

FIRE ON THE RIVER

SCENE: The interior of a truck stop café somewhere along route 40 in the Midwest around 1955. It is early in the morning. There is an entrance. A large window looking out on the parking lot. There is a long counter, stage right. Behind it is a door that leads to the kitchen and rooms in the back. Stage center and left are scattered tables and chairs. There has been an almost successful effort to make the place look homey.

CAROLINE enters from the back. She is a pretty girl of 18. As she starts to put out sugar bowls, etc, a sound from outside draws her attention. She looks out the window, draws back and ducks behind the counter. The door opens and JAKE SERGIS enters. He is large and unkempt. He goes to the counter and begins beating on the table top with a napkin holder. DORIS appears from the back. She slams down the tray she is carrying.

DORIS

What the hell is your problem? Put that damn thing down and act like a human being!

JAKE

Where's Caroline? I want to talk to my daughter, goddammit! I know she's here.

DORIS

You don't know anything of the sort. She ain't here, and even if she was, she'd be working for me and wouldn't have time to listen to you. Now git!

JAKE

Where is she then? She ain't over at the boarding house.

DORIS

I told you I don't know. Now, you clear on out of here.

JAKE

(Leans over the counter and shouts toward back room.)

Caroline! You get your ass on out here! Caroline!

DORIS

Jake, the girl won't talk to you on the street unless she has to. What makes you think she's gonna come when you call her like that?

JAKE

It ain't right a girl treating her Daddy this way.

DORIS

All you ever done was bring that poor girl shame and grief since the day she was born. Just leave her the hell alone, why don't you?

JAKE

It ain't for me. It's her mother. Her mother wants to see her.

DORIS

Helen's too far gone to know what time of day it is, Jake. Don't try pulling that on me. Caroline said the last time she went out there, Helen wouldn't come out of the woods to talk to her. Why don't you just get on out of here. I got more than enough trouble without listening to you and your nonsense.

JAKE

Will you tell her I been here?

DORIS

The smell in here alone will tell her that.

JAKE

Tell her I don't like her staying on her own in that boarding house. Folks will talk about her.

DORIS

Since when did you give a damn what folks would talk about ?

JAKE

This is my goddamn daughter we're talking about. There ain't nobody gonna talk about her while I'm alive. Now you tell her what I said—about her ma and all.

DORIS

Well, I'll tell her. Whatever good that will do, but you get the hell out of my restaurant now.

JAKE

All right. I'm going. I'll be back though. You tell her I'll be back.

(He turns to leave, then stops.)

I never meant to do that girl any harm. You know that? I never meant nothing bad should happen to her or her mother.

DORIS

Well, Jake. We were all born with the best of intentions.

JAKE

You reckon so? Hell. Don't matter much does it? (He exits.)

DORIS

He's gone. You can come out now.

(CAROLINE edges out of her hiding place)

Clear that end of the counter off, will you, honey?

CAROLINE

I'm sorry, Doris. I would have never taken this job if I had thought he'd come in here like—

DORIS

Hand me that stack of menus, will you?

CAROLINE

Doris! I am trying to apologize to you!

DORIS

About Jake? Forget it. The day I can't handle that man, I'll up and sell this place and move to Florida. Stop making yourself miserable over things what ain't your fault. I like cussing someone out first thing in the morning. It cheers me up. And I've known Jake Sergis all my life. If I can cuss him out—all the better!

CAROLINE

I wish I could be more like you, Doris.

DORIS

Bite your tongue, child. The last thing you want is to be like me.

CAROLINE

I wonder what he meant about my mother. I wonder if she's sick again?

DORIS

Then we'll call someone who can help. Don't go talking yourself into going out there. We'll hear soon enough if anything's wrong. Oh, lookee here! Who's that pulling up out front? Shortman's a little early today, or I'm a little late. I got to get his coffee ready. He just loves it that I always got him a hot cup of coffee waiting.

(DORIS bustles off. The door opens and a short, weatherworn man enters. He is accompanied by a tall, thin, ill-looking man in overalls.)

SHORTMAN

It was in '43, Jimmy. Just after Billy Joe and you was home on leave after boot camp.

JIMMY

It weren't no such thing. The Japs hadn't even bombed Pearl Harbor yet, and you were going out with that Chapman girl.

DORIS

(Delivering SHORTMAN's coffee.)

Don't you two start no big quarrel in here this early.

SHORTMAN

The man's losing his sense, Doris. He can't remember a damn thing past last week if he can remember that.

