

FADING GRAY
A Civil War Drama
By MARTIN A. FOLLOSE

CAST OF CHARACTERS
6 female, 7 male with doubling possible

CULLEN GUTHRIE.....	Union soldier
WILLIAM COVINGTON.....	Confederate soldier
ELLIE LANE	Daughter of Charles and Elizabeth Lane
AUNT RUBY.....	Crazy great aunt of Ellie
ANNA LANE.....	Younger sister of Ellie
ELIZABETH LANE (MOTHER).....	Mother to Ellie and Anna
CHARLES LANE (FATHER).....	Father of Ellie and Anna
TAD LANE	Younger brother of Ellie
ANDREW CASWELL.....	Ellie's cousin
SARAH.....	Acquaintance of Ellie
MARY	Another acquaintance of Ellie
JACOB	Union soldier
RICHARD	Another Union soldier
MOB.....	Doubled with JACOB, RICHARD, MARY, AND SARAH
PARTY GOERS.....	Extras, doubled with JACOB, RICHARD.

SYNOPSIS

The first of April, 1865 – The sunset of the American Civil War. In a ravine, following a battle near Petersburg, two soldiers lie next to each other: one Union, one Confederate. Cullen is from West Virginia and fights for the North. He is wounded and unable to make it out of the ravine. William is a Southern Rebel from Chapel Hill, North Carolina and is near death. As they wait to be rescued, they share their lives beyond the battlefield. As barriers are broken, these once enemies quickly form an unlikely bond.

Before he succumbs, William gives a letter to Cullen to deliver to his fiancé, Ellie. Cullen is so impressed by William's devotion to Ellie that he stands determined to fulfill William's final wish. He makes his way with the letter to Chapel Hill. But as soon as Cullen meets Ellie, he is unable to give her the letter or to tell her the truth about William. Aunt Ruby convinces everyone to allow Cullen to stay until his leg is healed. His presence however, does not please everyone in the family nor the community of Chapel Hill. But Cullen's biggest fear is not the people of Chapel Hill, but Ellie's foreknowing aunt who knows Cullen is hiding a terrible secret. Ellie still hopes for William's return, while Cullen hopes his secret will never have to be revealed.

NOTE: Although the characters are fictional, this play is historically correct.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT ONE

Scene One: Battle of Five Forks near Petersburg, Virginia. April 1, 1865. Nightfall.

Scene Two: Kitchen of the Lane family home, Chapel Hill, NC. April 7, 1865.

Scene Three: Garden area of the Lane family home. Same time as Scene 2.

Scene Four: Garden area. Same day, several hours later.

ACT TWO

Scene One: Garden area. Evening of April 7, 1865.

Scene Two: Garden area. April 8, 1865.

Scene Three: Kitchen. April 10, 1865. One day after Lee surrenders to Grant.

Scene Four: Kitchen. April 16, 1865. Union Soldiers arrive in Chapel Hills.

Scene Five: Battlefield. April 2, 1865. Pre-dawn.

SET

ACT ONE, Scene One and ACT TWO, Scene Five are set in a ravine near a battlefield. If possible, there should be an almost vertical dirt wall that looks like the side a ravine with plants and roots hanging from above. This set is dimly lit.

ACT ONE, Scene Two and ACT TWO, Scenes Three and Four are set in the kitchen of the Lane home. It could be as simple as just a table and chair. You could also add a side area with an old style wood cook stove, dry sink, and shelves to bring the illusion into focus.

Dishes, pots and pans, and other kitchen items would complete the kitchen. These can be set on a platform that can be wheeled off and on easily. MOTHER will need to have teacups, a coffee pot, and other breakfast food items and service wear for her use.

ACT ONE, Scene Three and four and ACT TWO, Scenes One and Two are in the garden area of the house. It can be as simple as a wicker table and two chairs. In ACT TWO, Scene One and Two, the table the chairs can be removed to provide more space if needed for the dance.

ACT I

Scene One

April 1, 1865. Five Forks Battle near Petersburg, Virginia. Nightfall.

The scene begins with cannon and musket fire of a civil war battle in progress on a dark stage. We see only the flashes from the muskets and cannon blasts. WILLIAM comes running in and is shot and falls on the ravine. We may not be able to see him but we hear him and see his silhouette during the blasts. Moments later CULLEN rushes on and following a cannon blast, falls on the ravine. Both are unconscious. Battle sounds slowly fade as we begin to hear a male voice singing, Battle Hymn of the Republic, sung in a haunting, free style.

Sung:

MINE EYES HAVE SEEN THE GLORY OF THE COMING OF THE LORD.
HE IS TRAMPLING OUT THE VINTAGE WHERE THE GRAPES OF WRATH ARE
STORED.
HE HATH LOOSED THE FATEFUL LIGHTNING OF HIS TERRIBLE SWIFT
SWORD.
HIS TRUTH IS MARCHING ON.
GLORY, GLORY, HALLELUJAH!
GLORY, GLORY, HALLELUJAH!
GLORY, GLORY, HALLELUJAH!
HIS TRUTH IS MARCHING ON.

