

THE SECOND MEETING OF THE BETTERMENT SOCIETY
FINDING PARADISE

A short play

by Mashuq Mushtaq Deen

Contact:
M.M. Deen
Brooklyn, NY 11226
646.645.2328
mashuq.deen@gmail.com

THE SECOND MEETING OF THE BETTERMENT SOCIETY
FINDING PARADISE

A place of vulgarity and simplicity and survival.
The front porch of a ramshackle house, probably
the only house on this godforsaken mountain. A
ramshackle outhouse nearby.

GERTIE is older, tougher, meaner. She has an
eye patch and is missing a few non-essential
fingers.

DOREEN is youngest, a bit mouselike, and yet
something more.

LYNETTE is somewhere in between, and not-yet-
noticeably pregnant.

DOREEN

Hey y'all, I have an idea for something we could do to better ourselves -- we could sing
together.

GERTIE & LYNETTE

NO.

GERTIE

I aint got no use for singing.

DOREEN

You didn't have no use for quilting, either.

GERTIE

Singin's worse. You know there used to be a time when they people would come together
in a house, and a man would stand up and talk about things -- "higher things" they called
them -- and then they'd sing together, all the voices at once until the racket was crawling up
your bones and you couldn't tell one voice from the next, and then when it was all over the
man would pass around a plate and take all your money. Money you didn't even have it to
give, they'd take it. That's what singing does, casts a spell over people, and I won't tolerate
it.

DOREEN

But I hear you hum sometimes.

GERTIE

You want to hum to your own damn self, that's your business, but I will shoot you before I let you get corrupted into the ways of being some kind of spell-casting songstress, ya hear?

LYNETTE

Some people don't take much to church, Doreen.

DOREEN

I wasn't thinkin 'bout it as church.

LYNETTE

Some people 'been burned by the book,' my momma would say, they so much as smell church, they start foaming at the mouth.

GERTIE

I aint foaming.

LYNETTE

Y'are too. I don't think of church so much as those dens o' sin where they sell a fella a bottle and send 'em upstairs with whoever turns their fancy, and while their doin it to ya, there's somebody downstairs bangin on the piana or singin a song, and sometimes it's the whole place that's singing the song. And it is a racket, Gertie's right about that.

GERTIE

Is *that* how it happened?!

LYNETTE

No, that aint how *it* happened, Gertie, that's how *I* happened, and I told you to quit prying, it aint none of your business!

GERTIE

It is my goddamned business if you bring an ugly, whiny, hungry mouth to feed into my house!

LYNETTE

I thought it was our house?!

GERTIE

It's *our* house cause I say it's *our* house which means it's goddamned *my* house first!

DOREEN

We don't have to sing. We could read to each other-- or I could read to you both.

(DOREEN pulls out a handful of worn and tattered pages.)

DOREEN

When I stopped my schoolin my teacher showed me some books from her travels, and she gave me a few pages from each to have for my own. These are from the Coraan... and these are from the Bugavidguitar .. and these are from the Bible...

(GERTIE draws her gun.)

LYNETTE

Some things you ought to keep to yourself, Doreen.

GERTIE

Some books are meant to be looked at, not to be read. You wanna read something so bad, I'll pick you up a seed catalogue next time I go down the mountain.

DOREEN

They're interestin words is all.

LYNETTE

They're church words.

DOREEN

I don't think about 'em like that.

GERTIE

It's best you don't think about them at all.

(GERTIE lowers her gun.)

LYNETTE

I feel sick.

(LYNETTE goes into the outhouse.)

GERTIE

That's what words'll do to ya.

LYNETTE

Not that kind of sick.

GERTIE

Whats wrong with you now?

LYNETTE (FROM OUTHOUSE)

I feel “peaked.”

GERTIE

(to DOREEN)

Peaked means pregnant, does it?

(to the outhouse)

And whose fault is that?!

DOREEN

Here we are at the second meeting of the Betterment Society, what are we gonna do to better ourselves? Besides shoot down ideas that Doreen has.

