

# gawk

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A Ten-Minute Play  
By Gary Garrison

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## CHARACTERS

### **WINNAPEG DUNN, 62.**

African-American. Gentle by nature. Hard-working, loving, compassionate. Has lived in the Chicago ghetto far too long.

### **JOYCE CRAINE, 55.**

A school teacher in the Chicago system for 30 years. Seen a lot of change. A list maker. Needs order. Hapless.

## SETTING

Winnapegs tenement apartment on the south side of Chicago.

## TIME

Today.

*Lights up on the interior of WINNAPEG'S empty apartment. She's moving out, and all that remains among the packed boxes is a rocking chair, a wall clock and an area rug.*

*Winnapeg sits in her old black-oak rocking chair, comforting herself with a slow rock forward, a hesitation, then back. A wall clock makes an unusually loud tick-tock. Winnapeg checks the time on her watch, holds the watch to her ear, shakes her wrist, then winds her watch.*

*We see JOYCE CRAINE clutching her tan colored, patent-leather purse -- the center of her being -- enter the stage and check the imaginary apartment door numbers against an address on an envelope, all the while incessantly dabbing at the perspiration on her face with an embroidered handkerchief. She makes her way to Winnapeg's very real door.*

*Joyce's knock brings Winnapeg slowly to her feet. She makes her way to the door, straightening her sweater and skirt as she walks. Three dead-bolts later, she opens the door.*

JOYCE

Mrs. Dunn? Winnapeg Dunn?

WINNAPEG

Yes, ma'am. That would be me.

JOYCE

I'm Joyce Craine.

WINNAPEG

Well, nice to meet ya' Miss Craine, and real nice a ya' to come all this way, ma'am. Now, how 'bout comin' on in?

*Joyce steps quickly through the door, dabbing almost painfully at the perspiration on her brow, then the corners of her mouth. After a long, quiet moment:*

WINNAPEG (continued)

You had no trouble gettin' here, did 'ya? Did you drive, or come by the L? I can't drive anymore 'cause my old shoulder hurts me. But I do miss a nice, Sunday drive in the -- 'S somethin' the matter, Miss Craine?

JOYCE

(blurting out, rapidly)

Why do you ask? Because I'm pale, or am I flushed? Well, not to worry, Mrs. Dunn. I go back and forth -- pale/flushed/pale/flushed all day long, hour to hour. It's annoying.

WINNAPEG

Uhm-hmmm.

JOYCE

See, I'm thin-skinned; practically translucent. It's from my father's side of the family. Certainly not from my mother's. They didn't have skin: they had hides. But that's neither here nor there, Mrs. Dunn. I'm not even sure why we're talking about this. What was your question?

WINNAPEG

I think the heat's workin' on you, sweetheart, I really do. Maybe you'd like to sit down?

JOYCE

Oh, no, thank you. I should hurry on. I have a list of things that should have been done three days ago. But after what's happened, I don't seem to be able to get back in the routine of things . . .

WINNAPEG

Well, I certainly understand that. Myself, I've been sittin' here for days trying to . . .

JOYCE

(overlapping)

. . . so yesterday's list is today's list which is actually a list from a week ago, and today's list will be moved to tomorrow or who knows when at the rate I'm doing things, and . . .

(a big gulp of air)

. . . you're gonna have to stop me Mrs. Dunn because I'm upset and I'm just babbling and I'll keep talking until you say something and maybe not even then.

WINNAPEG

Did you bring the letter, Miss Craine?

JOYCE

Oh, yes! Of course, the letter. I'm so sorry. Let me give you the letter.

(she doesn't)

As I said on the phone, I knew you'd want this. I certainly would have wanted it if I were you. And no one saw it but me.

JOYCE (continued)

You know, I was surprisingly calm, Mrs. Dunn. I've never seen, well, street violence like that. And I assure you, it's not like in the movies. It's all very quick, and quiet. Very, very quiet.

WINNAPEG

S'that so?

JOYCE

That is, until the ambulance came. And those screeching police cars. Then the noise was just short of deafening. People began to gather and were pointing and talking and making it an event for horribly wrong reasons, and I just blurted out, "Don't gawk." "DON'T -- GAWK!" They ignored me, as you might expect, but I repeated it over and over: "Don't gawk!"

*The sound of the clock grows louder, then fades.*

JOYCE (continued)

Please know I never left Darren's side and Mrs. Dunn you're going to have to reach in my purse and take this letter out because all I seem to be able to do is talk.

*Winnapeg reaches for her purse. Joyce moves it from her reach.*

WINNAPEG

Now, Miss Craine, I'm gonna take that letter, but first, you're gonna have to let me have it, honey.

JOYCE

(losing the battle)

I'm sorry. I . . . I just had this picture of how all of this was going to be, and nothing is falling into its rightful place . . . You're so calm.

WINNAPEG

Calm! I'm not calm, Miss Craine.