Lights slowly come up near the end of the song. It is dusk, near dark. Smoke drifts. There is a dirt wall where two bodies, CULLEN and WILLIAM, lay in the bottom of a ravine. There is a musket to the far side of WILLIAM and a canteen and haversack next to CULLEN. They are both wounded. WILLIAM has passed out and is covered with blood. CULLEN suddenly wakes and screams in pain. He examines his wounded leg but doesn't notice WILLIAM at first. CULLEN begins to look around and then he sees WILLIAM.

CULLEN: *(In a whisper.)* Hey. *(No response from WILLIAM.)* Hey you, soldier. Are you alive? *(He looks around for anyone to help him, wrenching from sudden pain. There is no one. WILLIAM moans in pain. CULLEN works his way over to him when he is close he notices WILLIAM is a confederate soldier.)* You're a Johnny Reb. *(WILLIAM coughs and begins to wake up. CULLEN looks around for a weapon and the only thing he can find is a stick. He prepares to hit WILLIAM with it, cautiously working his way closer. WILLIAM again coughs and groans in pain and then sees CULLEN as he raises the stick to strike. WILLIAM tries to move away but can't.)*

WILLIAM: Don't. *(Beat. CULLEN contemplates what to do.)* Please don't. *(CULLEN slowly lowers the stick.)* Water. *(CULLEN contemplates whether or not to give him water. He reaches for the canteen, takes a drink.)* Water, please. *(He eyes WILLIAM for a moment and then works his way closer and hands the canteen to WILLIAM.)*

CULLEN: Don't take it all.

WILLIAM: *(He takes a drink and hands the canteen back.)* Thank you.

CULLEN: Sure.

WILLIAM: Did you shoot me?

CULLEN: I don't think so.

WILLIAM: Are you hurt?

CULLEN: My leg, it's been busted up bad.

WILLIAM: I've been gut shot.

CULLEN: Gut shot?

WILLIAM: We know what that means.

CULLEN: Not always.

WILLIAM: Think they will take your leg?

CULLEN: I won't let them.

WILLIAM: They don't give you much of a choice.

CULLEN: Not this time. (*WILLIAM has a coughing fit.*) More water?

WILLIAM: Don't waste it on me.

CULLEN: It's okay. (*He hands him the canteen but WILLIAM waves it off. Sounds of distant musket and cannon fire. Yelling.*) Hey! Over here! Over here! (*The sounds fade.*)
Sounds like the battle's moving south. They'll come back for us.

WILLIAM: For you. Not for me.

CULLEN: (*Puts canteen away. He relaxes and leans back to rest.*) It wasn't supposed to be like this.

WILLIAM: What?

CULLEN: The war. When I signed up, I couldn't wait to be in battle. They talked about the glory of war. The marching band played. Now, all I want is to get away. (*Beat.*)
Where's home for you?

WILLIAM: Chapel Hill, North Carolina. You?

CULLEN: West Virginia. A town called Beckley.

WILLIAM: You're far from home.

CULLEN: Not far enough. (*Beat.*) I'm Cullen.

WILLIAM: William. (*He starts coughing and spitting up blood. CULLEN watching helplessly.*)

CULLEN: Can I do something for you?

WILLIAM: Yeah. Can you stay, until . . . ? I don't want to be alone.

CULLEN: With this leg, I won't be going anywhere until someone comes to help. They'll help you too.

WILLIAM: I heard Yankees just shoot the wounded.

CULLEN: That's not true. *(Beat.)* Well, I guess some do.

WILLIAM: It's the same on my side.

CULLEN: No one's going to shoot you.

WILLIAM: *(Ekes out a laugh.)* Too late for that. Might be the best thing for me now though.

CULLEN: Don't give up. To many people just give up.

WILLIAM: I think I'm just too tired. *(Takes out envelope and holds it to his chest. Beat.)* You have a girl back home?

CULLEN: Nah. Just a pa who cherishes a bottle more than me. You?

WILLIAM: Yeah. Ellie. She's the prettiest girl in all of Chapel Hill. She's waiting for me.

CULLEN: You'll see her soon.

WILLIAM: Not likely. *(WILLIAM again coughs and wrenches in pain. Beat.)* I gave her a ring.

CULLEN: *(Beat. Not knowing what to say.)* That's nice.

WILLIAM: She gave it back.

CULLEN: She give it back? Why?

WILLIAM: Said for me to keep it, to give it to her when I return. That she'd be waiting. *(Looks up and speaks.)* Sorry Ellie, I won't be keeping my promise.

CULLEN: Your promise?

WILLIAM: *(To CULLEN.)* I promised her I'd return. *(Looking up. Raising his head.)* Forgive me, Ellie. *(He relaxes. Appearing dead.)*

CULLEN: William? William! Are you still with me?

WILLIAM: *(Faintly.)* I'm here.

CULLEN: I thought you . . .

WILLIAM: *(Taking letter out of the envelope. Tries to read it but he can't focus.)* Can you read this to me? *(He hands CULLEN the letter.)*

CULLEN: What is it?

WILLIAM: It's a letter from Ellie. I just want to hear her words one more time.

CULLEN: Are you sure you want me to read it?

WILLIAM: Please.

