

The Good Lord Bird

Written by

Mark Richard and Ethan Hawke

Based on the novel by

James McBride

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TEASER**CHYRON: WILMINGTON, DELAWARE - 2018**1 **EXT. CHURCH - NIGHT** 1

CLOSE on a STAINED GLASS WINDOW. FLICKERING IMAGE OF SAINT PAUL with a SCROLL in one hand and a BROADSWORD in the other.

FLAMES BRIGHTEN behind the glass, until SAINT PAUL BURSTS outwards, GLASS SHATTERING, revealing CONFLAGRATION inside...

2 **EXT. CHURCH - CONTINUOUS** 2

PULL BACK from the window to reveal --

The CHURCH engulfed in FLAMES. The flames lick the STEEPLE -- FIRE climbs the CROSS; the steeple COLLAPSES in an EXPLOSION of FLAME and EMBERS...

3 **EXT. CHURCH - DAWN** 3

REVEREND CHARLES GREEN, 50's, African-American, sad but stoic, walks through CHARRED RUBBLE of his church. A FIREMAN sprays water over the smoking remains in the background.

Rev. Green stoops, picks up a LETTER OPENER, partly melted, continues to search the wreckage, then SEES -

A BLACKENED METAL BOX, in a gap between BURNED FLOORBOARDS, where the ALTAR used to stand.

FIRE MARSHALL DEWEY BROWN, 40's, African-American, approaches-

FIRE MARSHALL BROWN

Looks like it started around the furnace, Reverend. I'll have the arson people come just in case.

(sees Rev. Green
considering the metal
box)

What's that?

REV. GREEN

I don't recognize it.

4 **INT. EMERGENCY TENT - DAY** 4

Beneath a BLUE EMERGENCY POP UP TENT --

Rev. Green sets the METAL BOX down on a FOLDING TABLE among other rescued items, A SMALL CROSS, A COLLECTION PLATE, some HYMNALS, all badly burned.

Rev. Green uses the partly-melted LETTER OPENER to PRY open the METAL BOX.

DEACON LEE, 40's, African-American, joins Fire Marshall Brown as they look on with curiosity and a bit of excitement.

DEACON LEE

What if it's buried money to build
a new church...

Rev. Green POPS open the lid, looks inside, smiles.

REV. GREEN

It *is* money...

DEACON LEE

I knew it, praise the Lord!

Rev. Green withdraws some OLD CURRENCY...

REV. GREEN

Looks like twelve dollars,
Confederate.

DEACON LEE

What?

Fire Marshall Brown has to smile...

FIRE MARSHALL BROWN

Anything else? Of value?

Rev. Green withdraws...

REV. GREEN

A bird feather. And...

He gingerly retrieves some LEDGERS neatly bound.

Rev. Green pulls up a FOLDING CHAIR, takes out his READING GLASSES, opens the top ledger and begins to read...

ONION (V.O.)

I was born a colored man and don't
you forget it. But I lived as a
colored *woman* for near three years.

The voice we hear is SURE, MEASURED, touch of ancient SOUTHERN PLAINS ACCENT telling a story, so that it might be heard.

As a little BURNED CHURCH SMOKE wafts through the Emergency Tent we transition back in time to --

CHYRON: KANSAS TERRITORY - 1858

5 **EXT. DUTCH HENRY'S TAVERN - DAY**

5

Establishing - we pick up SMOKE lowering down from a SOD CHIMNEY of a RAMSHACKLE BUILDING at the edge of a crude hamlet; it's made of ROUGH PLANKS and MUD CAULKING, PIGS and CHICKENS in the yard, a DRUNK leaning in the open doorway...

CRUDE SIGNAGE announces: Dutch Henrys Tavern.

ONION (V.O.)

My Pa was a barber by trade without full satisfaction, so he preached the Gospel cutting hair at Dutch Henry's Tavern.

6 **INT. TAVERN - DAY**

6

ON PA: a small black man alternates SNIPPING a CUSTOMER'S HAIR and pouring liquor from a keg into filthy glasses for FOUR rough looking MEN playing cards at a table (one man we'll come to know as JAMES DOYLE).

ONION (V.O.)

Dutch's served as a post office, way station, rumor mill, and gin house for the Missouri rebels, who came across the Kansas border to drink, and throw cards, and holler to the moon 'bout black folk taking over the world, and the white man's constitutional rights being throwed in the shitter.

At another table THREE ROUGH MEN have their feet up loading their pipes, ignoring a FOURTH MAN (DIRK) passed out face down at their table.

Waiting for a stagecoach, on a bench along a wall, sit TWO MORMON MEN in stiff BLACK COATS and THEIR WIVES.

The women cover their noses against the tavern's smell, as a DRUMMER (salesman) tries to sell them RIBBONS and HAIRCOMBS, while TWO OTHER DRUMMERS are in a HEATED ARGUMENT...

ONION (V.O.)

That spring, talk in Dutch's circled round the murderous white scoundrel Old John Brown and his gang of sons, murdering, and raping, and stealing horses, and burning homesteads. I'd resolved that if I was ever to run across that most onerous, low-down, son of a bitch, I'd do him in myself just on account of what he was gonna do to the good white people I knowed.

Near the Drummers' feet, TWO BLACK CHILDREN, dressed in FLOUR SACKS, play MANCALA, an African game, using PEBBLES and CHALK CIRCLES.

WE FIND HENRY SHACKLEFORD (ONION), 11, a mixed race CHILD, also in a SACK SHIRT, kneeling, finishes scraping MUD and MANURE from a man's boots, while Pa removes his barber's cape. The man looks down, offers Onion a PENNY that Pa filches and throws into a CIGAR BOX on a counter behind the barber's chair.

ONION (V.O.)

Well, not long after I made them proclamations, an old tottering Irish feller come teetering into Dutch's...

A stooped skinny man, wrinkled face, tight thin lips, his COAT, VEST and TROUSERS mostly RAGS, sits in Pa's chair--

Pa whips the dirty BARBER BIB around the Stranger. Onion looks down at the Stranger's boots, WORN THROUGH at the TOES and coming apart all together.

STRANGER

(Irish brogue)

You a Bible man?

ONION (V.O.)

Well, Pa was a lunatic when it come to God, he perked right up...

Onion SEES his Pa becoming animated, and continues working on the Stranger's boots, what's left of them --

PA

Why, boss, I surely is. I knows all kinds of Bible verses.

A tight, thin smile on the Stranger's face.

STRANGER

Wonderful. Tell me. Which books in the Bible do you favor?

PA

Oh, I favors them all. But mostly I like Hezekial, Ahab, Trotter, and Pontiff the Emperor.

Pa, self-satisfied, SNIPS at the Stranger's hair, but the Stranger's smile evaporates --

STRANGER

I don't recollect I have read those, and I have read the Bible through and through.

Pa pauses --

PA

Well, I don't know 'em exact, but whatever verses you know, stranger, I'd be pleased to hear 'em.

STRANGER

Here's one: "Whosoever stoppeth his ear at the cry of the Lord, he also shall cry himself."

PA

Hot goodness! That's a winner!

Pa's enthusiastic reply turns a couple of heads --

PA (CONT'D)

Tell me another!

STRANGER

"The Lord puts forth his hand and touches all evil and kills it."

PA

That warms my soul! Gimme more!

STRANGER

(raising his voice)

"Put a Christian in the presence of sin and he will spring at its throat..."

Pa lifts his hands and scissors in the air --

PA

Come on, stranger!

