**THE TREE GANG**

BY

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**ACT ONE**

SCENE: (Plain, basic wood bar, a few liquor bottles on the shelves behind the bar, five or six stools, two or three cheap tables with chairs. One wall decorated with American flag, red Marine Corps Flag/USMC, display case with medals, pictures of soldiers. Set is dimly lit. Mike, stocky and muscled, wearing jeans, T-shirt, stands behind the bar, absently cleaning/dusting the bar. Pay phone on wall rings; Mike answers it.)

Mike: Mike’s Place; Yeah, hey!

(Offstage – woman’s voice) Mike, ya’ got that? I’m waiting for a call from Jackie. I keep tellin’ her to call on the house phone.

Mike: (hand over the receiver, yells) Nah, it ain’t her! I got it….

(quieter) Sorry….beer delivery guy….So, anyhow, how ya’ been? Good, good…Yeah, I’m OK…nothin’ much different, ya’ know?

(flustered, impatient) I’m workin’ on it, I’m workin’ on it! It ain’t so easy, ya’ know? …gotta wait for the right time. Maybe tonight….don’t know…

(pacing) Babe, it’s gonna happen! Just be cool, OK? Just give me time. I know, I know….you can’t wait forever. I’m gonna work it out, OK? Just gimme a little more time.

(woman’s voice again) Hey Mike, when’re you comin’ up? Your dinner’s gonna get cold!

MIKE: (Hand over receiver) Be right up! Almost done.

Look, I gotta go. I’ll give ya’ a call tomorrow….Don’t worry about it….Yeah….Yeah. Love you too.

Hangs up phone. Despondent, frustrated, stares at floor. Bangs receiver on phone heavily.

(woman’s voice) Everything OK down there?

MIKE: Yeah, yeah! I’ll be right up – just finishing up here. (Sits down briefly at a bar stool, head in hands. Slowly pulls himself to his feet, exits stage left. Lights dim)

**ACT TWO**

SCENE: (Curtain rises on a long, shabby room lit by three caged industrial ceiling lights, which provide minimal light to the surroundings of the crew break room. Furnishings consist of a dirty couch covered by an equally dirty blanket to disguise the fabric tears, two overstuffed chairs, and an old beat-up desk resurrected from a garbage dump with a wooden chair. A mismatched assortment of other chairs complete the furnishings. Along the back wall are placed the tools of the tree gang’s trade: shovels, rakes, hand saws, pole saws and several chain saws hanging from hooks. A set of four unmatched, unpainted lockers stand on the other wall. Two young, college-aged boys, probably late teens/early twenties, lounge on the sofa and one of the chairs. They are dressed in dirty shorts and T-shirts and wear sneakers.)

ENTER STAGE RIGHT:

Mike, Moran, Bill and Jackson all dressed in work clothes and boots.

Mike is stocky and muscled and carries himself with an almost cocky, self-assured confidence. Moran is sloppy, overweight, older and smokes a cigarette. Bill and Jackson are black men, Jackson older and better dressed than the laborers, wears an old fedora and leather jacket. Bill is in work clothes.

MIKE: (hanging up his gloves and hat in a locker)

Moran, you get the saws off the truck. You two help him. (head nods towards sitting boys)

MORAN: (deferentially) Sure Mike, right away. C’mon you two.

(Exits)

MIKE: Man, hot as hell out there today; a cold beer would feel great right now. Happy it’s Friday. (Sits in chair, rubbing his temples)

BILL: (at another locker)

Man, you got that right.

JACKSON: (chewing gum, hands in pockets, surveying the room)

Ain’t no better in that cab.

MIKE: (Looking at Jackson with disdain)

Maybe you should get off your ass once in a while and help us sometime.

JACKSON: (Smiling) Ain’t my job…

ENTER STAGE LEFT

Conway, elderly black man in overalls, dabbing his brow with kerchief, wears glasses, grey almost white hair, carrying a rake. Stands by Jackson.

