zaar once. And I'm fond of her.
MEG. All right; I believe you. Goodbye.
BARNETTE. Goodbye. (*Barnette exits.*)
MEG. Babe! Babe, come down here! Babe! (*Babe comes hurrying down the stairs.*)
BABE. What? What is it? I called about the cake—
MEG. What did Zackery do to you?
BABE. They can't have it for today.
MEG. Did he hurt you? Did he? Did he do that?
BABE. Oh, Meg, please—
MEG. Did he? Goddamnit, Babe—
BABE. Yes, he did.
MEG. Why? Why?
BABE. I don't know! He started hating me, 'cause I couldn't laugh at his jokes. I just started finding it impossible to laugh at his jokes the way I used to. And then the sound of his voice got to where it tired me out awful bad to hear it. I'd fall asleep just listening to him at the dinner table. He'd say, "Hand me some of that gravy!" Or, "This roast beef is too damn bloody." And suddenly I'd be out cold like a light.
MEG. Oh, Babe. Babe, this is very important. I want you to sit down here and tell me what all happened right before you shot Zackery. That's right, just sit down and tell me.
BABE. (*After a pause.*) I told you I can't tell you on account of I'm protecting someone.
MEG. But Babe, you've just got to talk to someone about all this. You just do.
BABE. Why?
MEG. Because it's a human need. To talk about our lives. It's an important human need.
BABE. Oh. Well, I do feel like I want to talk to someone. I do.
MEG. Then talk to me; please.
BABE. (*A decision.*) All right. (*After thinking a minute.*) I don't know where to start.
MEG. Just start at the beginning. Just there at the beginning.
BABE. (*After a moment.*) Well, do you remember Willie Jay? (*Meg shakes her head.*) Cora's youngest boy?

MEG. Oh, yeah, that little kid we used to pay a nickel to, to run down to the drugstore and bring us back a cherry Coke.
BABE. Right. Well, Cora irons at my place on Wednesdays now, and she just happened to mention that Willie Jay'd picked up this old stray dog and that he'd gotten real fond of him. But now they couldn't afford to feed him anymore, so she was gonna have to tell Willie Jay to set him loose in the woods.
MEG. (*Trying to be patient.*) Uh huh.
BABE. Well, I said I liked dogs and if he wanted to bring the dog over here, I'd take care of him. You see, I was alone by myself most of the time 'cause the senate was in session, and Zackery was up in Jackson.
MEG. Uh huh. (*Meg reaches for Lenny's box of birthday candy. She takes little nibbles out of each piece, throughout the rest of the scene.*)
BABE. So the next day, Willie Jay brings over this skinny, old dog with these little crossed-eyes. Well, I asked Willie Jay what his name was, and he said they called him Dog. Well, I liked the name; so I thought I'd keep it.
MEG. (*Getting up.*) Uh huh. I'm listening. I'm just gonna get me a glass of cold water; do you want one?
BABE. Okay.
MEG. So you kept the name—Dog.
BABE. Yeah. Anyway, when Willie Jay was leaving he gave Dog a hug and said, "Goodbye, Dog. You're a fine ole dog." Well, I felt something for him, so I told Willie Jay he could come back and visit with Dog any time he wanted, and his face just kinda lit right up.
MEG. (*Offering the candy.*) Candy—
BABE. No thanks. Anyhow, time goes on and Willie Jay keeps coming over and over. And we talk about Dog and how fat he's getting and then, well, you know, things start up.
MEG. No, I don't know. What things start up?
BABE. Well, things start up. Like sex. Like that.
MEG. Babe, wait a minute—Willie Jay's a boy. A small boy, about this tall. He's about this tall!
BABE. No! Oh, no! He's taller now! He's fifteen now. When you knew him he was only about seven or eight.
MEG. But, even so—fifteen. And he's a black boy; a colored

boy; a Negro.