STRANGER

(voice even louder)

"Free the slave from the tyranny of sin!"

PA

Preach it!

STRANGER

(practically shouting)

"And scatter the sinners as stubble so that the slave *shall forever be free!*"

PA

Yes, sir!

A disconcerting SILENCE settles over the tavern, the issue of slavery being a hot and lethal topic.

A NATIVE AMERICAN INDIAN in a Calico shirt, knocks the ash out of his pipe and slips out the door nearly colliding with -

DUTCH HENRY SHERMAN, well over six feet tall, massive hands, a no nonsense son of German immigrants, his speech is American prairie but with SLIGHT Germanic inflections...

Dutch walks behind Pa's barber's chair, empties the cigar box of coins into his hand, is about to turn away when he glances at the Stranger, sees something he doesn't like, and stops --

DUTCH

You look familiar. What's your name?

STRANGER
(cool as a cucumber)
Shubel Morgan.

DUTCH
What you doing 'round these parts?

STRANGER
Looking for work.

Dutch leans in, smelling a rat...

DUTCH
I got some wood out back needs
chopping. I'll give you fifty cents
to chop half a day.

STRANGER
No, thanks.

DUTCH
Seventy-five cents.

STRANGER
Naw.

DUTCH
How 'bout a dollar then? Dollar's a
lot of money.

STRANGER
Can't. I'm waiting on the steamer
to come down the Kaw.

DUTCH
That steamer don't come for another
two weeks.

The Stranger frowns.

STRANGER
I'm setting here sharing the Holy
Word with a brother Christian. So
why don't you mind your marbles,
friend, and saw your wood your own
self, lest the Lord see you as a
fat sow and a laggard.

Dutch's big wide face REDDENS.

Dutch reaches into his pocket and withdraws a PEPPERBOX PISTOL, a derringer with four barrels, and points it to the floor, says to the Stranger evenly --

DUTCH

Only a white-livered, tit-squeezing
Yankee would talk like that.

We HEAR the SOUND of CHAIRS SCRAPING the floor away from tables and the CLOTTER of shoes as about TEN PEOPLE, the Mormons and the Drummers included, head for the exits.

STRANGER

(quietly and calmly)
Sir, that's an insult.

Dutch backs off the Stranger a step, still holding the pistol to the floor...

DUTCH

Get down off that chair.

The Stranger slowly steps down out of the chair and off the pallet it rests upon.

DUTCH (CONT'D)

(to Onion)
Fetch the Bible.

Onion runs to the bar and is handed a Bible by the bartender. Onion gives it to Dutch.

DUTCH (CONT'D)

I'm gonna make you swear on this Bible that you is for slavery and the U.S. Constitution. If you do that, you old bag, you can walk outta here none the worse. But if you're a lying, blue-bellied, Free Stater, I'm a bust you across the head so hard with this pistol, yellow'll come out your ears.

Dutch extends the Bible to the Stranger.

DUTCH (CONT'D)

Now put your hand on that.

The Stranger hesitates, then throws his hand on the Bible, clearly uneasy...

DUTCH (CONT'D)

What's your name?

STRANGER

Shubel Isaac.

DUTCH

I thought you said it was Shubel Morgan.

STRANGER

Isaac's my middle name.

DUTCH

How many names you got?

STRANGER

How many do I need?

The interrogation rouses Dirk, the sleeping drunk. He wipes the drool off his face, peers drowsily at the Stranger --

DIRK

Why, Dutch, that looks like Old John Brown.

THE THREE CARDPLAYERS (including JAMES DOYLE) LEAP out of their chairs and draw COLT REVOLVERS on the Stranger.

DUTCH

Is that true?

STRANGER

Is what true?

DUTCH

Is you Old Man Brown?

STRANGER

Did I say I was?

DUTCH

So you ain't him.
(a bit relieved)
Who are you then?

STRANGER

I'm the child of my Maker.

DUTCH
(angering again)
You too old to be a child. You Old
John Brown or not.

STRANGER
I'm whoever the Lord wants me to
be.

Dutch FLINGS the Bible to the floor, presses the pistol into
the Stranger's NECK, and COCKS it --

DUTCH
Stop shitting around, you God-
damned potato-head. Old Man Brown.
Is you him or not?

A TRANSFORMATION crosses the Stranger, having seen the Bible
flung down, and the Lord's name taken in vain. When he speaks
next, he has dropped the Irish brogue...

STRANGER
(coolly)
You bite your tongue when you swear
about our Maker, lest by the power
of His Holy Grace, I be commanded
to deliver redemption on His
Behalf. And then that pistol you
holding won't be worth a cent. The
Lord will lift it out of your hand.

DUTCH
Cut the jitter and tell me your
name, God-damnit!

STRANGER
Don't swear God's name again, sir.

DUTCH
Shit! I'll swear his cock-dragging
God-damn name whenever I God-damn
please! I'll holler it up a dead
hog's ass and then shove it down
your God-damned shit-eating Yankee
throat!

Hot as a rattlesnake strike, the Stranger THROWS BACK his
barber's bib REVEALING the STOCK END of a SHARPS, a large-
bore, short-barrelled RIFLE under his coat --

But Dutch already has the PISTOL against the STRANGER'S NECK;
Dutch PULLS the trigger --

The men holding COLT PISTOLS take a STEP BACK so as not to be
SHOWERED by the Stranger's brains when Dutch pulls the
trigger, but --

The pistol MISFIRES, and one of its four barrels EXPLODES --
sending Dutch BELLOWING to the floor SQUEEZING his BLOODY and
SHATTERED right hand between his KNEES...

Confounded by what just happened, the three men holding their
pistols, hesitate, and in that moment --

The Stranger coolly withdraws the Sharps rifle from under his
coat and presses it to Dutch's neck on the floor, COCKS IT --

STRANGER

(to Dutch)

I told you the Lord would draw it
out your hand, for the King of
Kings eliminates all pesters.

(to gunmen)

Lay them pistols down on the floor
or here goes.

The GUNMEN lay down their pistols on the floor. John Brown
announces himself to the room, holds his rifle on the
whimpering Dutch --

JOHN BROWN

(calmly)

I'm John Brown, Captain of the
Pottawatomie Rifles. I come with
the Lord's blessing to free every
colored man in this territory. Any
man who stands against me will eat
lead grape and powder.

Not a soul stirs in the room.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

Every Negro in here, those of you
that's hiding, come on out. You is
now free. Follow me. Don't be
afraid, children.

The TWO BLACK CHILDREN playing mancala earlier shiver
TERRIFIED under a table; in a FLASH they hit the EXITS, not
looking back.

John Brown watches them scatter with disappointment --

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

They is not yet saved to the
Lord...

ON Onion, looking anxiously at the only other 'Negro'
remaining besides himself in the room -- Pa.

Pa stands quaking in his boots, mumbling --

PA

Lawdy Lawdy...

John Brown happily CLAPS Pa on the back, hearing "Lord, Lord"--

JOHN BROWN

Friend, you has made a wise choice.
You and your tragic octoroon
daughter here is blessed for
accepting our blessed Redeemer's
purpose for you to live free and
clear, thus not spending the rest
of your lives in this den of
iniquity with these sinning
savages. You is now free. Walk out
the back door while I hold my rifle
on these heathens, and I will lead
you to freedom in the name of the
King of Zion!

But Pa doesn't budge, still holding his hands in the air,
nervously looking down at Onion...

ONION (V.O.)

