

THE MARCH TO KOSCIUSZKO

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Synopsis:

During the turbulent year of 1967, two fictionalized families struggle with an appropriate response to the upcoming fair housing march to Milwaukee's Kosciuszko Park. A southside family wants to hold on to their Polish neighborhood that has recently lost housing as a result of freeway construction, but sees race becoming the operative theme in the opposition. On the north side, a Black family that has also lost housing during freeway construction, questions whether they should risk participation in the potentially violent march. The events are narrated by General Thaddeus Kosciuszko whose monument symbolizes the Polish presence on the south side. As he speaks, the audience learns the *historic* Kosciuszko—not the one both sides conceptualize.

The play challenges many commonly held ideas about race, culture, and neighborhood.

[These scenes will be set up as follows. The stage area should be divided into two sections. One section will represent Kosciuszko Park, with the horse and rider (Kosciuszko), a bench, and a trash receptacle. The other section will represent the parlor of both families, with a table and chairs, an easy chair, an American flag, and ethnic décor items. Only the accessories will change with the Polish and African American families. When the scene is at the park, the lights will only shine on that section; when the scene is in the parlor, the lights will only shine on that section.]

ACT 1. A WEEK BEFORE THE MARCH

ACT 1, SCENE ONE (PARK)

[A man is atop a life-size rearing horse. Both are spray painted a weathered blue concrete color. As the scene opens, the man on the horse is holding a sword toward the sky, emulating the statue of General Kosciuszko at Kosciuszko Park. In front of him is a park bench and next to the bench is a waste container.]

NOTE:

WHENEVER THE GENERAL SPEAKS TO THE AUDIENCE HE DOES SO IN A HALTING WAY, WALKING ACROSS THE STAGE AND STOPPING TO THINK. HE IS VERY ANIMATED AS HE SPEAKS TO THE AUDIENCE. HE DOES NOT RUSH WHAT HE SAYS. HE CONSIDERS EVERY WORD AND STOPS TO RECALL AT VARIOUS POINTS

IN HIS MONOLOGUES.

GENERAL K:

[Saluting with his sword] *Czesc!* ["Hello" in Polish—pronounced "Chesht"].

[Dismounts horse, brushes off dust and feathers, and addresses audience] That meant "hello" in Polish. If you live around these parts, you might know who I am. If not, well, I'm General Thaddeus Kosciusko—the guy the south side Poles named this park after. You might have passed my monument from time to time. Today I look a little scruffy, but back in 1967, where we are now, I was still—well—pretty darned dashing.

[Pause and slight turn of head] Why 1967? Well let me tell you what happened that year. [Pauses to think about how he's going to proceed.] See, the year opened up like most in this neighborhood. The Polish families went to church once, twice, maybe three times a week—mostly over there, at that Basilica. Nice, eh? Back in January, the kids were skating on the pond in the park. But now it's summer and the families come here for picnics, swimming, games, and to honor me [raises eyebrows and points to his chest].

The Poles have been in this neighborhood for over 80 years. Oh, now and then some non-Pole would move in. It didn't happen that often, as this is a tightly packed little neighborhood. There's been a few American Indians, some Germans, some Irish. Lately we've had a couple of Mexican families. Like most ethnic groups in this town, Poles don't exactly welcome new-comers. But they eventually get used to them. Especially if they're Catholics. Especially if there's not too many of them [raises eyebrows]. [Wait for laughter.]

But things are about to change. Oh, in a big way. On the north side of town Negroes are organizing. Negroes—that's they term they still used back in 1967. The Negroes of the Youth Council of the NAACP have been marching a lot lately. What they're after is getting fair housing laws passed in Milwaukee so they can live anywhere they wish. Even here. [Pause.] So they decided it might be a really good idea to march to my park and give everyone the message that they're humans too.

Right down the street from my park [points to Bay View] is Bay View. There this be-speckled kid grew up and became a priest. His name was James Groppi. Oh, he wasn't Polish. He was Italian. There were a lot of Italians in Bay View. Well he figured that the right thing to do, as a man of God, was to work for equal rights for the Negroes. So he worked with them, helped them organize. He knew what I meant to this neighborhood. He knew about the

celebrations to honor the day of my birth, my death—just about anything. He and the Youth Council had heard that I was a Polish hero in the Revolutionary War, a personal friend of Thomas Jefferson, and that I founded West Point. Lots of power . . . white power.

But they didn't know the full story. Not even all the Poles knew the full story, and others just forgot. But I'll get back to that later.

[Remounts horse and raises his sword at the end of the sentence.] Now I have to prepare myself for the big day next week—the biggest march of the Youth Council's campaign—the march to Kosciuszko Park.

[LIGHTS GO OFF ON THE PARK SECTION AND GRADUALLY LIGHT UP IN THE PARLOR]

ACT 1, SCENE 2 (PARLOR)

[This is the home of Roman and Mary [Maria] Michalski. The scene is a parlor, with a table, chairs, and one comfortable chair. There are linens on the table and coffee cups. There will be some Polish symbolism: *wycinanki* art on an easel and Polish eggs in a basket on the table. There will be an American flag in the room. Henryk Piotrowski, the neighbor, and Roman are seated at the table as the scene opens. Mary is about to fill their coffee cups. Yellow highlighting is where there is speaker overlap, which signals where the next speaker starts to speak. UNDERLINED WORDS AND PHRASES MEAN ACTORS ARE TO EMPHASIZE THESE WORDS.]

HENRYK:

I tell you, Roman, it'll be mayhem. One week. That's it.

ROMAN:

Yeah, I saw a reporter outside asking people questions. He wanted to know what we Poles planned to do when the marchers came.

HENRYK:

I talked to him—told him how the Poles in this neighborhood built the Basilica with our own hands—told him we plan to keep this a Polish neighborhood. [Looks at Mary.] Well, except for a few Germans and Mexicans [he nods apologetically at Mary as she pours the last cup of coffee]

MARY:

[In monotone.] I'm Puerto Rican.