JACKSON: (Smiling) Look who’s here….the General hisself!

CONWAY: Now, I done told you Witt, stop with that shit!

JACKSON: What you talkin’ about? I’m just callin’ you something’ big…..you asshole!

Conway reaches out to slap Jackson but he ducks and runs away, laughing. Moran and Bill laugh too.

ENTER STAGE RIGHT

Jack Kelly and Ron Leiberman, working summer jobs, bring in two chain saws and hang them on the wall. Reilly enters with them.

JACK: (wipes his face) That goddam chipper…kicked my ass all day!

RON: (looking at his scratched and dirty legs) Boy, you gotta get outta the way of those damn branches when they go in. Hurts!

JACK: I TOLD you to move back fast when you feed ‘em in.

Both sit tiredly on the couch.

MIKE: (In general direction of the two boys) Whatsa matter pussies? Chipper get the best of your sorry asses? (laughing)

JACK: (under his breath) You oughta try it one day. Hey Mike, you think the Sox are gonna make the playoffs? They’re lookin’ strong this year – great pitching. Saw ‘em beat the Indians last night 6 – 1. McDowell’s hot!

Ron: Hah! Gonna fall apart like they do every year. August: can’t stand the heat. Get with the Cubs – a real team!

Mike and Jack give Ron a “What the hell do you know” look

MIKE: Fuckin’ faggot Cubs fan. (shaking head) Who the hell knows? They sure as hell’ve started off good this year.

JACK: Yep; hey Lieberman, so ya’ like the Cubs, huh? What? 84 years since their last pennant?

RON: As we say every year – “Maybe next year!”

Moran, interjecting to get Mike’s attention.

MORAN: I’m with you Mike! Sox are on their game alright. Maybe they make the playoffs, I come over to the bar and watch the games with you, huh?

MIKE: (absently) Yeah, sure….

MORAN: Hey Mike – I tell ya’ that the widow had me over for drinks last night? And her daughter was there. Short-shorts, thin little blouse, prancin’ around(Leering) askin’ for it.

MIKE: (looking up in disgust) I told ya’ I don’t wanna hear that shit.

MORAN: No, listen, I’m tellin’ ya’, I’d love to give her a shot but momma’s got my hands full, ya’ know what I mean?

MIKE: (embarrassed to be included in the conversation in front of the others) What the fuck did I tell ya? Enough of that shit!

MORAN: Hey, man, don’t mean nothin’ by it. She just got me goin’, ya’ know? (grabbing his crotch, leering)

Mike turns and slaps Moran hard across the face.

MIKE: What the hell did I tell you?!

JACK: Whoa, man!

JACKSON: Back off now, man! Ain’t no cause for that!

MORAN: (shocked, hurt, scared, rubs his face) Christ, Mike, what’d you do that for?

MIKE: Fuck it! (storms out the door, stage right)

Jack and Ron look at each other with shocked surprise, unsure of what to do or say.

MORAN: (attempting to defuse the situation and his embarrassment) Not like he didn’t know about it…..

JACK: You OK…?

MORAN: (to Jack and Ron, angrily) Hey, you assholes get the rest of that shit off the truck!

Jack and Ron nod yes and exit immediately stage left.

Tony Spaghetti enters stage right, looking over his shoulder.

TONY: Jeez, what the hell hit him?

Ron and Jack enter stage left, carrying shovels and rakes.

JACK: What the hell was that all about, Bill?

RON: Yeah, no shit (clearly shaken, worried Mike may return).

BILL: (standing in front of his locker brushing black shoe polish into his Afro)

Hell, ain’t no thang; man got a lotta heat in him. Don’t know…too long in that jungle maybe. Fuckin’ VA no help either – fucked with his head. I just stay the hell away from him – mind my business.

JACK: Bull shit! I wouldn’t let the fucker hit me like that (full of bravado).

