

Tradin' Paint

Synopsis:

Darla Frye's life is on the skids. Her mother is dead, her delusional, dog-catching boyfriend is only interested in her fried chicken, and her job stocking auto parts at the Big Mart Distribution Center is going nowhere fast. All this, combined with the fact that Darla's father abandoned the family "twenty-six years ago next Wednesday", has left her "fraught with deep-seated insecurities." Then one night, on a dark deserted country road, a woman named Lucky Tibbs teaches Darla how to change a flat tire – and in doing so, change her life. Now Darla is on a quest to find her true "destiny", a journey that takes her into the inner world of stock car racing and includes an unexpected friendship with a gay, black college professor, a head-on collision with a car battery, and a heavenly visit with the late Dale Earnhardt. It's one helluva ride with a lot of "tradin' paint" but Darla discovers that it's the bump in the road that makes the trip worthwhile...

Setting: A small Appalachian town in southwest Virginia. The Present.

Set: a college classroom, the grandstand of The Speedway, The Pit Area of The Speedway and a common area that represents a racetrack, an old country road, a garage, and a hospital room, among other things.

Cast Size: 8 (Two women, six men)

Cast:

Halley Smoot – black, late thirties, a gay college professor whose love for English literature is only surpassed by his passion for stock car racing. In fact, it is the "roar of the engines" that's called him home to the hills he loves...

Darla Frye – a white, thirty-year old woman with "deep-seated insecurities" whose only talent consists of frying chicken for her boyfriend... or so she thinks, until a flat tire changes her destiny...

Coty Webb – Darla's thirty-something boyfriend and a bit of a bully, Coty always dreamed of being a cop but due to "emotional problems" had to settle for the next best thing – Piney Gap Dog Catcher.

Lucky Tibbs – the pretty, thirty-something crew chief for the Jett Racing Team. There's nothing broken on a car that Lucky can't fix. She's not too bad with the human heart, either...

Skeeter Jett – a handsome, thirty-something stock car racer and Lucky's husband. A good ol' boy who loves what he does almost as much as he loves his wife...

Pierce Garbarino – stock car racer, thirties.

Tucker Forbush – stock car racer, thirties

Flagman – late thirties. If a stock car race were an orchestra, he'd be the conductor.

Jack – Halley's lover. Handsome, late thirties, very "GQ".

The Boss – early fifties, very corporate, the head of stock car racing's governing body.

Football Player – left tackle for the Lebanon Badgers.

NOTE: The roles of **Flagman**, **Jack**, **Football Player** and **The Boss** are to be played by the same actor.

ACT I

SETTING: *The stage is divided into many playing areas differentiated with set pieces, platforms, lighting, etc. Upstage center The Podium resides on a platform representing a college classroom. Stage left is the spectator section in Turn Two of the Bristol Motor Speedway. Stage right is The Pit of the Speedway. Center stage is a common playing area. It is used as a racetrack, an old country road and a hospital room, among other things.*

AT RISE: *The stage is black. We hear a man's voice say "Gentlemen, start your engines." then the roar of forty-three stock car engines coming to life. Spotlight center on FLAGMAN holding a green racing flag. He waves it down and "the race" begins. FLAGMAN smiles as he watches. Spot fades to black and the sound of "the race" diminishes. Lights up on HALLEY SMOOT at The Podium. He addresses the audience.*

HALLEY

Dale Earnhardt is dead. Number Three. The Intimidator. Gone. He was on the final curve at Daytona when his Chevy Monte Carlo hit the wall at one hundred and eighty miles per hour. He died on impact, the base of his skull crushed. He was forty-nine years old.

Dale Earnhardt was born in Kannapolis, a small North Carolina town located thirty-five miles north of Charlotte on Interstate 85. Kannapolis is famous for two things: Cannon Mills, that maker of bed sheets and bath towels from which the town derives its name, and the aforementioned Dale Earnhardt. What most people don't know is that Kannapolis is also the birthplace of Halley Smoot, Senior. Sometime farmer, sometime factory-worker and sometime father to his son, Halley Smoot, Junior. That's me.

Wine, women and stockcar racing. The three great loves of my daddy's life. Of those three we have one in common. I love the races as much as he did... Maybe because my earliest memories are of the track. Holding my father's hand, the hot sun beating on our faces. The smell of fuel, melting blacktop and burning rubber mixed with cheap beer and hotdogs. And the *noise*...

(We hear the faint roar of engines. It gets louder over the following...)

HALLEY (cont.)

The noise is something you have to experience to understand, to be able to comprehend its overwhelming *penetrability*. The throbbing engines, getting louder and louder until you can't distinguish between the sounds of the race and your own beating heart ...