ROMAN:

[To Mary] Mary, sweetheart, could you put out some rolls for our neighbor?

MARY:

[Nods and leaves the room.]

ROMAN:

You don't have to worry about my wife, Henryk. I think she's more Polish than we are. You haven't tried her perogies.

HENRYK

[Chuckles.] Well, that's good. We have to stay united. It's our neighborhood. A few Mexicans move here, well okay. Negroes? No. That's the line we can't cross. That's a really different race. Races that different don't mix.

ROMAN:

I don't think that's the point. We have to tell people—tell those reporters—that we don't even have any place to put our own kids any more.

MARY:

[Returned with the rolls and sits down at the table to drink her coffee. As she speaks, Roman passes her the rolls and she takes one.] Roman's right, Henryk. We've got six kids. Only two live here and I don't know what will happen when Stephen gets married and tries to find a place. The other four are spread all over St. Francis, Cudahy and Franklin. There's no housing here at all. You can't find a thing since they tore up our neighborhood.

ROMAN:

I don't know why in the hell didn't we fight that freeway. What were we thinking?

[STEPHEN and GEORGE enter the room]

HENRYK:

We weren't organized. That's the . . . [He first notices the kids. He turns to address STEPHEN.] Stephen! So how's the college boy?

STEPHEN

Very well, thank you.

HENRYK:

[Turns to GEORGE] And George—all graduated now? [While the conversation goes on, MARY and ROMAN drink their coffee and refill their cups from the pot on the table.]

STEPHEN:

Jorge just got accepted at Marquette too.

HENRYK:

Hey, nice. . . You boys know what's coming, don't you?

GEORGE:

You mean the marches?

HENRYK:

In a week. You two can join my sons if you want. They'll be holding "Polish Power" signs on 16th Street. It's all being organized at Crazy Jim's Auto. If you talk to Ted, he'll get you signed up.

GEORGE AND STEPHEN:

[Mutter something unintelligible to each other.]

MARY:

I'm sure Stephen will want to participate.

HENRYK:

George, you can hold up some other sign, maybe a . . .

ROMAN:

[Seemingly uncomfortable with HENRYK'S plans] We really haven't talked this over yet. . .

HENRYK:

[Still looking at GEORGE] It's not as though the Mexicans are like the Negroes in any way. You know that don't you, George? You ain't no Negro. [ROMAN and MARY stop drinking their coffee, apparently surprised by what HENRYK is saying.]

STEPHEN: [Pleading] Mr. Piotrowski!

GEORGE:

[Uncomfortably mutters something]

STEPHEN:

[Raises his hands in frustration] Jorge, let's . . . [Motions with his head to leave]

MARY:

No, I brought out some rolls. Eat. Stephen, George, sit down . . . please.

STEPHEN:

I just brought Jorge here to show him some stuff . . .

MARY:

What stuff?

STEPHEN:

Just some stuff . . . [HENRYK sips his coffee. MARY and ROMAN look inquisitively at STEPHEN]

MARY:

Not that stuff in the boxes?

STEPHEN:

Okay, maybe that stuff. I just want to show him your pictures from Puerto Rico.

MARY:

[Angrily] Why? I left Puerto Rico when I was ten.

STEPHEN:

Well, just to . . . [lifts his hands]

MARY:

You're not going to go into those albums again?

STEPHEN:

Why can't I? It's family history.

MARY:

It's not family history. It's my family back in Puerto Rico. We have this family now. And this country.

STEPHEN:

But the photos?

MARY:

You leave those photos just where they are. You don't go into my personal things, and you surely do not show them to other people.

ROMAN:

You heard your mother. Take George to your room and study. We'll discuss this some other time.

STEPHEN

I just don't see why . . . [They begin to leave the room.]

MARY:

Common. [Pushes them out of the room, making sure they go to Stephen's room]

HENRYK AND ROMAN

[Sit silently for several seconds after MARY, STEPHAN, and GEORGE leave the room. They shake their heads, as if grappling for something to say.]

HENRYK:

Family secrets, eh?

ROMAN:

[Laughs] It's a woman's thing, Henryk.

HENRYK:

I get you.

ROMAN:

To be honest, I've never even looked in those boxes.

HENRYK:

[Sarcastically.] And I get you again, friend.

[LIGHTS SLOWLY GO OFF ON THE PARLOR SECTION AND TURN BACK ON WHEN THE PARLOR DÉCOR HAS BEEN CHANGED]

ACT 1, SCENE 3

[This is the home of Charles Waters. He lives in an upper flat with his wife (whom we never meet as she is always working second shift) and one teenage daughter, Brandy. Charles' mother, Lila, lives with them. Her sister, Maribel Brown, has come to visit. In the scene's opening, Lila and Maribel are seated in the parlor alone, reminiscing about old times in Bronzeville. The furniture will be the same as it was for the Michalski family, except the tablecloth will be different and there will be a throw on the easy chair. An African centerpiece, a teapot, and cups of tea for the ladies are on the table. The American flag and an African American painting on the easel will be displayed in their parlor also. The conversation is very animated and the ladies gently slap each other's wrists as they make points. There will be some overlapping dialogue also in this scene.]

LILA:

No, you're thinking of that inauguration tea.

MARIBEL:

No, no, not that. . .

LILA:

Yes, that one. When they inaugurated the Mayor of Bronzeville.

MARIBEL:

No, no. The one where poor Mr. Fitch raised his hand . . .

LILA:

[Explodes with laughter.] Oh no! No! When old Fitch tried to . . . [she is laughing so hard she can't complete her sentence].

MARIBEL:

When Reverend Johnson finished his speech . . . [Neither lady can finish a sentence as they are laughing so hard.]

LILA:

. . . And Mr. Fitch raises his hand and asks . . . [laughter]

MARIBEL

He asks . . . [laughter]

LILA:

He asks if God gets sun burned when . . . [laughter]

MARIBEL:

. . . When . . . when . . . [Explodes with laughter and can't finish the sentence]
They are interrupted by yelling in the next room, which startles them enough to stop talking and turn their heads to listen.]