GERTIE

That’s a good idea, Doreen. Every once in a while you say somethin and I’m reminded that we are in fact related by blood. Not often, but once in a while.

DOREEN

What’d I say--?

LYNETTE (FROM OUTHOUSE)

No, Gertie.

GERTIE

What’s that Lynette I can’t hear you. Betterment Society Meetin Two: Guns.

(GERTIE pulls out a bucket of guns, gives one to DOREEN, puts one where LYNETTE was sitting, and takes a large one for herself.)

LYNETTE (FROM OUTHOUSE)

Goddammit Gertie, the Betterment Society is for betterin ourselves--

GERTIE

Language, Lynette! And guns are betterin ourselves. Y’all aint never even cleaned a gun, you aint got no proper respect for the things. Now I’ll tell you somethin my daddy taughtme, you take care of your guns and they’ll take care of you, they’ll take care of you betterin than a woman will and that’s a fact.

LYNETTE (FROM OUTHOUSE)

Gertie, you are twistin mu Society into something else it aint s’posed to be.

GERTIE

You look down on my guns but my guns put food on the table. My guns keep you safe. You should be grateful.

LYNETTE (FROM OUTHOUSE)

Grateful! If we didn't live on a godforsaken mountain, we wouldn't need guns! I want to raise my baby somewhere better'n this, somewhere civilized. I want to learn how to be better, is that so hard to understand?

GERTIE

Civilized? Like that whore house you were born in, civilized like that?

(There's no reply from the outhouse. GERTIE tosses DOREEN a rag.)

GERTIE

(to DOREEN)

Take the bullets out first.

(They clean the guns in silence.)

DOREEN

Gertie, I got a question about "civilization."

GERTIE

What about it?

DOREEN

Well, civilization is supposed to be better, right? I mean what Lynette said, that's what people think, that things are better down the mountain than they are up here.

GERTIE

I don't think that.

DOREEN

And down the mountain is where you go when you go to town to buy and sell things.

GERTIE

What're you gettin at?

DOREEN

Well, I was just wonderin, those townies, they need you to bring them food, cause they can't grow any of their own, right?

GERTIE

So?

DOREEN

And so it seems like the things that grow, grow out here on the mountain with us. And down there, they can bullets and guns and stuff, but they can't make food.

GERTIE

You sure do tell a slow story, Doreen. You got a point to make?

DOREEN

Well, it just seems to me that their lands down there in civilization aint very fertile -- and I know you don't like no church talk, and this isn't church talk, this is just a little bit of God-talk -- but aint God, aint He--

GERTIE

God's a woman. She's too mean to be a man.

DOREEN

Um, okay, aint She, aint God, supposed to have punished the wicked people with land that done dried up and couldn't grow nothin? And weren't God supposed to love the good people, and give them fertility, so that "their herds would not diminish?"

GERTIE

I think I heard that. If you got a good life, you musta' done something good, and if you got a shit life, then you musta' done fucked up somewhere.

DOREEN

Well, my question is, well on one hand the town, they got lots of people and their herds don't seem to be diminishing. But on another hand, they don't have any fertility. So do we live on a godforsaken mountain, or do we live in paradise?

(LYNETTE emerges from the outhouse.)

LYNETTE

This aint no paradise, Doreen, no one would ever mistake this rotten spot for paradise.

DOREEN

I heard stories that they couldn't have no children no more in town -- the people had done lost their fertility, too. But you're fertile, Lynette. You're with child. So I just don't know what to make of this civilization thing -- is it a good thing, or is it a bad thing?

GERTIE

I take it back, we aint related. Clean your gun and stop thinkin so hard.

DOREEN

I was just wonderin. Lynette's condition got me wonderin.

GERTIE

"Lynette's condition" done turned our whole place upside down.

LYNETTE

Didn't you hear Doreen? God is smilin on me. You wanna blame someone, blame God.