(The engines ROAR! Then diminish again until all we hear is a beating heart. A moment and then that fades, too... Beat.)

I tried to leave this place once, the land of country music and stock car racing. In fact, I *did* leave for I felt an educated black man, a *gay* college professor, had no business living here. That I would be better off north in the Big City where there would be more of "my kind". And so I moved to New York and I met a man named Jack and we made a life together and I told myself I was content. But always, *always*, in the back of my mind, I heard it. The throbbing engines, the heartbeat of these hills, calling me home...

(Again we hear the faint roar of the engines.)

When a position opened up in the English department of a university here, a university in close proximity to The Bristol Motor Speedway, I took it. I *grabbed* it. I moved back to the land I love, the man named Jack in tow. I moved home to reclaim my heartbeat...

(The engines ROAR! Lights fade on HALLEY and come up center. Three drivers, SKEETER JETT, TUCKER FORBUSH and PIERCE GARBARINO are racing at The Speedway. SKEETER and FORBUSH are side by side, FORBUSH on the "inside" or stage left, GARBARINO is behind them. FORBUSH bumps into SKEETER. SKEETER bumps him back. They go into a turn and all three lean hard left. GARBARINO drifts to the outside. They come out of the turn and straighten up, three in a row. SKEETER pulls in front. FLAGMAN enters and waves a yellow flag. GARBARINO and FORBUSH get behind SKEETER in single file. The engines become quieter. FLAGMAN turns to the audience.)

FLAGMAN

First of all I'd like to apologize for what it is I'm about to do. I consider it an embarrassment, the fact that I was asked to explain this here thing to you good people who probably know it all by heart anyway. But the folks in charge, they wanna make sure and cover their bases in case there's someone out there, like a Yankee or an atheist maybe, who don't know nothin' 'bout it... So here we go...

FLAGMAN (cont.)

This here thing you're watchin' is a *stock car* race. I emphasize the word *stock car* because there's some people – believe it or not – what think the Indianapolis 500 is the same kinda race as the Daytona 500. They can't help it. They're ignorant. So, let me explain it real slow. There's two kinds of race cars. Stock cars, what race in the Daytona 500, and Indy cars, what race in the Indianapolis 500. There's a whole lot of difference between these vehicles and if I tried to name 'em all we'd be here for days. But I will tell you the two most important in my opinion. One, the Indy car don't have no wheel coverin's or fenders like a stock car does. That means they cain't bang into each other without causin' a crash. Stock cars bang into each other all the time. It's called "tradin' paint" and it's pretty much the name of the game in stock car racin'... The second difference is you cain't haul moonshine in an Indy car.

Okay, now – there's forty-three drivers in a stock car race. Today we're just focusin' on three of 'em, the latest bunch of up-and-comin' hotshots on the circuit.

(He turns to the drivers.)

Boys, when I call your name, just give a wave, will ya, so these folks know who's who? Thanks...

(He turns back to the audience.)

Okay, the fella out in front there, that's Skeeter Jett...

(SKEETER waves.)

And the fella behind him is Tucker Forbush...

(FORBUSH leans out, waves then leans back in.)

And the last one there is Pierce Garbarino...

(GARBARINO leans out, waves then leans back in.)

Of the three, only Skeeter there is local. Forbush is a Kansas boy and Garbarino's all the way down here from New Hampshire...

I guess it was bound to happen, all these Yankees and what not infiltratin' what was predominantly a southern sport. There's a lot of money to be made in racin' if you're good enough at it and you know how *them* people love money. Yes sir, it was bound to happen... But that don't mean we have to like it.

(Beat.)

FLAGMAN (cont.)

Now then, there's just a few more things you need to know before we move on. There's an area on the infield of the track what's called The Pit...

(Lights up on The Pit. LUCKY TIBBS is standing there in a jumpsuit. During the following, she mimes walking around a stock car, checking the tires.)

That's where a driver takes his car to be refueled, get the tires changed and get any other necessary adjustments made. It's important to the driver that his pit crew works fast because the quicker it gets done, the quicker he can get back into the race.

(Lights out in The Pit.)

And now we come to what I consider to be the most important person in stock car racin'... Me. The Flagman. The man what waves the flags. Oh, you might think it's no big deal, that any fool could do it but let me tell you somethin'... If this race track was an orchestra, I'd be the conductor. This is how it works...

I stand in this spot way up over the starting line, where all the drivers can see me. Dependin' on what's goin' on in the race, I wave a different colored flag. A green flag means "go", a red flag means "stop", a yellow flag means "caution" – kinda like a traffic light. Right now these fellas are drivin' under a caution flag. That's why they're stayin' single file and not racin' each other. A caution flag gets waved when there's somethin' on the track that makes drivin' conditions dangerous. In this case, that somethin' on the track is me. Soon as I get finished talkin' to you all I'll wave the green flag again and these fella will take off like a bat outta hell. Okay, let's see, I reckon that just leaves us with the white flag and the checkered flag. A white flag means the leader only has one lap to go. And when I wave the black and white checkered flag that means someone's done won the race...