CHARLES:

[Offstage] No! Absolutely not!

BRANDY:

[Offstage] Please, I have to do this! [CHARLES enters the room followed by his pleading daughter.]

CHARLES:

You heard me! [The teens continue to plead.]

MARIBEL:

What's going on?

LILA:

Yes, what's this about?

CHARLES:

Brandy, look at your grandmother [gestures toward LILA]. Tell her what you asked me.

BRANDY:

[Standing erect in front of LILA.] We want to join the Youth Council.

LILA:

Of the NAACP? Not to march?

BRANDY:

Just the march to Kosciuszko Park. Just one. It's for the Fair Housing law. Daddy, you know—you've been sending all those campaign contributions to Vel Phillips.

MARIBEL:

[Scoffing] Do you even know where this Kosciuszko Park is?

BRANDY:

[Nodding] I know.

LILA:

And what is your father telling you?

BRANDY:

That it's too dangerous.

LILA:

Then I have to abide by what your father says.

MARIBEL:

[Addressing the teens, sarcastically] So you wanna live among those Polacks?

CHARLES:

Maribel, please . . .

MARIBEL:

Those Polacks drain the blood from ducks, heat it up and call that soup.

CHARLES:

[Pleading with MARIBEL]. I think they really prefer being called Poles. Polack to them is like using the N word with us.

MARIBEL:

[Takes a large napkin off her lap and begins to tie it under her chin]. This is how Polacks dress . . . they call it this a babushka.

BRANDY

There's that word again. [Pause.] [Addressing LILA] Grandma, please try and change Father's mind.

CHARLES:

I've already told you my decision.

LILA:

And I'll have to back your father. For your safety. We've been watching these marchers and we've seen what people do to them.

BRANDY:

But no one's gotten seriously hurt.

CHARLES:

There's other issues.

BRANDY:

[Taking the large napkin/scarf from MARIBEL and holding it up] We just want the right to live in their neighborhood. We don't have to be just like them.

MARIBEL:

Oh sure, and what if they invite you to dinner?

BRANDY:

[Raising their arms in a questioning manner] Well . . .

MARIBEL:

Yes, pass me some of that delicious blood soup.

CHARLES:

And what if they invite you to their churches? They're Catholic.

BRANDY:

Well there's nothing wrong with visiting another church, to be neighborly.

MARIBEL

And things won't be too neighborly the first time you yell out "Praise Jesus" at their services.

LILA:

Maribel is right there. Those white churches are very different.

BRANDY:

We can stay by ourselves.

MARIBEL:

Oh yes, they'll love that. That's neighborly. Impose your own Apartheid. They did this to us, now we're getting even!

LILA:

My sister has a point.

BRANDY:

[Gesturing to show frustration] Auntie, grandma, you know that's not what we're saying. We want to march to do the right thing. You know it's wrong to deny us the right to live where we want. Heaven knows we are running out of places to go.

LILA and CHARLES

[At the same time, but not in unison.] Oh, we know that's wrong.

BRANDY:

Then why?

CHARLES:

It's too dangerous. I don't want rocks thrown at you. I don't want the police following you and the White reporters and . .

LILA:

And the racists.

MARIBEL:

[Gets up suddenly from her seat.] That's it. I'm leaving. You're missing the point. Lila, what did mama always tell us? Choose your neighbors before you choose your house. And I don't see none of this kind of thinking here. I'm going home. [She leaves.] [All sit and stand silently for several seconds after MARIBEL leaves. Brandy sits down.]

LILA:

Maribel is right. Mama used to say something else that was passed down from the ancestors. She said you don't plant your seed in the sea. If these marches work, then you'll see our people moving all over the city. But it won't accomplish nothing. It doesn't bring back community. Brandy is too young to remember the old neighborhood. Charles remembers. We had a real

community—all the right ingredients. Charles, before that Urban Renewal program and the freeway came, how many Negro businesses did we have on Walnut Street?

CHARLES:

[Head down, pauses] Hundreds . . . [slowly, shaking his head] and hundreds.

LILA:

And how many houses did they tear down?

CHARLES:

[Still shaking head.] Eight thousand.

LILA:

Eight thousand. And those weren't just houses. Those were the homes of our neighbors, our helpers. . . When our folks move into these new neighborhoods they won't even be able to find a barber that knows how to cut their hair. Do you see what I am saying?

BRANDY:

Grandma, you always talk about the old neighborhood, like everything was so perfect, but you forget. The only reason you were there was because they wouldn't let you live anywhere else. There were no fair housing laws. You had to move into those old decrepit buildings and . . .

LILA:

We built a community out of what we had. Who was it who said, "Cast down your bucket where you are"?

BRANDY:

Booker T.

LILA:

Yes.

BRANDY:

Then maybe the same thing can happen in the other neighborhoods.

CHARLES:

[Pausing] Brandy, this won't happen. Not now. It's like your grandmother, and my grandmother said—You can't plant a seed in a sea. The businesses from Bronzeville couldn't open anywhere else. They'd lost the neighborhood and their customers. The Whites wouldn't come.

LILA:

If we march for anything it should be to bring back the old neighborhood.

BRANDY:

[Sneering] Yeah, in the middle of I 43. [Pause.] And why didn't you protest then, grandma? [LILA and CHARLES drop their heads and remain silent. BRANDY pauses.] Why?

CHARLES:

[Dejected.] The past is the past, Brandy. It's gone.

BRANDY:

You don't have the hope, do you?

CHARLES:

Maybe not, Brandy. I'm not against the battle. I want to win. I just think the right decision for this family is to watch it play out on the television.

BRANDY:

But, please . . .

CHARLES:

I'm sorry, Brandy, but I'd like that to end this discussion. [The teens drop their heads, everyone is silent.]