Bill stops, looks skeptically at Jack. Moran turns his back to them.

TONY: All right, all right…. excitement’s over. Hey, you guys worked your asses off on that chipper today. Hot as hell too. (chuckling) Guess that’s why you get paid the big bucks.

JACK: (jokingly) Yeah, like you Joe – sitting on your ass all day reading the paper.

TONY: Like hell! Takes a lotta skill to drive a truck like that. And, I gotta watch out for these other fucked up drivers who don’t know what the hell they’re doing, especially the women. You shoulda’ seen it: some greasy-ass hebe in her big Caddy nearly hit me on 71st street. Oops!

Joe looks at Ron sheepishly, holding his hands up in apology. Jack laughs at the comment.

RON: Yeah, right….(shaking his head)

Jack and Ron move off to the side.

JACK: Hey Ron, when you going back to school? You workin’ the whole summer?

RON: Maybe not. Probably middle of August. Gotta be registered by September.

JACK: Same here. Not a bad summer job – pay’s OK. Helps to have a friend of the old man’s at the AD building. Politics – not what you know but who you know, right? Anyhow, sure beats workin’ at the mills.

RON: Yeah, my uncle’s in the unions. He got me the job. Still, wouldn’t wanna be doing this forever, like these guys. I’m lookin’ to go to law school one day.

JACK: Smart. My old man’s a lawyer and he’s always pushin’ it hard. “Gotta have a profession – can never take it away from you.” I’ve got some time before I need to make that decision anyway. Besides, too may of your people in law anyway. (playfully punches Ron in the arm and laughs)

RON: You gonna go to Mike’s place with Rita?

JACK: Thanks for reminding me. Wish to hell I hadn’t gotten myself into this (shaking his head). He wouldn’t let it go – kept asking me to come over. Like I give a shit about his polack bar on the east side. Now what the hell do I do? Talk about the Sox with him all night? Shit!

RON: So, you gonna bring Rita? She’s a babe!

JACK: Maybe…..she might be good to have along to keep the conversation going. You know, break the ice?

RON: More like MELT the ice…. You lucky fucker!

Mike enters stage left, acting as if nothing just happened. Moran turns his back on him and starts a conversation with Joe.

MIKE: (to nobody in particular) Long day, long week…Good to get home, get the hell outta here.

TONY: You and me both!

MIKE: Hey Kelly, you and your girlfriend comin’ by on Sunday?

JACK: (rolling his eyes at Ron) Should work. We’ll stop by around 6, OK?

MIKE: Sounds good. You can meet the old lady. Remember? I told ya’, she teaches Irish dancing? It ain’t the polka…(shaking his head)

JACK: My old man really likes that Irish shit. Really into it. Hey, maybe she’ll give us a little demo, huh?

MIKE: Yeah, maybe….(dismissing the idea out of hand). Anyhow, have a few beers. All right! I’m outta here. See all you assholes later.

Moran glares at Jack and leaves hurriedly stage left. Mike, Tony and Bill exit stage right.

JACKSON: Looks like you two close, college boy. Better watch yourself. Shit kin happen with him real fast. Heh! Heh! Leaves stage left.

Jack and Ron alone on stage.

CURTAIN, SECOND ACT

**ACT THREE**

SCENE: Plain, basic wood bar, a few liquor bottles on the shelves behind the bar, five or six stools, (one occupied), two or three cheap tables with chairs. One wall decorated with American flag, display case with medals, pictures of soldiers.

PATRON: Yo Mike? OK if I get a refill?

MIKE: (offstage) You touch that tap I’ll break your fuckin’ arm!

Mike now enters carrying boxes of beer, sets them behind bar.

PATRON: Hey! You know I’m good for it….(sullenly)

MIKE: You open your own place, do what you want. Here? My bar, my rules. And nobody touches that tap but me.

Takes Patron’s glass and refills.