Everybody in Dutch's knowed I was a
boy, even the lowly type so braced
on joy juice they wouldn't know a
boll weevil from a cotton ball. I
opened my mouth to correct the Old
Man but all that came out was...

ON Onion, beginning to WAIL.

Pa panics --

PA

(to John Brown)

Massa, my Henry ain't a...

John Brown cuts him off --

JOHN BROWN

We've no time to rationalize your thoughts of mental dependency, sir!
(waves his rifle at room)
We have to move. Courageous friend, I will take you and your Henrietta to safety.

ONION (V.O.)

My name is Henry Shackelford, but the Old Man heard Pa say "Henry ain't a" and took it for Henrietta. That's how the Old Man's mind worked. Whatever he believed, he believed. Didn't matter if it was true or not. He was a real white man.

JOHN BROWN

Remember Joel first chapter; "That which the palmerworm hath left, the locust hath eaten. What the locust hath left, the cankerworm has eaten."

PA

(terrified)
What's that mean?

JOHN BROWN

You'll be eaten alive if you stay here.

PA

But my child here ain't...

JOHN BROWN

Shush! We can't tarry. We can talk raising her to the Holy Word later.

John Brown GRABS Onion by the arm, backing out, still holding his rifle on the room; we HEAR --

HEAVY HOOVES charging down the back alley --

Pa RUSHES toward John Brown taking his son away --

PA

No!

Dutch MAKES A PLAY for one of the COLT PISTOLS on the floor, and with his MANGLED HAND, manages to PULL THE TRIGGER --

The BULLET STRIKES the DOOR'S EDGE by John Brown, sending an EIGHT-INCH SPLINTER jutting out sideways about CHEST HIGH;

Pa REACHES out to grab Onion when he accidentally RUNS RIGHT INTO THE SPLINTER; it goes DEEP IN HIS CHEST, into his HEART.

Pa REELS and falls DEAD.

Onion reaches for his Pa, but is JERKED into the doorframe toward the sound of APPROACHING HORSES by John Brown.

On the floor, Dutch fumbles with the pistol, calling out --

DUTCH

Nigger thief! You owe me twelve hundred dollars!

JOHN BROWN

Charge it to the Lord, heathen!

7

EXT. DUTCH HENRY'S TAVERN - ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

7

John Brown, rifle in one hand, Onion's arm in the other, LEAPS into the alley, just as --

TWO MEN on hardy PINTO HORSES reel up, with a THIRD HORSE, a PAINTED, on a bridle and without a saddle.

The man in the lead, who will be known to us as OWEN, one of John Brown's sons, HOLDS his REINS in his teeth because of a WITHERED LEFT ARM, but with his RIGHT HAND, he begins FIRING a REVOLVER into the doorway of Dutch's Tavern at anyone who pokes their head out.

The second man, who will be known as FREDERICK, also one of John Brown's sons, is YOUNGER but much LARGER than Owen.

Frederick TOSSES the reins of the Painted Horse to John Brown; Brown throws a leg over, then OFFERS a HAND to Onion.

But Onion is terrified, begins to flinch back...

Just then, the GUNMEN inside, having recovered their pistols and their courage, come FLANKING around the corner of the Tavern and OPEN FIRE on John Brown and his sons with their revolvers.

Frederick, heavily armed with GUNS, KNIVES, a SWORD, pulls TWO SEVEN-SHOT REVOLVERS and returns FIRE.

In the midst of the gunfight, John Brown remains calm, even as bullets PING around him.

He dismounts his horse, GRABS Onion, who is clearly frozen in a state of shock, and sets him on the horse's back, climbs on as well, and KICKS the horse into a run.

Owen and Frederick EXCHANGE a few more ROUNDS with the GUNMEN, who have fallen back. They see their father launching away, turn their horses to follow out onto the plains.

But Dutch appears in the doorway, holding a SHOTGUN in his bloody hands. He FIRES a VOLLEY at the retreating riders...

The shot WHIZZES harmlessly over their heads, but in that instant, we see Onion turn and duck around under John Brown's arm, one last terrified look back at his home.

FADE TO BLACK.

END OF TEASER

ACT ONE8 **EXT. KANSAS FLATLANDS - DAY**

8

ESTABLISHING - Long flat vistas of open GRASS FIELDS and clusters of COTTONWOOD TREES, emptiness into which BURST --

John Brown and Onion atop the Painted horse followed by --

Owen and Frederick riding hell-bent on the pinto ponies --

9 **EXT. JOHN BROWN'S CAMP - DAY**

9

Where the riders dismount at a crude camp, a THREE-SIDED TENT pitched against a LONG ROCK WALL, remains of a CAMPFIRE.

John Brown takes Onion off his horse, sets the child on the ground --

ONION (V.O.)

It was right much all at once to lose your Pa and be kidnapped by a murderous scoundrel and wrenched away from your home on a stolen horse, a hanging crime. My feelings was this--

ON Onion, BAWLING HIS EYES OUT.

John Brown seems suddenly moved, he KNEELS beside Onion --

JOHN BROWN

(trying to comfort)

There, there, I reckon you is not feeling righteous about what has just transpired with your pa, but in the name of freedom we is all soldiers of the cross, and thus the enemy of slavery. Like as not, you now believes you has no family or may ne'er see what family you has ever again. Fact is, you is in the human family and is welcome to this one as any.

Onion temporarily stops his wailing, wipes the SNOT from his face with back of his hand as John Brown rummages through a flea-bitten pocket...

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

I like that you might hold this, my child, as a token of your newfound freedom and family, even though you is a girl and we need to get rid of you as soon as possible.

John Brown feels what he's looking for in the bottom of a pocket and pulls it out, offering it to Onion, a BALL of some kind, covered in DIRT, LINT and TINY FEATHERS.

ONION (V.O.)

I didn't want that dried up rotten onion, but him being white and harrumping over it, and me being hungry and his prisoner...

Onion opens his mouth wide, and bites into the onion with a DRY-HEAVING FACE, and SWALLOWS it, gagging a bit. --

John Brown's eyes WIDEN in PANIC --

JOHN BROWN

That there's my good luck charm you just swallowed! I had that thing for fourteen months and nar a knife nor bullet has nicked me nar touched my flesh.

(contemplates a beat)

I reckon the Lord must mean it a sign for me to lose it. The Bible says "Hold no idle objects between thouest and me." But even a God-fearing man like myself has a pocketful of sins that flagellate betwixt my head and my thighs, too, truth be told, for I has twenty-two children, twelve living. But you has swallowed my sin like Jesus Christ munched on the sins of the world. Let that be a lesson to me, old man that I am for allowing sacrilegious objects to stand between me and the great King of Kings.

John Brown as he talks brings forth OTHER OBJECTS from his pockets -- a THIMBLE, TWO TIN CANS, THREE INDIAN ARROWHEADS...

John Brown continues to dig in his pockets, also producing an APPLE PEELER, a DRIED-UP BOLL WEEVIL, and a BENT POCKETKNIFE. He drops them into a SACK and hands them to Onion.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

Hold these things and may they
bring you good fortune till you
meet the soul that shows you the
way of the Maker. From now on
you're my Little Onion. May you
meet another Little Onion in your
travels, so that *she* might be your
good-luck charm and thus rid you of
these baubles and make you truly
free like me.