JOYCE

Then strong, maybe. Of course, that's it. You're just being strong, Mrs. Dunn. And I envy that because clearly I'm not.

*The clock ticks louder, then fades.*

JOYCE (continued)

What I really mean to say is that I'm the kind of person that doesn't do well with things I haven't planned for. I'm a fourth grade teacher which demands that I chart, construct and plan everything from when my kids pick their pencils up to when they put them down. And I like that -- that ability -- so you can imagine with something like this . . . .

WINNAPEG

Am I gonna get that letter, Miss Craine, or are you gonna talk a little more, sweetheart?

*The clock ticks louder, then fades.*

JOYCE

(opening purse)

Mrs. Dunn, I brought the letter exactly the way I found it.

WINNAPEG

Well, I do appreciate it.

JOYCE

I had thought to -- to clean it up -- but, as you'll see, there was no way to do that.

WINNAPEG

Miss Craine, I was used to Darren's filthy, trashy mouth. Lord, for a ten-year-old boy, he had more blue, loose language than a street drunk. So I'm sure there's nothing in that letter that would surprise me. Now, if you'll just . . .

JOYCE

Oh, I didn't mean "clean up" what was inside. No, I meant, the outside because . . .

*Joyce's voice trails off. She carefully hands her the blood-soaked letter. A long, quiet moment. Finally:*

JOYCE (continued)

I was walking behind him -- on a sidewalk that is in such ill-repair, and we were both side-stepping and almost hopping over the cracks, and the car -- the one I told you about -- came by and the next thing I knew, Darren was laying on the ground. But I thought he had tripped, see, on the sidewalk. But, of course, he hadn't. And when he didn't get up, or move, I called to him and then I was right up on him, and saw that he'd been shot.

JOYCE (continued)

(a beat, quietly dabbing at her neck)

The letter was in his hand, and I thought, well, when people come they'll question everything, and who knows what will happen to this letter. And since it was addressed to you . . . I thought it best to slip the letter out of his hand before anyone saw it.

*The clock ticks louder, then fades.*

JOYCE (continued)

Just so you know, for the last week, I've had it pressed between the pages of my Bible. I thought that was proper.

WINNAPEG

Has it been a week? Lord, I can barely make sense of time now.

(looking at letter)

Uhm-hum, that's his handwriting, all right. The child *never* made his "p"'s close all the way. Not that he didn't try. Lord, I drilled that boy one day from sun-up to sun-down just on his "p"s. And look, it didn't change a thing, God rest his . . . his sweet, little soul.

JOYCE

(consoling)

Most of the kids in my class don't close their "p"'s, Mrs. Dunn. But what can you do? We talk about completion, we talk about fulfilling a stroke, but the "p's", the capital "B's," and that ever-hateful "d" has always been a problem -- especially to Darren -- and he had a "D" in his name!

WINNAPEG

(interrupting)

You taught Darren?

JOYCE

Excuse me?

WINNAPEG

You taught Darren. You never said on the phone that you taught Darren.

JOYCE

Didn't I? Oh, well, I, I certainly did. I must have not thought about that when I called. Because I did teach him. I was his reading and writing teacher.

WINNAPEG

So you knew my grandson? Hmmmmmm.

WINNAPEG (continued)

I'm surprised you never said that, Miss Craine. Yes, ma'am, I have to say, I'm really surprised.

JOYCE

May I have a glass of water?

WINNAPEG

It's been turned off. As you can see, I'm moving. No reason an old woman my age should stay in this neighborhood any longer than she has to. I wouldn't have stayed this long, but Darren didn't want to change schools. That school was his anchor, Miss Craine. Besides me, that's all that little boy had. Why, he couldn't wait to get up in the mornin' and get his clothes on so he could run, not walk, to that school. And I had a helluva time gettin' him home at the end of the day.

JOYCE

You must have been so proud.

WINNAPEG

(overlapping "proud")

Now, I was always surprised that Darren cared anything about that school 'cause there were a few teachers who just wore his little butt out with meanness. Uh-hummm, just didn't like him, so they made life miserable for that little bean pole.

JOYCE

Are you sure, Mrs. Dunn? You know how children exaggerate.

WINNAPEG

(overlapping)

I knew my grandson, Miss Craine. Yes, ma'am, he never understood their meanness, and I have to say, neither did I.

JOYCE

Well, I can report that Darren and I had a good relationship. Tense sometimes, yes, but . . .

WINNAPEG

Well, whoever didn't like him, it upset him somethin' terrible. Some days I could hear that little tadpole crying all the way up the block 'fore he got home.

JOYCE

Well, he was an emotional boy . . .

WINNAPEG

With goddamn good reason to be, Miss Craine. Father dead -- shot, like Darren was, senseless, in the streets; a good boy, too . . .

(quietly)

. . . only child God give me.