CULLEN: *(Opens the letter and reads.)* My dearest William. I have not heard from you in some time and I pray that you are well. The family is doing well. Tad still pesters father to join the war, but father will not relent. I fear that when Tad turns 17 in three months, he will run off and enlist. Father continues to try and keep the store open. We have little money and trade for the things we need. We feel lucky that the war has not presented itself at our doorstep, although the battles draw nearer. I leave with these last few words so that I can post it today. I pray each day for your safe return. Please write as soon as you can. Love, Ellie. *(He folds up the letter.)* She seems like a lovely girl.

WILLIAM: She is. Can you write on the back of the letter my words for Ellie?

CULLEN: *(Hesitates.)* Yeah, sure. *(He unfolds the letter.)*

WILLIAM: I don't have a pencil.

CULLEN: I do. *(He takes out a pencil from his haversack.)* Okay.

WILLIAM: My dearest Ellie. *(CULLEN writes what is dictated.)* I feel that these few words will be read by your eyes when I shall be no more. I have fought, I believe, with great courage and I have no misgivings for the cause I support. There is only one thing that I feel more strongly about and that is my love for you. My last words will be a whisper of your name and my thoughts the memories of our time together. Forgive me, for I cannot fulfill my promise and always remember that my love for you is deathless. Your dearest and loving William. *(He sighs as it took great effort to dictate the letter. CULLEN put the letter back in the envelope.)* Can you deliver that to Eleanor Lane, Chapel Hill, North Carolina for me?

CULLEN: *(Shocked.)* You want me to deliver this letter?

WILLIAM: Can't trust the post and I need to know that Ellie will get it.

CULLEN: But I can't go to Chapel Hill, that's in Confederate hands.

WILLIAM: *(Pleading.)* Please! I need to know she will get it. Please!

CULLEN: Okay, okay.

WILLIAM: Thank you. *(CULLEN puts the letter in his haversack.. WILLIAM takes a string from around his neck. It has the ring on it.)* Here, I want you to have this.

CULLEN: What is it? *(Looking closely at it. Surprised.)* Is this the ring?

WILLIAM: It is.

CULLEN: I can't take this.

WILLIAM: I won't be needing it. Whoever finds me will just take it. I'd rather you have it. *(Puts the ring in CULLEN'S hand.)*

CULLEN: What am I going to do with it?

WILLIAM: Give it to someone you love. *(He starts coughing as the lights fade.)*

ACT I
Scene Two
April 7, 1865

At rise we are in the kitchen of the Lane home. There is a wood cook stove and dry sink stage right. Near center is a table and chairs. MOTHER is preparing breakfast. TAD enters.

MOTHER: Tad, where have you been?

TAD: I was talking with some soldiers on leave.

MOTHER: I have told you to stay away from them.

TAD: But mother, they're telling me all about the battles.

MOTHER: You cannot believe the stories they are telling you. They glorify the war as if it's a parade. Did they tell you about all the boys who won't be coming home?

TAD: In 3 months I will be seventeen, old enough to join the army.

MOTHER: I have had all the talking that I am going to do on this subject. Stay away from the soldiers. *(FATHER enters.)*

FATHER: Morning, Elizabeth.

MOTHER: Morning, Charles.

TAD: Father, some soldiers are here on leave, can I spend some time with them?

MOTHER: *(Interrupting TAD.)* I have already told him no.

FATHER: Listen to your mother.

TAD: But I'm almost old enough to enlist.

FATHER: When you are, we will discuss it, until then do as your mother asks.

MOTHER: Tad, please go gather the eggs.

TAD: But I always have to gather the eggs!

FATHER: *(Interrupting TAD.)* Tad! *(TAD reluctantly takes the basket and exits.)* We won't be able to stop him, Elizabeth. You know that.

MOTHER: But he's only 16.

FATHER: *(Interrupting.)* We can't expect him to stay when so many others have gone.

MOTHER: I can't see him fighting in a war that I do not agree with.

FATHER: Elizabeth, we have discussed this.

MOTHER: I know. But, I just don't want him coming back without a leg or an arm like Andrew. Or not coming home at all.

FATHER: He's almost a man. He feels he needs to go.

MOTHER: I hate this war. *(Beat.)*

FATHER: Is Aunt Ruby up?

MOTHER: Yes, she is in the garden. Expecting her coffee, which we are almost out of.

FATHER: We will just have to do without coffee for a while.

MOTHER: I won't be the one who tells her to do without. She insists on having a cup each morning, even though she won't drink it.

FATHER: Fine. I will have to get the coffee from a Blockade Runner. They're not getting much through these days, and that makes everything so expensive.

MOTHER: I don't know why you cater to that woman. She's down right mean at times.

FATHER: I know how difficult she can be, but right now I just want to make her feel at home.

MOTHER: Aunt Ruby has been here two weeks and still she has everyone walking around here as if they are walking on eggshells. And she is not right in the head.

FATHER: I know my aunt is a little different.

MOTHER: A little different? She goes around talking to Vern. Your Uncle Vern is dead.

FATHER: I know. I know. She tried to keep the farm going after Uncle Vern died, but then after the North took Nashville she had nowhere else to go. Everything she had was gone.

MOTHER: I understand what she has gone through, but I think she's crazy and I am afraid of what her influence will do to Anna and Ellie.

FATHER: She's not crazy, just a little eccentric.

MOTHER: Eccentric? She sees ghosts.

FATHER: She's just having a hard time accepting the loss of Uncle Vern and her home.

MOTHER: She lost Vern a year ago.

