

IN HIS PLACE: 1867

TIME

1867, late in President Abraham Lincoln's second term, and two years after John Wilkes Booth's failed assassination attempt.

CHARACTERS

ABRAHAM LINCOLN (age 58) 16th president of the United States of America

TAD LINCOLN (14) his younger surviving son

GOVERNOR SHELBY "BULL-ROARER" BLAKE (40s-50s) white governor of a Southern state not yet readmitted to the Union

CAPTAIN LUTHER JOHNSTONE (20s) Pres. Lincoln's Negro aide

SETTING

President Lincoln's office in the White House, with a desk and chair, an upholstered visitor's chair, and a small sideboard. Separately, an office antechamber with a small settee.

COSTUMES

Lincoln wears his familiar black outfit, looking, as always, as if he had dressed in a high wind. Blake wears a plain coat with a patterned vest and, pressed firmly on his head, a Confederate slouch hat with a snakeskin band. Luther is in dress uniform. Tad wears street clothes of the time.

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Lights up on the president's office antechamber. TAD LINCOLN is on a settee, playing adeptly with a wooden yo-yo. CAPTAIN LUTHER JOHNSTON enters.

TAD

Oh!

LUTHER

Hello. I didn't mean to startle you. I'm Captain Johnstone.

TAD

You're new.

LUTHER

Yessir, as always, it seems.

TAD

What do you mean?

LUTHER

I have been new so often, I think it must be my usual condition. Cotton picker, orphan, student, runaway, prisoner, fugitive, soldier--Almighty God has reborn me so many times I suspect that little of the original Luther Johnstone remains.

TAD

And what are you now?

LUTHER

One of your father's aides.

TAD

He needs a bodyguard more.

LUTHER

How do you know that's not one of my duties?

TAD

What else?

LUTHER

I can "walk the dog."

TAD

We used to have a dog. We don't any more.

LUTHER

Let me show you.

LUTHER takes the yo-yo from TAD and demonstrates the trick.

TAD

How did you do that?

LUTHER

Did I mention yo-yo master among my accomplishments?

TAD

Let me try.

LUTHER hands the yo-yo to TAD, who begins practicing eagerly as GOV. SHELBY BLAKE enters. LUTHER takes a protective stance before BLAKE.

GOV. BLAKE

Where's Lincoln?

LUTHER

Please announce yourself, sir.

GOV. BLAKE

As I told the Sunday soldiers outside: I'm Shelby Blake-- Governor Shelby Blake--and I'm here to see Lincoln.

LUTHER

Is the President expecting you, Governor?

GOV. BLAKE

I don't need an appointment, damn it. You ever hear of states' rights?

LUTHER

I'll see if President Lincoln has a moment for you.

(A long beat, considering...)

You'll have to remove your hat.

GOV. BLAKE

I don't take my hat off to no nigger.

LUTHER

In deference to the President.

GOV. BLAKE

I don't take my hat off for no nigger-lover neither.

LUTHER composes himself, then exits. BLAKE notices TAD.

GOV. BLAKE

You must be the young Lincoln kid.

TAD

Yep. Thomas.

GOV. BLAKE

My son was your age not long ago.

TAD

Where is he?

GOV. BLAKE

You Yankees killed him... Ever hear of Second Manassas? Your kind called it Bull Run.

TAD

Uh-huh. It was in the war.

GOV. BLAKE

Goddamn right. Yankees shot off my son's arm and half his chest and bled him to death. Practically just a boy.

TAD

I'm... sorry.

GOV. BLAKE

You oughta be.

TAD

I'm also happy for the Yankees your son didn't kill because we got him first.

BLAKE is open-mouthed and about to answer when LUTHER reappears.

LUTHER

The President will see you now, Governor.

BLAKE stares furiously at TAD, before following LUTHER into the office. LINCOLN rises and extends his hand, which BLAKE shakes perfunctorily.

LINCOLN

Governor Blake, how good of you to come by.

GOV. BLAKE

Lincoln, you've got to do something about the blacks in my state.

LINCOLN

My goodness, Governor, what a handsome hat. Excuse me. The band, is that copperhead?

GOV. BLAKE

Uh...yes. Killed it myself.

LINCOLN

May I see it?

BLAKE complies with pride.

GOV. BLAKE

Thing was damn near six foot long. Before I swung my axe, that is. Afterward, it was four and two.

LINCOLN

What a magnificent specimen. Reminds me of my Kentucky days. We boys used to wake snakes in the spring, when they were sluggish. Oh, it was great fun to uncover a den of them. Dozens packed together like worms in dog crap. It was a test of grit to see if you could pull one out by the tail, and before the thing could double up and bite--swing it around your head...

(Miming the action.)