[LIGHTS GO OFF ON THE PARLOR SECTION AND GRADUALLY LIGHT UP IN THE PARK SECTION]

ACT 2: THE DAY BEFORE THE MARCH

ACT 2, SCENE 1

[The scene returns to Kosciuszko Park, the horse with the general on it, the picnic bench in front, and the trash receptacle next to the bench.]

GENERAL K:

Well, it's time to get off of my high horse and be quite frank with you. [He dismounts the horse and moves to address the audience.]

I only have a minute. Shortly a group of Poles will be coming to honor me on the night before the fair housing march.

Oh, it's coming. It's coming tomorrow. And the papers are full of gloom and doom predictions about violence on both sides. My story is all over the pages—the park's namesake, General Thaddeus Kosciuszko, Polish hero of the Revolutionary War. [Stated sarcastically] Me, my charger stallion, and my trusty sword [blows on it and wipes it off, to shine it].

[He sits down on his bench, studying his sword.] [Leaning forward to the audience.] But I'm here to tell you the truth. Alas, the history books rarely tell my full story. In my native country of Poland we have a little prayer that goes: "God grant me a good sword and no use for it." So was my opinion back then.

But as a Pole living in a country that had been dominated for so long by other European powers, I was driven to fight injustice in any way I could. This drew me to the American colonies in 1776. There I read the great Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson. I cried when I read it, because I saw how this document could change the world. [Says the following in an oratory tone:] "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." [Pause to reflect.]

Ironic, isn't it? "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?" So here we are ready to meet a people whom the Americans kept in slavery and are today denying their right to live where they wish—to pursue, not just happiness, but downright necessity. [Looks to his right.]

Jest okropny! ["This is terrible"--Pronounced: ESdoKRUBny]. [Shakes his head.] Those Poles are already coming. I will have to talk to you tomorrow. In the meantime, I am going to send you back to the neighborhoods.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

[The scene returns to the parlor of Charles Waters. Maribel and Lila are setting the table for supper. During the entire scene, these two will be setting the table, except to stop to listen or speak. Some of the dialogue will overlap.]

CHARLES:

[Off stage, yelling] You did what?

BRANDY:

[Entering the parlor, speaking to his father who is offstage] I'm so sorry, Daddy. I just . . .

[CHARLES enters the parlor behind him, very angry.]

BRANDY:

This was just something I had to do. It won't happen again. Please understand, Daddy.

LILA:

What is going on here?

CHARLES:

She joined the Youth Council.

LILA and MARIBEL:

What!

CHARLES:

[Defeated, monotone voice.] She's going to march tomorrow.

LILA:

How could you disrespect your father like this?

MARIBEL

[Mutters something about spoiled kid.]

CHARLES:

Don't you know why your mother works nights? Why we both work?
Don't you know it's to buy us a house—like the one we had in
Bronzeville?

LILA:

And to send you to college? Don't act like you don't know.

CHARLES:

Did we do this so you could go off and get your skull cracked open by
someone?

BRANDY:

Daddy, please . . . Some day you'll know it was the right thing.

MARIBEL:

Ungrateful brat.

CHARLES:

[Defeated, he slowly sits down at the table and puts his head in his
hands.] Okay. Okay. You must do this. Okay. Then you know what
must happen?

BRANDY:

What?

CHARLES:

Then if you march, I march by your side.

LILA:

And your grandma too. And your aunt Maribel.

MARIBEL:

Whoa, Aunt Maribel is not part of this plan!

BRANDY:

[BRANDY slowly sits down at the table.] [Looking at his father] Daddy, you would do this?

CHARLES:

[Slowly nods.]

BRANDY:

And you too, Grandma? Do you know you have to walk all the way to Kosciuszko Park?

LILA:

I know. These old legs will make it.

MARIBEL:

[Under her breath, but loud enough to be heard slightly.] Kosciuszko – that was another damn Polack.

CHARLES:

[With suspicion in his voice] What's that you said, Maribel?

MARIBEL:

I said that this Kosciuszko was a big war monger.

BRANDY:

He fought in the Revolutionary War.

MARIBEL:

Revolutionary War. Ah, let me recall. Oh yes, that war between the English slaveholders and the American slaveholders.

BRANDY:

He was supposed to be an ally of Thomas Jefferson.

MARIBEL

And all them inalienable rights. [Mutters again under her breath—this time it can't be heard]

LILA:

Don't go there, Maribel.

BRANDY:

It's okay, Grandma. We understand. It's not like Thomas Jefferson did anything for us. [Pause.] In fact, my social studies teacher said that he even fathered kids with a slave, and all these descendants are still around. But no one will admit this.

CHARLES:

Well, I wouldn't be spreading that information too far. We are at least trying to be loyal Americans.

MARIBEL:

It's because you're still going to schools with Negro teachers that you even learn the truth. When you move into those White neighborhoods, all of this will get swept under the carpet. Like our mother used to say, "There's White lies and Black lies, except the Black lies are true."

LILA:

[Angrily] Mother never said that!

MARIBEL:

[Grumbles.]

BRANDY:

I just want you to know that it's not about moving to those White neighborhoods. I don't want to become White or give up our ways. It's about our rights.

CHARLES:

We know, daughter.

BRANDY:

If I could, I'd rebuild the businesses and the social clubs and all. I'd bring back Bronzeville.

LILA and MARIBEL

[Both shake their heads. The others look on, perplexed.]

BRANDY:

Did anyone try protesting back then? Try to stop it?

CHARLES:

[Defeated tone.] I think people talked about it, but no one . . . [voice drops off, shakes head]

LILA:

We didn't think we could change anything.

CHARLES:

Brandy, you weren't around before we had King and Malcolm and the other Civil Rights leaders. You just didn't think you could change what was. It's hard now, even. Hard to believe we can change laws. Harder to think we can change people.

LILA:

You didn't live through those times, Brandy. It wasn't even something you would consider thinking about.