John Brown reaches for an inside coat pocket, and reverently produces a last item - a BLACK and WHITE BIRD FEATHER that he TUCKS into Onion's hair.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

Feather of a Good Lord Bird. Now
that's special. I don't feel bad
about it neither, giving my special
thing to you. "Take that which is
special from thine own hand and
giveth to the needy and you moveth
on the Lord's path." That's the
secret, Little Onion, not to
believe in heathen things. And
don't stretch the Great Ruler's
word too much; you stretch it here,
there, before you know it, it's
full out devilment. We being
fighters of his Holy Word, we is
allowed a few indulgences, but we
ought not take too much advantage,
understand?

John Brown suddenly turns his eyes skyward as if listening to a voice in the clouds...

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

I hear Thee oh Great Haymaker! And
I thank Thee for blessing us every
minute of every day.

John Brown turns and walks away, literally leaving Onion holding the bag.

John Brown pulls a CANVAS MAP from a saddlebag, UNROLLS it under the TENT and begins studying it. He glances up, seems to remember Onion, motions for Onion to sit beside him.

Owen and Frederick approach, wait for John Brown's orders.

Owen, early 30's, is a strong, stocky man with RED HAIR. Despite his withered arm tethered to his waistband, he is a fierce fighter, Brown's most capable field commander. Owen is the only son who will question Brown's decisions or cut short a prayer, but he will follow his father to the brink.

Frederick is well over six feet tall, about 20 years old, and carries TWO SEVEN-SHOT PISTOLS, a BROADSWORD, a SQUIRREL GUN, a SHOTGUN, a BOWIE KNIFE and a SHARPS RIFLE. Frederick is a gentle giant unless riled, and in today's terms he would be labeled 'mentally challenged.'

Frederick can neither read nor write, but as with many people like him, he seems a bit closer to God than most. He's a noble, beautiful creature whose wonder at nature is often voiced in an ethereal stream of consciousness.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

(not looking up)

Water the horses and scare us up a fire.

ONION (V.O.)

I was frightfully hungry despite being kidnapped, and I must say my first hours of freedom under John Brown was like my last hours of freedom under John Brown: I was hungrier than I ever was as a slave.

Frederick and Owen set off to work, Frederick, in passing --

FREDERICK

(to Onion)

What's your name?

JOHN BROWN

(not looking up)

Henrietta. Slave but now free. I calls her Little Onion. Poor girl's Pa killed right before her eyes by that ruffian Dutch Henry.

(MORE)

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

I would have sent a charge through
him but I was in a hurry.

At the mention of Pa's death, Onion's face scrunches up and
he begins to cry, remembering...

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

Now, now, Onion, we're gonna
straighten you out right away.

John Brown pulls a gift from his saddlebag, a STAINED and
TORN DRESS and BONNET.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

I got this dress for my daughter
Ellen's eleventh birthday, it's
store-bought, but I reckon she'd be
happy to give it to a pretty girl
like you as a gift to your freedom.

Onion tries to well up some fake tears, but --

ONION (V.O.)

Ain't no way I wanted to put that
dress on, but my arse was on the
line, and it do cover my backside
and I am fond of it. My tears
busted forth again. I seen right
off that crying was part of the
game of being a girl.

JOHN BROWN

It's all right, you ain't got but
to thank the Good Lord for his
kindnesses. You don't owe me
nothing.

John Brown presses the DRESS and BONNET into Onion's hands.

FEW MINUTES LATER

Onion emerges from behind a tree wearing the awkwardly-
fitting dress with the bonnet SHOVED down to his ears.

ONION

(glum)

Thank you, Marse.

JOHN BROWN

(delighted)

I ain't a master to you, Onion, you
just as free as the birds run.

ONION (V.O.)

'Bout that time some of the other
Brown sons drifted into camp from
scoutin', they was in some form a
likeness to the Old Man in their
ugliness.

WE SEE JOHN JR., SALMON, and JASON BROWN, bearded, bushy
heads, a HOLLOWNESS in their faces from HUNGER and the
uncertainty of following their father.

John Jr. dismounts, a leaner, bean-pole version of John
Brown, but without the religious zealot fire. He's bookish
and well-read, like most of his family, but where Owen is the
soldier in the field, John Brown Jr. is better suited for
diplomacy and far-flung intelligence-gathering among his
father's factions.

ONION (V.O.)

John Jr. was the oldest but not the
favorite, I'd say. When the Old Man
would send Junior into danger, he'd
take the long 'way around to it.

John Jr. pulls the SADDLE off his horse and drops it on the
ground, plunks down to rest his head on it, exhausted,
spreading a filthy blanket over himself.

ONION (V.O.)

Thing about John Jr., he was a bit
skittish, especially concerning
rattlesnakes, which was unfortunate
'cause there was a rattler under
just about every rock or in every
gopher hole on the Kansas plain.

Suddenly John Jr. LEAPS to his feet and lets go a --

BLOODCURDLING SCREAM while beating his BLANKET with a SHOVEL.

ONION (V.O.)

Like as not, you'd be liable to
find one or two in your bedroll as
well.

OWEN

(to John Jr.)

Hush up that girl screech! You want
to draw the Redshirts in?

FREDERICK

(a glass half-full guy)

Least he didn't fire off a round
like last time.

John Brown seems oblivious to it all. He calls Frederick
over.

JOHN BROWN

Fred, take my horse and teach Onion
to ride, for the enemy will be
hurrying our way, we can't tarry.
There's a war on.

Onion's EYES show ALARM at the mention of "war."

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO10 **EXT. KANSAS FLATLANDS - DAY**

10

Onion on a pinto pony, being led slowly by Frederick on his horse toward a grove of Cottonwoods trees. Frederick chatters away all the while...

FREDERICK

I love Cottonwood trees. They is my favorite.

ONION

What's your Pa mean, a war is on?

FREDERICK

Pa says, I shouldn't have favorites. Jesus loves all the trees the same. But I do prefer Cottonwoods 'cause they is beautiful. Mama likes Weepin' Willows, But I don't like cryin' trees -- I like happy trees. And Cottonwoods is happy.

Onion stares off looking for a chance to escape...

ONION

I got to toilet, but a girl needs her bit of privacy.

Onion ducks behind a thick oak tree.

ONION (V.O.)

I near choked calling myself a member of the opposite nature, but lying come natural to all Negroes during slave time. For no man or woman in bondage ever prospered stating their true thoughts to the boss. Much of colored life was an act, and the Negroes that sawed wood and said nothing lived the longest.

Frederick ties their horses to a low-hanging tree branch.

FREDERICK

Deed a girl does need her privacy, Little Onion.

ONION

I hopes you is a gentleman.

FREDERICK

Oh I surely am. I'll scout some pheasants.

And Frederick walks off while Onion slips behind a tree. Onion does his business, then RUNS and LEAPS atop one of the pinto ponies to make his escape. As Onion fights to climb on the pony, he FUMBLES with the reins tied in the tree --

The pony REARS and LUNGES, sending Onion FLYING OFF, landing HARD on the ground, knocking him out COLD.

FEW MINUTES LATER

Onion slowly COMES TO with Frederick standing over him looking very upset. Onion realizes that the fall has hiked his DRESS above his waist, his PRIVATE PARTS on display.

FREDERICK (CONT'D)

(trying to understand)

Is you a sissy?

Onion pulls down his dress.

ONION

Why, if you have to ask, I don't know.

FREDERICK

(slowly, a little sadly)

Father says I ain't the sharpest knife in the drawer, and lots of things confuse me.

ONION

Me too.

Frederick brightens...

FREDERICK

Maybe we can put the question to Father about sissies.

Onion is not keen on this idea.

ONION

I wouldn't do that. Being that he's got a lot on his mind, fighting a war and all.