BABE. (*Flustered.*) Well, I realize that, Meg. Why do you think I'm so worried about his getting public exposure? I don't want to ruin his reputation!

MEG. I'm amazed, Babe. I'm really, completely amazed. I didn't even know you were a liberal.

BABE. Well, I'm not! I'm not a liberal! I'm a democratic! I was just lonely! I was so lonely. And he was good. Oh, he was so, so good. I'd never had it that good. We'd always go out into the garage and—

MEG. It's okay. I've got the picture; I've got the picture! Now, let's just get back to the story. To yesterday, when you shot Zackery.

BABE. All right, then. Let's see... Willie Jay was over. And it was after we'd—

MEG. Yeah! Yeah.

BABE. And we were just standing around on the back porch playing with Dog. Well, suddenly, Zackery comes from around the side of the house. And he startled me 'cause he's supposed to be away at the office, and there he is coming from 'round the side of the house. Anyway, he says to Willie Jay, "Hey, boy, what are you doing back here?" And I said, "He's not doing anything. You just go on home, Willie Jay! You just run right on home." Well, before he can move, Zackery comes up and knocks him once right across the face and then shoves him down the porch steps, causing him to skin up his elbow real bad on that hard concrete. Then he says, "Don't you ever come around here again, or I'll have them cut out your gizzard!" Well, Willie Jay starts crying, these tears come streaming down his face, then he gets up real quick and runs away with Dog following off after him. After that, I don't remember much too clearly; let's see... I went on into the living room, and I went right up to the davenport and opened the drawer where we keep the burglar gun... I took it out. Then I—I brought it up to my ear. That's right. I put it right inside my ear. Why, I was gonna shoot off my own head! That's what I was gonna do. Then I heard the back door slamming and suddenly, for some reason, I thought about mama... how she'd hung herself. And here I was about ready to shoot myself. Then I realized—that's

right I realized how I didn't want to kill myself! And she—she probably didn't want to kill herself. She wanted to kill him, and I wanted to kill him, too. I wanted to kill Zackery, not myself 'Cause I—I wanted to live! So I waited for him to come on into the living room. Then I held out the gun, and I pulled the trigger. aiming for his heart, but getting him in the stomach. (*After a pause.*) It's funny that I really did that.

MEG. It's a good thing that you did. It's a damn good thing that you did.

BABE. It was.

MEG. Please, Babe, talk to Barnette Lloyd. Just talk to him and see if he can help.

BABE. But how about Willie Jay?

MEG. (*Starting towards the phone.*) Oh, he'll be all right. You just talk to that lawyer like you did to me. (*Looking at the number on the card, she begins dialing.*) See, 'cause he's gonna be on your side.

BABE. No! Stop, Meg, stop! Don't call him up! Please don't call him up! You can't! It's too awful. (*She runs over and jerks the bottom half of the phone away from Meg. Meg stands, holding the receiver.*)

MEG. Babe! (*Babe slams her half of the phone into the refrigerator.*)

BABE. I just can't tell some stranger all about my personal life. I just can't.

MEG. Well, hell, Babe; you're the one who said you wanted to live.

BABE. That's right. I did. (*She takes the phone out of the refrigerator and hands it to Meg.*) Here's the other part of the phone. (*Babe moves to sit at the kitchen table. Meg takes the phone back to the counter. Babe, as she fishes a lemon out of her glass and begins sucking on it.*) Meg.

MEG. What?

BABE. I called the bakery. They're gonna have Lenny's cake ready first thing tomorrow morning. That's the earliest they can get it.

MEG. All right.

BABE. I told them to write on it, "Happy Birthday Lenny—A

Day Late." That sound okay?

MEG. (*At the phone.*) It sounds nice.

BABE. I ordered up the very largest size cake they have. I told them chocolate cake with white icing and red trim. Think she'll like that?

MEG. (*Dialing on the phone.*) Yeah, I'm sure she will. She'll like it.

BABE. I'm hoping.

BLACKOUT

END OF ACT I