BRANDY:

But you'll still go? You'll still march with me?

CHARLES and LILA :

We'll go.

MARIBEL:

And you're all fools. [Tosses her hands in the air.] You go on. Become their next pot of blood soup. See if I care.

[LIGHTS SLOWLY GO OUT ON PARLOR SECTOR AND SCENE CHANGES TO
THE POLISH PARLOR]

ACT 2, SCENE 3 (PARLOR)

[The Michalskis are having dinner in their parlor. ROMAN, MARY, and STEPHEN are seated at the table. Throughout the scene they will pass food helpings around the table and eat.]

STEPHEN:

So tell me Dad, how did you and mom meet?

ROMAN:

[Matter-of-fact, even tone.] It was during the War. The army had a dance for returning soldiers. Your mom was there.

STEPHEN:

Was that when you were a teacher?

MARY:

[Nods while chewing food.]

STEPHEN:

So you danced, and then who asked the other one for a date?

MARY:

[Wipes her mouth with a napkin.] Well back then it would have to be the man, Stephen.

STEPHEN:

Was your name Mary back then, or Maria?

MARY:

Maria. What really does this matter?

STEPHEN:

It doesn't. So you fell in love.

ROMAN and MARY

[Blushing and muttering something affectionate.]

STEPHEN:

[Looking at Mary.] Did it ever bother you, Mom, that Dad didn't have a college education, like you did?

ROMAN and MARY

[Looking at each other quizzically and raising their shoulders.]

MARY:

Why would you ask this?

STEPHEN:

Was it because he was White? That you were moving up by marrying . . .

ROMAN:

That will be enough, Stephen! Enough.

MARY:

This is about you rummaging through those boxes, isn't it?

STEPHEN:

I'm sorry. I just want to know everything about you. I want to know about Puerto Rico.

MARY:

I don't want you looking at those things! This is all the past. Old things should stay in the past. America is all about moving into the future.

STEPHEN:

Then why do we have all these ceremonies to honor the birth and death of General Kosciuszko?

ROMAN:

Well, it is a Polish neighborhood. And you are Polish.

STEPHEN:

[Under his breath] And Puerto Rican.

DOOR BELL RINGS

MARY:

I'll get it [she gets up and leaves the parlor to answer the door].

STEPHEN:

That's probably Jorge. We're going to the Park.

ROMAN:

You never hang out with your Polish friends anymore?

STEPHEN:

I do, but also with Jorge.

MARY returns with neighbor HENRYK.

MARY:

I told Henryk to join us for coffee. [She goes to the kitchen to get a coffee pot and a place setting for Henryk.]

HENRYK:

[Sits down.] Well, tomorrow's the big day.

ROMAN:

And how are things looking?

HENRYK:

Oh there will be a nice-sized counterdemonstration. Huge. These Negroes don't know what they're up against. They don't know what Polish power is all about.

ROMAN:

Really? [He continues drinking his coffee, seeming uninterested.]

HENRYK:

We'll be everywhere when they get off the viaduct.

STEPHEN:

Anyone marching with them on the other side?

HENRYK:

Well, yeah, that Indian family over on 7th. Their clan maybe.

ROMAN:

Any Poles? I haven't heard a word from the Hanoskis or the Rozgas.

HENRYK:

Well, you know . . . they're businessmen. Don't want to get mentioned in the papers.

MARY:

But what about that Margaret Rozga? Doesn't she volunteer for Groppi?

ROMAN:

Well, just because she volunteers for him doesn't mean . . .

HENRYK:

She's a member of the Youth Council. She's marching with them.

MARY and ROMAN:

[Chokes on their food.] Really?

STEPHEN:

Any others?

HENRYK:

Well, there's always those types, you know.

ROMAN:

So you're saying that there might be Poles on two sides of this march?

HENRYK:

Well, maybe a handful on the other side . . .

DOORBELL RINGS

STEPHEN:

That'll be Jorge. I'll get it. [Leaves the room.]

HENRYK:

The big thing is this: You'll be with us, right?

MARY:

We'll be at the Park.

HENRYK:

Carrying signs?

ROMAN:

[Grimaces] Probably not.

HENRYK:

I've got a couple of GOD IS WHITE signs left.

MARY and ROMAN:

[Shakes heads and gestures in disgust.] Ugh.

ROMAN:

That's way over the top. Way over. This is going to make us all look like the worst racists . . .

HENRYK:

It's not about every race, Roman. We just have to draw the line somewhere.

JORGE and STEPHEN enter the room.

MARY:

George, sit down. I'll get you a soda.

GEORGE:

Thank you, Mrs. Michalski. [He sits while MARY goes to get a soda.]

HENRYK:

[Turns to George.] George, we're having a discussion here. Now when exactly did your family move in?

GEORGE:

1957. A year after the Figueros.

HENRYK:

And did you like it here?

GEORGE:

I guess . . .

HENRYK:

And people treated you with respect when you moved here?

GEORGE:

I guess . . .

HENRYK:

Even though you were Mexicans?

GEORGE:

We told people we were Bay View Italians. The Figueroas did too. At least for the first few years.

HENRYK:

[Slight gasp, then turns immediately to ROMAN.] So, I can't talk you into bringing any of our placards?

ROMAN:

I think maybe all this talk about race is not the point here.

STEPHEN:

[Looks at HENRYK] Mr. Piotrowski, may I ask you a question?

HENRYK:

[Nods]

STEPHEN:

What do you think race is, actually?

HENRYK:

Well, it's in your blood. It's what makes people look and act different. It's like the Negroes with the black skin and the big lips and the way they talk. When your race is that different, you should stay apart.

STEPHEN:

But I remember, when I was in grade school. I remember that you and some others were talking about the O'Malleys, who were Irish. You said they were another race, but they looked like everyone else in the neighborhood. And before them, there was the . . .