JIMMY

I ought to remember the day I got my own goddamned nose broke.

DORIS

You mean that ain't your natural nose, Jimmy?

JIMMY

Don't you start in on me too, woman. Where's my coffee? You always got his coffee ready, but not mine.

SHORTMAN

That's 'cause you're so damn ugly, Jimmy. The women don't take to you the way they do to me.

JIMMY

And some raisin toast. You got any of that raisin toast?

SHORTMAN

Hey, Caroline. I seed that boyfriend of your'n headed this way. You want Jimmy and me to run him off?

CAROLINE

You know I don't have any boyfriend, Mr. Kline.

SHORTMAN

You better tell him that, girl. I seed that look in a man's eyes before, and when it's there afore 8 o'clock in the morning, you just better watch out. That's what I say.

CAROLINE

You stop talking like that, Mr. Kline. It's not very nice.

JIMMY

You tell the old gopher, honey. Hell, he wouldn't know courtin' from digging a well. Been too long.

SHORTMAN

That's all you know about anything.

(The restaurant door opens and VERNON enters. He is a good-looking, good-humored young man around 20 years old.)

Hey Vernon! How's that old hound dog of yours?

VERNON

He's doing real good, Shortman. Mom was grateful for that medicine you sent up.

SHORTMAN

I thought that stuff would do the trick. Had me an old coon dog. Took sick the very same way. Eatin' weeds what does it. Now, why a goddamned smart bird dog like your'n would take to eating weeds, I—

VERNON

Yes. Thanks.

(He sits at one of the tables. CAROLINE waits to see if DORIS is going to take his order. Doris doesn't, so she goes over to do it.)

Would you like some coffee?
CAROLINE

Yes. Please.
VERNON

Is that all?
CAROLINE

Uhhh. No. I guess coffee's all.
VERNON

How have you been?
CAROLINE
(Pouring it.)

Fine. (Pause.) My dog's been sick.
VERNON

I heard.
CAROLINE

You did? Oh, you mean just now.
VERNON

Yeah. Hope he's all right.
CAROLINE

Oh, he will be. You ever seen him?
VERNON

Yes, Vernon. I have seen your dog. .
CAROLINE

Oh. (Pause.) He's been sick.
VERNON

You're an awful idiot, Vernon. You know that?
CAROLINE
(Sitting.)

Well. . .yeah. I do.
VERNON

But I guess you're harmless.
CAROLINE

Yeah. I guess I am.
VERNON

CAROLINE

How come you haven't been around to see how my room's working out?

VERNON

Well, I didn't know as how that would be—you know, proper and all.

CAROLINE

Well, it's not like I was going to take you upstairs or anything. Does that disappoint you?

VERNON

Caroline, keep your voice down.

CAROLINE

You're also an old maid sometimes, Vernon. You know that too?

VERNON

Well, if I didn't, I'm sure someone would point it out to me.

CAROLINE

Don't get testy. I'm only teasing. Anyhow, my room is working out just fine. Thank you for asking Maida if I could stay there. I got a room all to myself. It's got a window and I can see Miller's pond from it. I haven't seen any ducks though. I guess it's too early for the ducks to come.

VERNON

I don't know if they stop there anymore.

CAROLINE

I hope they do—if I'm still there, I'd like to see them.

VERNON

Are you gonna be all right there on your own? Are you happy?

CAROLINE

I am very happy. I am happy to be at Maida's. I'm happy I can see the pond, and I'm happier than happy that I don't have to listen to Clara Windell first thing when I wake up and the last thing before I go to bed. I am for sure happy about that.

VERNON

Was she mad when you told her you were moving out?

CAROLINE.

I didn't tell her. I was going to, but she was so upset over what the carpenters were doing to the hallway and about whether the new wallpaper really matched the new carpet that I just tiptoed out the back door and was on my way. You know, I bet she hasn't even noticed that I'm gone yet.

VERNON

You know that's not true. You should have told her.

CAROLINE

I left a note.

VERNON

A note ain't no good.

CAROLINE

Maybe not, but that's what I did. I don't owe her anything, and I don't care what anybody thinks. I didn't take anything with me that wasn't mine. Anything she ever gave me, I just left there.

VERNON

You hate her that much?

CAROLINE

What do you know about hate, Vernon? I bet you never hated anything in your life. (Pause.) Look, I am just sick to death of Clara Windell! I never asked her to stick her nose in my family's business.