FREDERICK

Reckon you're right. Wonder what the Bible says about sissies?

ONION

I don't know. I can't read.

FREDERICK

(happily)

Me neither! I'm the only one of my brothers and sisters who can't read nor write!

Frederick turns toward a KNOCKING SOUND coming from the woods...

FREDERICK (CONT'D)

(excitedly)

Come on, my friend, Imma show you something.

Onion is led by a stealthy Frederick crouching low through the underbrush; Frederick stops, points toward a tree.

CLOSE ON: A DOWNY WOODPECKER (*Picoides pubescens*), coal-BLACK wings, crispy WHITE breast, and a RED CAP of feathers.

FREDERICK (CONT'D)

Ever seen one of them?

Onion shakes his head No.

FREDERICK (CONT'D)

(mesmerized)

They call that a *Good Lord Bird*. It's so pretty that when a man sees it, he says 'Good Lord!' I can catch or trap just about any bird there is but that one...that's an angel.

Frederick continues staring up at the bird, spellbound.

FREDERICK (CONT'D)

They say a feather from a Good Lord
Bird'll bring you understanding
that'll last your whole life.
Understanding is what I lacks,
Onion. Memories and things. I ain't
never found one...

Onion rummages in his pack and pulls out the GOOD LORD BIRD
FEATHER John Brown had given him, hands it to Frederick.

FREDERICK (CONT'D)

(astounded)

Where'd you get that?

ONION

I ain't allowed to say. But it's
yours.

Frederick grins from ear to ear.

FREDERICK

Onion, I ain't never had such a
gift. Already I can feel something
going on in my head. Knowledge and
things. Things I know that I can
teach you.

Frederick turns the feather over and over, still marveling at
it. Indeed, something occurs to him....

FREDERICK (CONT'D)

Now Imma teach you how to catch
pheasant without firing a shot...

11 EXT. WOODS - DAY

11

Onion watches Frederick take from his saddlebag and horse --
a BLANKET, a HANDFUL of DRIED CORN, and an OAK STICK.

FREDERICK

We can't shoot out here, for the
enemy might hear.

Onion watches Frederick lay the corn along the ground in a
straight line leading into a STUMP. Frederick throws some
corn in the stump, then settles on the ground and takes up
the BLANKET and pulls a KNIFE.

With the knife, Frederick cuts TWO PEEPHOLES in the blanket,
one for him and one for Onion.

FREDERICK (CONT'D)

Every game bird in the world is
afraid of man. But with a blanket
over you, you ain't a man anymore.

Frederick pulls the blanket over them.

ONION (V.O.)

I wanted to say I weren't feeling
like a man no matter how the cut
went, but pretty soon, I fell
asleep.

TIME CUT

ON A PHEASANT pecking at the DRIED CORN, following it into
the STUMP beside the figures under the blanket.

The blanket JUMPS up, throws itself over the stump, trapping
the bird inside, revealing Frederick and Onion.

12

EXT. JOHN BROWN'S CAMP - NIGHT

12

ON PHEASANTS roasting on a FIRE that illumines the faces of
Onion and the man-child Frederick; who shows Onion how to
arrange the skewers to better cook the birds.

ONION (V.O.)

I felt bad for Fred, thin-headed as
he was, not knowing I was a boy,
and planning to jump back to Dutch.
Coloreds was always two steps ahead
of white folks, having thunk
through every possibility of how to
get along without being seen, and
making sure their lies match up
with what white folks wanted. Your
basic white man is a fool, but
Frederick was different, and I had
to play him according to his mind.

ONION

Fred, you remember our deal?

FREDERICK

(absently)
'Bout what?

Onion sees the events of being found out a boy had already
slipped Fred's memory.

ONION

'Bout nothing. But you probably ought not tell nobody 'bout the feather I gived you.

FREDERICK

Your gift's giving me more understanding even as I speak it, Onion. I am grateful and won't tell a soul about this afternoon.

ONION

You is smarter than you look.

FREDERICK

(whispers a secret)

People think I is a complete bubble head fool. But I ain't complete-'cause when they call me names, they is judging me. And it ain't right to judge. I don't judge no one. Not sissies, not Owen... not nobody. The bigger fool turns out to be the one calling names.

ONION

Yeah. I guess that's how it goes when you place another man to judgement.

Onion stares at his new friend in disbelief.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE13 **EXT. JOHN BROWN'S CAMP - NIGHT**

13

A group of a dozen men enter the camp, a handful on horses, the others aboard a CREAKING WAGON loaded with furniture, housewares, pots, bolts of cloth, but NO FOOD.

REV. MARTIN, a hard, angry-looking man, dismounts and sizes up the camp. He eyeballs John Brown looking over his map, John Brown seems to be ignoring him.

REV. MARTIN

(loudly)

John Brown's fearsome army looks to be a ragtag assortment of the scrawniest, bummiest, saddest-looking individuals I ever saw.

The hungry stragglers dismount their horses and wagon and head straight to the pheasants roasting on the fire, almost roasted to perfection.

One of the stragglers, JEW WEINER, a thin storekeeper, finds Owen and SECRETIVELY PASSES him a folded NEWSPAPER.

JEW WEINER

Risked my neck for this and it ain't good news.

Owen turns his back to the camp, opens the newspaper, and scans the headlines...

JEW WEINER (CONT'D)

Our friends in Congress getting the worst of it these days.

Owen folds up the paper, passes it back to Jew Weiner.

OWEN

Hold it till after we eat otherwise the Captain will want to ride off directly.

But John Brown comes up and SNATCHES the newspaper.

JOHN BROWN

Mr. Weiner, no doubt the news from Lawrence is pressing, but worry not, I has already had a vision on it.

(turning to his men)

Before you stuff your gullets, let us thank the Holy Provider for these victuals.

GROANS from the hungry men, anticipating another long prayer.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

(head bowed)

Father, as Lord God our savior, I ought to be able to give you a proper prayer rather than just a few stumbling words to you Our Great Redeemer!

TWENTY MINUTES LATER

The FIRE has gone out, the pheasants DRIED UP, the men are STUPEFIED with hunger and waiting, and John Brown is still adding wave upon wave of prayer, gesticulating to heaven.

Owen SEES Rev. Martin has had enough praying. Martin throws down a STICK he was whittling and walks toward the food. To head off a show down --

Owen shouts --

OWEN

Pa! We got to get up the trail, there's a posse coming!

JOHN BROWN

(annoyed)

But I reckon you understands the impatience of children and is partial to their youth and recklessness. Thank you Lord for your understanding. Amen.

The men attack what's left of the pheasants while John Brown sits to read the newspaper.

After a few moments, John Brown balls up the paper and throws it angrily into the fire but the WIND catches it and keeps it out of the flames.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)
They attacked our man!

OWEN
Who's that?

JOHN BROWN
Roust up the horses and break camp.
Hurry men, we have work to do!

But no one moves. Owen picks up the newspaper and reads it more closely. Onion moves over trying to figure out what's going on.

JOHN JR.
(fearful)
What's Pa saying?

OWEN
Near as I can figure a senator from
Massachusetts got the worst of it
from a feller from South Carolina
who busted his cane over the
senator's head.

JOHN BROWN
We shall strike back tonight!

JOHN JR
Where to Pa?

JOHN BROWN
Osawatomie. That's where the Pro
Slavers are.

Rev. Martin, hunkered by the fire and showing no sign of going anywhere soon, throws a pheasant bone into the ashes.

