)  
Be that man. Be the next *Lincoln*.

WHITE

You mean a leader, or *dead*?

SMALLS

Your Jericho won't arrive on its own. We let down our guard and -- look at me -- they just claw back our every win. Move us forward. Become our people's voice.

WHITE

Our people need to stand and speak for themselves.

SMALLS

They're too beaten down to stand. They need to be carried.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

Silence. White reaches out... to shake hands goodbye.

WHITE

Mr. Smalls, thank you. But I'm not the man you want. I care too much about real change, to risk being sullied by this town.

SMALLS

Kid, you don't strike me as one to be dirtied by politics. What I'd fear... is that thing inside of you which insists on wearing a *white man's suit*.

(hands White a paper)

My address. Write.

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S TARBORO HOME - MORNING**

White's North Carolina home. Snow flurry whips outside.

In the kitchen, White's wife Cora multi-tasks. Puts on a smock-like factory uniform, pulls COOKIES from an oven, packs lunch for their kids. Lanky son GEORGE JR., 7, traipses in, reaches for a cookie. Cora slaps his hand.

Jr. 'hmpfs.' He pulls a Sears Catalog from his book bag, puts it on the counter. Cora sees ITEMS CIRCLED IN RED.

CORA

Jr., what is this?

GEORGE JR.

Christmas list.

Jr. sits at the table, ready for a piping hot breakfast.

CORA

Here you go, sweetie. Here's what you're getting for Christmas.

Cora hands him the SEARS CATALOG PAYMENT ENVELOPE.

Jr. pouts. As older sister DELLA, 16, bounds in.

DELLA

(whispers to Jr.)

Hey, dodo. Watch and learn.

(beat) Mama! You're workin' too hard. I'll finish making lunch.

Della gives Cora a big hug. Cora, clearly stressed, eases into her daughter's arms. While Della stealthily reaches behind Cora's back, *takes a cookie*, winks at Jr.-

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WHITE (O.S.)

Better grab me one too.

Family members freeze, Della looks back to the doorway-

GEORGE JR.

Papa!

Father is home. Jr. runs, jumps into White's arms. Dish towel falls from Cora's hands.

White faces Cora. Lowers Jr. Husband and wife embrace. Embrace turns sexual. Della *gets the message*.

DELLA

Uh, Jr. and I best get to school.

(parents distracted)

Yeah. Jr., come on.

Della pulls her kid brother out, he does not understand.

Now alone, White kisses Cora up and down.

CORA

I have to go to the mill.

WHITE

Be a little late.

CORA

Work is work. I need to...

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S TARBORO HOME - BEDROOM - DAY**

White and Cora make love in the bedroom, too long apart. Sensuous. And in climax, Cora pulls White even closer.

They settle on top of each other, White strokes her face.

CORA

I want you close forever.

CORA WINCES, rubs her forehead.

WHITE

What? Gosh, was I that rusty?

(beat) It's the headache again, isn't it? I'll get you a Madeira.

White drags himself out of bed, dresses at the armoire.

CORA

I'm fine. Just a pang.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Cora tries to stop him, but White is already committed. She sighs, gathers White's dirty clothes. His wallet falls, along with a slip of paper.

White turns to see... Cora holding SMALLS' ADDRESS.

CORA (CONT'D)

*The Robert Smalls? The old crook?*

WHITE

*(groans)*

*The naive, lonely, estranged-from-his-kids Robert Smalls. Yes*

CORA

*And?*

WHITE

*And... why do I have his address? Cause he had the wild idea of riding my coattails back to DC.*

White smiles, kisses Cora, reaches for the paper.

CORA

*Do it.*

*(White, surprised)*

*How much convincing do you need?*

WHITE

*Great. You're taking his side.*

CORA

*I'm taking *my* side. I've been haranguing you to run again.*

WHITE

*Yes, you've been very supportive.*

White tries to end the conversation. But not a chance.

WHITE (CONT'D)

*Honey, we can't have it both ways. I go on my solicitor trips and you tell me to stay. I come home and you taunt me to do more. The hell am I supposed to think?! Look, our firm is finally doing well. Kids are in school. You've been having these awful head pains. Why would I put you through more stress?*

CORA

*So refusing this is for me?*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

WHITE

Absolutely.

CORA

Just like the electric lights?

White, now upset, dismisses her with a wave.

CORA (CONT'D)

I whine about the solicitor job because *you* call it a consolation prize, *you* wanted more. How do we come so far and give up now?

WHITE

Because I know how much we'd lose it I keep pushing! The party respects me. I ask for more, and I become another Robert Smalls.

CORA

(quieted, weighted)  
George... you're scared.

WHITE

Of giving up our success? Yes.  
(beat) Now damn it, I'm getting your Madeira.

White grabs Smalls' address from Cora -- throws it out.

**I/E. MILGRAM'S COTTON MILL - AFTERNOON**

'Steam horn' signals end of the day at the mill. Hot SUMMERTIME now, black women WORKERS shut off their looms.

CARD:

MAY 1896 -- TARBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

6 MONTHS LATER

Cora, jovial, exits the plant with friends. She waves to Caucasian plant owner MR. MILGRAM outside the main gate.

CORA

See you on Monday, Mr. Milgram!

Mr. Milgram's response is unusually dour.

BLACK CO-WORKER

Oh, Mother Mary, look at that.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Mr. Milgram's dour mood is because... he oversees staff washing off a graffiti drawing of a HANGING BLACK MAN.

**EXT. GEORGE WHITE'S TARBORO HOME - AFTERNOON**

Cora arrives home with George Jr. As Jr. runs in, she notices a waiting TELEGRAM on the porch.

**EXT. TARBORO STREETS - A MOMENT LATER**

Cora races a 'safety' bicycle across Tarboro, wearing a nasty frown. Arrives at an office on Main Street.

Sign: 'GEORGE WHITE ESQ. LAW.'

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S LAW OFFICES - CONTINUOUS**

Inside his office, White meets laconically with clients.

WHITE

...the thing is, your neighbor calling your blue-ribbon sow 'ugly,' isn't actually a crime.

CORA (O.S.)

George, you tight-lipped rat! How far into a congressional run you plan to go before telling me?!

White, awkward, as Cora storms in.

WHITE

(to clients)  
I'm sorry, I don't know what this-

CORA

Don't apologize to them. They know their lawyer has corn kernels for balls!

WHITE

Honey, what are you talking about?

Clients awkwardly excuse themselves. Cora caustically hands White the TELEGRAM.

CORA

Your confirmation to speak at the *Republican National Convention*. I'm your partner. And you turn to *Robert Smalls* instead?!

White takes the telegram, brow furrows as he reads it.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CORA (CONT'D)

What? Don't tell me he did this  
without you knowing.

White looks up, fazed, marches out of the office to his  
curious LAW CLERKS.

WHITE

I'm going to Western Union!

CORA

He *did*. Wow.

Cora catches up with White, pulls him aside in the hall.

CORA (CONT'D)

Sweetie, relax a second. This  
opportunity is being offered on a  
platter. Let's think it through.

WHITE

(putting it together)  
Smalls is using me.

CORA

So use *him*. Take the invite, say  
thanks, and then ride this wave  
he's put you on.

(silence)

Don't dismiss me. You know better  
from your trips than I do -- Jim  
Crow is spreading. Swept South  
Carolina. He'll sweep our state  
too. Take our home. Jobs. Rob  
Jr. and Della of their futures.  
Tarboro is a bubble. How long can  
we keep hiding? (beat) *Guaranteed  
right to vote*, the law we've  
waited on for 30 years. You could  
be the one to finally win it. I  
know there's a cost. The children  
absolutely need protection. Red  
shirt racists will holler fury.  
But I don't see another black man  
with your opportunity. And that's  
a challenge we can't ignore.

WHITE

A *voting law*? Impossible.

CORA

Not impossible. We all just been  
too lazy to ask.

A moment. White sees the whole law firm watching them.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

CORA (CONT'D)  
Make the speech, George.

**EXT. ST. LOUIS - DOWNTOWN - DAY**

We find ourselves in an empty St. Louis intersection.

MASSIVE CROWD appears on main boulevard carrying banners that read: 'VOTE HOBART.' LARGER CROWD emerges opposite them, their banners read: 'MCKINLEY FOR PRESIDENT.' Two sides collide like rival armies, but a war of words.

**INT. ST. LOUIS CONVENTION HALL - DAY**

A temporary wood structure built for the convention brims with GOP delegates, dim but for magnesium camera flashes. White and Cora enter, well-dressed.

AIDE (O.S.)  
Solicitor White! Over here.

White sees an AIDE through the crowd. Aide escorts them.

AIDE (CONT'D)  
I'll take you to the stage. We'll stop at the press pool first. The trip in okay? See all the damage from last month's tornado?

WHITE  
What press pool? I was told I wasn't speaking until Sunday.

AIDE  
They bumped you to a better slot. With the *other congressmen*.

White, unnerved. But Cora proudly FIXES HIS COLLAR.

**INT. ST. LOUIS CONVENTION HALL - PRESS ROOM - CONTINUOUS**

In a smoky room, REPORTERS with their sleeves rolled up have White cornered. Cora steadfastly observes.

WHITE  
It's George White, W-H-I-T-E.

REPORTER  
That's gonna confuse the readers.

White feigns amusement. Reporter JOSEPHUS DANIELS, 39.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DANIELS

Mr. White, Josephus Daniels, News-

WHITE

(interrupting)

Wilmington News and Courier, I know who you are. You were no fan of mine in the solicitor race.

DANIELS

Still not. You have front billing tonight, but my readers know where this leads. Every two years GOP trots out some new Negro, rallies black voters, then dumps him like rotten cod. How're you different?

WHITE

I'm not.

Silence. Cigar hangs from Daniels' mouth.

WHITE (CONT'D)

Next question?

(reporters clamor)

Look, gentlemen, I'm likely more surprised by the hoopla than you. Yes, some party members take black votes for granted, but *my* goals aren't tied to those cynics. I want what the people want -- a new era. A day when we no longer talk about race. So if any politician thinks he can use me to maintain the status quo, they're in for...

(White, distracted)

Shoot. Excuse me, gentlemen.

White stands, hurries off. Reporters thrown, compelled.

REPORTER

*How* do you spell his name?

AS ACROSS THE ROOM, WE JOIN...

Robert Smalls, his eye on White this whole time, and now confidently waiting as White marches to him.

WHITE

He finally shows his face.

SMALLS

Sound smart for rotten cod.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

WHITE  
(deadly serious)  
What do you want from me?

SMALLS  
Well, a friendly 'hello' to start.  
(White is humorless)  
I want a new era. Same thing as  
you. Just sooner. Believe me, if  
my intent were less worthy, I'd of  
picked a much dumber man.

White, guard up, looks back to see CORA WATCHING,  
thronged by reporters. He faces Smalls.

SMALLS (CONT'D)  
Go speak truth to power.

'Cheers' of raucous crowd swells in the hall as...

**INT. ST. LOUIS CONVENTION HALL - BACKSTAGE - CONTINUOUS**

A SPEAKER whips convention crowd into a frenzy as White  
waits offstage. Suddenly, aide shoves him up steps into-

ARC-GAS SPOTLIGHTS. White squints to see. Nothing but  
Caucasian faces. Loud clamor. He slowly begins.

WHITE  
This... is an important moment.

Audience, distracted. White pauses, dispirited.

CROWD (B.G.)  
Speak up! (another) Negro, what?!

White sees CORA FAR IN THE DISTANCE. And refocuses.

WHITE  
This is an important moment! You  
today will choose the man who  
leads us into the 20th Century.  
You, today, will write history!

With White's heightened energy, a few attendees look up.

**INT. ST. LOUIS CONVENTION HALL - CONTINUOUS**

White continues (inaudible). We join Smalls backstage as  
he hobbles towards an active group. In the center is  
WILLIAM MCKINLEY (the man soon to be elected President).

But Republican bigwig MARK HANNA blocks Smalls' path.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MARK HANNA

He can't talk to you, Bob.

SMALLS

What time does our Presidential nominee go on? How about a cameo with Mr. White?

MARK HANNA

Not a chance.

SMALLS

Hanna, how many Negro voters you got in Ohio? How many Negro hands has McKinley ever shook? And how many southern blacks does your man need to win the White House, hmm? Let's help each other.

**INT. ST. LOUIS CONVENTION HALL - AUDIENCE - CONTINUOUS**

We JOIN CORA in the audience as crowd's enthusiasm grows.

WHITE (B.G.)

Our new Century begins with a new American vision! It is time this party lays old battles to rest. There will always be a north and south. But need not be a North *against* South, Republican *against* Democrat, nor black against white.

Crowd cheers, Cora glances about, honestly thrilled.

CORA

*They're listening.*

Suddenly, someone sits beside her. Smalls. Grinning, he pins a 'VOTE GEORGE WHITE' button on her blouse.

CORA (CONT'D)

You're Robert Smalls.

SMALLS

You married a very special man. In many ways, your job must be harder than his. His success depends on *your* strength.

Cora eyes the button, eyes Smalls. Suddenly, RAPTUROUS APPLAUSE, as on stage...

McKinley bounds in, soaks up cheers. White, beaming, as the nominee shakes his hand, calls to the audience.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MCKINLEY

George H. White! The next  
congressman from North Carolina!

WITH CORA: cheers double. Cora, wary, overhears nearby  
VIPs (denoted VIP by their roped-off section).

VIP 1 (B.G.)

Hell, rather have *him* on the  
ticket than Hobart.

VIP 2 (B.G.)

Don't joke. I hear in four yeas,  
McKinley might actually offer a  
Negro the vice presidential slot.

Cora, prideful, torn. Casts her suspicions on Smalls.

CORA

Mr. Smalls, my husband is a very  
special man. What path he takes  
will be for the best of our  
family, and our people. Don't  
dare push otherwise. I'll know.

Smalls, struck by her intensity. She stands, pockets the  
'GEORGE WHITE' pin, leaves. 'Applause' swell.

**INT. ST. LOUIS CONVENTION HALL - BACKSTAGE - CONTINUOUS**

White follows McKinley offstage. Hanna meets him.

HANNA

Not bad, son, not bad. Hear those  
cheers? Best part of politics!

Hanna pats White, exits with McKinley's entourage. The  
press suddenly surrounds White, call for his attention.  
White, flustered. Josephus Daniels grabs him.

DANIELS

News and Courier ain't endorsed a  
Republican before. But there's  
always gotta be a first. Guess  
that's how a Negro lasts more than  
two years, talk like a white man!  
Wish there were more of you.

WHITE

There are. Try and listen.

White pulls away, searching. Sees the AIDE.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WHITE (CONT'D)

Hey, you, where's my wife?!

**EXT. ST. LOUIS CONVENTION HALL - A MOMENT LATER**

Cora forces her way outside. Across the lawn, she sees White, alone, smoking a cigar in a brooding haze. Cora hurries over. He squashes the cigar as she nears.

CORA

I was looking everywhere  
for you.

WHITE

A law to protect black  
voters?

CORA

(pauses, uneasy)

We can get there... I know so. I  
just saw what you're capable of.

Silence. Cora bites her lip... turns back for the hall.

WHITE

Where are you going?

CORA

To end it. I'm cruel and a fool.  
You made up your mind long ago.

WHITE

Cora, stop. (beat) I was so sure  
they'd turn against me. But that  
audience was colorblind. Like  
I've never seen. They want this  
message. (beat) I should run?

Cora slowly, unavoidably, smiles.

WHITE (CONT'D)

One term. One term to make the  
argument. Prove there can be  
progress. If by next election, we  
don't have a strong voting law on  
the table, then I was never the  
one to do it. I'll resign.

CORA

You'll do it. No half-measures.  
I'll be with you for every step.

WHITE

With you at my side. With you at  
my side, I can run.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

White strokes her face. Partners in every sense.

SMASH CUT TO:

**EXT. WASHINGTON DC - DAY**

Marching band plays 'Hail to the Chief.' Celebration on Pennsylvania Ave. Now *President* McKinley leads a parade.