...then snap it like a bullwhip...CRAACK!...and break its neck like cheap twine!

(Beat, admiring the hat.)

Oh, yes, we were jackleg ruffians in those days.

Suddenly LINCOLN hands the hat to LUTHER, who sets it on the sideboard with a slight smile.

LINCOLN (CONT'D)

So, Governor Blake, what can I do for you?

BLAKE hesitates, torn between making an issue of the hat and pressing his case.

LINCOLN (CONT'D)

Something to help you improve the lives of your negro nationals, perhaps?

GOV. BLAKE

Their lives already been improved to the point of uselessness. Walk any street in the South and you'll see nothing but idle and insolent negroes, drunker'n fruit wasps and twice as ornery. Tell one of 'em to call you Sir and he'll laugh in your face. Tell a pack of 'em to move along and you better be armed. Meantime, when we do get cotton planted, it rots in the field 'cause there's no one to pick it.

LINCOLN

No one can compel a man to take a job he does not freely choose.

GOV. BLAKE
 We're not talking about men...
(Beat, glancing at LUTHER.)
 ...we're talking about negroes.

LINCOLN
 To the law they are one in the same. I thought we settled that.

GOV. BLAKE
 All we settled was that you Yankees had more cannon.

LINCOLN
 Which is still true, and which therefore lends a certain authority to the federal government's position about what constitutes a man, don't you agree?

GOV. BLAKE
 I agree to the fact, but not the principle.

LINCOLN
 At present, the one is as good as the other.

BLAKE is too furious to speak.

LINCOLN (CONT'D)
 Forgive me, Governor. I've forgotten my manners. You look parched. Let me offer you a drink. Whiskey?

BLAKE nods.

LINCOLN (CONT'D)
 Capt. Johnstone, would you be so kind as to order up a whiskey for our guest?

LUTHER exits as LINCOLN motions BLAKE to the chair opposite.

LINCOLN (CONT'D)
 Please, Governor, sit...I understand that your son fell in battle. I offer my sympathy.

GOV. BLAKE
 Manassas Junction in '62. He was...just seventeen.

LINCOLN
 I'm sorry. I know how hard it is to mourn a child. It is the worst part of war.

GOV. BLAKE
 The worst part of your war.

LINCOLN
 Ours--we both embraced it with equal fervor.

GOV. BLAKE

And yet who suffered it more? Who housed it? While you Yankees slept unmolested in your beds, we used ours for barricades. I think it must be far easier to keep your fervor up under clean sheets.

LINCOLN

I can imagine what you lost.

GOV. BLAKE

Imagining loss is not the same as living it. At the point of a bayonet, my wife tore up her skirts to bandage Yankee wounds. My granny watched 'em burn the house of her birth to the ground. A man whose boot is on another man's throat may imagine what the other man feels, but make-believe humiliation and rage are nothing like the real thing, I can assure you.

LINCOLN

I would like to step off. I am a highly reluctant occupier.

GOV. BLAKE

Well, your troops are unaware of your reluctance. They show no hesitation to interfere in our affairs without provocation. Just last week I heard that one of your officers arrested a store owner for exercising his God-given right to decide who he will and will not serve, and struck the poor man repeatedly.

LINCOLN

Governor, if you have evidence that any Union soldier has abused a civilian, I shall have him court-martialed. Meanwhile I expect the Freedmen's Bureau to promote just and orderly relations among citizens and for the military to keep the peace.

GOV. BLAKE

If you want peace, then do something about those damn blacks!

LUTHER returns to offer BLAKE a glass of whiskey on a tray. BLAKE glares at him before taking the glass. LUTHER stands at ease near the sideboard. LINCOLN writes intermittently on a sheet of paper during the following...

LINCOLN

Governor, I know that you and your people have suffered immensely. The tragic examples of your own family have been repeated hundreds of thousands of times across the South. The loss of land and the destruction of property have robbed your state of wealth and the means to rebuild it. Your administration is hampered by inflation and reduced revenue.

GOV. BLAKE

Those are damned good points, sir.

He drinks.

LINCOLN

Yes, you need prosperity and you need it quickly, along with your state's return to the Union.

GOV. BLAKE

And how are we to become prosperous when my planters are helpless to bring in a crop without their accustomed supply of labor? You're the one who stole that labor force. Make the negroes work.

LINCOLN

I can't force a man to sign a labor contract. That is the antithesis of free labor.

GOV. BLAKE

Your notion of free labor will ruin the South forever.

LINCOLN

Nonsense. You must simply reach new accommodations with your citizenry, starting with the chance for every man to own land.

GOV. BLAKE

The land is already owned. There is no more to be had.

LINCOLN

Now, Governor, we both know that to be untrue. Military surveys show an ample supply of abandoned acreage--in your state and throughout the South.

