

BOARDIN' TIME

A Play in Two Acts

Written by Angela Wilson

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Synopsis

The inherent cruelty of the slave trade in America has impacted countless lives throughout generations. Some lives were affected by gain and many lives were affected by loss and pain.

Cassie and her family were one of many who experienced this harsh reality. The family matriarch is a God-fearing woman with the best of intentions in her heart. However, her personal inner conflict and her painful past prevent her from being open to change and new ideas.

One fateful day a startling heartbreak occurs that threatens to dismantle the entire family. A distraught Cassie feels hopeless and her headstrong son Benjamin is more determined than ever to change their situation and the itinerary of their lives. Though Cassie has experienced great loss in her life, her unwavering love for her family causes her to realize that there is more to life than she dared to imagine. Realizing this will require her to tread into unknown territory. Through her courage, Cassie and her family's quest changes from hopelessness and despair to the pursuit of new possibilities.

During their courageous pursuit they were met with danger, uncertainty, and scarcity; however there was no turning back if they were to alter the course of history.

In some of the darkest hours of our history the reality for some was to be treated as less than human and to have the potency of one's spirit tested beyond what was possible to endure. This family withstood these unforgiving circumstances to find a place inside them where a measure of hope resided. They pulled together and hope turned to resolve. This is a story of improbable courage and extraordinary faith. This is Boardin' Time.

Cast of Characters

- CASSIE: A slave woman in her mid to late 30s, early 40s, mother of BENJAMIN and OLIVIA. Possesses deep sense of righteousness, accepting, loving and kind.
- PAPA JO: A male slave in his late 40s to early 50s. Seems older, walks with a cane or crutch, doesn't speak, keen and observant.
- YOUNG JO: A male slave in his 30's.
- BENJAMIN: A young male slave, 19-22 years old - has a great deal of frustration and angst over lot in life, idealistic, courageous.
- YOUNG OLIVIA: A young female slave about 12 or 13 years old, daughter of CASSIE and PAPA JO, innocent but feisty.
- ELROY: A young male slave, 19-22 years old, nephew of CASSIE, fun-loving, idealistic and intellectual.
- MASSAH PENBROOK: The white slave and plantation owner. Over 40.
- ROSIE: Older woman slave who works in the Penbrook household.
- SLAVE CATCHERS: 2 gentlemen can be Caucasian or African American. Preferably stout and burly.
- THOMAS GREENWELL: A white male 30s-50s, Quaker abolitionist.
- THELMA GREENWELL: A white female 30s-50s, Quaker abolitionist

SUE JOHN:

A young slave woman age 19-22 years old. BENJAMIN'S girlfriend and eventually wife

LOUISA:

A young slave woman 19-22 years old. ELROY'S girlfriend and eventually wife

GARDNER:

A male slave about 25-30 years old. ELROY'S father in younger years.

Setting

In rural Georgia somewhere near Savannah.

Time

Slavery during the 1840's

ACT I

Scene I

SETTING: Outside on the Penbrook plantation. It is night and two slaves are trying to escape from the plantation: YOUNG JO and GARDNER, CASSIE's brother. Dogs are heard barking in the background.

OLIVIA - Voice is heard off stage

It ain't sumpin that people likes to talk about and that's slavery in America. It did happen tho and I understand why people don' like to speak on it. It was a terrible time, it was ugly but then again, when you born to it, you don't know no diffrent, at least dat's what I used to thank. I wanna tell our story to you. Course dis here a play so I ain't exactly a real person...but I could be and so could my family because slavery...it was real as breathin.' So wile you here, Ima tell you bout this turrible time through the eyes of my family. My mama is Cassie, My Pa is Jo and my brother name Benjamin. Dis here story bout true thangs that happened to real people and I don't thank it something we ever quite get over...

AT RISE: MASSAH PENBROOK is giving orders to his two slave catchers.