FATHER: It's not like I can send her away. I'm the only family she has. Just give it a little more time. (*MOTHER gives up. TAD enters with basket of eggs.*)

MOTHER: I hope the hens laid a few extra eggs.

TAD: (*Still with anger in his voice.*) Sorry, but there's one less egg than yesterday.

MOTHER: (*Takes basket. TAD sits at the table.*) One less? Oh dear, I need extra eggs to trade for a gift for Ellie's birthday.

TAD: Would you like me to squeeze the hens for another egg or two?

MOTHER: No, I want extra eggs, not chicken soup.

TAD: Maybe tomorrow.

FATHER: Tad, I need you to open the store this morning. I need to go down to Judge Battle's office.

TAD: Can't mother open the store, so I can go with you?

MOTHER: No, I'm waiting here until Ellie wakes up. I'm letting her sleep in.

TAD: I never got to sleep in on my birthday.

FATHER: *(Interrupting TAD.)* No arguing! Take the eggs with you to the store. And don't trade those eggs for anything until I get there. They're like gold. *(To MOTHER.)* I have to go. *(He exits.)*

MOTHER: Here Tad, have some breakfast. *(She sets down a plate of food.)*

TAD: Fried cornmeal mush, again!

MOTHER: That is all we have right now.

TAD: Can't we eat one of the chickens?

MOTHER: Those chickens provide us with eggs, which we can trade for the things we need.

TAD: Than can I have an egg?

MOTHER: I will need two eggs for a cake for Ellie. The others we will use to trade for a gift. Now eat your breakfast.

TAD: I bet the soldiers eat better than this.

MOTHER: Maybe you should just go open up the store.

TAD: *(As he exits. Without the eggs.)* I can't wait until I turn 17. *(MOTHER begins to clean up. Moments later ELLIE enters.)*

ELLIE: Good morning, mother.

MOTHER: Good morning, Ellie. Happy birthday.

ELLIE: Thank you, mother.

MOTHER: We have a wonderful party planned for this evening.

ELLIE: I wish you'd cancel it.

MOTHER: I will not!

ELLIE: But how can we have a party when I have not heard from William?

MOTHER: I am sure William is just fine and I know he would be very upset if we cancelled your party because of him.

ELLIE: Then we will postpone it until he returns.

MOTHER: We have no idea when that will be, so I think we should do what he would want us to do, and that is to have your party.

ELLIE: He would also want to be here.

MOTHER: I'm sure he would be, if he could. Now, there will be nothing more said about canceling your party.

ELLIE: Very well.

MOTHER: *(Taking TAD plate from her seat and giving it to ELLIE.)* Here, have some breakfast. *(ANNA enters.)*

ANNA: Morning, mother.

MOTHER: Morning, Anna. Would you take a cup of coffee out to your Great Aunt Ruby? She's in the garden.

ANNA: But she never drinks it.

MOTHER: I know. That's why I want one of you to bring the cup back to me when she leaves. I'll just heat up the same coffee for her tomorrow.

ANNA: That's silly.

MOTHER: You want to tell your Great Aunt that?

ANNA: *(Apprehensively.)* No.

MOTHER: I didn't think so. *(Hands her the cup, carefully.)* Be careful now.

ANNA: I will. *(She exits with the cup.)*

ELLIE: I had another dream, mother.

MOTHER: About William?

ELLIE: Yes. He was calling to me, but I couldn't hear what he was saying. I feel like I need to go to him.

MOTHER: It's just a dream, my dear.

ELLIE: But it seemed so real.

MOTHER: Well tonight when you go to bed, try to think about a good time you had with William, like when you first met him. Then maybe you will have a happier dream.

ELLIE: I will try.

MOTHER: Now, you might want to be a little careful around your Great Aunt Ruby today; she may be upset, since it has been a year ago today that she lost your Great Uncle Vern.

ELLIE: My Great Uncle Vern died on my birthday?

MOTHER: I'm afraid so. It was almost a year before we heard he died. Your Great Aunt and Uncle weren't known for communicating with family members. They mostly kept to themselves. It was just last month that we heard Aunt Ruby had lost her home in the war.

ELLIE: It must have been difficult for her.

MOTHER: I'm sure it has been. I think it has affected her mind. She imagines things.

ELLIE: Is she still seeing Uncle Vern?

MOTHER: Yes. Yesterday she carried on an entire conversation with him for nearly an hour. There's something just not right about thinking you can talk to the dead.

ELLIE: Do you really think she sees him?

MOTHER: She thinks she does.

ELLIE: I'll check on her.

MOTHER: *(Seeing the eggs.)* Oh, that boy! Tad forgot the eggs. Will you ask Anna to come to the kitchen? I'll have her take the eggs over to the store.

ELLIE: Yes, mother. *(She exits as lights fade.)*

ACT I
Scene Three
Same day

At rise we are in the garden area of the house. There is a wicker table and chairs center stage. As the scene begins, AUNT enters talking with someone who is not there.

AUNT: Vern, you old rascal! Of course I remember Berta, she was so angry at you for cancelling your picnic with her to take me instead. I'm surprised she will even talk to you now. *(She laughs again. She seems to be listening to someone.)* She was quite fond of you, but not as fond as I was and I always get what I want. *(Listens.)* That's right. She wouldn't speak to me for months after that. I felt blessed. She talked incessantly. *(She laughs. ANNA enters.)*

ANNA: Aunt Ruby, here's your coffee.