CARD:

MARCH 1897 -- WASHINGTON DC

INAUGURATION DAY

**INT. ROBERT SMALLS BEAUFORT HOME - CONTINUOUS**

We join Smalls in his coastal South Carolina home. He dresses, combs in pomade, eats ham -- normal AM routine. But when virginal black HOUSEBOY, 17, arrives, Smalls is still at the breakfast table, eyeing an unopened LETTER.

SMALLS' HOUSEBOY

Morning, sir. Got the horse glue  
for your scrapbook...

(notices letter)

Oh no. Is it from the bank?

SMALLS

Read it to me.

Smalls sits back stroking an ORANGE TABBY CAT. Houseboy takes letter, turns grim as he looks it over.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

They want my house?

Houseboy, silent. Smalls shoos his cat, shoves away breakfast dishes, and walks out.

SMALLS (B.G.) (CONT'D)

Take dictation.

Houseboy caught off guard, chases after Smalls.

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S DC TOWNHOUSE - CONTINUOUS**

Cora leads the family into their new DC townhouse, a rental brimming with dust and draped furniture.

CORA

Kids, go choose your new rooms.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Cora urges Della and Jr. along. White finds a LETTER by the door, picks it up. From 'ROBERT SMALLS.'

**EXT. WASHINGTON DC - STREETS - CONTINUOUS**

White and Cora in a carriage, dressed for a celebration. Inaugural parade seen on parallel streets. White reads Smalls' letter aloud.

WHITE

'Dear, George. On this, the first day of your congressional term, as a seasoned veteran, please accept my few gems of wisdom: time is fleeting, relationships are your currency, loyalty is paramount. But now, having opened this door, I do extend one request...'

White silently reads ahead, glances at Cora. Cora, wary.

CORA

And now he asks for the keys to the kingdom, right?

WHITE

'Use me. I'm here to help.'

End of letter. Cora groans.

WHITE (CONT'D)

You're very hard on him. Just think of Smalls as an in-law. A handful at times, but a gift when once a week he takes the kids.

CORA

Hmm. Good analogy actually. I always worried your mother wanted to unseat me in a palace coup.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - CONTINUOUS**

White and Cora's footsteps echo across the U.S. Capitol's soaring rotunda. They enter, all alone, both in awe.

CORA

Remember this moment.

White lovingly squeezes Cora's hand. Suddenly, APPLAUSE. SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE THOMAS REED, 58, approaches with an entourage, clapping. He reaches to greet Cora first.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SPEAKER REED

Madame, an honor. Thomas Reed,  
Speaker of the House.

(turns to White)

At least we don't gotta worry  
about you cavorting with  
mistresses -- you'll never do  
better than her! (beat) Our party  
finally has the White House and  
both chambers of congress -- you  
arrived at the right time, son.  
Anything I or the leadership can  
do, say it. You're one of us now.

Reed hits the point home with a wink, trucks along before  
White can get a word in. White and Cora, wide-eyed.

Murmurs now from across rotunda. White sees uniformed  
BLACK GROUNDS PEOPLE gathering. They light up as he  
waves. Black CUSTODIAN opens a double door to...

THE HOUSE CHAMBERS. White smiles broadly. Leads Cora  
towards the magic room, pauses in the doorway.

WHITE

Come on. Everyone, join us.

But custodian steps back.

CUSTODIAN

No Negroes allowed. Congressmen  
excepted, of course.

WHITE

You're kidding. Forget that.  
That changes, right now.

CUSTODIAN

We's just listen on the public  
audiophone. Best that way.

Custodian flicks a switch in rotunda, a PA SQUEALS.

White eyes the black grounds people, saddened. None will  
follow him in. *None will take risks.*

**INT. ROBERT SMALLS BEAUFORT HOME - DAY**

WE SEE SMALLS FROM ABOVE quietly assembling a SCRAPBOOK  
at his kitchen table. ALL SELF-LAUDATORY MEMENTOES.

He glances rearward, checks he is alone, turns to a  
photo: himself on his boat, the Planter, young and proud.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Smalls opens a wood case, removes a BROWN VILE and WIRE MESH MASK (this is the narcotic anesthetic, ETHER). His cat hops onto the table. He dips his mask in the drug, presses it to his face, delicately inhales, touches the Planter photo in a fetishistic way, eyes roll in ecstasy.

SMALLS' HOUSEBOY (O.S.)

Telegram from Mr. White-

Smalls drops the ether, houseboy freezes at the door.

SMALLS' HOUSEBOY (CONT'D)

Sir...

SMALLS

Get out.

SMALLS' HOUSEBOY (CONT'D)

The dope. Again? How could you?

(beat) What does Pastor Long say?

SMALLS

Get out!

Smalls throws the ether, houseboy ducks, bottle shatters.

SMALLS' HOUSEBOY

(reads telegram)

'Dear Robert. Cora is overtaxed. I fear I've asked too much of her and my family. It seems I could in fact use a veteran's wisdom.'

(beat) He wants you in DC. Good! I've had enough of caring for you!

SMALLS

You call this care?!

Houseboy slaps telegram on table, exits. Smalls chases.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

Good. Go! You're barely more literate than I am anyway!

Houseboy gone. Smalls, mortified. Cat 'purrs' against his thigh. His gaze slowly drifts towards the telegram.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - GEORGE WHITE'S OFFICE - DAY**

U.S. Capitol abuzz with congressmen, first day of the new term. Workers pound hammers, turn a distant hallway alcove into an office. White's news editor friend TOM FORTUNE and White's daughter Della arrive, seem confused. Elderly lady PARLIAMENTARIAN enters, offers documents.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PARLIAMENTARIAN

Who is White's Chief of Staff?

(Tom nods)

You're Thomas Fortune? Alright, you found your office -- good. This is your official swearing-in statement, congressional calendar, and office equipment list. All you start with, you return when your Congressman surrenders his seat. Understand so far?

TOM FORTUNE

Statement, calendar, and everything we have is temporary, got it. *Where's* our office?

Parliamentarian points to where they stand.

TOM FORTUNE (CONT'D)

This is a half-built closet.

PARLIAMENTARIAN

It's an *annex*. Where's the rest of your staff?

DELLA

Just Mr. Tom Fortune and I.

Parliamentarian grunts, skeptical.

HALLWAY: two handsome male STAFFERS pass in the corridor. One (we will know him as NICHOLAS) glances back at Della. Second staffer smacks him aback the head.

STAFFER NICHOLAS

C'mon, she's got legs.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - HOUSE CHAMBERS - CONTINUOUS**

Elegiac House chambers. Speaker Reed, with entourage, introduces White to blonde REP. HENRY CABOT LODGE, 44.

SPEAKER REED

George, meet Congressman Henry Lodge, my boy from the Bay State. He'll show you the ropes here.

REP. LODGE

Been watching your rise. Quite impressive. You'll do circles around me, I'm certain. Are you well? Family settling in okay?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WHITE

Yes. Thank you. A friend let us  
his brownstone in LeDroit Park.

REP. LODGE

LeDroit! Great, great. All the  
upper-class blacks live there.

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S DC TOWNHOUSE - CONTINUOUS**

Cora sweeps floors in their new DC townhouse as MOVERS  
carry in furniture and George Jr. drags a box.

CORA

Credenza by the davenport in the  
parlor. Watch the scuff marks!

Cora, fatigued, sits. Jr. eyes her with concern.

A young BLACK MOVER, distracted by a FRAMED PHOTO atop  
his box, mindlessly kicks Cora's dust pile.

GEORGE JR.

(tries his best)  
Mr., pay attention. Mama's tired.

Cora, apologetic, quiets Jr.

BLACK MOVER

No, boy is right, my apologies.

Mover quickly re-sweeps, but still eyes the photo.

CORA

(re: the photo)  
Husband with Booker T. Washington.

BLACK MOVER

I know, I studied with Mr. Booker.

CORA

You got a degree at Tuskegee?  
(beat) Pardon, but then why...

BLACK MOVER

-do I work in hauling? DC is a  
tough town for Negroes, Ma'am.

Cora sighs, sympathetic.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - HOUSE CHAMBERS - DAY**

Gold-inlaid lettering spells out 'REP. GEORGE WHITE (R-NC).' White regards the nameplate on his chambers desk with pride. Rep. Lodge pats his back.

REP. LODGE

We're in quorum call till one.  
Leadership is going to Grenouille  
for lunch, *Reed wants you to join.*  
Off to a good start, congressman.

Lodge smiles, heads to Reed's group, waves White along.

SMALLS (O.S.)

Keep the nameplate. When they  
take your seat back, gold leaf is  
worth a few bucks.

White turns, surprised to find Smalls.

WHITE

Robert? You didn't say you were  
coming. Christ, welcome.

Smalls takes White's arm for support, starts to walk.

SMALLS

Good to be here. So I got a nasty  
nasal infection, haven't bathed  
since Tuesday, but we've much to  
do. Been weighing how to make  
myself most useful, what I propose  
is creating a new post. Call it  
*Negro ambassador* -- a sort of  
roving spokesman for you.

(White stops, antsy)

*What*, do I smell?

WHITE

You're buzzing. Look, let's find  
you a place to stay, huh?

Which is when Smalls sees Rep. Lodge by Speaker Reed waiting for White -- the source of White's tension.

SMALLS

Should I find a room *now*, George,  
that your point?

REP. LODGE (B.G.)

Well, I'll be. Is that *Robert Smalls*? They *said* you were in the building. Been what, decade since you retired? You packed on a few!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SMALLS

And you grew facial hair, Henry.

REP. LODGE

George, we really should go.

SMALLS

Off to lunch? Good, I'm starving.

White feels the strain of Smalls' impropriety...

**I/E. LA GRENOUILLE RESTAURANT - DAY**

White keeps a hawk eye on Smalls as cops stop traffic for their group to cross from Capitol Hill to nearby LA GRENOUILLE RESTAURANT.

SMALLS

(off White's glare)

Lighten up, will ya'. Beginning to feel like your chaperone to the church dance.

White grabs Smalls, stops him. Pack leaves them behind.

WHITE

These congressmen are judging us. I'm building first impressions. I invited you as a counselor, an elder statesman. If you want to stay, I beg of you, act like one.

SMALLS

You're associates are waiting.

WHITE

Answer me. This is my seat, my methods. Are we clear?

SMALLS

(pulls free)

Relax. These men know the stink of my shit. It ain't gonna rub off on you, okay?

'Whistle,' Lodge waves for White as group enters eatery.

INSIDE: congressmen bunch up by Reed in portico, waiters set a table. White enters, vigilant eye on Smalls.

SPEAKER REED

... so there I am with this Jew, woman suffragist, and a Mick.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SPEAKER REED (CONT'D)

I gotta figure out how not to offend all three. Guess who I decide to meet with? George, do you know?

All eyes turn to White. He is completely unprepared.

REP. LODGE

Balancing competing interest groups, George.

WHITE

What would I do? I... I suppose, meet none of them. Only way to prove influence can't be bought.

The men, uncertain how to respond. All turn to Reed.

SPEAKER REED

I like this kid. I like him.

Everyone quickly nods in agreement. Except for Smalls.

SPEAKER REED (O.S.) (CONT'D)

It's fine. They're with me.

A MAITRE'D whispers to Reed.

SMALLS

(quiet)  
Now what?

SPEAKER REED

Well you tell them, those two are congressmen, and they're with me.

White realizes the restaurant is filled entirely by Caucasians. And the sign in the window: 'NO NEGROES.'

WHITE

Shit. (beat) Robert, let's go. Work to get to, right?

Smalls stays put. Something within him begins to boil.

WHITE (CONT'D)

Mr. Speaker, we weren't staying.

SMALLS

Yes, we we're. Hell yes, we were.  
(to maitre'd)  
You. I don't know where he is, but Jean Ryfe is an old friend. Tell the owner of this restaurant, congressman Smalls is here and I'm famished.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

MAITRE'D  
(growing tension)  
Mr. Speaker, please.

SMALLS  
No, me, I'm talking. DC has an  
integrated restaurant law-  
(White grabs him)  
Congress writes the rules. *They*  
say a black man can eat where he  
wants. And Mr. White and I would  
like our Goddamn frog legs!

Silence blankets the eatery. White drags Smalls out.  
Leadership left shell-shocked.

SPEAKER REED  
(to maitre'd)  
Just give us our table. And take  
down that fucking sign.

WE JOIN WHITE OUTSIDE: Smalls pulls out of White's grip.

WHITE  
Are you insane?! I'm trying to  
hold our rights, and you come  
stoking a race war! You led me to  
run, you knew my values. I'll be  
accepted not as a *black*  
congressman, but a congressman.

SMALLS  
Bull crap, you'll be seen as what  
you are! I'm your ally, not them.

WHITE  
Speaker Reed was doing more for us  
in there than you were!

SMALLS  
Reed cares of one thing, counting  
votes. Don't deliver the Negroes,  
he'll replace you with the next  
puckered-ass who can. I know,  
they did it to me. But guess  
that's the risk of hand-holding  
you. You can't even recognize  
when you're in a street fight.  
(White, steaming)  
Know what the old pros call you?  
,

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

SMALLS (CONT'D)

Sheep in wolf's clothing.' 'Skin is black but not your spirit.' Want a black man to ever have an equal chance in the race of life -- take my wisdom. Stop worrying about reputation and get rough.

WHITE

This is not the counsel I needed.

SMALLS

Tough love, kid, it's exactly why you need me. Think you're better off marching to the speaker's drum, side with them. But if I stay, I ain't hiding in no closet.

Smalls spits. Waits. Stand off.

WHITE

*He asks for the keys so he can rob me blind.*

SMALLS

*What? (beat) Think I got a horse in this? You mean the Negro ambassadorship? Fine, forget it. I'm not asking for anything. Just a bit of loyalty. That too much?*

WHITE

You're jobless, starving for power, and a dope fiend, Robert -- you're going to want something.

Smalls goes suddenly silent, mortified.

WHITE (CONT'D)

Yes, I know, I know about the ether habit. Think I wouldn't have done my due diligence?

His sins laid bare, Smalls shifts from horror to rage.

SMALLS

That ungrateful houseboy.

WHITE

Bob, look at me. If I go down, you aren't riding my sacrifice unscathed, I won't let you. I haven't upturned the lives of my family, my children, for you to claim another breath of fame. So we need to be clear.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

WHITE (CONT'D)

It's true change we're both after.  
Period. No five-dollar handouts  
waiting, no personal takes.

SMALLS

I'm no dope fiend. No addict.

WHITE

You will not try to play me.

SMALLS

George, I'm your friend.

WHITE

Alright. (beat) Then appreciate  
this advice as a friend. I need  
space. Let me get up on my own  
two feet. And then we act. We'll  
have no shortage of trials when  
the moment comes. I beg you.

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S DC TOWNHOUSE - NIGHT**

White, bitter, tosses his coat as he arrives home. Della  
and Jr. wave at him to be quiet, because-

Cora lies on the sofa in pain, COLD COMPRESS on her head.

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S DC TOWNHOUSE - BATHROOM - LATER**

Cora sits in a steaming tub. White gently sponges her.

WHITE

I'm taking you to the doctor.

CORA

You're better off without him.

WHITE

Who? *Smalls*? Don't change the  
subject. You aren't well. The  
more you pretend these headaches  
away, the more you worry me.

CORA

You shouldn't have reached back  
out. If Smalls has done a noble  
thing in his life it was despite  
himself. I'm just trying to  
protect you.

White ignores the bait, sponges. He starts to HUM.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WHITE

(sings quietly)

*Swing low, sweet chariot. Coming  
to carry me home. I looked over  
Jordan, and I what did I see?  
Coming for to carry me home?*

CORA

(touched)

Song I wooed you into my bed with.

WHITE

Uh, you we're 16 -- I think I was  
wooing you.

Cora grins. White amused.

CORA

This Mr. Lodge, let *him* guide you.

WHITE

Baby, please, I barely know Lodge.

CORA

Okay, forget it, I'm done... you  
won't like my other idea anyway.

White sits back, now curious. Cora lures him in.

CORA (CONT'D)

Really, you wouldn't be  
interested. Just a guy I met.

