

MOUNT MISERY  
~  
A Comedy  
of  
Enhanced Interrogations

by  
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DRAFT: 30 April 2015

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## CHARACTERS

DON, 72, the Secretary of Defense.

FRED, 16, a slave.

ED, 28, a farmer and 'negro-breaker.'

JOYCE, 71, Don's wife.

## PLACE

The stable on Mount Misery,  
a farm on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay, in Maryland.

## TIME

1834; 2004

## NOTE

In 1834, Frederick Douglass, at age sixteen, was sent by his owner, Thomas Auld, to the farm Mount Misery to be broken into obedience by farmer Edward Covey. In 2004, Donald and Joyce Rumsfeld purchased Mount Misery for a vacation home.

## SCENE 1

*FRED reads, while nursing unseen wounds on his back.*

*Enter ED, holding a baby, and a whip. FRED hides the book.*

ED

Fred! Inspiration has struck my mind. My words. My thoughts. Write them down while they're piping!

FRED

But you prohibit me from such activity.

ED

I'm making an exception. Now put this plume to paper!

'My dearest Sue,

*(clears throat)*

'You are a thorn in my side.

But then I yank you out,  
and realize you're a rose.'

FRED

The poem is awful... diminutive. Would you like me to...embellish it?

ED

Embellish? Boy, are you trying to wiggle out of your duties?

FRED

Misses Covey is a fair sight of a woman.

ED

Have you been leering at my wife?

FRED

In the sight of God, sir! She is fairly viewed by the Lord!

ED

Indeed. Now get chopping! The woodpile's low.

FRED

I hate chopping wood.

ED

You best change that attitude, boy. Now work! And give me what's hiding under your ass.

*(grabs the book)*

*The Columbian Orator...*

FRED

*Containing a Variety of Original and Selected Pieces Calculated to Improve Youth and–*

ED

Improve youth? That's my job. Why your owner sent you here. You don't need this book. My son will, once he's of reading age.

FRED

May I have it back, sir?

ED

Boy, you know the price of transgression...

FRED

Please, sir...

ED

Heavenly Father, please guide my hand in correcting this young boy. May this leather crumble the brambles choking Fred's young heart. May the lesions I levy sow seeds of love and adoration. God bless you, Fred.

*As ED lifts the whip, FRED cries out. The baby cries.*

ED

Shhhh, Junior. Shhh... Everything's fine. The whole world's made of sugar.

Now Fred, my son just saved you a whipping. Where's your gratitude?

FRED

Thank you, Edward Junior.

ED

That doesn't sound quite complete.

FRED

Thank you, Edward Junior. Sir.

ED

Always insist on respect, Little Ed. *(tosses baby in the air)* Wheee! Wheee! You're an Angel, flying in Heaven, keeping watch over my heart.

I've got my eye on you, Frederick.

*ED touches FRED's back with the whip. Exit ED.*

FRED

That man seems bred for my torment. When will he open his eyes, and look into mine?

I am alone in this. My mother, stolen. My father... abandoned me to this lot. That's a father's role, if he's white, that is, and his son the color of dirt. Dirt is what I was to him. But I know that dirt births roses. And sycamores. Corn, and wheat, which our bodies reconfigure into vision, love, and dreams.

What causes you greater shame, father? That your immaculate seed sprouted into this shaggy weed, or that you lay your gleaming skin upon my mother's sooty flesh?

Out of shame you deny me your face, and name. Your shame damned me into this war upon the immortal spirit, this outrage upon the soul, this hydra-headed monster that consumes me daily – Slavery! Tell me, did you recoil when I was born? Or were you not even there?

*Enter DON.*

DON

An absence of evidence of deer is not evidence of absence of deer. They may just be skittish. I think I'll tuck that deer metaphor into my pocket for Monday's press conference. No deer, but you hit that quail, Dick. Right in the face! Thanks for missing mine.

*Exit DON. FRED peers after him.*

FRED

Is that...?

*Enter ED.*

ED

Dammit boy! Those trees await splintering. You know what comes if you tarry. Now hurry up and grab that hatchet!

*Exeunt.*

## **SCENE 2**

*DON and JOYCE play Scrabble at the table. Between turns, DON reads the newspaper.*

JOYCE

H-A-T-C-H-E-T. Hatchet. Fifteen points.

DON

That's what they've put to my head. A hatchet. They salivate for my head, Shinseki, Kerry. They want to auction it in Berkeley.