PATRON: Didn’t mean no harm. Well, gotta go. (hurriedly finishing his beer)

Patron leaves as Jack and Rita enter.

JACK: Hey man! How’s it going? (looking around) Nice place; had it long?

MIKE: (staring at Rita) Just since I got back.

JACK: Sorry – fucked up! Rita: Mike, Mike: Rita. This is the guy I’ve been tellin’ you about – big shot with the tree gang.

MIKE: Yeah, big shot! ….Nowhere to go but up….get it? (all smile)

RITA: Nice to meet you. Jack talks about his job a lot. (awkwardly)

MIKE: What’ll you have? Got about everything – booze, beer – three on tap!

RITA: Can I get a glass of white wine?

MIKE: (Staring and smiling at Rita for a moment) Don’t get much call for that here…maybe my wife’s got some upstairs.

RITA: No, no, no! Please don’t bother….maybe gin and tonic?

MIKE: Now that I can do! (starts to mix drink) You? (to Jack)

JACK: Ya’ got Old Style outta one of those taps?

MIKE: Best beer in Chicago! Got it. (pulls draft) So, Rita, you work?

RITA: Just got outta college, doing a little bartending at Mother’s, looking for a job. Tough market for a drama major.

JACK: Yeah, thinks she’s an actress – gonna be in porn films! (laughing).

RITA: (visibly embarrassed) Shut the hell up Jack!

MIKE: Not nice, Jack. Better back off…

JACK: Sorry, Babe…(holding his hands up in apology) just screwin’ around.

MIKE: (smiling at Rita) College boy’s got no class. I think I’ll join ya’. (pulls a beer and pours a shot of whiskey).

JACK: Whoa! Goin’ high test, huh?

MIKE: A man’s drink! My old man showed me how it’s done. (distantly) He liked it a little too much. (drinks half the beer and shoots the shot of whiskey)

JACK: (standing taller, bravado) Yo! Let me try that.

Mike pours a shot and hands to Jack (smiling); watches Jack take a long drink of his beer and quickly drink the shot.

JACK: Oh mama! (eyes open wide, whistles)

Mike refills his and Jack’s beer and pours two more shots.

MIKE: (to Rita) How about you, movie star?

RITA: Sure, why not? Jack says you were in the Marines?

MIKE: Yeah…”a few good men and all that shit.” (sardonically)

RITA: Overseas?

MIKE: (darkens and hesitates) Yeah….a different time…

RITA: Heard there was some bad shit.

Jack moves closer.

MIKE: (distantly) Good men….buddies….brothers….didn’t really know much what it was about….just doin’ a job, ya’ know? Told us we were stopping the commies… all a crock a’ shit……these guys dyin’ for nothin,’ really? And here I stand – drinkin’ beer in my own place, good job, good wife….doesn’t seem fair….doesn’t seem right…(shaking his head somberly)

Hey! Fuck that shit! We’re here to have some fun! Drink up! (hands Rita a beer and a shot, which she quickly drinks. Mike and Jack look on approvingly)

OK, let’s have some tunes! (walks to juke box, pushes some buttons. Looks over his shoulder) Hah! Free! (music TBD starts) Another round? Let’s hit the good stuff. (retrieves bottle from shelf and refills all the beers and shots)

JACK: Anyhow, missed that shit. Got a high number in the lottery. Luck, I guess.

MIKE: You one of them peace demonstrator pussies? I got back, those fuckers spit on me at the airport! Spit on me! Motherfuckers! (drinks quickly)

JACK: A bad time, man….lotta bad shit going down.

MIKE: Hell, I got over it.

“Unchained Melody” plays on the juke box. Rita, viewing selections, sways to the music.

(to Jack) Not bad…you did all right with that. (finishes beer & shot)

JACK: She’s a pistol.

MIKE: I’d like to dance with her; you mind? (looking at Rita, not Jack)

JACK: (hesitating, looking at Rita and then Mike) Yeah, sure….