(White wants to know)

Look. At some point, you'll have  
to move past haughty oratory and  
start pushing for the voting law,  
right? You need momentum, tiny  
wins to build support. Well, I  
found someone you could champion.  
A hard-working black, treated  
unfairly. You'd make him a poster-  
child for the rights we're after.  
The effort attracts supporters,  
gets the ball rolling, you follow?

White, silent. Cora, worried, eager for a response.

WHITE

Christ, woman. Who the heck  
taught you political war craft?

CORA

My husband. Having to protect his  
skinny butt for 10 years.

**INT. SHIPPING WAREHOUSE - MORNING**

Roaring machines and men move crates across a giant warehouse. Sheltered from supervisors in a corner, White and Cora join the black mover with college degree whom Cora met. (His name is ELROY COOK.)

CORA

Elroy, go on, tell the story you told me. Applying to West Point. Your plans to be an army officer.

BLACK MOVER (ELROY)

Right, that was the hope.

(to White)

My application was voided, sir. On grounds of *race*. They sent me to what they called an appropriate unit -- 2nd Brigade *kitchen staff*.

CORA

George, our nation's top military academy rejected him cause of color.

BLACK MOVER (ELROY)

Exactly right.

White glowers, looks between Cora and the mover.

WHITE

Your congressman is supposed to deal with these issues, but...

BLACK MOVER (ELROY)

Congressman Nye of Virginia's 6th is a former Confederate colonel.

CORA

George, there are six-million Negroes in this country. And just one man for them to turn to.

We can see White's energy building.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - HOUSE CHAMBERS - DAY**

White reads a speech from House chambers lectern, Della turns pages (House floor sparsely populated).

WHITE

By all accounts, Elroy Cook should be a shoe-in at West Point.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WHITE (CONT'D)

At 17, working as a security guard at a local mill, he single-handedly stopped an arson attempt and apprehended the suspects. This while raising six siblings.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - GEORGE WHITE'S OFFICE - LATER**

White, in his tiny Capitol office, jammed with REPORTERS.

WHITE

My House motion censures West Point for violating its own rules. We had black officers lead Buffalo regiments. To see army backslide on Civil Rights is unacceptable.

Della tries to enter, bumps door against packed chairs. Cascade of movement just to squeeze her in.

REPORTER

The army should be integrated?  
Both races in the same unit?

WHITE

I didn't say that. One small step is all. Give Mr. Cook a chance.

Reporters nod -- this seems a *reasonable* position.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - SPEAKER'S OFFICE - LATER**

Speaker's office is a palace compared to White's annex. Della delivers a ream of documents to handsome staffer Nicholas (Reed's staffer who had eyed her earlier).

DELLA

Letters in support of Mr. Cook.

STAFFER NICHOLAS

I'll get them to the speaker.

Della nods, sighs, exhausted.

STAFFER NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

Hard work, huh? Does it help at all having your Pops for a boss?

DELLA

*Help?! Papa ain't given a day off since we started! How've you lasted four terms, Nicholas?*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

STAFFER NICHOLAS

Simple. It was either this... or  
work for my father.

Della laughs, snorts it back, makes eyes with Nicholas as  
she exits. Nicholas sees staffer 2 STARING.

**INT. SPEAKER'S PRIVATE OFFICE - CONTINUOUS**

Nicholas hands letters to Speaker Reed as Reed sips port  
with DEMOCRATIC MINORITY LEADER RICHARDSON in private.

MINORITY LEADER

My Democrats aren't happy. This  
Negro is at the very sort of race-  
baiting he campaigned against.  
And that you, Thomas, oppose.

SPEAKER REED

But he's right. West Point is an  
integrated academy.

MINORITY LEADER

Integration was a wild experiment  
imposed by radicals. Mr. Speaker,  
this body has more important  
issues to address. I suggest you  
be ready with the muzzle.

**INT. ROBERT SMALLS BEAUFORT HOME - DAY**

Smalls seems ever more fragile in his morning routine:  
cuts himself while shaving, spills the pomade, burns  
himself on the frying pan. 'Ow!'

His sweet tabby cat joins him at the kitchen table as he  
wets an ETHER MASK, stares at a prominent newspaper PHOTO  
OF WHITE AND COOK, and as angst builds, he shoves away  
the paper, inhales ether, and relaxes...

'Pound' on the front door -- Smalls and cat jump. Two  
MEN yell from the porch.

REPO MAN (O.S.)

Smalls, we know you're in there,  
open up. Settle this debt now,  
you's gonna save yourself a lot of  
trouble. (beat) You'll lose the  
house, Smalls, ya' hear?!

**I/E. ROBERT SMALLS BEAUFORT HOME - A MOMENT LATER**

Rear of the house, Smalls topples out the back window.

'Pounding' on door fades behind as Smalls bundles his scrapbook, scurries away. But stops. *He forgot something.* Still on the counter, through the high window, he can see... his ether. Smalls curses.

INSIDE: Smalls struggles to lift himself back into the window, grabs his ether, hears the 'laughs' of the repo men as they leave the porch.

REPO MAN (O.S.)

That'll send the message.

Smalls freezes in horror.

Over the front door, his TABBY CAT hangs dead in a noose.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - HOUSE CHAMBERS - MORNING**

We join Rep. Lodge and White, quiet mid-conversation, as they exit House chambers

REP. LODGE

I'm not saying do less. But I know you'll more headway with our *congressmen* by avoiding the press.

SMALLS (O.S.)

Do I look like a damn panhandler?!

White stops in his tracks at the sound of Smalls' voice.

Smalls, bearing a STACK OF FILES, held back at the corridor entrance by CAPITOL POLICE.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

George, thank God! Get me in.

Lodge quietly put his hand on White's shoulder, urges him down the corridor. White, heavy heart... walks on.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

Buddy, where you going? Help.  
(beat) At least see what I brought you. George, don't leave me.  
You're wasting time on West Point!

Smalls shoves forward, guards grab him, files go flying.

Lodge pats him confidently, but White is clearly troubled. He looks back at FILES LEFT BEHIND.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - GEORGE WHITE'S OFFICE - AFTERNOON**

White leafs through Smalls' files at his desk. Grimace deepens with each. Folders marked 'U.S. MARSHALS SERVICE.' Inside, PHOTOS OF LYNCHED BLACK MEN.

White shuts the folder, sits back, weighted. Tom watches from the office doorway.

WHITE

Everyone thinks he's trouble.  
Cora swears he's trying to use me.  
She's part right. Only part.

TOM FORTUNE

So let's find some middle ground.  
Smalls just wants you to move  
faster. Don't gotta throw the  
baby out with the bath water, huh?

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - CAFETERIA - NIGHT**

White and Lodge meet in the Capitol's basement cafeteria.

REP. LODGE

George, no. Bad idea. You need  
to distance yourself from Smalls.

WHITE

This was my idea -- Smalls had no  
part. It's the right thing to do.

REP. LODGE

Doesn't mean it's smart! Asking  
the *President's* support on West  
Point, it'll send the Democrats to  
Bedlam. And McKinley will say no.

WHITE

Fine. I know how this works. I'm  
not looking for special deals.  
Just a chance to meet him, offer  
my case for helping Mr. Cook. If  
the White House still won't sign  
on, I get it, I did what I had to.

Lodge sighs, sits back, conflicted.

REP. LODGE

So *why*? You're cashing in awfully  
big chips. Don't you have more  
worthy goals to spend capital on?  
Say, something in your district.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WHITE

Like what, a new road?

(deep-felt)

Listen, Henry. By law, blacks in my state can still vote. But come next year, with these *attacks*, I fear they'll be too scared. U.S. troops protect them now because our police won't, and there's less of them every day. My community doesn't want *luxuries*. They want their lives back. Or at least to know there's haven beyond this drought. To see another black earn his due, you realize the faith that'll inspire? Mr. Cook, a meet with our president, such minor requests. But seen from my district, they can move mountains.

**I/E. THE WHITE HOUSE - DAY**

White exits a carriage to reveal... THE WHITE HOUSE. He can hardly hide his awe as four AIDES lead him in.

REPORTERS (VARIOUS)

Congressman, over here!

FLASHPOWDER. Reporters take pictures as White enters the Treaty Room. Mark Hanna meets White, shakes and smiles.

MARK HANNA

(discreet to White)

You're tenacious. No president has ever given a private sit down to a Negro politician, you know. We're going to plaster black districts with these pictures.

WHITE

Don't care how you use it, Mr. Hanna. All that matters is you're on the right side of history.

More flashbulbs, White waves. A huge smile spreads across his cheeks. And then slam cut to-

DANIELS (PRE-LAP)

Cocksucker!

**INT. NEWS AND COURIER OFFICE - DAY**

Offices of Wilmington newspaper News and Courier.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Editor Josephus Daniels (from GOP Convention) reviews  
PHOTOS OF WHITE AND MCKINLEY. A rotund PUBLISHER nearby.

PUBLISHER

McKinley says he'll support the  
cadet going to West Point.

DANIELS

Fat fuck had George White over for  
tea? Yankee President or not, the  
White House is hallowed ground.  
That congressman is going to stain  
its walls with his Negroid skin.

PUBLISHER

You were the one going easy on  
George White the past year.

DANIELS

Because he wasn't rubbing his  
niggerdom in anyone's face!

PUBLISHER

Take it you intend to  
editorialize in opposition.

DANIELS

Damn-as-a-pig-anus right I  
will!

Publisher smirks while Daniels stews. A moment.

PUBLISHER

Heard me a nasty rumor. Some aide  
in the speaker's office is bunkin'  
George White's daughter.

DANIELS

Sick Republicans. (beat) What's  
she even doing on the Hill?

PUBLISHER

What do you mean? She's on his  
staff. You didn't know that?

**EXT. GEORGE WHITE'S DC TOWNHOUSE - DAY**

Cora plays stick-and-wheel with Jr. outside their  
townhouse. White sits on the front steps, while at his  
side, Tom pores over a stack of NEWSPAPERS.

TOM FORTUNE

Evening Post says the Cook push  
was an 'accomplished feat of  
politicking.' Times says,  
'McKinley's decision was morally  
righteous.' They love you. (beat)  
Want to hear Southern headlines?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WHITE

Nope. I can guess what they say.

Cora overhears this, approaches, kisses his forehead. White, not sure why. So she whispers in his ear.

CORA

I'm proud of you. See what you achieve when you take *my* advice?

Cora smiles, rejoins Jr. on the street.

TOM FORTUNE

Didn't tell her about Smalls and his lynching files?

WHITE

I don't talk to her about Robert.

Tom flashes his brow. Flips more papers.

TOM FORTUNE

Jesus. Listen to what they wrote.

WHITE

Tom, I don't care. Christ, it's a Southern paper -- there are some minds we aren't going to change.

TOM FORTUNE

It's Josephus Daniels at News and Courier, thought he was a friend!

(White dismisses Tom)

You're like the damn ice man, you know that? Take advice from an old newsie, George. You roll over, they'll only bite worse.

White begins to stand, so Tom forces the article on him.

As White reads, we turn to Cora and Jr. in the street. Cora misses catching Jr.'s wheel, winces, rubs her brow, seems ANOTHER HEADACHE is coming on-

WHITE (O.S.)

Pea-coddling son of a bitch!

Jr. freezes. Cora covers their boy's ear. Not every day they hear White react to a newspaper like that.

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S DC TOWNHOUSE - LATER**

White furiously scribbles notes at the kitchen counter, family gathered. Daughter Della, hands on her hips.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DELLA

But Papa, you don't care what the press says. The article ain't true, Nicholas and I chatted in the hall, thas' all. Why you gotta blow it out of proportion?!

GEORGE JR. (B.G.)

Papa.

WHITE

They won't harm you to get at me.

GEORGE JR. (B.G.)

Papa.

WHITE

Jr., what?!

Jr. points to Cora, eyes shut, slumped over in a chair.

The boy reaches for his mother's hand. Cora suddenly topples to the floor -- White leaps over, Tom lurches.

WHITE (CONT'D)

Cora? Jesus, Cora!

White scoops her up in his arms. Children stare in horror. Tom tries lifting her onto the chair.

WHITE (CONT'D)

Tom, get help. Get a doctor!

**INT. PROVIDENCE HOSPITAL - MORNING**

Jammed infirmery waiting room. White, stony-faced amidst the blood and sickness, Della and Jr. by his side. A mother cradles an obviously dead infant. A young boy sits in a pool of his own urine. A DOCTOR arrives.

White, alone, follows the doctor through corridors.

DOCTOR

We did our best to keep the tests painless but she wants to stop. Asked to see you. I brought in my lead cranial research fellow. He ruled out meningitic infection and psychiatric causes.

WHITE

*Psychiatric?*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DOCTOR

(stops walking)

We ruled it out. Mr. White, your wife appears to have a broad based condition known as *neuropathy*. Death of the nerves. It's a... progressive disorder.

WHITE

I don't understand.

(he *does* understand)

You need to do more tests.

DOCTOR

We can treat the condition. Give her time.

WHITE

*Time?* Cure the condition -- that's what you'll do! There must be *some* new science going on.

DOCTOR

Mr. White, I'm sorry. Pain tinctures will help. The ailment is aggravated by stress. You need to change your wife's lifestyle. You can delay the full onset. Up to year. Maybe two.

CORA (O.S.)

George?

Cora calls from inside a room. White, frozen, for the first time helpless.

White enters, finds Cora on a gurney. She fights tears.

CORA (CONT'D)

All the headaches -- we knew it was coming. I'm sorry.

WHITE

Shh, baby. No words.

White hugs her deeply. Door opens, Jr. and Della peek in. Cora quickly WIPES HER EYES DRY, powerfully strong.

CORA

Don't let them see me like this, not yet.

White nods, hurries to sweep up his son.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

WHITE

Shh, Mama needs to sleep.

But Jr. desperately reaches for Cora. White, uncertain, lets him kiss her... Cora cannot hold back, gushes tears. She takes her son. White watches, his heart breaking.

**EXT. GEORGE WHITE'S DC TOWNHOUSE - EVENING**

White, outside his townhouse, cigar in mouth, whole world turned upside down. A carriage passes. Stops. Backs up. Cigar hangs loose as White watches. Smalls exits. White stands, not that man he wants to see now.

SMALLS

George, wait.

WHITE

Bob, I can't do this now.

White holds still, on guard, as Smalls approaches.

SMALLS

How is she?

WHITE

Sick, Bob. She's really sick.

(ashamed)

Brutal campaigns, rebs slapping at my methods, I was ready for all that. But not this. It wasn't supposed to be so hard.

Smalls... HUGS HIM. Awkward at first, but powerful.

SMALLS

(as White gives in)

It doesn't get worse. If you can stay true now, that's all you need to know of yourself. That's all.

Smalls waits a beat. Pulls back, offers a wrapped gift.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

Brought her this. To help Cora... continue being your wife.

White, tentative, opens the box. Finds a HORSE WHIP.

WHITE

Not funny. You degenerate.

SMALLS

It's a little funny!

(serious)

George, I hold no grievances. I pray you don't either.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SMALLS (CONT'D)

Like we said, this town does awful things to a man's ego. But I think we can be stronger.

White, deep breath, takes stock of his friend.

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S DC TOWNHOUSE - LATER**

White and Smalls share a post-prandial smoke over dirty dishes in the dining room.

SMALLS

That nasty article on Della -- Tom said you intended to file a libel suit. This is true?

(White nods)

That's exactly what they want, you know. Trap you in a petty *ad hominem*. They tar your family, you should turn the attack around.

WHITE

You've a better approach?

SMALLS

Yes. You're a congressman. Don't hide in the courts. What's our core issue? Why are you here? What do you think Cora would want now? A matter of life and limb?

Smalls leans in, White looks him straight through.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

Lynching. Our survival. Tie it all together. That news editor brought this fight into the halls of Congress, let's have it out, in chambers. I'm sick of this. I'm sick of a black man rolling over to every abuse. For God's sake, trust me for once.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - HOUSE CHAMBERS - DAY**

House floor always busy even while members speak.