AUNT: Thank you, Anna. Just set it on the table. *(She smells the coffee.)*

ANNA: Aunt Ruby, each day I bring you coffee, but you never drink it.

AUNT: I can't stand that stuff!

ANNA: Then why do you want me to bring some each morning?

AUNT: That muddy water isn't for me, it's for Vern. Every morning I would make him a cup, thick and black, just the way he liked it. He'd come into the kitchen, wouldn't say a word until he drank a cup, then he would look at me, say, "Good morning, beautiful," and hold out the cup for more. Every morning.

ANNA: But Uncle Vern died a long time ago.

AUNT: Yes, what an awful thing for a man to do, leave his wife alone. But I suppose it wasn't his choice. The good lord thought he needed him more.

ANNA: But coffee is . . .

AUNT: . . . is for me. I made it for Vern for 37 years, couldn't stop even after he left me. The smell brings back all the memories of him. And that seems to be all that I have left now, memories.

ANNA: You have me.

AUNT: Yes, I do. And your Uncle Vern, in a way.

ANNA: Is Uncle Vern here, now?

AUNT: Yes, of course.

ANNA: *(Afraid.)* Where is he?

AUNT: Where he has been for all those years, *(she looks to her side)* right by my side.

ANNA: He scares me.

AUNT: There is nothing to be afraid of, my dear.

ANNA: Is he a ghost?

AUNT: No, no. I think of him as my angel. You aren't afraid of angels, are you?

ANNA: No.

AUNT: Then there is no reason for you to be afraid of your Uncle Vern. He is a very wise man. He even seems to know what is to come.

ANNA: You mean he can see the future?

AUNT: Seems too.

ANNA: Wow! I wish I could have known Uncle Vern.

AUNT: That's right, you have never met him. We lived so far away, and Vern wasn't much for traveling. Well, let me introduce you two. (*To the invisible VERN.*) Mr. Vern Powell, I would like you to meet your little great niece, Anna Lane.

ANNA: (*A bit afraid.*) Are you sure it's okay?

AUNT: Oh, yes of course.

ANNA: (*She stands.*) Nice to meet you, Uncle Vern.

AUNT: He's tipping his hat, Anna. You should curtsy. (*ANNA curtsies. To VERN.*) Isn't she the prettiest young lady you have ever seen? (*Listens to VERN.*)

ANNA: What did he say?

AUNT: He said, "The prettiest."

ANNA: Thank you. What was he like, Aunt Ruby?

AUNT: Oh, he was a crass old man, grumpy, demanding, stubborn as a mule. Always had to have his way. (*She listens to VERN.*) Oh, you hush up! (*To ANNA.*) He hates it when I talk about him in that way. (*To VERN.*) I have told you that sometimes the truth is like a needle. (*To ANNA.*) I was the only one on this earth who could put up with that man and love him. (*Listens to VERN.*) Your Uncle Vern wants to know what fills your day, besides bringing your crazy great aunt a cup of coffee she won't drink?

ANNA: Oh . . . well, I like to read. And I like to ride horses. But we don't have horses any more. The army needed them.

AUNT: Vern liked riding horses, too. Your Uncle Vern loved taking me for rides on Sunday afternoons. It was a fine time back then. Less neighbors to get in the way. Vern hated neighbors. Said there was (*Mimics VERNS rough voice*) “plenty of land to spread out on, why would they need to settle near us.” But they did. Made your Great Uncle mad. Life was much more simple back then.

ANNA: Things have really changed, with the war and everything.

AUNT: Men are fools when it comes to war. They run in without thinking. But this war is different, it’s brother fighting brother. Vern liked a good fight, but he says “this war is like fighting yourself. No one will come out a winner. “

ANNA: Aunt Ruby, what do you think will happen?

AUNT: I dare to think child, but I believe the war will be over soon. Our boys have been gallant, but they need to be with their families. Now, no more talk of war today. Today is a special day. Today is Ellie’s birthday.

ANNA: I know. I love birthdays.

AUNT: So do I child, as long as it’s not mine. Now Vern, he hated birthdays, said it “was just an excuse to get out of work and waste money.” But he never forgot my birthday though. And he’d better not. He knows he got a good thing when he got me. Now for me, well, my memory isn’t like a trap. I forgot a birthday or two of Vern’s. Never seemed to bother him though, just me.

ANNA: I am almost finished making a paper flower for Ellie for her birthday.

AUNT: I am sure Ellie will love it.

ANNA: Don’t mention it, I want it to be a surprise.

AUNT: My lips are sealed. But you needn’t worry about me, it’s your Uncle Vern you need to be worried about. He says “there’s no need to keep a secret. Just tell it like it is,” is what he always says. (*She laughs. ELLIE enters.*)

ELLIE: Good morning, Aunt Ruby.

AUNT: Good morning, Dear.

ELLIE: I thought I would make sure you are all right.

AUNT: And why wouldn’t I be? I may be old child, but I have been taking care of myself for over 60 years, don’t plan on changing that.

ELLIE: I know, but mother is afraid you might be imagining things again.