Mike comes from behind the bar and walks over to Rita at the juke box. She turns from the juke box, sees Mike, looking surprised. Glances over to Jack, hesitating, realizing that Mike wants to dance. Jack shrugs an assent, looking down. Mike holds her around her waste, slowly swaying, smiling down at her. Rita tries to increase distance from him, but Mike pulls her closer. Rita looks to Jack, who walks over and indicates he wants to break in.

JACK: My turn, man (nervously).

Mike scoffs at Jack, holding Rita tighter. Rita breaks free and goes to Jack.

MIKE: (obviously drunk, leering at Rita) No harm, man! Just tryin’ to have some fun. (walks back to the bar, pulls another beer, and drinks) Nice moves, Rita – you shoulda’ been a dancer. (snickering) Maybe your boyfriend should give it a shot too, like the other fags…

JACK: Fuck you, Mike!

MIKE: We had a lotta fruitcakes in the Marines, in basic. Always sneakin’ out behind the barracks at night. Fuckin’ faggots! We’d catch ‘em and beat the shit out of ‘em. “A few good men” my ass! First to run in a fight. (drinks beer)

JACK: (hoping to defuse the situation) How’d you end up a gyrene in the first place?

MIKE: After school, not a lot out there for guys like me. No chance for college – not one for the books, ya’ know? More interested in drinkin’ and I’ in fights. Old man dead. Mother had her hands full – didn’t want me just hangin’ out I’ fucked up with my buddies all the time. Not workin,’ just odd jobs. War heating up, guys getting’ drafted…. Hell, I ain’t no Senator’s son, as the song goes! Figured fuck it! (raises glass in toast) Loved my country….So I joined the Marines. Figured I was as tough as any of those assholes! After boot, gung ho to ship out and kick some ass. Hell, how bad could it be, right? I’m a tough-ass jarhead! Third day, out on patrol. Guy right in front of me takes one to the side of his head. Helmet pops straight up, like a joke. Except, wasn’t no joke… Shit hits the fan, and ya’ know what? I piss my pants… Over as fast as it started….never saw the motherfuckers, never got a shot off. This shit went on for thirteen months. Platoon had forty guys when we went over. Twenty-four came back, a few of ‘em, no arms, legs, balls blown off, and for what?

Takes a long drink of beer and another shot.

Never ends, man…cold sweats, hearing the screams…bad shit…

(takes another drink) But what the hell? You, sittin’ on your ass over here, checkin’ out the cheerleaders…Got real tired of you assholes lookin’ down at us with that “baby killer” shit. Goddamit! We had pride! We were Marines! We had a job to do!

JACK: It ain’t that way Mike. Yeah, we heard about that shit, but it was the whole fuckin’ thing, ya know? The war? Just got worse. Nothin’ personal…

MIKE: (Looks up sharply) What the fuck’s that supposed to mean?? You think that I had anything to do with that? You don’t get it, college! Getting’ shot at, guys droppin,’ not knowin’ where to shoot. Sometimes wrong people got wasted. Didn’t mean it – women, kids…wrong place, man, wrong place! That’s all! That’s fuckin’all! So drop it, fucker – drop it!

JACK: Didn’t mean that, man, didn’t mean that. It was just….

Mike slaps Jack, then slaps him again.

Jack, stunned, scared, shocked, backing away.

JACK: What the hell…?!

MIKE: Get the fuck outta here! And take your fancy bitch with ya!’ Hell, you didn’t want to come here in the first place. This ain’t no place for a big shot college boy! Just get outta here and leave me the fuck alone!

Jack and Rita hurry out the door. Mike stands at the bar alone, enraged and embarrassed.

MIKE: Oh fuck, oh fuck….

Scene shifts to the break room, which is empty and in partial darkness.

Childress in voiceover:

You two go home. We closed for the day. Aw, hell. Mike done shot hisself last night.

**FINIS**