WHITE

(at lectern)

I, like any of us, know the barbs of the press. And I can turn the other cheek. But News and Courier crossed a line.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WHITE (CONT'D)

I've long held quiet on certain issues out of honor and decorum. But if these men can stoop to attack my family, I'll be silent no more. A year ago when I arrived, I feared most the South's effort to cull the black vote. My worries have grown. Today a crueller scourge spreads, one politely unmentioned within these walls. The judging of black men not by juries, but by racist vengeance of angry mobs. Blacks lynched from trees for no reason beyond rumor and hate. A crime with no punishment, which the laws of the South *allow*. To all these bigoted offenses it is time we say enough. And we can start by punishing News and Courier for waving the noose.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - COMMITTEE ROOM - CONTINUOUS**

Rep. Lodge sits in committee as a witness testifies. STAFFER enters, whispers to Lodge.

REP. LODGE (B.G.)

He did *what*?!

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - GEORGE WHITE'S OFFICE - EVENING**

Rep. Lodge throws open door into White's inner office-

TOM FORTUNE (O.S.)

Ow!

Door hit back of Tom's head in the tight annex. Lodge shoves in, waving a copy of White's speech.

REP. LODGE

'Punish News and Courier for waving the noose' -- are you mad?! You compare a barb on Della to our most tenuous, most heated issue like a plaything. We don't discuss lynching.

WHITE

They slandered my daughter. *They* made it about race.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

REP. LODGE

We do not discuss lynching. The speaker has crises enough to manage without you baiting war with the Democrats.

OUTER OFFICE: Della, distracted by the yelling, turns to see her alleged courtier arrive.

DELLA

Nicholas...

STAFFER NICHOLAS

Della. Congressman White needs to see the speaker.

White and Lodge go silent seeing Nicholas outside.

**INT. SPEAKER'S PRIVATE OFFICE - CONTINUOUS**

White escorted into speaker's office, Reed by the window.

SPEAKER REED

I am a Christian man. I pray for a day when the rights your people deserve are won. But you will not imperil our entire agenda. It pains me to do this, but from now on, you're to clear every speech you make with congressman Lodge.

White, aghast. Reed steps closer, looms.

SPEAKER REED (CONT'D)

In this institution, seniority is power. Those lacking patience will fail. I want you to last. George, we have an election upon us. So I'll say this once. Stop acting so black.

**I/E. PROVIDENCE HOSPITAL - CONTINUOUS**

Cora struggles to dress in her hospital room.

HOSPITAL CORRIDOR: George Jr. helps his mother to walk. A man holds open the hospital exit, but Cora refuses.

OUTSIDE: Cora pauses to collect herself. Notices a sign.

FORD THEATER

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - SPEAKER'S OFFICE - A MOMENT LATER**

White finds Lodge waiting in the Capitol corridor.

WHITE

All I did was tell the truth.

REP. LODGE

It's how you did it.

**INT. FORD THEATER - CONTINUOUS**

Cora and Jr. inside the Ford Theater, a scant memorial to the event that occurred here -- *Abraham Lincoln's assassination*. Signs identify key objects and locations:

THIS IS THE HAT PRESIDENT LINCOLN WORE.

THIS IS WHERE JOHN WILKES BOOTH STOOD.

THIS IS WHERE LINCOLN WAS SHOT.

Cora, deep breath, faints. Jr., frozen in horror.

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S DC TOWNHOUSE - NIGHT**

Cora lies in bed, sick, cold sweat. White at her side.

WHITE

Why would you even *think* to leave the hospital without me?

CORA

You have more important things.

WHITE

You're most important, damn it!

Cora recoils, sad. White pulls away, pained.

WHITE (CONT'D)

What are they doing to us? We're better than this. (beat) I want to take you home. Back to Tarboro.

CORA

Tarboro? Mr. Milgram won't have me back at the mill, not like this

WHITE

You're not going *to the mill*. I'll take care of you.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CORA

(realizing)  
You're giving up on a second term.  
(beat) You made a promise. I  
still believe in it. In you.

WHITE

I promised *one* term. They laid a  
trap, I saw it, I walked right in.

CORA

You did what any father would.

WHITE

Exactly! I couldn't help myself.  
I was supposed to be better. I  
bring up race once, once and Reed  
all but destroys me. Real change  
is years off.

CORA

You're taking the first steps.

WHITE

I wanted to win it.

Cora feels the magnitude of her husband's admission. A  
moment passes as she reads his mind.

WHITE (CONT'D)

I want to take care of you. At  
home. No more *struggle*.

CORA

My father used to tell me about  
Lincoln. About the world before  
the gains he made. It's happening  
again. And we'd walk away because  
it's a *struggle*? I'd support you  
to run, I'd fight for you.

WHITE

It's what I fear. You're tougher  
than I am. And it's not how I  
want to spend... our last days.

White hangs his head. Nothing more Cora can say.

**I/E. ROBERT SMALLS BEAUFORT HOME - NIGHT**

We join Smalls in South Carolina, wildly, *sweatily*,  
emptying his house in the dark of night. He drags a load  
to a wagon filled with BOXES, only to find...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

White lifting SMALLS' SCRAPBOOK off cart's front bench.

WHITE

Robert? What is all this?

SMALLS

Called poverty, George, pleased to make your acquaintance. They got my house. I'm fleeing before they get me. (beat) You come to blame my advice on the lynching speech for ending sourly? Cause I don't want to hear it.

WHITE

It was sloppy advice.

SMALLS

It was a half-hearted execution.

WHITE

I'm giving up my seat.

Smalls pauses. Wipes sweat from his brow. Then, without a word, grabs his scrapbook and heads in. White, thrown.

INSIDE: White finds Smalls in the parlor, taking off his sweat-drenched shirt in exchange for a dry one.

SMALLS

Because it wasn't all peaches and cream, you give up. Fine. What do you want me to say?

WHITE

(honest)  
That you understand.

SMALLS

George, I think you're a wimp.

WHITE

(holds his ground)  
And I came to tell you that if you ran in my stead... I'd back you.

Smalls goes quiet, not what he expected. A moment.

Wet shirt unbuttoned, he grabs a hand-written BIRTHDAY CARD off the mantle.

SMALLS

Grandchildren sent it. Only time I ever hear from them. How much you know about my kids, George?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

WHITE

Your daughters? Nothing. You said you don't speak.

SMALLS

But do you know why? I made the mistake you're about to. Acted like a chicken in the rain and walked out on them. (beat) It was '79, I'd just been voted out of Congress. Democrats in control, violence rising, seemed us Negroes were doomed. So I left. Left my wife with her new lover, became an *exoduster*. Moved to a Negro colony in Arizona Territory. Thought I'd find The Promised Land. Guess what? One month in, first 'no Negroes' signs arose on Main Street. Scorn I prayed I'd left behind didn't *chase* me to Arizona, it was already there.

WHITE

Then you came home to your kids.

SMALLS

Hah! Wife was too uppity to take me. No, sir. Went to DC. Bid again for Congress, and you know the rest -- two more terms. Cause I understood there'd be no Promised Land to run to. It wasn't a place, it was a time. And I'd have to earn it. George, I get that our methods differ, that you see me as impure. But our goal is the same. And it ain't to be found in your Podunk town of Tarboro. Read the card.

White, hesitant, takes card and reads, while Smalls puts on a dry shirt. White looks up prematurely and sees...

The BRUTAL SCARS OF SLAVE-MASTER LASHES across Smalls' back. Smalls, aware of this, capitalizes on the candor.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

My grandson wrote that he wants to be an army general. My little colored boy wants in military academy. I'd no idea he even knew what you'd done with West Point. But the damn thing gave him wonder.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

SMALLS (CONT'D)

George, you're insecure and too  
couth for your own good, but if I  
had your seat, Elroy Cook would  
still be dragging crates. And  
Negroes would be fleeing to the  
frontier. You'd better run again.  
I got my grandkid counting on you.

**EXT. GEORGE WHITE'S LAW OFFICES - DAY**

White watches as a banner is nailed atop his law firm.  
He takes a deep breath, Tom at his side. Banner reads:

RE-ELECT GEORGE H. WHITE FOR CONGRESS

TOM FORTUNE

Get ready for war.

CARD:

AUGUST, 1898 -- TARBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

**EXT. TARBORO STREETS - DAY**

White and law staff busily distribute fliers on Main St.

TOM FORTUNE

Vote Republican, vote for George.

**EXT. GEORGE WHITE'S TARBORO HOME - MORNING**

Returning home to Tarboro, Tom and White help Cora and  
Jr. from an arriving carriage. Cora flashes a newspaper  
photo -- a CONFEDERATE COLONEL.

CORA

James Lloyd?

WHITE

He's who the Democrats put up  
against us, yes. The *Butcher of*  
*Antietam*. I knew you'd be upset.

CORA

Upset? No. Wondering why you're  
*here*, helping me from a carriage,  
and not busy campaigning.

Cora heads inside, USES A CANE. White glances at Tom.

TOM FORTUNE

Don't look at me. She's right.

**EXT.  TARBORO STREETS - DAY**

Back in town, White orates to a SMALL CROWD on a soapbox.

WHITE

Republicans reunited this nation.  
Our party backs the gold standard!

A LOUD CLAMOR arises around the corner. White's voice trails off as a MUCH LARGER CROWD emerges.

CROWD

(chant)

*Niggers out, Republicans go!  We  
want Lloyd for Tarboro!*

The parading crowd escorts JAMES LLOYD, 60 (recognized from the newspaper photo), on a stallion. He leers down at White as he passes. KKK WIZARDS (aka. red shirts) take up the rear. White's listeners forced to step back.

**I/E.  TARBORO STREETS - CARRIAGE - MORNING**

Cora reviews a notepad, riding in a carriage with White.

WHITE

You'll speak after Tom.  Then me.  
Sure you're up for this?

Cora glances, resents being asked. White defensively bounces George Jr. on his knee. A chant loudens outside.

CROWD (O.S.)

We want George!  We want George!

**EXT.  TARBORO FAIRGROUNDS - CONTINUOUS**

A reelection rally fills Tarboro's fairgrounds. Crowd of chanting BLACKS surround a gazebo. Band plays. White helps Cora from the carriage, Cora still reviewing notes.

SMALLS (O.S.)

Brutus came to bury Cesar, not to  
praise him.  But I'm here to  
praise congressman White!

Cora freezes, looks up in horror, as... Smalls bellows from gazebo stage to loud applause. Tom approaches.

TOM FORTUNE

Big crowd, lots of press...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CORA  
What's *he* doing here?

TOM FORTUNE  
(takes pause)  
You guys did discuss Robert moving  
in. Right?

Cora faces her husband. White rubs his brow, *meek*.

A MOMENT LATER: White chases Cora as she struggles back  
to the carriage with Jr. Smalls orates in background.

WHITE  
It's just for the campaign. His  
other option was a boarding home.

CORA  
I don't trust him! I don't  
understand your devotion.

WHITE  
I'm telling you, we need the help.  
The party is distracted. There  
aren't enough troops guarding  
blacks at the polls.

CORA  
Bullocks. You got some sort of  
puppy-love devotion to the man.  
What's next, he shares our bed?

WHITE  
Yeah, well, I bet you'd still have  
to be on top.

Cora 'gasps,' slaps him lightly. Tom, watching, swallows  
back a laugh. White, wordless, upset Jr. heard that.

SMALLS (B.G.)  
Let Red Shirts cry fury, because  
*yes*, this black man will triumph!  
So I say *Lloyd go, Republicans*  
*fight. Who's our voice?*

CROWD  
(call and response)  
*Congressman White!*

SMALLS  
*Who's our voice?*

CROWD  
*Congressman White!*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

SMALLS

Give me a cheer, bring our leader  
on stage! Let the Democrats  
across the state hear your power!

CORA

I was supposed to introduce you.

Crowd chants for White. He looks apologetically to Cora.

White bounds onto stage. Smalls lets go the spotlight,  
notices Cora glaring from afar.

WHITE

(to crowd)

Let's change Tarboro! Let's  
change the country! Thank you  
Republicans! Thank you Uncle Bob!

Cora, suddenly caught by something more worrisome -- slow  
influx of CAUCASIANS bearing CLUBS and CONFEDERATE FLAGS.

WHITE (CONT'D)

We'll claim our right to work and  
prosper. We'll win our future!

'Yells' from edge of crowd. A BLACK PUSHES A KKK WIZARD.

WHITE (CONT'D)

(mood change)

Brothers? Please, we're on public  
land. We are all allowed here.

Fight breaks out in rear. CAUCASIANS INSTIGATING.  
Democrat Lloyd and entourage arrive behind White.

WHITE (CONT'D)

(to Lloyd)

What are you doing? Stop this.

LLOYD

Congressman, I don't control them.

White turns to Cora, as though her fear was prescient.  
Fight builds. White jumps offstage, races Cora and Jr.  
back to the waiting carriage.

RED SHIRT socks White in face -- White stumbles back.

RED SHIRT

Stay down, nigger!

Tom leaps at the red shirt. But more red shirts pour in.  
Scuffle swells. White grapples for Tom, pulls him out.  
Blacks stream from the park.

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S TARBORO HOME - DAY**

White and family in their kitchen. Jr. visibly shaken. 'Pound' on the back door. Tom, bandaged, peeks out the curtain before opening. Smalls tromps in, mid-sentence.

SMALLS

-doctors says six Negroes came in, bent limbs, that's the worse of it. We're okay. What I want is to organize another a rally. Same place Monday. Lloyd knocks you down, we stand right back up.

Silence. Smalls suddenly senses the fear in the room.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

You know this is just beginning.

(to Jr.)

Right, youngin'? Just a bit of excitement, grown-ups being crude.

CORA

Don't coddle my son.

SMALLS

Ain't aimin' to coddle. Toughen.

CORA

Don't talk to my son.

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S TARBORO HOME - BEDROOM - EVENING**

White stands above Cora in their bedroom.

WHITE

It's not just *help* -- I can't win without him! He does the work I can't. Do you understand?

(*sotto voce*)

He's a *scrapper*. I'm not. If he'll get his hands dirty taking heat for the squabbles we don't want, why not let him? Got it? So please, stop making waves. Jesus, you twist messages, you know that? You pushed this run, now got me questioning my steps.

CORA

No, I pushed you to be honest and noble. That *man* takes his victories at any cost.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Cora lets the message steep. It direly embitters White.

WHITE

I don't Goddamn need this.

(stands)

I don't gotta be struggling to my bone only to have my wife tell me I'm being ignoble! Damn it!

White exits in a huff. Cora curses.

White pauses in the hallway, *angry at his anger*. Turns, looks wistfully at Cora, both in a cloud of self doubt...

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S TARBORO HOME - MORNING**

Cora fries pork hash, early-morning kitchen. Commotion as bathrobe-wearing Smalls stumbles in, barely awake. Sees Cora, pauses, awkward, just the two of them.

SMALLS

I's gonna make coffee.

Cora points to a hot kettle. *Coffee made*. Smalls grins, pours a cup... plate of hash lands in front of him. A gift from Cora.

CORA

I love my husband. He deserves a second term. If that means bearing your presence, I will. Cause I know it's only a matter of time until you slip and reveal that selfish coal-ash soul within.

SMALLS

Wow. That's some bitter coffee.

CORA

You're here on *my* invitation, see?

SMALLS

Right. But don't forget, it's this cold soul who convinced your husband to run again. So maybe we need *each other*. (beat) Nice lookin' meal, gonna make me fat!

CORA

(snarls, heads out)  
You're already fat.

**I/E. THE FRANCONI FAMILY CIRCUS - DAY**

White works a crowd entering to a circus big-top with Jr. Tom and Smalls run point. White keeps one eye on a large holstered knife under Tom's coat.

TOM FORTUNE

Protection.

VOICES (B.G.)

Go White! (another) Got *my* vote!

White waves to hollering FANS, wary of Tom. A REPORTER (recognized from the News and Courier office) intercepts.

REPORTER

White, what do you say to claims you're fomenting black violence?

(no response)

You support the formation of black militias, yes?

WHITE

The Tarboro Black Militia, which I've supported, is a *social club*. They have a peaceful record of protecting blacks at the polls. Don't misquote me. Social clubs are legitimate. Violence is not.

White comes to CIRCUS BARKER.

WHITE (CONT'D)

Four tickets. Remember to vote.

Barker ignores White, turns to a Caucasian pair in line.