Well, now, there you go. All you folks watchin' a stock car race for the first time ought to be able to follow along real well now. I appreciate you lettin' me take up so much of your time. I'm just gonna get on outta here now so these boys can start racin' again...

(He exits with the yellow flag. Beat. The drivers hold their position. Beat. FORBUSH leans out then looks at SKEETER. SKEETER shrugs. GARBARINO leans out then looks at FORBUSH and SKEETER. They both shrug. Suddenly from offstage we hear...)

FLAGMAN (O.S.)

Shit!

(FLAGMAN enters, carrying a green flag.)

FLAGMAN

Sorry boys...

(He waves the green flag and exits. The drivers immediately start racing again. The engines ROAR! SKEETER, still in front, drifts right. FORBUSH moves up on the inside. GARBARINO is between them. They go into the curve, leaning hard to the left. They come out of the curve and straighten up. GARBARINO bumps into SKEETER. SKEETER bumps him back, knocking him into FORBUSH. A shoving match ensues. They lean hard into the curve. Lights fade on The Track. Lights up on COTY WEBB and DARLA FRYE in Turn Two. DARLA is sitting, eating a piece of chicken from a sack at her feet. COTY is standing up.)

COTY

Go on, you sonofamother! Move it! Move your sorry ass!

(He watches for a moment then throws his hands up in disgust.)

Oh...*Jesus!* Did you see that, Darla? Son of a... Did you see *that*? Give me a chicken bone, girl.

DARLA

There ain't no more. You threw 'em all already.

COTY

Dammit! Well, hurry up and finish that one you're chewin' on. I gotta have somethin' to throw at that stupid mother...

(COTY continues to watch the race. DARLA addresses the audience.)

DARLA

This fella's my boyfriend Coty Webb. He likes to come to the races here at the Speedway so he can scream and curse and throw chicken bones on the track. He ain't the only one, neither. All the folks what sit up here in Turn Two do the same thing. Whenever somethin' happens they don't like then... *Boom! Boom!* There goes the chicken bones. Most of 'em come in packin' a bucket or two of The Colonel's Recipe. But not Coty...

(COTY slowly turns and watches her. DARLA is oblivious.)

DARLA (cont.)

Coty says he don't trust The Colonel or his Recipe. He says you cain't never be sure what kind of chemicals that *faggot* puts in his chicken. He calls the Colonel a faggot because he wears one of them string ties. Anyway, the only chicken Coty'll eat is what I fry up for him. If there's one thing I can do, it's fry up chicken, which is kind of ironic because that's my last name. Frye. Darla Frye. That's me.

COTY

Darla.

DARLA

Huh?

COTY

What're you doin'?

DARLA

Explainin' about the chicken bones...

COTY

How 'bout I do the explainin' and you shut the hell up and eat that chicken like I told you?

(Beat. DARLA continues to eat the chicken. COTY addresses the audience.)

You'll have to excuse her. Darla's kinda ignorant. She don't know much about the ways of the world. It's on account of her daddy walkin' out on the family when she was little. At least I think that's what happened. She told me about it once but I was tryin' to watch the Daytona 500 on ESPN so I ain't real sure I caught it all. But it's somethin' like that. And now Darla is what I call "fraught with deep-seated insecurities". I like that expression. I read it in a book somewhere. Or maybe it was Playboy. Somethin' like that...

(COTY is suddenly drawn back to the race.)

Move it. Move it. *Dammit to hell! Move it!*

(He turns to DARLA.)

You done yet?

(She shakes her head, a drumstick in her mouth.)

COTY (cont.)

Well, hurry up.

(He turns back to the audience.)

I ain't real sure how this whole throwin' chicken bones thing got started but I do know this... it's a tradition. And every track on the circuit has one. Stock car racin' is full of tradition – or it was, anyway, until Dale Earnhardt died. Now it's pretty much gone to hell. Here's what I mean... you see that pit over there? The one for Skeeter Jett's crew? See it...?

(Lights up on the pit area and LUCKY. She is watching the race and communicating on her headset. DARLA, still working on that piece of chicken, turns to watch.)

Now take a look at what's in there. That's a gee-dee *woman!* That's right. A *woman* is Skeeter Jett's crew chief. Now I'm gonna tell you somethin' and this is the God's honest truth. A woman don't have no business bein' in the pit let alone bein' crew chief. Stock car racin' is a man's world and the fact Skeeter Jett let that bitch in just proves once and for all that he's a big homosexual faggot!