JOYCE

Don't pay attention to Democrats.

DON

Not just Democrats. Hagel. Schwarzkopf. Lott. McCain. The ringleader, I bet. How quickly loyalties turn.

JOYCE

Focus on the game, dear.

DON

Rumsfeld resign. Resign. Resign. I offered to. Twice! The President wouldn't accept.

JOYCE

Your turn.

DON

They think they're so certain of what's going on over there. But they don't know the whole picture. They know slices of it. Scraps.

JOYCE

Don!

DON

P-E-A-C-E. Peace. Nine points.

JOYCE

O-F-F-S-P-R-I-N-G. Offspring. Eighteen points.

DON

I recall having offspring, once upon a time.

JOYCE

They're with their husbands. They sent gifts. The chocolate from Valerie. And those flowers from Marcy. Happy Father's Day.

*JOYCE gives DON a peck.*

DON

Nothing from Nick?

JOYCE

Don...

DON

How hard is a phone call?

JOYCE

It was apparently impossible for you on 9/11. How many hours did I wonder if you were even alive?

DON

Don't dig that up. I had my hands full. You know that.  
If Nick didn't want to hear my voice, he could've sent a card.

JOYCE

It's a huge step, checking into rehab. Have realistic expectations.

DON

I have zero expectations.

*Pause.*

JOYCE

Now, for your special day, I thought we could pick up some cod at Big Al's.  
Then, see the picket fences in Oxford. And tour St. Michael's historic homes!

DON

Joyce, we live in a historic home. Just walk from room to room.

JOYCE

But you like history.

DON

I like the events of history. The men. Douglas MacArthur. Ulysses S. Grant.

JOYCE

Then you'll love your gift.

DON

I hope it's bin Laden's head on a platter. (*opens gift*) *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself.*

JOYCE

How amazing, that Frederick Douglass lived right here. There's a certain poetry to a former plantation housing the chief defender of freedom across the globe.

DON

Now now, Joyce. The President's the chief. I just back him up. Besides, that Douglass stuff's a bunch of hooey.

JOYCE

*The New York Times* reported it. *The Economist*. Quite authoritative.

DON

Amy Goodman and her cabal. She's obsessed with that handshake with Saddam. I represented President Reagan. Should I have spit in his face?

JOYCE

Don!

DON

Frederick Douglass didn't live here. It was further down the road. (*examines Scrabble tiles*) I've got nothing but gobbledygook.

JOYCE

While you contemplate, I'll decorate.

*JOYCE hangs a plaque on the wall.*

DON

What in the dickens is that?

JOYCE

Sandy's Root. I got it at Nancy's Nostalgia. It grows in the woods. It has magic powers, supposedly. Frederick Douglass wrote that it helped him fight back against his overseer. As long as he carried it, no one could land a blow on him.

DON

You spent money on this?

JOYCE

It has a certificate of authenticity.

DON

It's ginger. Or ginseng. On a plaque.

JOYCE

Oh, be a sport. You know, Nancy said this property, Mount Misery, is haunted.

DON

I'm changing that dadburn name.

JOYCE

She offered to send over her husband to spook the spirits away.

DON

She's creating a business opportunity for herself. I know that maneuver.

JOYCE

A girl's gotta eat.  
Don, that better not be work you're reading.

DON

We're at war, Joyce. Work doesn't stop.

JOYCE

But it spins your mind into such a tizzy.



DON

A rolling stone grows no moss.

JOYCE

You're 72, Don. It's time for a little moss.  
Why did we even buy this house?

DON

Look, once I've finished, we'll drive into town, tour all the homes, and reward all our walking with pretzel milk shakes.

JOYCE

I do love those pretzel milk shakes. (*glances at his reading material*) Oh, Don! Of all the things to bring into my house... Those pictures, they're... unfitting of you.

DON

Joyce, when you let me work, our marriage works.

*Pause.*

JOYCE

Sometimes I wish you were a nobody.

DON

I was a nobody when you married me. We didn't own a ranch in Taos back then. Where are you going?

JOYCE

Out of sight, out of mind.

*Exit JOYCE.*

DON

I didn't drape hoods over those men. I didn't attach electrodes to their fingertips. And to take those photos, grinning ear-to-ear. How could they have been such dimwits? Them, not me.

*Enter FRED. DON doesn't see him.*