ROMAN:

Enough, Stephen. Show respect. [Turns to HENRYK.] Henryk, I think the point is this. I don't want this to be about race—whatever in tarnation that means. This is about keeping our families together. When they built that damn freeway and we lost all those houses and lots, there was no place for our kids to go and live. My kids had to move to Cudahy and St. Francis, and Franklin. If we can't keep our families

together in this neighborhood then maybe we'll eventually have to move out altogether. We need to hang on to whatever housing we've got.

STEPHEN:

Dad, you do know that the freeway took out their homes too. And it took out their entire business district.

ROMAN:

[Seems confused, but then remembers.] Their? Oh, yes, the Negroes. I remember. Yes, they did build the freeway there too . . .

GEORGE:

And they had Urban Renewal too. That project took out thousands of their homes.

MARY and ROMAN

[Look at each other, frowning.]

MARY:

Thousands . . . that's like an entire mile . . .

ROMAN:

Is this true?

GEORGE and STEPHEN

[Nod.] Hmm Mmm.

HENRYK:

We're losing the point here. Okay, let us say this is not about race. It's about keeping families together—our Polish families together. We should have the right to have control over the same neighborhood we built. We should have the right to keep this a Polish neighborhood.

MARY:

[Says unconvincingly] I know.

HENRYK:

I mean, the center of the neighborhood is the park, named after General Kosciuszko. How can this be anything other than a Polish neighborhood?

MARY:

It would seem so.

ROMAN:

[Dejected tone.] I don't know . . .

HENRYK:

Think of the General.

[LIGHTS SLOWLY GO OFF ON PARLOR. A FEW SECONDS PASS AND THE LIGHTS GO ON IN THE PARK SECTION OF THE STAGE]

INTERMISSION

AS THE INTERMISSION COMES TO A CLOSE, A NEWSREEL OF THE ACTUAL MARCHES APPEARS ON A SCREEN WITH A SOUND TRACK.

ACT 3, MARCH

ACT 3, SCENE 1 (PARLOR SIDE)

[The parlor side of the stage has been cleared. On this side is a large screen and on the screen will be black and white newsreels of the march on 16th Street and on Lincoln. Accompanying the newsreels will be a soundtrack of people yelling, as some of the newsreel is without sound. On the newsreel you will see the marchers moving forward without incident with Groppi, and you will see jeering counter-protestors with signs that read “White Power” and “God is White.” This will last about seven minutes. As the newsreels come to a close, they will fade out, but the crowd soundtrack will continue as the scene transitions to the park.]

ACT 3, SCENE 2 (PARK)

[The lights dim on the Parlor side of the stage and begin to light up on the Park side. The soundtrack is gradually lowered until it is about half its volume. The General is on his horse as the scene opens.]

GENERAL K:

[Leans forward looking down Lincoln Avenue, which would be to his right.] Ah yes, they are marching down Lincoln right now. I might have time to finish my story. [He dismounts his horse and comes to address the audience.]

When we left off, I was telling you how I’d broken down and cried when I first read the Declaration of Independence. [Pauses and sighs.] Ah yes. So impressed was I with these words that I sought out Thomas Jefferson during the War and made him my personal friend. I thought—no doubt others thought—that these inalienable rights would shortly extend to American Indians and African slaves. And we waited . . . [pauses for some time, shaking his head]. and waited.

Well, sometime after the War ended I returned to my own country and tried to apply this doctrine at home. I fought for independence from the occupying European forces. I fought for inalienable rights for the serfs and Jews who had been oppressed by my own countrymen. And how

were they oppressed? They were denied the right to own their own property. Not all that far removed from what we're seeing right now, right here. But alas, my battles in Poland failed—at least during my lifetime.

So, in 1797 I made my last trip to America in hopes of having some impact on the oppressed. My good friend, Tom Jefferson, welcomed my return royally. I made a home in Philadelphia for a few years. All that time I spoke out whenever I had the chance for rights of the Indians and the abolition of slavery. It didn't seem like my friend Tom, and his crowd, were working very hard on these issues. When I finally left America, I decided to leave my Revolutionary War pay--\$15,000, a good chunk of dough for the times—to a worthy cause. That worthy cause was freeing a group of slaves. Whose slaves, you might wonder. Well, let's take a look. [Goes into his vest pocket for a sheet of paper.] Yes, here it is. Here is the final version of my will:

I do hereby declare and direct that should I make no other testamentary disposition of my property in the United States I hereby authorize my friend Thomas Jefferson to employ the whole thereof in purchasing Negroes from among his own or any others.

Yes, my friend Tom agreed to execute this will. He agreed to use my money to purchase freedom for his slaves and hopefully more. Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, would finally free his slaves.

And how did this go down? Well as things turned out, my good friend never honored my will. Rather, he withdrew from his pact in a Virginia court in Charlottesville a few years after my death. Ah . . . he said he was too old and tired to carry out this request, and his slaves remained—well—slaves.

So my friends, you see in all of this the absurdity of my situation. I failed in so many campaigns I led for the oppressed back then. And now there's today. What irony. The Poles see me as their agent, and the marchers see me as the enemy—as a defender of white power.

They are getting closer. They'll go to the picnic area just to my left [points] and probably won't stay but a few minutes. They are keeping their word—the Youth Council and Groppi. They never lifted a finger in violence and they won't linger long in the park. And the counter-demonstrators kept their word as well—they pounded them with insults

and rocks and bricks . . . and spit. [Shakes his head.] It will all play out on the 10 o'clock news.

[Stops to think.] But I do think the marchers will win. Right doesn't always win out—[smirks] tell me about it—but the marchers have never wavered. I do believe they will get their bill passed and be able to live wherever they want. Legally speaking, I believe that . . . [he's startled] . . . Oh, they're here. I've got to run. [He quickly remounts his horse and remains still.]

ACT 3, SCENE 3 (PARK)

[HENRYK and GAREK enter the Park area and are looking to their left. They are carrying "Polish Power" and "God is White" signs. The soundtrack slowly increases in volume, signifying that the marchers and counterdemonstrators are arriving.]