AUNT: Imagining things? She thinks I'm crazy doesn't she? Develop a few wrinkles and people are ready to send you to the crazy house.

ELLIE: Oh no, she's just worried about you. I'm sure it's been stressful for you to move to Chapel Hills and leave Tennessee.

AUNT: Tennessee has nothing for me now. We can't change what was, so we learn to live with what we have. Tennessee is in my past, best leave it there. *(With resentment.)* The thing that irks me is other people who won't mind their own business.

ELLIE: I'm sorry if I upset you. I will not bring it up again. *(She turns away.)*

AUNT: *(Seeing that she has upset ELLIE.)* I'm so sorry, Ellie. Please, forgive me. I'm just a crabby old woman.

ELLIE: I don't think you're crabby.

AUNT: Why not? Everyone else does, and they're right. Not that it bothers me much, never cared much what others think.

ANNA: Aunt Ruby and I were talking.

ELLIE: Is that so? And what were you talking about?

AUNT: Nosy aren't you? That's a little secret between Anna and myself. *(She winks at ANNA.)*

ANNA: It's a secret.

ELLIE: Oh well, I won't ask about it again. Oh. Anna, mother needs you in the kitchen.

ANNA: Okay. *(She exits. ELLIE turns away. Lost in thought.)*

AUNT: What a dear child that Anna is. If I could have had a child, I would have wanted one just like Anna. But the good Lord meant for Vern and I not to have any children. And maybe that was for the best, but we will never know, will we? *(Notices that ELLIE is not listening.)* Ellie? Ellie?

ELLIE: Oh, I'm sorry. What did you say?

AUNT: Nothing, dear.

ELLIE: Can I get you anything?

AUNT: No. I'm fine. But how are you? Vern tells me that you have been troubled lately.

ELLIE: Uncle Vern?

AUNT: Yes, your Great Uncle Vern. He is here with me. It's not like I have much control of his visits. He comes and goes as he pleases. Pretty much like he did when he was alive. *(ELLIE turns away again.)* One time he went out to work in the field and I didn't see him until the next day. He saw a deer and hunted it deep into the forest. I wasn't worried, well, not much. But when he . . . *(Notices that ELLIE is not listening again.)* Ellie? Ellie?

ELLIE: Yes?

AUNT: You seem very distant, child. Are you okay?

ELLIE: *(Halfhearted.)* I'm fine.

AUNT: I am quite sure you are not being truthful. And you know how I hate that. Tell me what's on your mind, dear.

ELLIE: It's the not knowing. I haven't heard from William in over five months. I need to know he is okay.

AUNT: You mustn't think the worse. Just keeps you up at night. You have told me that William has more wits than most lawyers.

ELLIE: He does.

AUNT: And that he is a very resourceful young man.

ELLIE: He is.

AUNT: Then I am sure he is just fine.

ELLIE: Then why hasn't he written?

AUNT: War often leaves little time to write. And you can't trust the post either. They lose more mail than they deliver, I'd suspect.

ELLIE: I hope you're right.

AUNT: Oh my, Ellie! Please, excuse my forgetfulness. I have not yet wished you a happy birthday. *(Goes to ELLIE and kisses her on the hand or cheek.)* Happy birthday, Ellie.

ELLIE: Thank you, Aunt Ruby.

AUNT: Even though your Uncle Vern hated birthday presents, as soon as I can leave the house, I will get you a lovely gift.

ELLIE: That is not necessary. There is so little available now. Do you know that flour is \$200 a barrel? A bushel of potatoes is now \$6. And yesterday Mr. Phillips sold his last turkey for \$60.

AUNT: *(Gasps.)* Land sakes, how are people supposed to survive?

ELLIE: Mother has been saving for months just to make a cake for me.

AUNT: Has she?

ELLIE: I feel rather guilty for having so much time and money go for a cake for me.

AUNT: Don't you fret. It is your birthday and we are going to have a party. We will have music and dancing. It will be a grand time. Vern and I will dance the night away. He may not have been a talker, but whoa could he dance. Even at our age, we can still dance until the sun rises.

ELLIE: How can we celebrate while this awful war is going on?

AUNT: Your birthday celebration will give us something to look forward to and that is what we need now, a reason to be happy. Now, you go and pick out your prettiest party dress for tonight.

ELLIE: But . . .

AUNT: You don't really want to argue with your great aunt, do you? *(ELLIE shakes her head.)* Then go and pick out that dress.

ELLIE: All right. *(She kisses AUNT on the cheek. AUNT turns away as ELLIE takes the coffee and exits.)*

AUNT: *(To VERN.)* Yes, Vern? *(She listens.)* Who's coming here? *(Listens.)* Well, that will cause quite a ruckus. *(AUNT exits.)*

Cullen staggers on stage. He is limping with a homemade crutch. He is not dressed in his Union uniform but is still in the same ripped pants so that his wound can be attended too. He carries his haversack. ANNA enters with the empty egg basket singing, "She'll Be Coming Around the Mountain." She gasps as she sees CULLEN.)

ANNA: Who are you?

CULLEN: Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you. Is this the Lane home?

ANNA: Yes, do you know my father?

CULLEN: No. Does Eleanor Lane live here?

ANNA: Yes, she is my sister. (*MOTHER enters.*)

MOTHER: Anna! Who is this?