DARLA

What's her name?

COTY

What?

DARLA

That woman in the pit. What's her name?

COTY

What the hell do you care?

LUCKY

(To the audience)

Lucky Tibbs is my name. Stock car racin' is my game.

(Lights out on Turn Two.)

As Skeeter Jett's crew chief, I'm responsible for the overall performance of his car during a race. It's a tough job and I'm damn good at it.

(Beat.)

LUCKY(cont.)

A lot of folks wonder if “Lucky” is some sort of nickname. Well, if the truth be told... no. Fact is, my mama wanted to name me “Edna Ruth” after her grandmother but my daddy put his foot down and said “Hell no! No daughter of mine’s goin’ round with some “old lady” name”. So instead he picked out “Lucky”. He said the day I was born was one of the luckiest days of his life, second only to the day he met my mama. Well... how could any woman argue with that? So “Lucky” I was christened and “Lucky” I’ve been ever since. In more ways than one. Oh, I don’t mean to say that you should ask me to pick your lottery numbers or anythin’. I don’t have that kind of luck. Hell, I remember back in high school me and some friends used to sneak into that bingo game the Catholics would run in their church hall every Friday night... shit. I never even come close to winnin’ the jackpot. No, the kind of luck I’m talkin’ ‘bout is more subtle. More *blessed*, if you will. I have my health. I have friends and family who love me. I have a job I’m passionate about... How much more lucky could a person be?

(LUCKY gets back on the headset.)

Skeeter, how do them tires feel? You look like you’re draggin’ a bit on the right...

(Lights out in the pit. Lights up on Turn Two.)

DARLA

I like her name. Lucky Tibbs. I wonder if she’s nice...

COTY

She’s a *bitch* is what she is... *go!* Move it, move it...! *MOVE IT!*

(DARLA turns to the audience as COTY continues to watch the race.)

DARLA

Coty’s right. I *am* fraught with deep-seated insecurities on account of my daddy’s leavin’. I ain’t never finished high school. I ain’t never been married. Sometimes I wonder what Coty loves more – me or the fried chicken...

COTY

(Still watching the race)

Dammit!

(He sticks his hand back. DARLA hands him her now-finished drumstick. He throws it onto the track.)

Stupid sonofa...!

DARLA

I reckon it's a toss up. But for all his talk, I every once in a while get the feelin' that maybe Coty ain't all that secure with his own self.

COTY

(*To DARLA*)

What the hell is that s'posed to mean?

DARLA

It means that maybe you and me got a lot in common. That maybe we're both insecure...

COTY

I ain't insecure. You hear me?! I ain't insecure one bit! Y'know why? Because I know for a fact, girl – *for a fact* – that I ain't responsible for the bad things happenin' in my life. No, ma'am! It ain't my fault! I am a *victim* of circumstance, that's what I am! A victim of circumstance!

(*To the audience*)

See, what Darla here wants to talk about is my career. Ain't that right, Darla?

DARLA

Coty...

COTY

Ain't that right?

DARLA

(*To the audience*)

He's a dogcatcher...

COTY

Dammit to hell! Let me tell my own story, will you? I let you tell yours...

DARLA

No, you didn't.

COTY

What?

(*DARLA remains silent. COTY turns to the audience.*)

I'm a dogcatcher. That's right. I work for the City of Piney Gap catchin' dogs. Strays and whatnot. It's an okay job. Not great, but okay. I ain't complainin' none...

DARLA

Ha!

COTY

But the truth of it is, I didn't set out to be a dogcatcher. Okay? So there you have it. I'm bein' as upfront as I know how to be. What I *wanted* to be, what I always *dreamed* of bein' until the cruel hand of fate smashed all my hopes and aspirations... was a cop. A policeman. An enforcer of the gee-dee law. That's what I wanted to be. But I couldn't on account of a medical condition over which I have absolutely no control so it's not my fault...

DARLA

(To the audience)

He flunked the exam.

(He whirls on her, furious.)

COTY

Woman, unless you want to feel the back of my hand I suggest you shut the hell up!

(Beat. DARLA gets up and walks away.)

Where you goin'?

DARLA

I gotta pee.

(She exits Turn Two.)

COTY

(Calling after her)

Hey, grab me a beer on your way back, will ya?

(To the audience)

I didn't *flunk* the exam. I hate it when she says that. It makes me sound like a retard or somethin' *which I ain't*. I can read and I can count pretty damn high when I want to. My mental ability has nothin' to do with why I cain't be a cop. The real holdup, if the truth be told, is more of an *emotional* nature, a problem with temperament that can be attributed to one dark day of my youth...

(Lights follow COTY as he leaves Turn Two and crosses to center.)