WHITE (CONT'D)

Excuse me, four tickets, please.

Barker signals the CIRCUS OWNER for help.

WHITE (CONT'D)

*My* boy wants to see a show.

GEORGE JR.

Papa, what's wrong?

TOM FORTUNE

George, forget it. We have an election in two weeks, right?

Jr. ambles alone towards the tent. Owner grabs Jr. -- White grabs owner, everyone instantly at arms. Until finally, White pulls away with Jr. and leaves.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WHITE

They won't do this to my child.

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S LAW OFFICES - MORNING**

Tom and Smalls read News and Courier in White's office.

TOM FORTUNE

'Congressman declares support for  
dangerous black militias.' (beat)  
That stringer twisted his quote.  
Don't let George see this.

'Slam.' Men glance out window. White exits, copy of  
paper in hand, races off in a carriage.

SMALLS

(smiles, proud)  
Too late.

**INT. NEWS AND COURIER OFFICE - CONTINUOUS**

Daniels glances up from his desk as White storms into the  
News and Courier office. Others block White's way.

WHITE

*Dangerous black militias?!*  
(Daniels approaches)  
I've led my campaign with respect.  
And you print lies. You're a  
newsman -- where's your honor?!

DANIELS

House rules. If a Negro  
politician can't handle politics,  
well, that's printable.

A moment. White socks Daniels. Staff holds him back.

WHITE

Print that, you son of a bitch!

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S TARBORO HOME - NIGHT**

Only moonlight. White and Cora lie in their Tarboro bed.

WHITE

You think I've taken it too far?

CORA

Yes. And they deserved it.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WHITE

(rueful)

I want you and Jr. back in DC with Della.

When... ORANGE GLOW outside. White and Cora, confused.

'Crash' from downstairs. Cora sits.

CORA

Someone's in the kitchen.

White grabs his shoes, hears 'yells' from outside.

WHITE

Jr. (beat) Get dressed!

White explodes out of the room. Smoke in the hallway.

Breaks into Jr.'s room, lifts son from bed.

White sees Tom and Smalls in the hallway, just awakened. Tom in underwear, brandishes his knife, races downstairs.

**EXT. GEORGE WHITE'S TARBORO HOME - CONTINUOUS**

We face Tom as he exits to the yard, freezes, unnerved.

White races out behind him, freezes, lit bright orange. No one speaks. Only then do we see what they see...

Massive flaming cross on White's lawn.

**I/E. GEORGE WHITE'S TARBORO HOME - DAWN**

Sun barely up as White packs his family onto a wagon. Tom takes horses' reins. White pulls Cora's head to his.

WHITE

I'll be right behind you.

(to Tom)

Tom, get them home.

White smacks horse's rump. Wagon rides, family goes.

White faces his house in the pale light. Windows broken, outside walls singed by flame.

INSIDE: White enters the kitchen, finds Smalls alone.

SMALLS

Your local militia disbanded.

Black voters will be defenseless.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WHITE

I'm going to DC. Going to talk to Lodge and Speaker Reed, demand federal troops. My district will vote, this race won't be stolen. Pack a bag. We need to leave.

SMALLS

I'm staying. (beat) You got a week left, someone needs to campaign.

WHITE

You can't be here alone.

SMALLS

Kid, I got scars older than you. Don't worry.

A moment.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

I want you to make a promise. You'll do what it takes to win. Our enemy isn't playing honest. I'm telling you now, victory means hitting back like they do.

Both men seem to measure each other. White, focused.

WHITE

I want to kick Lloyd's sorry ass back to retirement.

SMALLS

Then we'll win. I promise.

Heavy silence, White taking full measure of his mentor.

**INT. PULLMAN CAR - ATLANTIC COAST - DAY**

White, on a train, barrels north, deep in thought. Sees two Caucasian BUSINESSMEN smoking pipes, staring at him. White straightens his suit. But gives a dirty look back.

**EXT. TARBORO STREETS - NIGHT**

On lonely gas-lit Tarboro streets, Smalls hangs signs for White. Two RED SHIRTS approach on horseback. Smalls sees them, cautiously moves to the next sign.

RED SHIRT (B.G.)

Get 'em!

Red shirts charge. Smalls looks back, starts to run-

**INT. TARBORO PROTESTANT CHURCH - CONTINUOUS**

Smalls, bound, thrown onto a church floor. 'Yells' as a burlap sack is yanked off his head, he gasps for air.

RED SHIRT

George White's right-hand man, eh?

Red shirt kicks him, Smalls hacks, glares. Suddenly, CANDIDATE LLOYD ENTERS. Red shirts step aside.

Lloyd unties Smalls. Hands him his cane. And then...

LLOYD

Robert, I'm sorry.

SMALLS

Goddamn right, you are!

Smalls struggles up, swings his cane at red shirts.

RED SHIRT

(jumps back)

Jesus, Lloyd, you two are friends?

SMALLS

Get these cocksuckers out!

Lloyd urges pair to go, they back off, Smalls chases.

LLOYD

I should've told 'em to be gentle.

SMALLS

Damn it, we should've met for tea!

LLOYD

Bob, want my ear? I'm listening.

Red shirts gone, Lloyd beckons Smalls to a pew, sits.

SMALLS

(focuses)

I want you out of the race.

A moment.

LLOYD

Screw this, it's past my bedtime.

SMALLS

Let White win reelection. And in return, I give your party two House seats you could never win.

(Lloyd pauses)

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SMALLS (CONT'D)

How, you ask? DC might think me washed-up. But my people back home don't. South Carolina, 4th and 9th districts, a pair of popular black men there got shots at winning with white voters.

LLOYD

I'm familiar. We can't beat them.

SMALLS

You can if I pull my support. Your party could take those seats for the first time in two decades. Anyway, those two pompous Negroes always irked me.

LLOYD

You want me to throw this election to George White? (beat) Forget it.

SMALLS

Name a price.

LLOYD

What, cash? You're broke, Smalls.

SMALLS

Not if White wins. Let's just say my party and I have made *agreements*. To be remunerated for my troubles. We could share.

Silence. Lloyd glowers, questioning Smalls' veracity.

LLOYD

And here I thought you were doing this all out of the goodness of your heart.

SMALLS

(blatant sarcasm)  
Yes, Lloyd, a huge bleeding heart!

Lloyd hovers, clearly weighing the possibility.

LLOYD

This was supposed to be my year.

SMALLS

But take a dive now, think how much leverage it gives you. Wait just a few years more, and in the eyes of your party's leaders, you'll be a hero.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

LLOYD

And you're willing to cost your party, *your people*, two seats to keep your spindly hands on power?

SMALLS

Yes.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - SPEAKER'S OFFICE - DAY**

Sunlight fills the speaker's DC office. White sits opposite Reed, Lodge, and throng of staff, mid-meeting.

SPEAKER REED

Can't do it. More riflemen in Tarboro means less on the frontier. The president just doesn't have the troops to spare.

WHITE

I don't think you understand. These red shirts want blood.

SPEAKER REED

*If* blacks go to the polls.

WHITE

Exactly.

(realizing)

You're going to acquiesce. Jesus. I'm one congressman. And you have 200 races to worry about, that it?

(to Lodge)

Henry, you can't possibly agree.

(no response)

Unbelievable. Vile.

REP. LODGE

George, you did it to yourself.

WHITE

What are you talking about?!

REP. LODGE

Robert Smalls.

(White goes quiet)

We all expected more from you. I thought you were different.

WHITE

(fazed)

Smalls? What about him? (beat)  
You have proof of something?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SPEAKER REED

This isn't a trial, congressman.

WHITE

No, it's a kangaroo court. What are you accusing me of? (beat) I've been on Smalls like shit on a pig. If he's done wrong, I want to know. If you got proof, tell me. But don't dare sit there insisting I disavow the one man at my side over rumor or innuendo.

REP. LODGE

Are you done?

(silence)

You want to know about Smalls? Ask Mark Hanna at the White House. If you win, and in a few months, Smalls has himself a new Hilton Head manor to call home, Hanna will happily explain why.

White's face muscles go slack -- *could it be true?*

SPEAKER REED

George, you've but a few days left to campaign. I suggest you use them with the utmost comportment.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - A MOMENT LATER**

White, pallid, finds Tom in waiting the corridor, aglow.

TOM FORTUNE

Whatever just happened, listen to the good news first. Lloyd quit!

(White freezes)

Hear me? Lloyd dropped the race. Blamed 'mounting threats of unrest.' Four days to go, and Democrats put up a half-wit party hack in his place!

WHITE

Not like this...

TOM FORTUNE

George, it's ours to win!

WHITE

It was Smalls. We gotta stop it.  
(shoves past Tom)  
He's stealing the election!

**INT. UNION STATION - WASHINGTON DC - EVENING**

White meets Tom already aboard the Pullman car in Union Station. Tom, double-take when he sees... Cora joining.

WHITE

Her decision. And I want her.

**INT. TARBORO POLLING SITE - MORNING**

Dawn in Tarboro. TOWN CLERK sets up a polling site. Hand-lever voting machines. Ballot box. Voter roll.

As his watch strikes 8AM, clerk opens the doors. Nods as first voters enter. ALL CAUCASIAN.

**EXT. TARBORO TRAIN DEPOT - CONTINUOUS**

White, Tom, and Cora disembark in Tarboro, met by clerks.

LAW CLERK

Got your telegram. No one's seen Smalls since Friday. It's havoc. The news about Lloyd has every last staffer out persuading voters they're safe.

WHITE

Tom, find Smalls. Bring him back.  
(to clerk)  
Go to Jim Lloyd, tell him I want a personal meeting.

TOM FORTUNE

Where you gonna be?

WHITE

Getting my voters to the polls. I won't steal the race, but I sure as hell don't want to lose it!

**EXT. TARBORO STREETS - MORNING**

White and Cora hurry up Main St., wave to fellow blacks.

WHITE

Morn', Mr. Kend. Vote yet today?  
(to another)  
Gladys, smile, it's election day!

But black TOWNSPEOPLE all shy away. Because Main St. is littered with RED SHIRTS ON HORSEBACK.

**INT.  TARBORO POLLING SITE - MORNING**

White enters the voting booth, eyes HIS NAME on a ballot.

A MOMENT LATER: White hands punched ballot to town clerk.

WHITE

How many in my party voted so far?

TOWN CLERK

You're the first.

Cora faces her husband.

CORA

Red shirts are scaring them off.

**EXT.  TARBORO STREETS - DAY**

White, Cora, and law staff spread across a neighborhood. Chorus of 'knocks' as group try every door.

CORA

We need your vote.

WHITE

Come along to the polls.

BLACK FAMILIES peek nervously from inside. No one comes out. White, unsettled, sees law clerk (from the train station) approach by horse.

WHITE

Where's Lloyd? Did you get him?

LAW CLERK (B.G.)

No, he already left town.

WHITE

So find his staff! They need to rein these thugs in.

LAW CLERK

Sir, listen. Reports from Hemm's Gulch say our voters are arriving, *outnumbering* Democrats two to one!

White and Cora share a confused look.

**EXT.  TARBORO STREETS - HEMM'S GULCH - CONTINUOUS**

White and clerk race to a new neighborhood on horseback, shocked to find BLACK MEN lined up at polling site.

BLACK TOWNSPERSON

We got you, congressman.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

White cannot understand, until clerk points at a row of HORSE-MOUNTED BLACK MILITIA. White gallops over.

WHITE

You! Who are you?!

BLACK MILITIAMAN

Congressman? (beat) Tim Ebers, Negro Guard, South Carolina corps. Robert Smalls asked us to come, said the *North Carolina* militia wasn't brave enough. *We* are.

**EXT. TARBORO STREETS - MAIN STREET - EVENING**

Sun sets. White paces his horse up and down Main St., watches blacks stream to the polls. 'Ruckus' erupts as a horse-mounted RED SHIRT blocks an elderly voter -- and before White can move, BLACK MILITIAMEN encircle the lone Caucasian, chase him off. Militiamen nod at White.

White sees Tom arriving, races his horse to meet him.

WHITE

Where the hell is Robert?!

TOM FORTUNE

I'm sorry, no one can find him.

WHITE

Were there rumors of votes bought? Did you hear *anything*?! (beat) If Lloyd brings one shred of proof-

TOM FORTUNE

(interrupting)

We'd spend our whole term in court defendin' this win, I know. But like I said, not a word. Maybe... you're looking a gift-horse in the mouth. (beat) Polls just closed, official tally not in, but George, wasn't one report of blacks hurt. I say, as for Smalls' militia, just be grateful.

White hangs his head, tearing apart inside.

WHITE

No violence... thank God.

Tom perks up, GAZES over White's shoulder. White turns to see Smalls arriving triumphantly on horseback.

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S LAW OFFICES - EVENING**

'Slam,' as White throws close the door to his law office. The two men alone. White, silent, as if sweating Smalls out. Smalls reclines on the sofa, arms behind his head.

SMALLS

You gonna pontificate? Feels like I always gotta be on egg shells with you -- know that? (beat) I'm back here pumping your voters full of piss and vinegar, while Speaker Reed is filling your head with God knows what -- did I do wrong?

WHITE

Why'd Lloyd flip?

SMALLS

(sighs)  
I brought you militia. Your party leaders didn't do that.

WHITE

Dealing with safety should've been enough, don't you see?! I can't claim righteousness, I can't ask these voters to risk their lives if I'm lying from the start. We were this close to winning fairly.

SMALLS

George, this was *fair*. This was survival. Think Frederick Douglas didn't break rules too, if that's what it took to put things right? If the ends are noble, then we do it. If God wants to render judgement in the next life, let him. I'm worried about *this* one.

WHITE

(with confirmation)  
We stole the election...

SMALLS

Oh Christ.

WHITE

I would never have okayed fraud. I denounce it.

SMALLS

(assertive posture)  
The match is fixed.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SMALLS (CONT'D)

We fight with ballots, they come back with guns. You tell me, who has the moral high ground? I did what I had to. Now stop asking me to lay out the guts. You knew from day one what my job was!

WHITE

Did you bury the other side's dead in the War?

SMALLS

What?!

WHITE

When your enemy lay rotting in the fields, did you leave him or did you give a proper Christian burial? You buried him. Because that was what's right. It's what makes us men. If staying in government requires blood, I don't want to live in that world.

SMALLS

(sad, distant)  
Such a waste.

WHITE

I can't defend you anymore!

SMALLS

From that morning at Fort Sumter. Leading those poor souls north, Lord, you should've felt their fear. A year later, joining the navy, goin' back into the beast. My first election, claiming a black was equal when I wasn't even sure. All I overcame, all I fought against to help my brothers, to help you. What more can I do? I labored and strove for you to win. Want to disavow that, what can I say?

White eyes the old man, long silence, opens the door.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

You're walking out on me?

WHITE

No, Bob. You walked out on *me*. I need to be with the voters. Whatever the results, this vote was their win. As for you and I...

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

WHITE (CONT'D)  
our political relationship is  
over. We're friends now. And  
nothing more.

Smalls, a hollow ache forming within.

SMALLS  
George. I wish I were you. With  
your gifts, with this opportunity.

White sees Cora waiting... joins her. No looking back.

**EXT. GEORGE WHITE'S LAW OFFICES - A MOMENT LATER**

Black crowd gathers around the firm in the dimming light.  
Heads turn as White and Cora emerge. White, emotional,  
shakes hands, voice carries.

WHITE  
Good to see you. (another) Thank  
you. (another) Thank you.  
(to group)  
Today, we walked with our heads  
high. No epithet or blow could  
hide the truth -- that we are men.  
Today, we voted. No matter the  
results, that is victory.

'Murmurs' across the street. White sees Tom exit TOWN  
HALL with town clerk beside him. White leads Cora and  
crowd over to hear results. Silence. Crickets chirp.

WHITE (CONT'D)  
Well?

TOM FORTUNE  
(bleak)  
Keep in mind, votes aren't all  
counted yet.

*Loss implied*, wave of sadness slams White, sweeps crowd.

WHITE  
How close did we get?

TOM FORTUNE  
Not close at all, George... you're  
ahead by 4,000.

Silence again.

WHITE  
Wait? What?!