HENRYK:

We give 'em five minutes and they are outa here!

GAREK:

[Laughing] And then they can face the gang at Crazy Jim's Auto on the way home again.

HENRYK:

[Laughing] Did you see the interview my son gave to Channel 4?

GAREK:

Oh, that was the greatest.

GAREK:

This will end all those Polish jokes in Milwaukee.

HENRYK:

Hey, they're here.

HENRYK and GAREK:

[All three hold up their “Polish Power” signs and start to chant, all looking to their left] Polish Power! Polish Power! Southside Polish Power!! Marchers go home!!

HENRYK:

Four more minutes. Then we close in.

GAREK:

Oh, oh, Groppi’s getting up on the bench to give a speech.

HENRYK:

He’s not allowed. The park official will stop it.

GROPPI [off stage]:

Gather around! Gather.

GAREK:

[Waving the sign.] Go home you nigger priest! You’ve had your day!

HENRYK:

[Waving sign.] Go back to your ghetto, you black apes!

PARK OFFICIAL [Off stage]:

Sir: you only have a picnic permit from the Park! You cannot make speeches!

GROPPI [Off stage]:

We want our picnic area. When you enforce the law on them, you can enforce it on us! Gather around for a prayer!

HENRYK, GAREK:

[Change signs to “God is White.”]

HENRYK:

[Waiving the sign] Hey you! Who do you think you're praying to?

GROPPI [Off stage]:

[The crowd soundtrack become softer.] Our father, who art in Heaven . . .
. . . Hallowed be . . . [prayer fades with only the sound of some "amens" on
the sound track]

GEREK:

[Waiving the sign and pointing to it] Yeah, Groppi. Look at this!

GROPPI [Off stage]:

. . . thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in
heaven. . .

HENRYK, GAREK:

[All three continue with their barbs and insults and sign waving during
the prayer.]

GROPPI [Off stage]:

Give us this day our daily bread, on earth as it is in heaven, and lead us
not into temptation. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the
glory, forever and ever.

VOICES [Offstage: That have been pre-recorded]

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

HENRYK:

Okay. Let's escort them off our grounds!!!

HENRYK, GAREK:

[Picking up all their signs] Farewell boys! [They march off to their left.]

ACT 3, SCENE 4

[The scene does not change. The General remains still on his horse, but the light is only on the bench and the trash can at the front of the set. A few seconds go by. The soft crowd noise can still be heard in the background.]

[ROMAN, STEPHEN, AND MARY WALK INTO THE SCENE. THEY SIT DOWN ON THE BENCH, WITH STEPHEN IN THE MIDDLE. THEY APPEAR EXHAUSTED AND SPEAK IN AN OUT-OF-BREATH, TIRED FASHION. THE DIALOGUE AMONG THE MICHALSKI FAMILY MEMBERS WILL BE VERY MONOTONE, EXPRESSING THEIR EXHAUSTION.]

MARY:

Well, I guess they'll be leaving.

ROMAN and STEPHEN:

[Slowly nod in unison]

STEPHEN:

The marchers were peaceful, like they said.

ROMAN:

They were.

STEPHEN:

Henryk's group was horrible.

MARY:

They were.

ROMAN:

I think we agree that we need to distance ourselves a little.

MARY:

Hmm Mmm. [Pause.] The Negroes are going to win, aren't they?

ROMAN:

Hmm Mmm.

STEPHEN:

Hmm Mmm.

MARY:

Probably.

ROMAN:

They need to live somewhere.

STEPHEN:

I know.

MARY:

[Shakes her head slowly.]

STEPHEN:

You think they're right, don't you Dad?

ROMAN:

[Still in monotone.] I think things should be fair, if that's what you mean.

MARY:

[Slowly shakes her head again.]

ROMAN:

But I just don't know what's going to become of our neighborhood—how we can hold our families together.

STEPHEN:

[Sighs.] I don't know either.

MARY:

I just can't believe the Grabowskis were there with the marchers.

ROMAN:

And the Figueroas.

MARY:

And George! What was George doing with the marchers?

STEPHEN

Mom, I don't know what you expected.

ROMAN:

Your mother thought he was like us.

STEPHEN:

If you mean Polish . . .

MARY:

Just like us, Stephen!

STEPHEN:

What part of us, Mom?

MARY:

Just let it go, Stephen.

STEPHEN:

I can't, Mom. Just like us means more than one thing.

MARY:

Not those pictures again!

[ALL THREE JUST SIT SILENTLY FOR A FEW SECONDS]

STEPHEN:

Why can't I just ask questions?

MARY:

There are no questions to ask.

ROMAN:

Let's just go home.

STEPHEN:

Dad, I love being Polish. I love everything about being Polish, But, Mom, I have your blood just like I have Dad's.

MARY:

That's it. The subject is closed.

ROMAN:

You heard your mother. We're leaving.

MARY:

And when we get home, you will go into the basement and get those albums, Stephen. You will take them right to this trash [points] and get them out of our life. [She stands up and motions the others to stand]

ROMAN:

Look, let's go. Some Negroes are heading over here.

THE MICHALSKIS SLOWLY GET UP AND LEAVE.

CHARLES AND LILA ENTER THE SCENE. LILA IS LIMPING AND CHARLES IS HOLDING HER UP.

CHARLES:

Here, Mother. Just sit. We'll wait this out until the busses start running again. [CHARLES helps her sit down and he then joins her.]

LILA:

But you should go back with Brandy.

CHARLES:

In a minute. Let's catch our breath. [They both stare straight ahead for several seconds.]

LILA:

I'm glad we marched.

CHARLES:

Me too.

LILA:

And Brandy didn't get hurt.

CHARLES:

No.

LILA:

And we will win.

CHARLES:

Do you think so, Mother?

LILA:

Don't you?

CHARLES:

I do. I'm not sure why.

LILA:

Hope is different here. It's easier to hope when you're fighting for something, I guess.

CHARLES:

Maybe.