MASSAH PENBROOK

Now you hear me good! You better bring those negras back here tonight. I personally don't rightly care if they dead or alive but I need that Jo to be brought back here to to this hear plantation alive. I'm gonna teach that Jo and everybody else around here a valuable lesson. You better off staying put than tryin' to run from this plantation. Y'all hear me?

SLAVE CATCHERS

Yes Massah, yessuh.

SLAVE CATCHER 1

(to the other - pointing)

I seen which way dey was runnin'.

SLAVE CATCHER 2

Let's go!

(they take off running in the direction of the pointing.)

(Switch to YOUNG Jo and GARDNER talking. They are out of breath because they have been running.)

GARDNER

Jo, we gots a better chance if we splits up.

JO

Gardner how that's s'posed to work? We gotta stay together on this now.

GARDNER

I ain't got time to argue wit you now Jo, I'm gon' meet you on da other side of da brush, I promise. Come on now, we gotta keep movin!

JO

Allright now but you run and I mean you run as fast as you can, run for yo life boy, an I'll be on that other side when you get there!

(They run in opposite directions)

SLAVE CATCHER 1

I sees one of em right there!

SLAVE CATCHER 2

Shoot em!

SLAVE CATCHER 1

But Massah said to bring Jo back alive!

SLAVE CATCHER 2

Shoot em!!!

(Gunshot rings out; GARDNER yells and falls to floor. YOUNG JO runs up beside him. YOUNG JO falls on his knees murmuring something

intelligible. YOUNG JO then decides to get up and keep running. In the meantime, the slave catchers have snuck up on him. He gets to his feet and turns around and finds himself staring into the barrels of two shotguns. He drops back down to his knees and puts his hands up. One of the Slave catchers goes behind him and binds his hands. Jo is stage center on floor sweaty and bound, he stares ahead fearful for his life.)

MASSAH PENBROOK

(MASSAH PENBROOK enters the scene, stops to the left of

YOUNG JO, at first calmly and sarcastically but raises his voice as he speaks)

So you think you can run from me boy? You are my property!!!!
You understand me boy!?! Now I'm gonna fix it so you won't be able to run anywhere, anymore, ever!!

(YOUNG JO shows the fear in his face as his eyes dart to and fro.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Boardin' Time Song starts playing immediately

ACT I

Scene 2

SETTING: Inside the family slave cabin

AT RISE: CASSIE is applying an ointment to son's back, son is flinching in pain. OLIVIA is watching and making grimacing faces. PAPA JO is sitting in his chair whittling. He doesn't speak much, more with grunts, but occasionally shows his interest in the conversations.

CASSIE

Hold Still Benjamin, I need to put more salve on these here wounds. Your back so marked now, you can't take no more beatins'.

BENJAMIN

(flinching)

Owww, just let it be.

CASSIE

Now hold still this here salve will keep them welts from swellin' and take away some of the pain.

BENJAMIN

Leave 'em be, shoot don't make no difference,
(low and angry)

this the last time anybody gonna be beatin' me for anythang. My days is numbered 'round here.

CASSIE

(surprised by his comment)

Boy you need to hush up, I don' tol' you bout talking such foolishness - you so high minded, thank you so different from everybody else.

(Exasperated)

That's why you in this situation right 'chere. You got so much to say and got all these bright ideas and you just keep testin' Master, I don't...

BENJAMIN

(interrupting her and jumps up from the chair-frustrated)

What ideas you want me to have mama? I guess I can jes have ideas 'bout life as a slave forever huh? That aint the right ideas for nobody to have. I jes don' understan' what you want me to thank like sometimes. (little louder) I can't thank so, so, helpless and...

CASSIE

(interrupting and irritated but calm)

Boy don't raise your voice to me, ain't respectful, and that ole foolish talk is what keeps you in trouble.

(pauses, getting a little emotional)

An when they takes you out like that I never knows if you gon walk back through this do...

(irritated again)

I jes don see why it seem like you has to make everthang so hard.