TOM FORTUNE  
Congressman, you won!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

White's jaw drops. Tom grabs White by the cheeks, plants a kiss on his forehead. Cheer spreads. Cries of joy.

Door 'slams.' White glances back... painfully watches Smalls exit the law firm, head alone to his horse. Cora draws him to her as Smalls ride off into the night.

**I/E. GEORGE WHITE'S LAW OFFICES - LATER**

Celebration spills into the law firm, all Dionysian glee. Except for White and Cora. The fraud haunts them.

Tom, PISS DRUNK now, hangs on White's shoulder.

TOM FORTUNE

(drunk, slurred)

I'm gonna make a vacation in New Orleans, find me a Creole gal-

A PARTYGOER yells with bemusement across the room.

PARTYGOER (B.G.)

Hear what Daniels at News and Courier says now?! That we stuffed ballots, stole the race.

TOM FORTUNE

Let the sucker pout, seat is ours!

Tom, woozy, hiccups back his liquor. White looks at Cora in the corner. Seats Tom.

White joins Cora, takes her hand. A sad, quiet moment.

WHITE

I'm afraid to show my face in Washington... with an asterisk by my name.

CORA

You wouldn't be the first.

(moment of lightness,

Cora turns serious)

Or quit. That's the logical thing to do, right? (beat) No, of course not. Cause no matter what Smalls did, it was *Smalls* who did it. You will use this seat for good. And that's why it's just. Stop judging yourself by an impossible standard. If this sickness has taught me anything... it's to not struggle over the things we can't control.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Cora, unwavering. A law clerk enters.

LAW CLERK

Congressmen, we gotta leave.

(White waves him off)

There's a riot in Wilmington!

That editor Daniels, he's got men  
surrounding GOP headquarters!

Party goes quiet. White, sudden focus... grabs a jacket.

WHITE

I'm going there. Talk some sense.

LAW CLERK

Sir, are you nuts? Rebs are in a  
frenzy. Flee town.

WHITE

Tom will get my back.

Both face Tom... PASSED OUT DRUNK. White curses.

Law clerk 'whistles,' tosses a PISTOL. White glances at  
Cora. She is clearly worried. But he LEAVES THE GUN.

WHITE (CONT'D)

No blood in my name. Not with an  
asterisk.

**EXT. WILMINGTON STREETS - NIGHT**

White gallops on horseback. Flames from city evident at  
a distance. Then, 'gunshots,' 'screams.'

White speeds up, worried. Slam. White knocked off his  
horse. Large Caucasian pins him. White struggles, until-

MR. MILGRAM

Stop, I'm tryin' to help!

White recognizes mill owner Mr. Milgram.

MR. MILGRAM (CONT'D)

We were celebrating your win. Red  
shirts swarmed. Burned town hall.  
Congressman, get out of here.  
They're goin' after the coloreds.

Mr. Milgram backs away, races off. White heads for his  
horse. 'Crash,' MOLOTOV COCKTAIL shatter store windows.

RED SHIRT (B.G.)

Burn every nigger business!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

RED SHIRTS on horseback appear, do not yet see White.  
But they do find a BLACK TEENAGER hiding.

RED SHIRT (CONT'D)

Get the motherfucker!

Black teenager runs, red shirt gallops after him.

WHITE

Don't...

Heads turn at sound of White's voice. Red shirts charge.

White runs for his horse, too late, red shirts lasso him.  
Knock White over, gag him -- muffled 'yells.'

RED SHIRT

Now nigger can only cry.

Red shirts ride, drag White to-

**EXT. WILMINGTON TOWN SQUARE - CONTINUOUS**

A tree in the town square. White, bound, lands at its base with a 'thud.' Cutting heat radiates from the flaming town hall. Rioters break windows.

ROPE NOOSE strung above White. His eyes bulge in fear.

WHITE

(knocks off the gag)

-you don't know what you're doing.

I'm a congressman!

Central KKK wizard approaches, pulls off his hood, and we recognize news editor Daniels.

WHITE (CONT'D)

You... what've you done?

DANIELS

Justice. *Congressman.*

Daniels nods, red shirts yank White up. WHITE HANGS.  
Throat being crushed, cannot even scream. Eyes tear up.  
Carotids bulge. Face turns dark blue. Suddenly-

'Gunshot.' White TOPPLES TO THE GLORIOUS GROUND, red shirt holding his rope shot dead.

White gets freed, 'gasps.' SIX FEDERAL SOLDIERS appear.

FEDERAL SOLDIER

U.S. Army! Put down your weapons-

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

A red shirt strikes the soldier with a bat. Soldiers surrounded, forced to flee.

Red shirts turn back to White on the ground, but...

**EXT. WILMINGTON STREETS - CONTINUOUS**

White sprints into town. Suit torn, blood on face, chest heaving. Hears men coming -- the Federal troops. He waves for them. To no avail. Soldiers RETREAT right by.

RED SHIRT (O.S.)

He's going to Tarboro!

White, hearing the rioters' next target, sees a HORSE-

**I/E. GEORGE WHITE'S LAW OFFICES - A MOMENT LATER**

White gallops into to Tarboro, his steed dripping sweat, red shirts hot on his tail. White sees black townfolk.

WHITE

Run! Get inside!

He spills off his horse outside his law firm. Races in.

WHITE (CONT'D)

Cora!

INSIDE: White enters the firm, finds streamers and liquor bottles. But *not a single person*.

'Screams' outside as red shirts arrive. Molotov cocktails fly through the law firm window. Flames erupt.

OUTSIDE: White stumbles out the back exit, frantic.

'Whistle.' White, confused, searches, sees no one.

'Whistle.' Finally he sees hiding in adjacent marsh... his LAW CLERKS, dozens of blacks, and Cora.

White holds Cora in his arms, buried in mud, only their gleaming eyes visible as armed KKK burn his law firm. In the distance, a LYNCHED GIRL hangs, backlit by flame.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - GEORGE WHITE'S OFFICE - DAY**

Della, nervous breakdown, besieged by REPORTERS as she pushes towards White's DC office.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

REPORTERS (VARIOUS)

Comment on the Wilmington riot?  
Thirty Negro dead. (another) Any  
word from the congressman?

DELLA

We haven't heard anything. (beat)  
*How many were killed? Thirty?*

Tom pulls Della into their office, slams door on press.

TOM FORTUNE

Della, your parents... are safe.  
(she nearly faints)  
Federal troops rescued them from a  
clinic. They're coming home.  
Della... I should've stopped him.  
I should've protected him.

Tom wipes red eyes. Della hugs him with deep emotion.

**EXT. GEORGE WHITE'S DC TOWNHOUSE - EVENING**

Della and Jr. race to meet White as he helps Cora from a carriage. Bruised, bandaged, but alive -- children desperately embrace them.

WHITE

It's okay, we're fine. (beat) Hey,  
who's hungry? Let's get supper.

Strangely, White pulls away, helps Cora walk. Children, confused by his distance. Della looks to her mother.

CORA

Papa just wants things normal.

**EXT. GRENOUILLE RESTAURANT - NIGHT**

White leads his family to La Grenouille (eatery that once rejected him and Smalls), stops with his hand on the door. Caucasian diners watch them warily from inside. He eyes the sign in the window: 'NO NEGROES.'

**INT. CARNEY'S TAVERN - A MOMENT LATER**

A new restaurant. Dark, sawdust covered floors, and every customer... black. Della leads the family in.

DELLA

Never been to Carney's, Papa?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

White, sullen, looks around, shakes his head, 'no.'  
Family sits, BARKEEP immediately serves chicken, drinks.

BARKEEP

Meal's on the house, congressman.

White, thrown. Phonograph plays. Some patrons dance a jig. White finally loosens his tie, settles in.

WHITE

(pleased, emotional)  
Okay. A quiet, family meal.

White cuts chicken, smiles, about to take first bite.

GEORGE JR.

Daddy... we love you.

Fork at mouth, White bursts into tears. Children, amazed by the uncensored display. White briefly hides in Cora's shoulder, then heads to a corner.

Cora joins White. Holds his head as he cries.

WHITE

Why am I so scared? Still trying to fit in, earn respect. Ain't no such thing as colorblind.

CORA

All I care, is I still have you.

White looks at his children.

WHITE

*No Promised Land to run to.* (beat)  
I won't waste two more years. We finish what we promised.

SMASH CUT TO:

**INT. NATIONAL AFRO-AMERICAN COUNCIL DINNER - NIGHT**

Spotlight illuminates empty stage, a U.S. flag backdrop.

CARD:

JANUARY 1899 -- WASHINGTON, DC

3 MONTHS LATER

'Applause' builds as White steps into the spotlight. He looks thinner, harder. TRACK OUT to reveal a black-tie ball, expectant all-black crowd. Banner on stage reads:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

NATIONAL AFRO-AMERICAN COUNCIL HONORS  
GEORGE WHITE, OUR BLACK CONGRESSMAN

WHITE

(applause dies down)

Thank you. Thank you. (beat) I came to be honored tonight. But being a lone black in all the U.S. government has proven no source of pride. Instead of accepting your tribute this evening, I wish to lay out how I intend to earn it...

Crowd, confused. Cora and family watch expectantly.

**INT. THALIA BOARDING HOUSE - CONTINUOUS**

A baby's 'cry' jolts Smalls awake -- he hits his head on the bunk above him. *Take two*, he sits carefully. We find him in an overcrowded BOARDING HOME.

(White's voice continues in V.O.)

WHITE (V.O.)

When Congress next convenes, I will propose and I will invest all my energy into passing...

A MOMENT LATER: Smalls exits the home, dour mood, passes an elderly IRISH MAN in the parlor. Man nods at a SIGN.

SMALLS

I don't read.

IRISH MAN

Rent due on Monday. It's *Monday*

**INT. NATIONAL AFRO-AMERICAN COUNCIL DINNER - CONTINUOUS**

We join White again as he delivers the zinger.

WHITE

...a sweeping anti-lynching law.

'Gasps' from the crowd.

**INT. MEDICI PAWNBROKER - CONTINUOUS**

Smalls opens his scrapbook at a pawnshop counter, hands the BROKER a beloved NAVY MEDAL to inspect.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WHITE (V.O.)

The scourge of violence and murder  
sweeping the South, acquiesced to  
by the North, must end...

Pawnbroker hands the medal back to Smalls.

PAWNBROKER

I'll pay 90 cents.

SMALLS

It's a Civil War battle-streamer.  
I've seen these medals go at \$200.

PAWNBROKER

Hell, more than that! But thing  
is, when a Negro has one, I don't  
believe for a second it's real.

**EXT. THE WHITE HOUSE - EVENING**

Grand facade of the White House. Mark Hanna exits, led  
by staff across the street to the War and Navy Building.

WHITE (V.O.)

...I see how much ground we've  
lost since the great leaders  
before us. I see a people too  
pummeled to stand. No more!

Hanna glances to his side, double-take. Finds Smalls.

MARK HANNA

In walks a ghost.

SMALLS

This ghost ain't done haunting.

MARK HANNA

For *me*, he is. I'm busy.

SMALLS

You've been ignoring me, Hanna. I  
was promised remuneration.

MARK HANNA

(aside)

I was promised a congressman.  
You've given me a raving radical.  
Bargain is off. Anyway, tides are  
shifting. State legislatures in  
the South aren't rolling your way.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SMALLS

What are you talking about?

MARK HANNA

I think, come next election...  
you'll have no black voters left  
to horse trade. So bugger off.

**INT. NATIONAL AFRO-AMERICAN COUNCIL DINNER - CONTINUOUS**

White finishes his speech in a frenzy. Crowd applauding.

WHITE

... we must claim *our equal chance*  
*in the race of life*. We must  
claim our rights as men!

ASSEMBLYMAN (PRE-LAP)

Strangle the Negroes out!

**INT. NORTH CAROLINA STATE ASSEMBLY - MORNING**

'POUNDING' of a gavel in North Carolina State Assembly.

STATE ASSEMBLY SPEAKER

Proposal on the table will revise  
North Carolina electoral law-

ASSEMBLYMEN interrupt with a chorus of 'ayes.'

News editor DANIELS arrives in the gallery. Sees former  
candidate LLOYD. The men acknowledge each other proudly.

STATE ASSEMBLY SPEAKER (CONT'D)

Well, then. The ayes have it.  
Come next election, let 'dem  
Negroes beg to vote!

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - GEORGE WHITE'S OFFICE - EVENING**

Della hands Tom a TELEGRAM in their DC office. Tom's jaw  
drops as he reads.

**EXT. WASHINGTON DC - STREETCAR - A MOMENT LATER**

Smalls in a packed STREETCAR, suitcases beside him. Car  
stops, Smalls realizes he has arrived... at White's home.

He jumps to exit. 'Clink'... a bottle falls from his  
pocket. Fellow passengers glance between him and an  
EMPTY VILE OF ETHER rolling on the floor.

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S DC TOWNHOUSE - CONTINUOUS**

Cora lies on a sofa in the parlor, White wipes her brow. Both glance up at the 'racket' of an arriving carriage.

**EXT. GEORGE WHITE'S DC TOWNHOUSE - CONTINUOUS**

The racket comes not from Smalls, but a newly arriving carriage. Tom leaps out. White opens his front door. Smalls, meanwhile, watches this from across the street.

TOM FORTUNE (B.G.)

The North Carolina Assembly, they went through with it. They're taking back our right to vote!

White looks back as Cora enters the hall, wrapped in blankets. Tom quiets in her presence.

TOM FORTUNE (CONT'D)

Public will have to ratify it. We still got 'til August. But George, what do we do?

White, thinking quick, pulls Tom in, about to shut the door, when... he sees Smalls across the street.

White steps forward, *is it really him?* Smalls backs off. White follows a step, but Smalls vanishes into a park.

White look back at Cora -- she saw all of this.

WHITE

Just a vagrant.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - GEORGE WHITE'S OFFICE - DAY**

White and staff in Capitol office. Papers spread out.

DELLA

It's an ambush. You pivot from voting rights to lynching, and so they go after voting rights.

WHITE

We'll work twice as hard. Do lynching, voting -- both at the same time.

TOM FORTUNE

George, we go full bore on voting, and we'd be lucky to make ground. Options on lynching are worse.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

TOM FORTUNE (CONT'D)

We can draft legislation *without* teeth, work like dogs to get Lodge's support, and *maybe* it will pass. But write a bill that calls lynching what it is, a true crime, and failure is assured.

DELLA

It's murder. You're saying no one will vote for a law that says so?

**EXT. WASHINGTON MALL - EVENING**

White carefully helps Cora to walk, a rare bit of exercise, wintry dusk on the Washington Mall.

WHITE

The party is scared to death of labeling lynching a capitol offense. Scared how many Southern voters it'll cost them. But if I compromise, then there's still a shot on voting rights.

CORA

They want you to call lynching a lesser crime than *petty theft*?

WHITE

Or we lose on *both*.

CORA

Then you need to lose.

White glances warily. Cora stops, sits on a bench.

CORA (CONT'D)

Tell me something. The *vagrant* last night... that was Robert, wasn't it? You let him go. Why? (beat) Because you see a version of yourself in him. With all we've given, you fear *that's* how it might end.

White cannot answer, but his inaction says enough.

CORA (CONT'D)

George, you gotta believe me, his failure was not temperament, not *bad politics*. It was vanity. Always wanting his due. Don't you make that mistake.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CORA (CONT'D)

I'd rather you tell the truth and risk being hated, exiled from public life forever -- that's okay -- because at least our souls will be free.

WHITE

I can't come so far and leave the people with nothing.

CORA

You gotta be prepared... that our people might do this without you. It's not you who has to want this in the end, it's them. And if all they see is compromise, we've already lost. (beat) It's not about tactics or politics anymore. Understand? It's deeper. Don't call lynching a misdemeanor. My sweet chariot, don't be afraid.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - COMMITTEE ROOM - NIGHT**

Handful of CONGRESSMEN sit at U-shaped committee table. White, in a corner. Lodge, dreary-eyed in center.

REP. LODGE

Alright, committee work's done for the night. Thank you, gentlemen.

Congressmen begin to stand and stretch.