VERNON

I'm just worried that you're gonna be all right.

CAROLINE

Well, stop worrying. I don't want you to. What difference does it make anyway?

VERNON

None at all, I guess. Nothing I'd do would make any difference to you.

CAROLINE

Oh, Vernon, I didn't mean it that way. I'm sorry.

(The door opens again. RALPH enters. He is wearing a deputy's uniform. He heads directly for Vernon's table.)

RALPH

Hey, Vernon. Morning, Caroline. Doris! You got my eggs done?

DORIS

I ain't fixing you eggs this morning or any morning till you get that goddamned crossing filled in.

RALPH

I keep telling you, Doris. I am not the Illinois Central Railroad Company.

DORIS

You are supposed to be protecting the rights of us citizens which you serve, and I lost a perfectly good tire and bent my axle all to hell going over it two weeks ago, and I ain't heard one word since.

RALPH

I sent in an accident report, Doris.

DORIS

Damn lot of good that done. You want 'em scrambled or fried?

RALPH

I want 'em over easy like I have been having them every morning of my life since you opened this place.

DORIS

(Exiting to kitchen.)

Goddamn railroad thinks they can do anything they want!

RALPH

I wish the hell I'd been a farmer like my Daddy.

VERNON

You can quit.

RALPH

Too late. Daddy sold the farm.

VERNON

Buy another one. You got the money.

RALPH

Shit. Can I have some of that coffee, Caroline? (As she fills his cup.) What's this I hear you moved out from Clara Windell's house?

CAROLINE

Maybe I should have just put a notice in the newspaper! What is wrong with my getting a place of my own? I am eighteen years old and a high school graduate. I can do what I want.

RALPH

Well, now, it's just that Clara—

CAROLINE

Clara what? Put out a missing person's report?

RALPH

She came by the office and got Herb in an awful state. You know how his stomach is.

CAROLINE

I don't do a lot of worrying about Herb's stomach, Ralph.

RALPH

What's your old man say about all this?

CAROLINE

I have not seen or spoken to him lately.

RALPH

Wish I could say the same.

CAROLINE

I should think that if you don't want to see so much of him, you should just stop arresting him. It doesn't do any good anyway.

RALPH

I reckon that's so. How's your mama doing?

CAROLINE

Why all the questions, Ralph? Has Clara posted a reward?

RALPH

It ain't me, Caroline. It's Herb. There's the election coming up, and he depends on the good will of the voting public.

CAROLINE

And I'm not old enough to vote—well, I won't be here much longer to worry about, Ralph. Get old Herb some Milk of Magnesia and leave me alone.

RALPH

All right. All right. Just remember where I am if you need anything.

CAROLINE

All I need is to be left alone for a while, and I sure won't be left alone over at Clara Windell's.

RALPH

Nope, probably not. Lot of work going on over there. She seems to be fixing things up right nice since the fire. I hear as how Mr. Frank's coming home soon. Is that right?

CAROLINE

I got to go help Doris! (exits.)

RALPH

She's as ornery as that old man of hers. You better look elsewhere for a wife if you're counting on a peaceful old age, Vernon.

VERNON

I reckon I've had all the peace I can stand for one life, Vernon.

RALPH

Ha! Anyway, wish you'd marry up with this one quick, so's I'll have one less thing to think about.

VERNON

She wouldn't have me.

RALPH

You asked her?

VERNON

Not exactly.

RALPH

Jesus H. Christ! I believe I am the only man for thirty miles around here who's got a lick of sense to begin with.

VERNON

That must be a great responsibility, Ralph.
(There is a noise out front. SHORTMAN gets up and peers out the window.)

SHORTMAN

Jumpin' Jehosephat. You ain't gonna believe what's going on out there.

JIMMY

(Joining him.)

What is it?

SHORTMAN

There's two men pulled up on motorbikes—Oh, my Lord in Heaven!

JIMMY

Get the hell over, so a man can see!

SHORTMAN

It's a goddamned nigger. Ralph. Look out here. There's a goddamned nigger getting off one of them motorbikes.

JIMMY

What in the hell is a nigger doin' on a motorbike? He ain't coming in here is he?

SHORTMAN

Get back! They're both looking this way. Ralph—I tell you there's a nigger and a white man walking this way together.

VERNON

For God's sake, Ralph. Can't you make them sit down and shut up?

RALPH

Maybe if the colored fellah's big enough. I won't have to.