ANNA: I don't know. He was here in the garden when I came back from the store.

MOTHER: State your business for coming here.

CULLEN: I have a message for Eleanor Lane.

MOTHER: A message for Ellie? What is the message?

CULLEN: I must only give it to her.

MOTHER: This is most unusual.

CULLEN: I understand ma'am, but I promised someone that I would only give it to her.

MOTHER: What is your name?

CULLEN: Cullen. Cullen Guthrie.

MOTHER: Are you a soldier in the army?

CULLEN: I was.

MOTHER: (*Beat. She studies CULLEN, wondering if he can be trusted.*) Anna, will you please go and bring Ellie?

ANNA: Yes, mother. (*She exits.*)

MOTHER: You are wounded.

CULLEN: Yes, my leg.

MOTHER: Please sit down and let me take a look at it. (*She looks.*) You should not be putting weight on this leg. Why has the army not given you better medical treatment?

CULLEN: They didn't treat me.

MOTHER: Why not?

CULLEN: I was a ways from the battlefield when a cannon blast did this to my leg. After a day of waiting, I realized that no one was coming.

MOTHER: No one came for you?

CULLEN: No.

MOTHER: You mean the army doesn't know where you are?

CULLEN: No.

MOTHER: Won't they consider you a deserter?

CULLEN: I guess they might consider me a deserter. As I look at it, they deserted me. Anyway, it would be some time before I would be able to fight again. I feel lucky that the blast didn't kill me.

MOTHER: The war has caused many deaths.

CULLEN: Yes, many on the battlefield, and many from disease. I have seen many soldiers lose arms and legs, some so broken up that they are not even treated and only left to suffer and die. I was not willing to bear the same fate. So I left.

MOTHER: How did you get here?

CULLEN: A slave came by scavenging the battlefield and helped me. He got me to the road and then a couple of hours later an older couple came by, escaping the war and offered me a ride. They told me in just one day over 3,000 soldiers lost their lives at a battle near Petersburg.

MOTHER: So many men? In just one day?

CULLEN: Who will not go home. *(Beat.)*

MOTHER: My daughter's beau is also in the army.

CULLEN: I am sure she is worried sick about him.

MOTHER: Yes, she is. She hasn't heard from him in some time.

CULLEN: It's hard to find time to write.

MOTHER: We hope that is the reason. I am hoping that a letter from him will come today. It's Ellie's birthday and that would be the finest birthday present I could think of.

CULLEN: *(Concerned.)* It's her birthday today?

MOTHER: Yes. I have been saving for over a month to make a cake for her.

CULLEN: Cake? I haven't had cake in, well, I can't remember the last time.

MOTHER: When have you eaten last?

CULLEN: It has been a while.

MOTHER: I will get you something to eat.

CULLEN: That's okay, ma'am, I know how scarce food is.

MOTHER: Nonsense, we share what we have. Please excuse me. *(She exits.)*

CULLEN: *(He pulls out the letter.)* Some birthday present. *(Moments later ELLIE enters.)*

ELLIE: Excuse me, sir. *(CULLEN quickly puts the letter away.)* Anna tells me you are here to see me?

CULLEN: *(Long Beat. Love at first sight?)* You are Eleanor Lane.

ELLIE: Yes.

CULLEN: Nice to see you.

ELLIE: Have we met before?

CULLEN: No. Your mother was just telling me about you. My name is Cullen Guthrie.

ELLIE: You have a message for me?

CULLEN: Yes.

ELLIE: *(At first hopeful.)* Is it about William? *(She rushes to him. Beat. She realizes that it might not be good news. She backs up and turns away.)* Please don't tell me he is dead. Not on this day.

CULLEN: No, ah . . . *(It is not easy for CULLEN to lie.)* . . . the message is from William's father.

ELLIE: Mr. Covington?

CULLEN: Yes. He wanted me to tell you that he hasn't received a letter from William and was wondering if you had.

ELLIE: *(Relieved.)* No, I haven't. I was so afraid you came with dreadful news.

CULLEN: I am sorry if I upset you.

ELLIE: No, it is just I haven't heard from William in some time.

CULLEN: You must miss him?

ELLIE: Yes, I do.

CULLEN: I can only imagine how worried you are.

ELLIE: Each day a bit more. *(MOTHER and ANNA enter with some cornbread.)*

MOTHER: Oh Ellie, I see you have met Mr. Guthrie?

ELLIE: Yes, he had a message from William's Father. Mr. Covington wanted to know if I had gotten a letter from William.

MOTHER: Oh. *(To CULLEN.)* Do you know Mr. Covington?

CULLEN: No. We met as I was passing by. I mentioned I was on my way into town so he asked me if I would deliver his message.

MOTHER: That was considerate of you. Now, please eat.

CULLEN: Thank you, ma'am. *(He eats quickly as he is hungry. They watch for a moment.)*

MOTHER: Where are you from?

CULLEN: *(Quickly, without thinking.)* West Virginia, a place called Beckley.

MOTHER: *(Very excited.)* Beckley? I know that place. I grew up in Charleston.

CULLEN: *(Excited.)* You're from Charleston?

MOTHER: Yes. *(Remembering. Cautiously.)* Wait. West Virginia? They broke off from Virginia. They are a Union State. For which side did you fight?