WHITE

Mr. Lodge, if I still might...

Members pause as Della and Tom distribute DOCUMENTS.

WHITE (CONT'D)

My staff is passing you language for H.R. 349, my bill to outlaw the vigilante hanging of Negroes.

REP. LODGE

Uh, this isn't on our agenda.

WHITE

The bill needs committee approval to advance.

REP. LODGE

George, what are you doing?

WHITE

For too long, we've turned a blind eye to this crime. No more. It's an abuse that deserves punishment.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WHITE (CONT'D)

So henceforth I ask all such acts  
be declared a capitol offense.

Lodge 'pounds' his gavel, as we SLAM CUT TO-

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - CORRIDORS - A MOMENT LATER**

Lodge and White in corridor, others watch from afar.

REP. LODGE

You are to clear all work with me!

WHITE

I saved you the trouble of saying  
no. Never expected support, just  
a chance to get the bill out of  
committee to the House floor.

REP. LODGE

No! We're already overstretched  
fighting this disenfranchisement  
amendment in your home state.

WHITE

You barely lifted a finger on  
voting rights.

REP. LODGE

Because you're threatening us with  
a fucking lynching bill!

(finally calms)

Damn it, George. Think I *want* to  
be your guard dog? I'm not the  
bad guy. (beat) Remember when you  
told me the power of *small steps*?  
Those perhaps I can still do.

WHITE

Sorry, Henry. I can't let this  
one slip. I'll campaign across  
the country, lobby our National  
Convention in July if I have to.

Lodge backs away distraught, shaking his head.

WHITE (CONT'D)

Henry, this matters. This my  
people need.

Lodge disappears down corridor with staff.

White sees BLACK GROUNDS PEOPLE look up from their toil.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WHITE (CONT'D)

(calls out)

We need to push now, get the bill  
voted on. You'll stand with us,  
right? Keep your heads high?

Utter silence.

**INT. BOSTON AME CHURCH - BOSTON - DAY**

We join White and Tom, speaking to a LARGE BUT HESITANT  
all-black church audience in Boston.

WHITE

The evil of lynching has become  
our crucible. Support of blacks  
in the South alone cannot stop it.  
I need the blacks in Chicago, New  
York, and here in Boston...

**EXT. NORFOLK NAVAL STATION - CONTINUOUS**

The Norfolk Naval yard is a sprawling military base.  
NAVY SENTRIES man a main gate, rubbing their hands to  
stay warm. A BLACK DRIVER arrives in a 'VIRGINIA DAIRY'  
carriage truck. Sentries waves him through.

Black driver parks, nervously opens the cargo wagon.

BLACK DRIVER

End of the line, man. Get out.  
Ship decommissioning yard is in  
the rear. Good luck.

Smalls emerges. Climbs out with his cane.

**EXT. TARBORO STREETS - CONTINUOUS**

Tom escorts White up Tarboro's Main Street, harks.

TOM FORTUNE

Join us in the park on the topic  
of the anti-lynching bill! Only  
two months left in Congressman  
White's term! Support the anti-  
lynching bill, now's our time!

**I/E. NORFOLK NAVAL STATION - CONTINUOUS**

We return to Smalls as he crosses the Naval station, hat  
brim lowered. Sailors glance dubiously.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Smalls turns a corner, gets a view of his destination: a line of aging rusted ships, including the Planter.

**EXT. TARBORO FAIRGROUNDS - CONTINUOUS**

White stands on the same fairgrounds gazebo from which he once orated to hundreds. Now, not a single black. Because RED SHIRTS on horseback watch from afar.

WHITE

No one's coming. They're giving up on me.

TOM FORTUNE

No, George. They're just trying to survive.

WHITE

Who are we helping? It's my greatest fear. I race out in front to lead, and wind up alone.

**I/E. CSS PLANTER GUNBOAT - WHEELHOUSE - CONTINUOUS**

Smalls is aboard THE PLANTER, a ghost of its former self, rotted and worn. Planks cover the WHEELHOUSE'S windows and doors. He tries to pull one off. Too tight. Smalls peeks in the dark chamber, sees...

The floor plank covering his STILL-HIDDEN BAG OF CASH.

Now committed, he shoves his cane between boards, uses all of his strength to pry them loose. His face turns beet red, he 'yells.' CANE BREAKS, HE TOPPLES BACK.

SMALLS

Goddamn sunnova-

Someone above him, Smalls turns. Sees a ROW OF SOLDIERS.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

Just visiting my boat, gentlemen.

**INT. NORFOLK NAVAL STATION - BASE BRIG - NIGHT**

Smalls sits in a dank brig, slouched over, head in hands.

REP. LODGE (O.S.)

Always knew you'd wind up behind bars. Just never figured on charges as meager as trespassing.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Rep. Lodge arrives in a suit. Smalls groans, not the visitor he wanted. A GUARD unlocks Smalls cell.

REP. LODGE (CONT'D)  
Let's go. You're free. Call it a  
*professional courtesy.*

SMALLS  
I don't believe it. What is this?

REP. LODGE  
The party wants rid of you.

Smalls scoffs. He stands, straggles towards the unlocked gate. But Lodge blocks gate with his foot, leans in.

REP. LODGE (CONT'D)  
But I want to know one thing. How  
much money is on that boat?  
(pained silence)  
You sought it far too long and  
hard for it to be about *fairness.*

Smalls' eyes drifts over, he measures Lodge's intention.

SMALLS  
And let me guess. I can stay in  
the GOP's good graces by making a  
donation -- is that it?

REP. LODGE  
So I'm right. Robert... leave.  
Of all the things I'd do for  
money, suffering further alliance  
to you isn't one of them. If I  
never see you in DC again, that'll  
still be too soon.  
(Smalls pushes past)  
Want to know my great pity? That  
you had to drag George White down  
with you.

SMALLS  
(waits)  
I made George White a better man.

REP. LODGE  
No. You cast him after your own  
image.

SMALLS  
My face was cast in God's image.  
Just likes *yours.* Before you pity  
me, look in a mirror first.

**INT. PULLMAN CAR - DAY**

White and Tom work on a train, jammed full of boisterous passengers. We notice pins and banners, all read:

REPUBLICAN NATIONAL CONVENTION, 1900

TOM FORTUNE

Two cocktail meetings tonight,  
lobbying all day tomorrow. You  
care which order? If we're gonna  
build enough pressure on Speaker  
Reed to get your bill to the  
floor, this is our last best shot.

WHITE

(ignores question)  
Tell me something. If we *do* get  
our bill in and voted on... how  
many 'yes' votes can we swing?

TOM FORTUNE

I think a good number. Maybe.  
Enough to get some real newsprint.

White knows a lie when he hears one.

CONDUCTOR (B.G.)

Crossing Pennsylvania state line.  
Please respect the state line.

White and Tom glance. Two BLACK PASSENGERS stand, head rearward. CONDUCTOR approaches.

CONDUCTOR (CONT'D)

State law, gentlemen. As of last  
month. Need you in the Negro car.

**INT. BELLEVUE-STRATFORD HOTEL - EVENING**

Philadelphia hotel, grand lobby, celebratory guests. Tom at reception argues *sub rosa* with HOTEL MANAGER.

TOM FORTUNE

The congressman has been staying  
at this hotel for years. We  
belong with our associates.

**EXT. BELLEVUE-STRATFORD HOTEL - NIGHT**

White and Tom outside hotel in the RAIN, soaked, try to flag a livery. None stop. Until finally, one carriage arrives, door opens, and within...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SMALLS

Need a bed?

**INT. PHILADELPHIA STREETS - SMALLS' CARRIAGE - CONTINUOUS**

White and Smalls face each other in the carriage cab.

SMALLS

You'd have the same problem at any hotel. Only 29 coloreds even came this year. Owner of Freeman Bank, good Negro, opened his home to all of us. Paid my way here.

(tense silence)

You know I've been to every GOP National Conventions since the War. Conditions for blacks get worse at each. Yet I keep coming.

WHITE

Stubborn.

SMALLS

Occasionally for the better.

(White smiles)

Hmm... know what happened one year here? Remember how I told you I never took Helena Douglas to the sack? Well, I did snag her older sister once.

WHITE

Wait, wasn't Helena's sister... nearly 20 years older?

SMALLS

Yes. It was like bedding a prune.

White and Tom both groan and laugh.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

Thought you'd appreciate that.  
(beat) Good seeing you, George.  
Been a hard time in your absence.  
I hope us two can do this trip again. Many times. Two old and grey, retired congressman...

White bites his lip, imagining their future.

**EXT. FREEMAN BANK OWNER'S HOME - NIGHT**

White exits into rain from bank owner's mansion.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

TOM FORTUNE

We're scheduled to lobby. Where you goin'?

WHITE

To think. To breathe.

**EXT. PHILADELPHIA CONVENTION HALL - CONTINUOUS**

White, alone, strolls past festooned Convention Hall. Crowds pour out of pubs. Caucasian POLICE stare as White passes, GRASP BATONS. White gets the message.

ALLEYWAY: White cuts back through an alley, bundles up from the cold. When suddenly, TWO LARGE MEN block his exit. Then behind him, TWO MORE MEN appear.

WHITE

What do you want? What is this?!

MAN

Congressman White?

**INT. SLAUGHTERHOUSE OFFICE - CONTINUOUS**

The four large men lead White into a nondescript room. Where White finds former Democratic challenger Lloyd.

LLOYD

Hiya', George. You know House Minority Leader Richardson, yes?

DEMOCRATIC LEADER in corner. White, on guard.

MINORITY LEADER

Congressman, take a seat. Take a cigar. When'd a man from your party last offer you a cigar, hmm?

WHITE

You're deep into GOP territory for Democrats. What do you want?

MINORITY LEADER

You.

(silence)

I want you to leave President McKinley, and back our nominee Bill Jennings Bryan instead. Democrats are willing to play ball with the Negro race. Which from the looks of it, is more than we can say for the party of Lincoln.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

A moment.

WHITE

You want me to ask blacks to vote for the very men that threaten their lives?

MINORITY LEADER

Times change. Democrats want back in power. And we all know, we'll need your votes to get there.

Nothing. White heads for the door.

LLOYD

Congressman.

WHITE

I don't do *deals*.

MINORITY LEADER

(to Lloyd)  
Told you he didn't know.

LLOYD

George! What about Robert Smalls? Didn't you ask him to approach us?

White freezes... turns, filled with dread.

MINORITY LEADER

Smalls gets politics. Knows what it takes to keep your seat.

WHITE

When? When did he approach you -- you mean in our last race.

LLOYD

I mean this morning.

White, mortified. Confirmation of his every fear.

MINORITY LEADER

This is your chance for lasting power. Do the right thing for your kind. We all benefit.

**I/E. FREEMAN BANK OWNER'S HOME - NIGHT**

In his banker's house bedroom, Smalls wears a suit and a top-coat. But sits in a rocking chair, dazed. We see no vile, but he is clearly on ETHER.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

'Pound' on door. Smalls perks up. Opens the door.

White, soaked by rain, counts CASH from his wallet.  
Smalls, confused. White shoves cash into Smalls hand.

WHITE

Not enough? More? What's the  
number? Say it! How much of my  
life do you need to pillage?

(realizes)

Are you drunk? Are you drugged?

SMALLS

On my way to a mixer at St. Croix.  
(beat) Guess Lloyd talked to you.

WHITE

(seething)

Looking at you now, I don't feel a  
shred of respect. (beat) I'm done.  
Hear me? With all of this. With  
you. Don't come near me or my  
family, never again. I'm done.

(cools a moment)

Why can't you learn? You robbed  
me the right to succeed on my own.

SMALLS

George, don't you see? You never  
could have!

GUESTS peek from their rooms. White, fed up, heads out.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

(follows White)

Quit now and then what? How many  
more generations gotta pass in  
servitude? I *believe in you*.  
Your voice, your wisdom. But you  
don't land the punch. Your bill  
is stuck. I'm offering another  
chance -- a third term. We can  
make it happen. Don't abandon our  
people just so you can feel *proud*.

WHITE

The people aren't following!  
Cause they see men like you at my  
side. They see nothing but greed.

SMALLS

You do it too! Ever since I've  
known you! You're afraid of your  
own warts.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

This drags White to a halt. Tom appears in the hall.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

All either of us ever wanted was the people's love, tell me that's not so. At least *I* admit it.

WHITE

But I regret it. I try to change. Your generation might've set us free, but you sold us out. You're the last of them, Smalls, thank God. Your time in the light is over.

White swallows back emotion, pushes past Tom to the exit. Tom stops Smalls from following.

TOM FORTUNE

It's over. Let him go.

OUTSIDE: White shoves his way outside, trips on the pathway, KNOCKS OVER a lamp sconce. He kicks the brick, 'yells' in visceral anger. Then hunches over. A mess.

**I/E. GEORGE WHITE'S DC TOWNHOUSE - MORNING**

White returns home, early morning, gut in knots. Inside, he finds, Della and George Jr. in the kitchen... CRYING.

WHITE

What happened? Where's Mother?

**INT. PROVIDENCE HOSPITAL - EVENING**

Cora UNCONSCIOUS on a hospital bed, tubes connect her to glass IVs. Doctor confers with White in a corner.

DOCTOR

We believe it was a stroke. Late last night. She'll have to revive before we know the full impact. Depending on its extent...

Voice fades as White zones out, focuses on his wife.

**INT. PROVIDENCE HOSPITAL - NIGHT**

Nighttime in the hospital. White sleeps in a chair.

Cora wakes, weakly grasps White's hand. White opens his eyes. Cora, so frail, he cannot help but let go a tear.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CORA  
(barely heard)  
We used to hide our tears.

WHITE  
You're so beautiful.  
(sings, quiet)  
*Swing low, sweet chariot, coming  
for to carry me home. I looked  
over Jordan, and I what did I see?  
Coming for to carry me home?*  
(soft)  
I love you... my sweet chariot.

CORA  
Keep me close.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - SPEAKER'S OFFICE - DAY**

Speaker Reed works with staff at his desk, as Rep. Lodge reviews a Washington Post by the coffee table.

REP. LODGE  
(reads paper)  
'Last Negro congressman giving up  
on reelection. No blacks left in  
government when his term expires.'

Lodge lowers the paper, glances at Reed for a response.  
The speaker was either not listening, or does not care.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - GEORGE WHITE'S OFFICE - DAY**

White and Della open incoming mail in his Capitol office.  
We notice BOXES ALREADY PACKED. Tom enters.

TOM FORTUNE  
I just heard something funny.  
When the term ends, our office  
officially becomes a broom closet.

White focuses on a letter. Puts it in a DRAWER.

DELLA  
Another letter from Mr. Smalls?  
You won't open them?

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S DC TOWNHOUSE - DAY**

ORDERLIES carry Cora to a bed in their townhouse parlor.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Cora reaches to George Jr., biting a trembling lip at the sight of his mother. The boy grips his father's waist.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - GEORGE WHITE'S OFFICE - NIGHT**

Nighttime, White alone in his office, seals final boxes. Gets to his GOLD-PLATED NAMEPLATE, holds it with longing.

SMALLS (O.S.)

Don't sell it. The memories are worth more than the gold.

Standing in dimly-lit doorway... Smalls.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

I'm the last man you want to talk to, I'm sure. Don't worry, you don't gotta speak. Just listen.

Smalls approaches. Places his SCRAPBOOK on White's desk.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

I've been keeping a secret. For 30 years. I need it off my chest.

Smalls opens scrapbook to PHOTO OF HIS BOAT, THE PLANTER.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

True story of the Planter, a truth I never shared. That the men I took with me never even knew.

(White glances, wary)

I'd no intention to escape North. My goal with that ship... was to sail to Liberia.

We CUT from B&W photo of Planter to...

PLANTER GUNBOAT (THIS IS A FLASHBACK): Smalls, age 23, on the Planter. As Union blockade is revealed. We recognize his once unclear emotion as... *fear*.

SMALLS (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I wasn't a hero. I's petrified. I didn't defect, I was captured.

WHITE AND SMALLS (REAL-TIME): DC, Smalls flips pages.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

More lies. Me joining the Union navy, wasn't for the *valor* of fighting the South.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

UNION MILITARY BASE (FLASHBACK): young Smalls in military camp. Smalls held with captured slaves. Some sign up for the army, others marched off in chains.