BENJAMIN

How is I making it hard mama? Harder than what? Harder than dis? Dis hard mama, getting up at the break-o-day, pickin til my hands turn raw, can't take a drink til somebody tell me to. Dis hard, not being treated like a person ma, like I cain't do what my mind tells me to do, like I ain't nothin, Dat what's hard mama!

CASSIE

Well it's all I know and I don' like everything 'bout it, believe me when I tell you but what else am I gonna do? I done made my peace bout it and I prays, I gots to b'leve that the good Lawd knows what he's doin.

BENJAMIN

Humph, I just don't b'leve that ma, I sorry, I don' tried to, I swear I has. I don' tried to b'leve all you don' taught me but I don't hardly got no more b'levin in me. I's a man now and I gots to b'leve in something mo' than dis mama. I can't believe when a man standin' over me wid a cord in his hand mad wit me cause he know I don't like being no slave. You go on praying and b'levin in all dat if you want.

CASSIE

Benjamin! I won't have no blaspheming in dis house. You thank you know so much, if you not careful - you'll end up like your papa or dead like your uncle or hung from one o these trees. You thank you the onliest one ever felt this way? They felt it too. Oh yes they sho did. They felt it like fire shut right up in they bones. They tried to do sumpin bout it.

(with a little sarcasm)

Hmph, thought they was so sma't both of em. You soun jes likem' too. It was right after 'Livvie was born. "We's gon get away from here" they kep sayin, "We's gon up north to have a better life they would say." You see where dey at don't you Benjamin? Your uncle, 'my brother was shot 'fore he even get off the property and by the time they catch up to your Papa, they beat him within a inch of his life and let the dogs darn near eat him alive!

(Recalling it with emotion)

We didn't even thank he was gon' live and the only reason he still livin is cuz Massah wanna make an example out of him, trying to show everybody, dis what will happen if we even thank about runnin way from here. Look at him, *(louder)* Look at yo papa boy! He ain't been right since then and he can't do much of anything, barely walkin and he aint barely uttered a word since but he's still here! And I thanks my God for least allowin me that. Now here you goes with all this, this.... talk, can't you see it's not gon' get you anywhere Benjamin, it's nonsense?

BENJAMIN

Not to me mama, it ain't nonsense to me.

(they look at each other intently)

I gotta go.

CASSIE

Where you be going this hour?

BENJAMIN

Gotta get some air mama.

(walks out abruptly)

(LIGHTS DOWN)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT I

Scene 3

SETTING: Outside on the Penbrook plantation

AT RISE: Music: "Early in da mo'nin'" is playing as MASSAH PENBROOK enters the scene. He is looking around his plantation and smugly taking in all that is his. BENJAMIN walking deep in thought about his conversation with his mother and encounters MASSAH PENBROOK.

MASSAH PENBROOK

Evening boy.

BENJAMIN

Suh.

MASSAH PENBROOK

Reckon you finished for the day, have you weighed in?

BENJAMIN

Yessuh.

MASSAH PENBROOK

(pretending to care)

Now see here, if you negras would just do your work like you s'posed to, won't be no need for another scene like we had yesterday. I hate those scenes just as much as you negras do but when you decide you gonna do something different than what we tell you, then it becomes necessary. There ain't no need for you questioning my folks. You understand me boy?

BENJAMIN

I does.

1-3-8

MASSAH PENBROOK

Now your mama CASSIE, she's a good woman, I done owned you all for a number of years now and you all are one of my favorite families so I don't want no trouble between us. Your mama was born and raised right here on this here plantation and she done raised a good family. Now I don't want you to go and make the same mistakes your Papa made.

BENJAMIN

(bothered by MASSAH PENBROOK'S statement but tries not to show it)

Yessuh, well if you don't mind suh, I'd be getting on home now
(BENJAMIN STARTS to walk away).

MASSAH PENBROOK

Jes a minute boy, now that's what I'm talking about - I wasn't finished talking and I aint dismissed you yet.

BENJAMIN

Suh?

MASSAH PENBROOK

Now... how's your mama getting along?