Rev. Martin has a DANGEROUS but WISE look about him, like a WOLF carrying a SIX-SHOT REVOLVER.

REV. MARTIN
What difference will it make? It
can wait a day.

JOHN BROWN
The Negro has waited two hundred
years.

Rev. Martin snorts, digs around in the ashes for more pheasant bits. He pulls out a BURNED DRUMSTICK BONE, which he considers.

REV. MARTIN

Let 'em wait.

(tossing the bone back
into the ashes)

There ain't enough food in this
camp.

JOHN BROWN

We is not here to eat, Rev. Martin.

REV. MARTIN

Just 'cause two fools have a fight
in Congress don't mean nothing. We
has our own fight here.

JOHN BROWN

(calmly)

Rev. Martin, you is on the wrong
side of understanding.

Rev. Martin looks up at John Brown with a cold eye.

REV. MARTIN

And I aim to better my readin' so I
don't have to hear your
interpretations of things, Captain,
which I is no longer sure of. Every
time I ride out and come back, you
got another face rooting around,
eating. We ain't got enough food
for the men here already.

(nodding at Onion)

Who's that there?

ON Onion, in mid-chew of a pheasant leg, pausing.

FREDERICK

(proudly)

That there's Onion.

REV. MARTIN

Where'd she come from?

FREDERICK

Stolen from Dutch Henry hisself.

Rev. Martin stands up in alarm...

REV. MARTIN

(to John Brown)

Of all the troublemakers in this country, why'd you go pick a fight with Dutch Henry?

JOHN BROWN

I didn't pick no fight. I went to scout his territory.

REV. MARTIN

Well you done scouted trouble. I wouldn't pick a fight with Dutch Henry for a box of crackers. I ain't in this to shoot it out with Dutch.

JOHN BROWN

Nobody's shooting nothing. We is riding for redemption. The Bible says it - "Hold truth to thine own man's face, and the Lord shall deliver."

REV. MARTIN

Don't pick no boil with me about the Bible.

(sneering)

I know more about it than any man here.

A FLASH of fire in John Brown's eyes as he STRAIGHTENS UP, REARS BACK, and let's fly --

JOHN BROWN

"Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them, they shall afflict them four hundred years!"

REV. MARTIN

(firing back)

"Do unto others as they do unto you!"

JOHN BROWN

"And also that nation will I judge, and afterward shall they come with great substance!"

REV. MARTIN

"Truly my soul finds some peace and
quiet with God!"

John Brown can outlast, out-preach, out-quote any man of his
day and it becomes abundantly clear. Finally --

JOHN BROWN

"I shall deliver the poor that cry
out, the fatherless, they in
bondage, and him that has no one to
help him." Job twenty-nine or
thereabouts.

Rev. Martin concedes.

REV. MARTIN

(snapping)

All right already. But you sportin'
trouble. Dutch has got a mess of
Missouri Red Shirts round his place
and you just gave him reason to set
'em loose. He'll come after us
hard.

JOHN BROWN

Let 'em come. And you be sure that
Onion is my family now.

Onion is aware of all eyes watching him, he tries to swallow
down his shred of dry pheasant meat.

REV. MARTIN

She ain't part of mine. I'm
fighting to free Kansas, not to
steal oily-headed slave rabble like
this one.

JOHN BROWN

(ice cold)

I thought you was a Free State man,
Reverend.

REV. MARTIN

I am a Free State man. That ain't
got nothing to do with getting
aired out for stealing somebody's
property.

JOHN BROWN

You shouldn't have rode with this company if you was planning to hoot and whine about the colored being free.

REV. MARTIN

(indicating Onion)

Point is, that there's Dutch's chattel, bought and paid for. He won't forget that kind of wrong.

JOHN BROWN

(eyes narrowing)

Then I'll clear his memory of it when he comes.

A STARE-DOWN between John Brown and Rev. Martin. In an attempt to salve things, an INDIAN, OTTOWA JONES steps forward trying to be a peacemaker...

OTTOWA JONES

Dutch ain't a bad sort, Captain. We done some work together back before he ever had that tavern. He weren't for slavery back then. He ought to have a chance to change his mind.

From beyond the circle of campfire light, a man pipes up --

PEABODY

You just defending Dutch 'cause you had a slave or two yourself.

OTTOWA JONES

(spinning to the Man)

You're a liar.

Arguments break out on all sides about what to do, when John Brown has had enough; he merely RAISES his hand for silence.

JOHN BROWN

I aim to strike a blow at the slavers. We know what they done. They killed Charles Dow. They sent Joe Hamilton to his Maker right in front of his wife. They raped Wilma Tompkins. They're rapists, pillagers, sinners all.

(MORE)

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

The Good Book says "Hold thine enemy to his own fire." Dutch Henry is an enemy as is all of his consorts.

Rev. Martin hitches up his pants, tightens his coat.

REV. MARTIN

Well, you be sure of this. I ain't going up against Dutch. I got no hank with him.

A man named PEABODY gets up and stands beside Rev. Martin.

PEABODY

Me neither. Dutch gived me a horse on credit. Plus this here army's got too many angles to it. I didn't come all the way from Connecticut to ride with Jews.

JEW WEINER

Peabody, you open your mouth sideways again I'll bust you straddle-legged.

JOHN BROWN

That's enough. We is riding on the Pro Slavers in Osawatomie tomorrow night. That's where the sinners are. Whoever wants to ride, come on. Whoever don't, can go home. But go north by way of Lawrence. I don't want anyone riding south to warn Dutch.

Rev. Martin bristles at the order --

REV. MARTIN

You wanna ride against Dutch, go 'head. But nobody tells *me* which way to ride, especially not over a nappy-headed, bird-gobbling nigger.

Rev. Martin puts his HAND on his REVOLVER, steps back as does Peabody; they are joined by three other men, and thus John Brown's army is SPLIT in TWO.

SUDDENLY there's MOVEMENT behind John Brown, and Fred BURSTS forth holding his TWO LARGE SEVEN-SHOT PISTOLS. He MASHES the barrels into Rev. Martin's chest, and we HEAR --

Frederick COCK BACK on both pistols --

FREDERICK

If you say another word about my friend Onion here, I'll bust a charge in your chest.

JOHN BROWN JR.

(calmly)

Frederick.

OWEN

Fredrick.

JOHN BROWN

(pause)

Leave him be.

Frederick steps away, Rev. Martin HUFFS and GLARES. He gathers his RIFLE and things, mounts his horse. Peabody and some others join him, mounting their horses...

Jew Weiner whispers to John Brown --

JEW WEINER

You ought to duck hunt him in the back while you got a chance, Captain. He won't be outta sight five minutes before he heads to Dutch's Tavern to hoot and holler loud as he can.

JOHN BROWN

Let him holler. I want everyone to know what I aim to do.

Onion stands with John Brown, Owen, Frederick, John Jr., Salmon, Henry and Jason Brown as they watch Rev. Martin and his followers RIDE OUT with roughly a dozen men.

Jew Weiner shakes his head, casts a worried look at Ottawa Jones, Oliver Sewell, and James Cake, the remainder of Brown's followers, who look more like men who would follow a plow than follow anyone into battle.

ONION (V.O.)

But the Old Man made a big mistake
letting the Reverend go that day,
and it would cost him dear down the
line, cost him a son.

The young Brown boys await their fate

FADE TO BLACK.