GOV. BLAKE

You make it sound as though Southern landowners just walked off to a life of debauchery instead of to the grave.

LINCOLN

We must deal with the situation we have, Governor. Among other things, that means finding ways to make every citizen productive.

GOV. BLAKE

Well, you won't do that by giving blacks their own property and permission to be idle on it. God made the negroes shiftless and put us here to rule over 'em. If we can't use the lash, we must use the law. My legislature does whatever I want. We'll require blacks to contract for work and jail 'em if they don't fulfill the terms.

LINCOLN

Freedmen's Bureau courts have stricken down such Black Codes everywhere else. They'll do the same to yours.

GOV. BLAKE

See here, Lincoln, you have no right!

LINCOLN

Oh, but I do. It's called the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, which says that I can forbid you to impose a disguised form of black servitude and gives me the power to make it stick.

GOV. BLAKE

Do that, Lincoln, and you'll have another fight on your hands.

LINCOLN

Blake, I knew a farmer once who was the victim of a bear that preyed upon his livestock. At first the farmer tried to accommodate the marauder. He set out guard dogs, but the bear killed 'em. He built a barn, but the bear broke in. That bear's intransigence finally convinced the farmer that he must drop all other activities to hunt down and destroy his nemesis. It was difficult, but once he killed that beast, he quickly made up his losses. You don't worry me, Blake. In '65, I killed a bear. Do you think I'll hesitate to swat a fly that's come to shit on my knee?

GOV. BLAKE

I'll not be treated this way--

LINCOLN

--You'll be treated according to the law.

GOV. BLAKE

Here's what I think of your law.

BLAKE spits into the drink he's been given. Glaring, he slams the glass down on the desk. LINCOLN finishes what he's writing with a flourish.

LINCOLN

Captain Johnstone.

LUTHER approaches the desk.

LINCOLN (CONT'D)

Governor, I have just signed an executive order commanding Captain Johnstone to garrison a company in your state capital to ensure that you follow the law. As long as you satisfy him that you intend to fulfill your duty to protect all your citizens, as Congress has decreed, you will remain in office to the completion of your term. If, however, you do not, Captain Johnstone will declare martial law and detain you as an insurrectionist. So you must be nice to Captain Johnstone.

*LINCOLN hands LUTHER the order.
BLAKE moves as if to protest,
but LINCOLN cuts him off.*

LINCOLN (CONT'D)

Captain, please show the governor to the exit. Once outside, under God's blue sky, if the governor asks you politely, you may return his hat. But if our hot-headed friend is rude to you, you may exercise the authority I have given you to pitch your tents on his state capitol grounds using his hat as your banner.

LINCOLN offers his hand.

LINCOLN (CONT'D)

Good day, Governor. I hope to have you back in the Union soon.

BLAKE hesitates, then, ignoring the proffered hand, follows LUTHER, who has picked up BLAKE's hat. BLAKE reaches for it, but LUTHER uses the hat like a cape, and with a matador's sweeping motion, directs the angry BLAKE like a bull over the threshold, following him out. LINCOLN turns back to his desk. After a moment, TAD enters.

TAD

Father, look.

TAD proudly wields his yo-yo.

TAD (CONT'D)

It's called "walking the dog".

LINCOLN

Bravo! What a magnificent trick, and so much less messy than the real thing.

TAD

Captain Johnstone taught me.

LINCOLN

He is a man of many talents. He has much to teach us all.

TAD

Why did you let that nasty man into your office? Everyone says he's a scoundrel.

LINCOLN

A president often has to ignore what everyone says, at least if he wants to fulfill his oath of office and avoid setting examples that will come back to haunt him. I needed to discourage that nasty man from disrespecting all government officials, at least one of whom you and your mother adore.

TAD

Who's that?

LINCOLN

Why, me, of course.

TAD

Oh... yeah... Father, will there be another war?

LINCOLN

Only if we cowardly shirk the peace. Only then.

TAD

How long will you be president?

LINCOLN

As long as I can perform my duties and the people will have me.

TAD

But from everything I can see, aside from the parties, it's an awful job.

LINCOLN

That is it, my boy. Sometimes so awful that I would willingly switch places with our valiant Mr. Johnstone, if he would consent. Although I am sure he prefers soldiering.

TAD

I'm going to be a lawyer, like you and Robert.

LINCOLN

The law is a noble calling. A lawyer can do a lot of good without being overburdened by society's gratitude.

TAD

Would you like me to teach you to walk the dog?

LINCOLN

I would be most grateful if you would, Thomas. An honest man who don't know a few tricks is defenseless against dishonesty.

TAD eagerly jumps up to demonstrate. END OF PLAY