BENJAMIN

(trying to go along)

She doing fine and uh thank you for asking...suh.

MASSAH PENBROOK

Now your sister, what's her name?

BENJAMIN

(turning suspicious as to why he is asking about Olivia. Speaks slowly)

Her name Livia suh.

MASSAH PENBROOK

Ah yes, Olivia - she growing into a handsome young gal -what is she bout 12, 13 or so?

BENJAMIN

She bout that age ... can I know why you be asking bout Livia suh?

MASSAH PENBROOK

(lying)

Well... my wife, uh, well uh she needs someone - a young girl to help her around the house, keep her company and to do her hair and, and things like that and I was thinking Olivia was about the right age.

BENJAMIN

(understanding what's being implied)

Oh no suh, my mamma have Livia doing so many thangs - she couldn't bear to part with her right now and Livia kinda slow in

the head an, an she don't follow directions too good suh, she wouldn't be good at helping the Missus...

(sadly)

...she too young suh.

MASSAH PENBROOK

Did I ask for your opinion boy?

BENJAMIN

No suh, I jes was...

MASSAH PENBROOK

You sassin me boy?

BENJAMIN

(upset)

No suh.

MASSAH PENBROOK

You can go on and get going home to your ma. Go on now.

(BENJAMIN turns to walk away but walks back to try to reason with MASSAH PENBROOK.)

BENJAMIN

Massah Penbrook...Suh?

MASSAH PENBROOK

What is it boy?

BENJAMIN

It would break my mama heart if you took Livia to the big house.

MASSAH PENBROOK

(dismissive)

Good Evening Benjamin. You're free to go.

BENJAMIN

(dejected)

Evening suh.

(LIGHTS DOWN)

(END OF SCENE)

(Music: Early in da mo'nin' begins playing again)

Act I

Scene 4

SETTING: Family slave cabin.

AT RISE: Music fades, CASSIE and OLIVIA are doing chores. PAPA JO is sitting in his seat whittling - he is startled when BENJAMIN enters. BENJAMIN comes rushing into the house - out of breath.

BENJAMIN

Mama, mama!

CASSIE

Boy, what going on? Why is you rushing so?

BENJAMIN

Massah Penbrook...

CASSIE

What about Massah Penbrook? What is it Benjamin? You look like you done scene a ghost boy!

BENJAMIN

He say, he say he gon take Livia to live in the big house to help Missus Penbrook round the house and to sit with her and thangs.

CASSIE

Oh now Benjamin, he ain't say no sucha thang. Everbody know Rosie works for Missus and they gets along quite well.

BENJAMIN

I'm not making it up mama. He asked me how old Livia was and said Missus Penbrook be needin some help.

CASSIE

You must be mixed up Benjamin, that cain't be so. Sides Livia too young to go up there, and Massah Penbrook promised me a long time ago that he wouldn't break up this family - so you must be mistaken, no unh uh, that don't sound right.

BENJAMIN

Ma, listen to me. Now he said it, I know what he said to me. He want Livia Ma, he was asking bout her.

CASSIE

No! Now that cain't be. Massah Penbrook promised me that...

BENJAMIN:

(interrupting and louder)

I don't care what he promised you! He gon try to take Livia to that house and everbody knows what happens up there. You won't see her no more Ma and next thing you know he'll put a baby in her that he won't even claim it as his own, he'll jes put it out in the fields when it get big enough to work just like the rest of us. It ain't like we don't know who Massah's children are. We don' seen it time and time again!

CASSIE

(upset at the whole possibility of it all but not wanting to believe it)

You listen heah Benjamin. Massah ain't gon' take Livia. He promised me that he was gon keep our family together long as there was no more trying to run and I promised him and we had a deal.

(to PAPA JO)

Jo, you hear what this boy be saying? After what they did to you I promised Massah that it won't be no more running. 'Sides he promised me a long time ago that he would nevah break up this family. I wish you could talk to this boy Jo - he so worked up he got thangs all mixed up. Benjamin, why would you say such a thang?