LILA:

Go back now. I'll be fine. These Poles won't beat up an old lady.

CHARLES:

Are you sure?

LILA:

I'm sure. They have their grandmas too. I heard they take good care of 'em.

CHARLES:

[Kisses his mother on her head and leaves.]

SEVERAL SECONDS PASS AS LILA LOOKS STRAIGHT AHEAD and straightens her skirt. STEPHEN ENTERS THE SCENE WITH TWO PHOTO ALBUMS. HE TAKES THEM TO THE TRASH RECEPTACLE AND PUTS THEM IN.

LILA:

What did you just do?

STEPHEN:

[Seemingly surprised by her question.] Nothing.

LILA:

Nothing? Were those photo albums?

STEPHEN:

Yes, Ma'am.

LILA:

With pictures inside?

STEPHEN:

Yes, Ma'am.

LILA:

Family stuff?

STEPHEN:

Yes ma'am. But my mom wanted them thrown out.

LILA:

I'm shocked. Young man, you take those albums out of the trash right now!

STEPHEN:

What?

LILA:

You heard me, young man. Bring them here!

STEPHEN:

[Slowly and cautiously, he takes the albums from the trash and hands them to her.] My mother wanted me to throw them away.

LILA:

[Begins to page very slowly through the album.] Oh? Oh, I do see.

STEPHEN:

[Standing over her, watching her look through the album.] My mother is Puerto Rican. The pictures are from Puerto Rico.

LILA:

I can see that, son. My mother was Puerto Rican too.

STEPHEN:

[Looks stunned.] Seriously?

LILA:

Sit down.

STEPHEN:

[Looks around to see who might be watching, and doesn't sit]

LILA:

[Pats the seat next to her.] Now you sit down right here. Don't mind who is looking this way.

STEPHEN:

I wasn't looking . . . well . . . [He sits slowly at the far end of the bench.]

LILA:

Well have your way. [A moment of silence.] You know about Puerto Ricans, don't you? You know that most of them are descendants of the slaves that worked those sugar plantations. You know that don't you?

STEPHEN:

I sort of know this.

LILA:

But it's the pictures that got you all upset.

STEPHEN:

[Drops his head]

LILA:

You didn't think of yourself as being a Negro boy. Now did you?

STEPHEN:

I . . . uh . . . I don't know what to think.

LILA:

But you see these pictures and see that some of your grandparents look kinda like me, right?

STEPHEN:

[Nods, with his head still down.] But I live here, in this neighborhood. I'm not supposed to be a Negro.

LILA:

And your mamma?

STEPHEN:

She doesn't talk about it.

LILA:

You can't judge your mamma for wanting to hide this. It's other people, young man, not her.

STEPHEN:

I know.

LILA:

This race thing is a bunch of phooey. You know that, don't you?

STEPHEN:

I've been wondering what race really is.

LILA:

Your appearance don't have nothing to do with who you are, except that people might treat you different. It's the culture that makes you different. You been raised in the Polish culture?

STEPHEN:

Yes. But is it wrong to want to know about my mother's culture?

LILA:

No, it sure ain't.

STEPHEN:

I want to know what I could have been, if . . .

LILA:

If your mother hadn't married your father?

STEPHEN:

Yes. I'd even like to know about Negro culture . . .

LILA:

[Lights begin to slowly dim on this set, but only slightly.] Well, we got lots of that. We've got lots of customs from the South. And my mother's family kept some African traditions in Puerto Rico. [Continues paging

through the albums.] Well, I'll be. [She holds up the album to show STEPHEN a photo.] See this? Do you know what this is?

STEPHEN:

No.

LILA:

This is the Puerto Rican *fiesta de los Santos Inocentes*. You can see in Milwaukee right after Christmas. It's when Herod's soldiers were sent to kill the first-born boys. [Points to the picture.] See how the kids are dressed?

STEPHEN:

Like Roman soldiers?

LILA:

We used to do this with my mama. . . [Laughing.] This is probably St. John the Baptist night. This really brings back memories. Do you want to know what they're doing?

STEPHEN:

[Smiling. He moves in closer to LILA.] Yes. I would love that. [Music begins to play—something that would appropriately close a play]

LILA:

[Tells the story like a fairy tale, with intrigue. As she tells it, her voice gets softer and softer, the music louder, and the lights get dimmer and dimmer.] Well, see, right at midnight on June 23, the birthday of John the Baptist, the people go to the beach. See this here? [Points to photo.]

STEPHEN:

[Leaning in, looking]. But they are facing away.

LILA:

[Her voice gets softer and softer, until both people just freeze in the scene] They are indeed. The waters this night have special powers and can grant your wishes. So the people, they walk backward into the

ocean at the stroke of midnight. They do this three times and then . . .
Both freeze.]

GENERAL K:

[Kosciuszko gets off his horse and slowly walks to the front of the stage, in front of the frozen actors on the bench.] And so it would be. At long last the Negroes won their battle and got a fair housing law passed. And what happened to the neighborhood? . . . Well, the Poles are still here, but in smaller numbers. [Long pause.] Today there are people of 110 nations living here—that looks like change.

[Pause.] And hatred of difference? Well, laws don't change people's attitudes. That kind of change comes very slowly. It didn't happen in my lifetime and it didn't happen hundreds of years later. There's still some hatred. There are still those who think all people should be the same. [Pause.] Like them.

But I watch. One day a young woman of one background sits down here [points to bench] next to a woman of a different background. They talk. They ask questions. They come to an understanding. It happens like that, one person at a time . . .

[He walks back to his horse.] It goes on right at this spot. In Kosciuszko Park . . . where I live—where I was destined to live. I'll be here for the future. I will watch . . . and watch. [Lights go out as he returns to his horse.]

END

THE CAST SLOWLY REASSEMBLES AND COMES OUT. THE LIGHTS ALL COME ON. THE CAST IS HOLDING HANDS, FOR A CURTAIN CALL.