CULLEN: *(Beat.)* The North. *(ELLIE and MOTHER react, pulling ANNA back to protect her.)*

MOTHER: Anna, go get your father, quickly. *(ANNA rushes out.)*

CULLEN: *(Rising. Overlapping with MOTHER'S line.)* My fight is over now. I only want to move on. I am not here to hurt anyone. I promise. *(AUNT enters. Her voice stops all the action.)*

AUNT: Well, I see you have arrived, Mr. Guthrie.

CULLEN: (*Long beat. Stunned.*) Do I know you?

AUNT: No. But I knew you were coming.

MOTHER: Aunt Ruby, he is a Union soldier.

AUNT: Yes, I know.

ELLIE: You know? But he is the enemy.

AUNT: Pish posh! Enemies are on the battlefield; here he is just a man who needs our help.
(*To CULLEN.*) You will be staying, won't you, Mr. Guthrie?

ELLIE: But he is a Union soldier.

MOTHER: He cannot stay here!

AUNT: (*To MOTHER.*) Elizabeth, you have a nephew who is in the war, fighting on the Union side, I believe?

MOTHER: You know I do.

AUNT: Would you send him away, if he came for a visit?

MOTHER: He is family.

AUNT: Then think of Mr. Guthrie as family. Treat him as you would your nephew.

ELLIE: Aunt Ruby, he is not family and he must leave.

AUNT: We cannot send a wounded man away.

ELLIE: But he has probably killed many of our soldiers.

CULLEN: I have. And I have seen many of my comrades killed by yours. That's what war is.

ELLIE: Aunt Ruby, he fought against our boys. Maybe even against William.

MOTHER: Ellie is right.

AUNT: What is right, is to help a man in need. What is wrong, would be to turn him away.

ELLIE: When father arrives. He'll make him leave. (*She exits. MOTHER begins to exit.*)

AUNT: Elizabeth! (*MOTHER stops.*) Now that you know Mr. Guthrie is from the North, as you are from the North, what does your heart say?

MOTHER: (*Beat.*) It is hard to think of someone who is from where I grew up as an enemy.

AUNT: In this war there is a fine line between friend and enemy. Many families are divided by the battlefield, as is yours. (*TAD enters with a gun.*)

MOTHER: Tad, what are you doing?

TAD: (*To CULLEN.*) Anna says you're a Yankee?

CULLEN: (*Tense beat.*) I was. (*TAD raises the gun. CULLEN stands and puts his hands up.*)

AUNT: Put the gun away, young man!

TAD: Aunt Ruby, he's a blue-belly.

AUNT: He is not. He is a man who needs our help.

CULLEN: (*To TAD.*) You don't want shoot me.

TAD: Yes, I do. You're a Yankee.

CULLEN: Even if I still were, this is not the battlefield.

TAD: It doesn't matter.

CULLEN: Yes. It does. If you shoot me now, it's murder. So put the gun down before you do something you can't take back.

TAD: No!

MOTHER: Tad, please put the gun down.

CULLEN: (*Beat. He slowly lowers his hands.*) If you want me to die quickly shoot me here. (*He points to his heart.*) If you want me to die slowly (*he points to his gut*), shoot me here. Gut shots are the worst. What's it going to be? (*Long beat. CULLEN slowly hops to TAD until the barrel is at his chest. Beat. TAD looks him in the eye and can't shoot. CULLEN slowly takes the gun from him and disengages the trigger. TAD is upset at himself for not being able to shoot. Tense moment.*) Don't think yourself a coward. A boy would have shot me; it takes a man to stand down. (*CULLEN hands the gun back to TAD. TAD slowly takes it, puzzled. He holds it without pointing it at anyone. MOTHER crosses to TAD.*)

MOTHER: Tad, please go back to the store. Please! *(TAD is upset and rushes off. MOTHER stands looking out over the audience, wondering if she is doing the right thing. AUNT crosses to her.)*

AUNT: *(Aside, to MOTHER.)* Elizabeth?

MOTHER: I cannot send him away. There's something . . . when I look into his eyes.

AUNT: Yes, Vern saw it too.

MOTHER: Vern? Aunt Ruby, I wish you would please stop this. Vern's dead.

AUNT: I don't argue the fact. Who do you think told me Mr. Guthrie was coming? *(MOTHER is shocked. To CULLEN.)* Mr. Guthrie, why don't you follow me in to the kitchen and let me get you something to drink.

CULLEN: Yes, ma'am. *(They begin to exit.)*

AUNT: Call me Ruby, Mr. Guthrie. *(They exit. Moments later FATHER enters.)*

FATHER: Is it true what Anna tells me?

MOTHER: Yes, it's true.

FATHER: Run and get the authorities. I will . . .

MOTHER: No, there is no need.

FATHER: He has gone then?

MOTHER: No, he's with your Aunt.

FATHER: He's in the house? With Ellie?

MOTHER: Yes, but it is okay.

FATHER: How can it be okay?

MOTHER: She knew he was coming here.

FATHER: What are you talking about?

MOTHER: Your Aunt. She knew he was coming. She even knew his name before he told her.

FATHER: How could that be?

MOTHER: She said, Vern told her.

FATHER: And you believe her?

MOTHER: I don't know what to believe.

END OF PREVIEW