BENJAMIN

Mama, I not mixed up and I know what he say to me. He made his 'tentions clear to me mama and you says y'all gots a deal huh. I'm just wonderin if you done made a deal with the devil.

CASSIE

(angrily)

Get from out my face boy - you keep comin' in here with some kind of foolish talk. I don't know how these thangs get in your head, I swear I don't. God as my witness, I know I raised you better than to always be going around here with crazy talk coming out of your lips. But no, you jes caint stop, can you? Not til you got everbody round here worked up - is that what you want?

BENJAMIN

(cynical & ignoring the question)

I wonder sometime how you got to be so trustin mama. The way Massah done treated you, the way he done cheated all us and you still believe what he be saying? I'm the one don't understand I

guess. I'm the one don't get why it's okay to be some white man's property, I'm the one who's'posed to understand that it's not okay to have your own mind. I'm the one who s'posed to say, (over dramatic) go head, beat me Massah if that's what you wanna do, go ahead Massah, you live up there in your big ole fancy house, wit you fancy clothes while you throw us the scraps off your table and (mockingly) we sho is grateful fo yo kindness Massah. Humph, I'm the one s'posed to believe that because I was born with the dark skin that I's not s'posed to be treated like I's human and I's the one must be mixed up?

(As soon as BENJAMIN says his last word he is met with the sting of CASSIE's slap to his cheek. BENJAMIN is clearly stunned, Jo and Olivia are shocked as well.)

CASSIE

(calm but firm)

Now that's enough. (pauses and looks at everyone who is stunned) It getting' late, it been a long day, we all's tired... we all needs to be getting to bed.

(LIGHTS DOWN)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT I

Scene 5

SETTING: Family slave cabin

AT RISE: CASSIE is sitting next to PAPA JO having a conversation with him but not expecting a response but just wants to get her thoughts out. OLIVIA is doing chores in the kitchen area.

CASSIE
(to PAPA JO)

Don know what Ima do wit dat boy Jo. He stubborn jes like you was and I thanks he spendin too much time with Elroy and his other cuzzins. They all got these crazy ideas in they head; keep Massah and his men all worked up all the time, jes waitin fer one of em to make a move so they can beat em or sell 'em right way from here. That's just what they waitin on. I wish you would talk more cuz I know you can talk some sense into those boys. I know you would tell em how you had to learn thangs the hard way. We don't want that for them, do we Jo? (not really expecting a response but hoping he agrees.)

(to OLIVIA)

Livia, go on out and get them clothes off the line for it get dark. It smell like rain may be comin.

OLIVIA

Yes mama.

(exits)

BENJAMIN

(enters the cabin obviously in a good mood and he kisses his mother, greets his father)

Hey Mama, hey Papa.

CASSIE
(Teasingly)

What? Is that a smile I sees on your face boy? What you up to today got you in a right good mood?

BENJAMIN
(trying to hide his smile)

It ain't nothing mama.

CASSIE

Well smilin' suit you just fine - you look like my handsome son now. That something you need to do more often for sure. Now something done put that smile on that face. What's going on boy?

OLIVIA

(overhearing as she comes back in)

I know what he be smiling bout.

CASSIE

Oh? Well do tell...

OLIVIA

I saw him talking to Sue John earlier. I thanks they fancyin' each other. I thank she his girl.

BENJAMIN

Hush gal!

OLIVIA

I saw you two all giggly and holdin hands.

CASSIE

What you say now?

OLIVIA

Ummmm hmmm

BENJAMIN

Mama don't pay her no never mind, she likes to make up stuff, you know she full of mischief.

OLIVIA

I'm not making it up mama, I seen em down by the peach trees - they was...

BENJAMIN

(interrupting her by putting his hand over her mouth)
You needs to hush now sister.

(A loud knock is heard at the door)

CASSIE

(laughing)

You two stop that foolery, Benjamin get the door.