GERTIE

Is that how you got knocked up? God came down and stuck it in you?

LYNETTE

I guess so.

GERTIE

And what exactly did "God" look like?

LYNETTE

More handsome than *you*.

DOREEN

Was it someone from town?

LYNETTE

No. The stories are true, they caint make no babies in town no more.

DOREEN

"And he did not let their herd diminish." That's the only bit I really remember. You think it's like a punishment or something?

LYNETTE

Oh I don't know about that, but there's so many people in town they're about to start eating each other, so I think thinning the herd might be a good thing.

GERTIE

You been goin to town, have you?

LYNETTE

I went twice.

GERTIE

Lyin to me the whole while.

LYNETTE

Twice -- once when I was a kid to see where my momma used to work, and once recently. It didnt come to nothin.

GERTIE

You're a whore, Lynette. Just like your momma.

LYNETTE

Maybe I am. I don't know, I sure don't get paid like my momma got paid.

GERTIE

So who was it then. Who did it to ya?

LYNETTE

Gertie--

GERTIE

Tell me goddammit, I wanna hear it from your mouth -- who did it to ya? And where do they live cause I'm gonna shoot them, repeatedly with all of my guns.

LYNETTE

Gertie, it doesn't matter who it was--

GERTIE

It matters--

LYNETTE

They're dead, Gertie. I shot 'em. After it was done. He was a handsome fella, as sweet as a fella from the south ravine could be, but, well, anyway, he's not around anymore.

GERTIE

You killed him dead? You checked?

LYNETTE

I checked.

DOREEN

Why'd you kill him, Lynette?

LYNETTE

I guess I knew that Gertie'd kill him, and I figured it'd be easier comin from me. He was surprised, that's for sure.

GERTIE

You killed him.

LYNETTE

Yep. I didn't want a man, Gertie, I have you. I wanted a child.

GERTIE

So. What are you gonna do about it?

LYNETTE

What do you mean?

GERTIE

You went and started growin a child inside you without so much as asking me. Who's gonna take care of it? Who's gonna feed it? Y'all excited about makin the child civilized, you done forgot about keeping it alive.

LYNETTE

I didn't forget. I'll figure it out.

GERTIE

You plannin on stayin here?

LYNETTE

Yeah.

GERTIE

Then you aint get to make the decision on your own.

LYNETTE

This is *my* child, *mine*. No one gets to decide nothin except me.

GERTIE

You wanna give birth up here on the mountain? Who's gonna do your chores while you're feelin peaked, as you been? You gonna be needin doctorin to have a baby, and that costs money. How you gonna get the money?

LYNETTE

I dont know, Gertie, I havent thought it all through yet.

GERTIE

You best be thinkin on it. Maybe you can get Doreen to help you, she likes thinkin.

DOREEN

I'll help you, Lynette.

LYNETTE

I don't need any help, Doreen, I just need some time.

DOREEN

I always been the youngest. I won't be the youngest anymore. Ya think maybe the chile could go to school? Or I could teach it some readin or writin, jus what I know which isn't a lot, but some.

LYNETTE

I aint decided nothin yet.

GERTIE

Course, you got options. You could go down the mountain.

LYNETTE

Down the mountain?

GERTIE

Pick your paradise. Right, Doreen?

LYNETTE

Neither of them's paradise. There aint no paradise, no such thing.

DOREEN

Gertie, I don't want Lynette to leave.

GERTIE

Fact remains, she needs some money. And she aint got much to seel that those town folks would pay for. 'Cept maybe one thing that they can't make for themselves no more. It's *ironic*, is what it is.

(GERTIE continues cleaning her guns.)

LYNETTE

I'd shoot myself before I'd sell it.

(GERTIE finished cleaning the gun. Checks the barrel. Loads it and spins the wheel.)

(GERTIE holds the gun out to LYNETTE.)

(LYNETTE looks at the gun and looks away.)

(Fade to black.)

END OF PLAY.