END OF ACT THREE

ACT FOUR14 **EXT. CALIFORNIA TRAIL - DAY**

14

THE STOLEN WAGON plods along a rutted path, with Onion, John Brown reading his Bible, his sons JASON, SALMON, and JOHN JR. in the back; riding mounts are OWEN, FREDERICK, OTTAWA JONES, HENRY, OLIVER, JAMES, and WEINER THE JEW.

The men look DISPIRITED and most of all, scrawny from HUNGER.

ONION (V.O.)

Like many of the Old Man's plans, the attack on Osawatomie got delayed. We spent the next few days wandering, trying to steal food from Pro Slavers. Truth is, we was starving fooling with John Brown. Only when I was free was I eating out of slop barrels, and happy to have it. I was done with all that crap when the Old Man sat up in the back of the wagon...

On John Brown in the wagon, his hand cupped to his ear --

JOHN BROWN

Shh. I'm getting a message from our Great Redeemer. Who stopped time itself on our behalf!

(pause)

We is attacking tonight.

OWEN

(used to this)

You ain't gonna tell us where?

JOHN BROWN

Just sharpen your broadswords.

Close up on the men. They are losing, or have lost, confidence in their Captain.

ON OLIVER, a meek follower, trying to summon his courage.

OLIVER

Captain, I been meaning to tell you, when I broke from home, both my twins had the pox, but my wife, a strong Godly woman, urged me to join up with you. So I may turn south a bit, see if the fever's broke, catch up with you on the other side of the Mosquito River.

John Brown stands up in the wagon, looks up into the clouds, then studies a nick in back of the driver's bench seat.

Oliver turns his horse and trots off.

JOHN BROWN

Anybody else?

A fellow named James just kicks his horse and rides away, no farewell.

Next, of all people, it's Ottawa Jones, the trusted peacemaker.

OTTOWA JONES

Last night was the first phase of harvest moon. Reckon I'll be seeing how the crop is dried in, if it's ready for the sickle.

(pause)

You know me, I'm a good tracker, I'll find you after the crop's in.

Ottawa Jones turns his horse and heads away.

On Onion in the back of the moving wagon watching Ottawa Jones' figure recede in the distance...

15

EXT. ROUGH ROAD - NIGHT

15

By moonlight, Onion watches John Brown SNORING loudly in the back of the wagon.

Owen leads, stops at a FORK in the CRUDE ROAD, lifts a SHADED LANTERN to read the PLANK ROAD SIGNS; one is worn BLANK, the other is just painted with an ARROW.

LATER

Owen approaches ANOTHER FORK in the road, lifts the lantern. It's the SAME SIGN, they've been traveling in circles.

JEW WEINER

I knew it, we passed that old
homestead back there twice.

OWEN

Near as I figure, we're off the
California trail by a wide mark,
probably clear the other side of
Mosquito Creek.

Suddenly, John Brown AWAKENS, sits up, looks around, SEES the
HOMESTEAD in the distance, a poor shack, some split rail
fencing, a little SMOKE wafting the MOONLIGHT from a mud
chimney.

JOHN BROWN

Head to that cabin in clearing
yonder. Our work is here.

Owen is worried. Onion climbs down from the wagon and quietly
approaches Owen and Jew Weiner talking.

JEW WEINER

I'd rather speak up against Jesus
Christ hisself before taking up
against your Old Man... but I feels
sure we is in the wrong place,
Owen. Your Pa might have his map a
little mixed up... What do you
think?

OWEN

We follow the Old Man to the brink.

John Brown leaps out of the back of the wagon.

JOHN BROWN

Dismount and tie off the horses.
(looking at the cabin)
I do believe we'll catch him by
surprise.

OWEN

Pa. Are you sure this is Dutch
Henry's place?

JOHN BROWN

I can smell slavery within it. Let
us strike quickly with the Lord's
vengeance. Broadswords only, no
guns.

John Brown turns to Onion.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

Little Onion, you are a courageous child, and while I knows you wants to strike a blow for freedom yourself, tonight is not the time. Stay here with the wagon and the horses. We'll be back shortly.

Onion watches the men single file to the cabin, and when they are a good distance away --

Onion BOLTS as fast as he can in the opposite direction, and is promptly SET UPON by --

TWO ENORMOUS DOGS that try to rip him apart.

Onion FIGHTS them off best he can until SOMETHING falls on one of the dogs and the other runs off HOWLING into the woods...

Onion looks up, in the dim moonlight, he sees Frederick holding his bloody broadsword over the slain dog, John Brown and the others standing over Onion.

Believing he'll be punished, Onion is relieved to hear --

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

It's lucky Onion here had the mind to look out for watchdogs behind us, which none of you had the mind to consider. I reckon you can't prevent someone from fighting for their freedom. So come on, Little Onion, stay back of us and be quiet.

Onion's worst nightmare is coming true, yet he follows.

16

EXT. CABIN - FRONT PORCH - NIGHT

16

Owen and Fred climb the steps, politely knock on the door.

DOYLE (O.S.)

Who's there?

JOHN BROWN

Lost, looking for Dutch.

The door opens a CRACK and Owen and Fred COLD-KICK their way in followed by John Brown, and Jew Weiner.

Salmon, Jason, John Jr. wait on the porch with the others; Onion lingers in the doorway peeking in.

17

INT. CABIN - CONTINUOUS

17

It's a crude one-room cabin, lit by a SINGLE CANDLE, we see JAMES DOYLE (from Dutch's earlier) in his long-johns, and some DIM FIGURES in nightclothes huddle in a corner --

It's MRS. DOYLE and THREE TEENAGE SONS.

John Brown pulls a piece of paper from his pocket, reads by the light of a lantern Owen holds --

JOHN BROWN

I am Captain Brown of the Northern Army. We come here to free the enslaved people of this territory under the laws of our Redeemer the Lord Jesus Christ who spilt His blood for you and me.

He puts the paper down on the table.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

Which one of you is Dutch Henry?

Doyle is white-faced with terror.

DOYLE

(stammering)

He, Dutch don't live here.

JOHN BROWN

(not knowing that)

I know that. Is you related to him?

DOYLE

None of us here is.

John Brown lifts the tip of his broadsword toward Doyle...

JOHN BROWN

Is you Pro Slavers or against?

DOYLE

I don't own no slaves.

JOHN BROWN

I ain't ask that.

(looks closer)

Ain't I see you at Dutch Henry's?

DOYLE

Dutch lives down the road a piece.

Don't you remember?

JOHN BROWN

I don't recollect every step I take
in doing my duties as the Almighty
directs me to them.

(to Owen)

Pass me up that lantern...

Owen holds the lantern closer, John Brown scrutinizes Doyle's face.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

But I do recollect you being one of
the ruffians wanting to blast me
there at Dutch's.

DOYLE

But I'm not Dutch. Dutch's place is
east of here.

JOHN BROWN

And a heathen's haven it is.

DOYLE

(pleading)

I could have fired on you then, but
I didn't...

JOHN BROWN

Well, you should have. I'm asking
you again. Is you for slavery or
against it?

DOYLE

You're not gonna find one slave on
this place. Nar a one.

Long pause as John Brown seems to soften...

JOHN BROWN

(baiting)

Too bad. It's a big homestead. Lot
of work to keep it going...

Doyle is suddenly relieved a bit, thinks he's clear...

DOYLE

You telling me. I got more plowing
than me and the boys can handle. I
could use a couple of niggers
around here, you can't make it in
Kansas without help. Just
yesterday...

Doyle stops, realizing his mistake. John Brown's face begins
its transformation; he straightens up, squares his jaw.