SMALLS (V.O.) (CONT'D)

It was for fear of being returned to slavery.

ARIZONA TERRITORY (FLASHBACK): Smalls, mid-30s, rides a covered wagon in empty desert, rising sun. He hides his face in fear as a drunk SHERIFF passes on horseback.

SMALLS (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I fled to Arizona not in hope of making a refuge for other Negroes. But to escape an arrest warrant and dead marriage at home.

ELECTION RALLY (FLASHBACK): Smalls, 40s, rouses a crowd.

SMALLS (V.O.) (CONT'D)

And I ran for Congress with just one goal... power, taste of the limelight. You were right.

WHITE AND SMALLS (REAL-TIME): Smalls stands back.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

George, all I've ever done was for self-salvation. Never risked a bone purely for others in my life. And now my failing has stained you. Nothing I'll say can forgive it. I understand your choice to quit, more than you imagine. But it means, I realize, *neither* of us will live to see the Promised Land. Not even you. So I ask just this. If you are to leave the altar of public life, do not shut the door behind you. Do what I failed to, show other blacks the path to rise in your stead. They might not yet have the strength to follow. You might not live to see the ones who do. But tread the path, take them atop Mount Pisgah, tell them what lies beyond and what *we as men* deserve. And one day, God willing, the strongest amongst them will take up in your place. He, not us, will carry our people home.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

SMALLS (CONT'D)

George, you and I have to accept  
our own failure to achieve this...  
but it is the last and *greatest*  
thing we can do.

Smalls lets go of the scrapbook. White, silent. Smalls  
sighs, bitter-sweet, lifts his chin, and turns.

SMALLS (CONT'D)

One more thing... since I'll  
likely never see my boat again.  
In the Planter's wheelhouse, under  
an old, gnarled floor board -- I  
swear, you can't miss it -- you'll  
find a box. This box needs a  
home. If you can get to it, use  
it. Take care of Cora and the  
family. You doing that... would  
make this all worthwhile. Take  
care, George.

White, deeply affected. Smalls disappears down the  
corridor into red glow of a rising sun.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - SPEAKER'S OFFICE - NIGHT**

Speaker Reed's outer office, staff blow horns, celebrate.  
Staffer Nicholas tango-dips a female page in jubilee.

STAFFER NICHOLAS

Congress is ours, 10 new seats!

CARD:

NOVEMBER 1900 -- WASHINGTON DC

ELECTION NIGHT

Nicholas dances across the office, and runs into White.

STAFFER NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

(quickly serious)

Mr. White. I'm sorry. We did  
poor in your home state, I know.

WHITE

I'm here to see the speaker.

Nicholas eyes SENIOR STAFFERS, grave.

WHITE (CONT'D)

What, can't even get a meeting  
now? (beat) I'm nearly out of  
power.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WHITE (CONT'D)

Just three weeks left of my term.  
I accept that my anti-lynching  
bill will vanish without a vote.  
But not me. I want one speech  
from the floor. I'm not asking  
you, I'm asking Reed. So, damn  
it, let me see him.

STAFFER NICHOLAS

Sir, you already know his answer.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - GEORGE WHITE'S OFFICE - A MOMENT LATER**

White in his empty office. 'Knock' at door.

WHITE

(without looking)

They're gonna make us disappear  
into the night, Tom-

REP. LODGE (O.S.)

It breaks my heart.

Rep. Lodge enters. White, guarded.

REP. LODGE (CONT'D)

Wish it were otherwise, wish there  
were something I could do.

WHITE

There *is*.

REP. LODGE

I can't get you on the floor.

WHITE

Of course you can. You have a  
bill set for a final vote, don't  
you? On... *oyster quotas*? Let me  
speak during its debate.

REP. LODGE

But I know what you'll say. And  
you know the price I'll pay.  
(beat) Look, I don't come empty  
handed. If Reed ever found out I  
did *just this* for you...

Lodge hands an ENVELOPE. White, confused, opens it  
warily. (We do not see the contents.)

REP. LODGE (CONT'D)

I really wish you well, George.  
Don't ask me to do any more.

**INT. THALIA BOARDING HOUSE - CONTINUOUS**

The IRISH MANAGER of the boarding home we saw Smalls in leads White down a ramshackle hallway, points to a door.

White about to knock, but instead... slides LODGE'S ENVELOPE under the sill. And walks away.

'Creak,' door opens. White pauses, turns to see Smalls.

WHITE  
(re: envelope)  
It's about fairness.

Smalls opens it. We finally see a LETTER, headlined:

FROM U.S. NAVY -- DEED TO C.S.S. PLANTER

WHITE (CONT'D)  
The boat is yours. Norfolk, berth nine. At least I quit knowing I achieved *something* in DC. (beat) I tried to speak one last time on the floor, I want you to know.

SMALLS  
(re: the deed)  
You were supposed to take this.

WHITE  
I didn't earn it.

SMALLS  
(emotion brewing)  
George, if you had spoken... what would you've said?

WHITE  
The truth.

**I/E. U.S. CAPITOL - AFTERNOON**

End of work day, Rep. Lodge finishes with staff.

OUTSIDE: Lodge exits Capitol, gets in a carriage, freezes. Right outside carriage window -- Smalls. Smalls lifts the unmistakable CONFEDERATE EMBLAZONED LOCK BOX, his decades-long object of desire.

REP. LODGE  
You're welcome, Robert.

Smalls drops the box through the carriage window, 'thud' as it lands, topples gold across carriage floor.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SMALLS

Keep it. For the Grand Ol' Party.

Lodge, stunned, as driver shakes reins, carriage rolls.

REP. LODGE

Driver, wait!

Carriage stops. Lodge leans out the window.

SMALLS

Our lone black congressman asks to speak. Nothing, nothing matters more. Certainly not me. Help him. That's all I ask. The money is yours. (beat) George doesn't know I came. Best he never does. Just... consider me a ghost.

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S DC TOWNHOUSE - NIGHT**

Nighttime. White opens his front door. Lodge outside.

REP. LODGE

Last day in session, you'll get five minutes to talk on my oyster bill. I'm going to be blamed. So, George, make it good.

White, confused, excited. Lodge turns to leave.

WHITE

Henry. What changed?

REP. LODGE

I realized how much courage it can take... to be stubborn.

**EXT. NORTH CAROLINA STATE ASSEMBLY - DAWN**

Dawn. Crews rig banners and parade stands outside North Carolina's Capitol.

CARD:

FEBRUARY 1901 -- RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA

NEWSIE harks from a corner.

NEWSIE

Inaugural parade today! Democrats take control of state government!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Nearby, Daniels and publisher arrive by carriage.

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S DC TOWNHOUSE - CONTINUOUS**

White wakes up, dark townhouse bedroom. *Tough day ahead.*

A MOMENT LATER: White dresses in finest suit, silk tie.

A MOMENT LATER: White visits George Jr., calmly asleep.

**INT. GEORGE WHITE'S DC TOWNHOUSE - MORNING**

Quiet kitchen, White cooks his own eggs. Eats alone.  
Heads for the sink to wash his plate-

Cora, now in a WHEELCHAIR, enters. Tries to stand...  
suddenly stumbles, White catches her. Cora hangs limp.

CORA

Whatever you plan to say on the  
floor today, you deserve someone  
at your side. And don't dare tell  
me I'm too ill.

PRE-LAP: 'roar' of crowded U.S. Capitol chambers swells.

**INT. U.S. CAPITOL - HOUSE CHAMBERS - DAY**

Loud congressional chambers packed with congressmen.  
SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE 'pounds' gavel in front.

White enters the rear, Cora at his side. (She is just  
barely able to walk hanging from his shoulder.) She  
keeps her dignified air, despite the stares.

CORA

Full house. Your audience.

SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE

Quiet, gentlemen! Chair next  
recognizes Mr. White for five  
minutes. We'll then proceed  
immediately to a vote.

White seats Cora at a desk. She grips White's hand. He  
heads up aisle. Nears Speaker Reed and Rep. Lodge.

SPEAKER REED

(whispers to Lodge)  
Wife and I are vacationing on Cape  
Cod until the next term, Henry.  
You should come visit.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

REP. LODGE

George.  
 (White stops)  
 Keep it *relevant*.

White eyes Reed, knows LODGE IS COVERING HIS ASS. Nods.

INTERCUT AS NECESSARY...

NORTH CAROLINA STATEHOUSE: grand parade past Statehouse.  
 Daniels visits VIP viewing-stand, shakes hands.

U.S. CAPITOL: White arrives at lectern.

On House Democratic side, Minority Leader Richardson  
 watches with cynicism.

White glances at Speaker Reed. Reed, eagle-eyed.

White turns to face speaker pro tempore, unfolds printed  
 speech (cannot see House floor or gallery behind him).

WHITE

Mr. Speaker, I wish to comment  
 on... oysters, as a representative  
 of a coastal district and avowed  
 nature lover. The well-being of  
 bivalves is an important concern-

'Sighs' from Congressmen. Cora, confused.

CORA

Oysters?

NORTH CAROLINA STATEHOUSE: Daniels joins gleeful state  
 assemblymen as they file into assembly chambers.

U.S. CAPITOL: White speaks, congressmen eye wristwatches.

WHITE

Oysters are a zoological triumph.  
 A culinary delight. I could list  
 many virtues. But I'd be remiss  
 to do them poorer justice than  
 others who have spoken. And so...  
 I will consume the rest of my time  
 on an issue of greater import.

Reed glances up. Cora, suddenly compelled.

WHITE (CONT'D)

A plea for all the colored men and  
 colored women of this country.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

As he expected, members 'gasp' and 'groan,' gavel pounds.  
(White keeps his back to audience.) Reed leaps erect.

SPEAKER REED

Point of order!

Tension sweeps the chambers -- speaker pro tempore frets.

SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE

Does the congressmen from North  
Carolina wish to cede the floor?

WHITE

I do not.

SPEAKER REED

I demand Mr. White focus on  
the bill at hand!

SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE (CONT'D)

(awkward)

Mr. Speaker, the congressman is  
recognized for four more minutes,  
however he chooses to use them.

Cora, thrilled. Tries, but can barely hide a smile.

WHITE

(forceful)

I'd not digress if I did not view  
this the most urgent, most ill-  
handled crisis affecting the  
United States today. And I do  
believe, until we address this so-  
called *race issue* head on, we  
remain failures in the eyes of the  
world, and the eyes of God.

Reed turns to Lodge. But Lodge only shrugs.

Democratic congressmen not so restrained.

CONGRESSMEN (VARIOUS)

Sit down! (another) Shut  
the Negro up!

SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE

Gentlemen on the Democratic  
side will respect decorum!

WHITE (CONT'D)

I stand here today the only black  
amongst you. And when this body  
next convenes, it will not possess  
a single colored face. In the  
minds of many, this is victory.  
Yet you've earned the mantle by  
deceit and murder!

Democrats have heard enough, start to MARCH OUT. Cora's  
smile fades. Speaker pro tempore stands, pounds gavel.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

SPEAKER REED

(to Lodge)

What have you done?

WHITE

You distort the rule of law to keep black men from the polls. Spread ill-formed rumors to turn our white friends against us. And when we still wouldn't submit, you turned to the noose. I remind you of my efforts to legislate against these crimes. Yet my bill dies sweetly still in committee.

Minority Leader Richardson passes Reed, spits, exits. Reed stands, faces the exit, turns to Rep. Lodge.

SPEAKER REED

It's an abomination.

Cora, unable to stand, watches helplessly as... Reed and entourage exit. LODGE RELUCTANTLY IN TOW.

WHITE

I stand here as testament to a spirit that will not be crushed.

Leaders now gone, all of congress exits in droves.

Speaker pro tempore whispers frantically to staff, but even some on dais begin to jump ship. White, only glancingly aware of the migration behind him.

WHITE (CONT'D)

Though you will try, the hunger for our rights cannot be quashed. And if today you succeed, it is due not to the weakness of my people, but the inaction and timidity of *one man*... me.

This admittance wins Cora's focus. White swallows deep.

But speaker pro tempore, finally resigned, hands in pockets, he walks out.

As speech crescendos WE FOCUS ONLY ON WHITE AND CORA. Cora, bittersweet agony as White pours forth his heart.

WHITE (CONT'D)

See, fear is a mighty force. And it trapped me. I was afraid to be shunned as an outcast, afraid of your scorn, you men in this hall.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

WHITE (CONT'D)

Worked all my life for acceptance. But to what end? I *am* different. I see now I will never be like all you. Because I... am Negro. And what I want, what I demand, is no longer mere approval. But a chance. An equal chance in the race of life. Lift the repressive hand that judges us, that rives this nation. See what my people share with our brother in white. Or don't. But if you do, if you allow us just a moment's calm, then I will not be the last black man in these chambers. And my two children will not spend their lives in fear. I offer these as parting words on behalf of an outraged, heart-broken, bruised and bleeding, but God-fearing people. A faithful, industrious, rising people. This might be our temporary farewell to the American congress, but some day, phoenix-like, we will come again. Some day. I pray, God willing, the day arrives soon. And my only apology for the earnestness with which I speak, is that I plead not just for me, but for the life, liberty, future happiness, and manhood suffrage of one-eighth the entire population of the United States.

(long exhale)

And on the issue of oysters, I vote aye to Mr. Lodge's bill.

Utter silence. Only then does White regain his focus, finally turn around and see...

Entire chambers emptied. Only Cora. Tears streaming.

NORTH CAROLINA STATEHOUSE: Daniels steps up to dais.

DANIELS

(orates)

I am honored to offer the benediction on this, the first day of North Carolina's 59th Assembly!

U.S. CAPITOL: White delicately re-folds and pockets his speech, walks calmly up empty aisle to Cora.

NORTH CAROLINA STATEHOUSE: Daniels, passionate.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (5)

DANIELS (CONT'D)

Today we celebrate. For the Democrats have taken control of our assembly, governorship, and for the first time in 30 years, every U.S. Congress seat from this old state! We have a white man's government. From this hour on, no Negro will disgrace our proud heritage in the council chambers of the nation! For these mercies, thank God. Today we celebrate.

U.S. CAPITOL: White takes Cora's hand.

WHITE

Did all I can. And no one heard me. Mrs. White, let's go home.

Cora, too weak to stand, so White lifts her, CARRIES HIS WIFE to the chamber exit.

**I/E. U.S. CAPITOL - CONTINUOUS**

Silent and stony-faced, White and Cora exit to rotunda. White shields his gaze from sunlight through open doors.

When... 'clap.' More 'claps.' Then, FULL APPLAUSE.

White, mystified, slowly focuses to see... every black Capitol employee fills the rotunda.

And at crowd's head, Robert Smalls. He applauds as well.

SMALLS

Sounded good for rotten cod.  
(beat) Listened on the audiophone.  
These people heard you. *These* are  
the people you're leading.

White glances at ROTUNDA PA SYSTEM, realizing. White looks over the crowd, battles emotion, quivering lip.

WHITE

(whispers to Smalls)  
You fought for this. You're why  
any of us are here. I stood on  
your shoulders.

SMALLS

Some day another man will say the  
same to you. Just imagine where  
you'll both be standing then.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

White sees Della, Jr., and Tom, applauding. Touches his heart. Pulls Cora close, nods to Smalls, they all walk.

White smiles graciously to every black as he passes. Sees Speaker Reed and entourage in corridor.

Rep. Lodge, unseen behind colleagues... APPLAUDS as well.

White, Cora, and Smalls exit. Tom, Della, and Jr. follow. New Spring day across the Washington Mall.

CARD:

ROBERT SMALLS RETIRED FULLY FROM  
POLITICS.

CORA WHITE SURVIVED FIVE MORE YEARS.  
GEORGE WHITE MOVED INTO PRIVATE BUSINESS.  
HE HELPED FOUND THE NAACP.

WITH WHITE'S DEPARTURE, THE SOUTH WOULD  
NOT ELECT ITS NEXT AFRICAN AMERICAN  
CONGRESSMAN FOR 73 YEARS.

THE END