(harder now)

With his father gone he only had a good-for-nothin' mother who didn't care for anybody, includin' her own sorry self so she jumped out that very window in front of Darren. Did you know that, Miss Craine? No, I don't suppose you did. And when that happened, Darren was taken by Social Services and for two solid years was shuffled around to fifteen --count 'em -- *fifteen* foster families. Only THEN could they decide that maybe, just maybe, his own sixty-two year old grandmother might be "physically able" of seein' after that child. So yes, he was emotional. But I guarantee you, nothing like this lady!

(even harder)

. . . So if that boy misbehaved in your class -- and I'm thinking he did, Miss Craine, and you were one of the teachers who came down on him too hard -- and I'm thinking you were -- I would like to say for the record that I would have appreciated some understanding on his behalf. Not an insult in class, not a punishment he didn't understand or a note home that may or may not have reached me . . .

JOYCE

Which is exactly why I asked him to write the letter.

WINNAPEG

Would you repeat that, Miss Craine?

JOYCE

Well, I . . . I was going to tell you. I mean, that's why I came to tell you in person. I had asked him to write this letter because . . . You seem upset, Mrs. Dunn, so maybe I should go now and return tomorrow when we've both had time . . .

WINNAPEG

Before you move your ass outta that chair, woman, you better tell me what's in that letter and why you really came here.

JOYCE

I will not let you badger me, Mrs. Dunn!

WINNAPEG

And I will not let you lie to me, woman! Now I have had it with you people. And I do mean, "you" people. Can't get a goddamn straight answer about nothin'and never have been able to.

JOYCE

I should leave now.

WINNAPEG

Oh, no, honey. I want you to stay and listen to every charge I can level at you and then run out here like a chicken with its head cut off and tell everybody you know how this poor, old black woman mistreated you. Get 'em good and angry, Miss Craine, so's they start callin' people names, threatenin' big actions and talkin' mean and Godless. Get 'em real charged up, Miss Craine, and have 'em storm down to this neighborhood, break through the doors of this building, race down that hall way and cave down this door. But have 'em finish me off, baby, 'cause that's the only thing that's gonna keep me from losin' my religion, huntin' you down and shootin' you when you least expect it.

JOYCE

(standing)

I am not responsible for the death of your grandson!

WINNAPEG

(also standing)

THEN WHO THE HELL IS?

JOYCE

Mrs. Dunn, I came here to offer my condolences . . .

WINNAPEG

You came here to cover your ass, Miss Craine!

JOYCE

From what, Mrs. Dunn?! I was not responsible for that horrible crime. Yes, I insisted he write that letter, and yes, I walked him to the mailbox to ensure its delivery. But I cannot be responsible for the ills of this society. That is for another pair of shoulders. Not mine.

WINNAPEG

Then whose? 'Cause somebody needs to shoulder the blame. Somebody's gotta own this and say "I'm sorry." Somebody needs to gather their courage, admit their wrong, look me right in the eye, honey, and try to put the fire out raging in my soul. 'Cause that's where real murder starts, Miss Craine. Because my boys aren't at rest. No, maam. They're both right here. In me. And they started a fire in there that screams out for somebody to get burned. And when I die, I'll make sure that fire finds its home in somebody else. And when that person dies, it'll go to somebody else and on and on.

WINNAPEG (continued)

And before you know it, you gonna have one poor man walkin' around like a powder keg loaded up with everybody's fire. And he's gonna explode, honey, and he'll touch everything with his firey damnation. So you can put the fire out in me, or you can wait for him. But it won't just go away.

JOYCE

I'm not sure what we're talking about here, Mrs. Dunn.

WINNAPEG

(harder, louder)

I want to know why, Miss Craine, that little boy had to live through all of the nastiness this life has to offer, and still get shot in the head. And I want to know why I've lost not ONE but TWO children to a bullet, and why people think I'll just fold up and be okay with that. I WANT -- SOMEBODY -- TO OWN THIS.

*The clock ticks loud and long, then fades.*

JOYCE

(tired, sad)

What would you have me do, Mrs. Dunn? Really?! What can one person do?

WINNAPEG

Well, thank you for asking . . . First, we're gonna start with that letter you asked Darren to write to me, Miss Craine.

*Winnipeg hands her the blood-soaked letter.*

*Joyce hesitantly receives it.*

WINNAPEG (continued)

Now, I want you to open that letter, and read it to me. And then I want you to tell me why you asked him to write that letter.

JOYCE

(repeating)

Why . . . I asked him . . . to write the letter . . .

WINNAPEG

That's right. And after all of that . . .

*Winnipeg walks to her rocking chair, sits and sighs heavily.*

WINNAPEG (continued)

. . . I'm gonna decide how much fire is still with me, and what I'm going to do with it.

(sitting)

Now take a seat, Miss Craine, and let's begin.

*Joyce sits meekly down in a chair, nervously tears open the envelope, slides the letter out, and unfolds it.*

JOYCE

(reading)

"Dear Grandma, I already wrote one letter, but I threw it away. So now I have to write . . . another letter . . . "

*Lights slowly fade. The sound of the clock fills the room.*