In his eyes there begins to burn a COLD HEAT; he is entering
into what his men will call a "killing frolic."

JOHN BROWN

(evenly)

I come to deliver the Redeemer's
justice to free His people, and to
exact the Lord's revenge on the
murdering and kidnapping of the
Negro people by slavers and them
like yourself, all who is involved
in it. There ain't no exceptions.

DOYLE

I'm just a farmer trying to make a
dollar change pockets...

JOHN BROWN

Step outside.

Owen holds the lantern and illumines the doorway. In the dull
light, Doyle notices Onion peeking in --

DOYLE

(to Onion)

Hey, I know you.

JOHN BROWN

Save your howdy's for another time,
I'm doing the talking here. I'll
ask you for the last time; is you
Free State or Slave State?

DOYLE

I'll say whatever you want to hear.

JOHN BROWN

Make up your mind.

DOYLE

I can't think with that pig-sticker
under my chin.

Mrs. Doyle bursts into tears...

MRS. DOYLE

I told you, Doyle, this is what you
get for running with them damn
rebels!

DOYLE

Hush, mother!

John Brown NODS to his sons Owen and Frederick who grab Doyle
and drag him outside.

JOHN BROWN

(to Jew Weiner)

You'll deliver them two.

Jew Weiner nods Yes.

Mrs. Doyle WAILS as Jew Weiner holds the door for Salmon and
John Jr. to rush in and grab the two eldest Doyle teenagers
and FLING them out the door.

END OF ACT FOUR

ACT FIVE18 **INT. CABIN - NIGHT**

18

Mrs. Doyle throws herself on her youngest son...

MRS. DOYLE

He's just sixteen, he ain't had nothing to do with this, he's just a boy.

JOHN BROWN

"Take thine own hand and split an axe with it." Ecclesiastes twelve or thereabouts.

MRS. DOYLE

What's that mean?

JOHN BROWN

This one's coming with me, too.

Mrs. Doyle falls on her knees, between John Brown and the boy, howling, pleading --

MRS. DOYLE

Please leave him be, he is called to be a preacher, please!

John Brown relents, the killing frolic leaves his face for a moment.

JOHN BROWN

All right. Boy, Do you hereby solemnly swear that you will treat the negro as your brother till the end of your days?

MRS. DOYLE

He does.

JOHN BROWN

Do you promise to preach the Gospel and be the shadow of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ and preach peace to all who will listen.

MRS. DOYLE

He does.

The boy is just crying.

JOHN BROWN

He can stay. But I'm keeping a man
with a muzzle trained on this door.
If you or anybody else pokes their
head outside it, they gonna chew a
lead ball.

19

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

19

Doyle is held by Owen and Fred with his back to a tree in a
thicket, John Brown and Onion approach --

DOYLE

(sobbing)

It was just talk, I didn't mean
nothing by it.

Doyle SEES Onion in the light of the shaded lantern.

DOYLE (CONT'D)

(to Onion)

Tell 'em I'm all right. You know
me! Tell 'em! I never done you no
wrong.

(to John Brown)

I'm just a man trying to make a
living slinging wheat and growing
butter beans.

JOHN BROWN

You didn't say that to Lew Shavers
and them two Yankee women you
ravaged outside Lawrence.

Doyle is perplexed...

DOYLE

Wait, WAIT! That weren't me, just
those I knowed --

JOHN BROWN

You wasn't there?

DOYLE

Well, yeah, I was in Lawrence, but
it weren't me that done them
things. It was them others!

JOHN BROWN

I'll beg the Lord your forgiveness,
then.

(MORE)

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)
(to Owen and Fred)
Draw your swords. Make quick work
of it.

But Owen hesitates.

OWEN
Father, this isn't Dutch Henry.

JOHN BROWN
He admits consorting with the
Slavers.

OWEN
We don't know for sure he's guilty
of anything.

JOHN BROWN
The crimes of this guilty land will
never be purged away except by
blood, my son.

OWEN
He doesn't even own any slaves.

DOYLE
(sobbing)
Nar a one, please don't kill me...

John Brown steps into Owen's lantern light, his eyes set on
killing.

JOHN BROWN
These slavers will never relent
without bloodshed. Never. Listen to
me right now son. If someone came
into our home and stole one of your
brothers, your mother, two of your
sisters, your grandmother- and
placed them in chains, raped them,
forced them to work with no pay and
only enough food to stay alive...
And if those thieves took your
sister's child and sold that child,
so your sister could never see your
niece and my granddaughter again...
and I met that thief? I'd stab that
son of Satan through his eye
socket.

(MORE)

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

And I'd kill his friends and any person who consorted with him or laughed at his jokes. And it would not be murder... you know what it would be? About time!

Owen stares at his father. Onion stares at Owen. Doyle's eyes fill with tears.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

"Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed." Jeremiah twenty-two. Now, is the moment, son. You need to consider our Holy Saviour's calling, is the negro your brother?

Owen looks at the blubbering Doyle.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

Look at me, Owen. Would you kill, if this man had stole your sister Anne?

Owen looks back at Jim Doyle.

OWEN

Yes, sir.

John Brown draws Owen's broadsword from its sheath, hands it to Owen.

JOHN BROWN

In the eyes of our maker is Onion here your sister?

Onion and Owen share a distraught glance.

OWEN

Yes, sir.

JOHN BROWN

Do we mean to start a war?

Owen looks to his father.

OWEN

Yes, sir.

JOHN BROWN

Now, I don't care if this heathen's name is Dutch or Jim or Lucifer hisself. This war starts tonight. Luke chapter twenty-two, verse eight. Just as Christ once armed Peter, so God has put these swords into our hands.

John Brown hands the lantern to Onion, grips his broadsword with both hands.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

(to Onion)

Gird your loins, Onion. This here is for you and your people.

John Brown lifts his sword and brings it down heavily into the base of Doyle's neck, a deep wound but not mortal.

Doyle begins an ANIMALISTIC BELLOWING, as now Owen and Frederick STRIKE at Doyle's head, hacking off first his EARS and then his FACE and JAW.

Onion does not stay to see anymore; he DROPS the LANTERN and takes off running blindly through the woods across a crop field toward the horses.

20 **EXT. CROP FIELD - NIGHT**

20

Suddenly Onion HEARS a familiar SCREAM OF TERROR, it belongs to --

John Jr. ALSO fleeing the violence being rendered on the two teenage sons by Jew Weiner and Salmon and Jason Brown.

Onion and John Jr. nearly COLLIDE in the crop field, like frightened animals, they pause to look at one another, then flee in opposite directions; Onion for the horses, John Jr. for the woods, seemingly having lost his mind.

21 **EXT. CROP FIELD/WOODS EDGE**

21

A BLOOD-SPLATTERED John Brown emerges carrying his SWORD and LANTERN, he HEARS John Jr.'s scream, catches sight of him...

JOHN BROWN

John!

(beat)

Son!

And John Brown and the brothers set off across the fields searching after John Jr., Onion just keeps running...

ONION (V.O.)

There weren't going to be another chance. I run into the thicket where the horses were tied. I jumped on the Old Man's pinto, clung for life and turned it toward Dutch's working it as fast as it would go.

Onion BURSTS out of the thicket in the moonlight --

ONION (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Only once did I look behind to see if I was clear and I was. I'd left them all behind. I was gone.

Onion disappears into the night. His horse galloping away from the violence and insanity behind him. Onion leans over the galloping horse barely on, just holding tight.

FADE TO BLACK.

END OF EPISODE