

DINAH

by Ken Green

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

DINAH, 25, Enslaved woman in the Wanton household in Newport, R.I. Closely works with SARAH. Occasional gets visits from her husband, JAMES, an enslaved man who works at the shipyard. Has a three-year-old son, NEWPORT

JAMES, 25, shipyard worker in Newport, R.I., and an enslaved man. Husband of DINAH, but lives on the Champlin property in NEWPORT. Considering a possibly dangerous path to freedom.

SARAH, 25, wife of prominent Loyalist politician Joseph Wanton Jr. From a prominent family that is loyal to the crown.

ACT I

SETTING: The Hunter House

TIME: May 1778, late afternoon

SCENE: DINAH is walking to the Hunter House. She is carrying a basket of laundry. She is about to enter when JAMES approaches. He is coming from work at the shipyard and heading home to the Champlin house, where he lives, but has gone a bit out of his way to see DINAH.

JAMES

Afternoon, Dinah.

She turns and sees it's JAMES.
She's a little miffed at him, and
it shows. He repeats himself.

Good afternoon, Dinah

DINAH

(Coldly) I heard you the first time, James.

JAMES

And yet I stand here still hoping for a response.

She keeps walking. He finishes the
"conversation" without her.

"Oh, good afternoon, James, wonderful to see you as always.
And where are you going this fine day? Home after a hard
morning working at the shipyard, I presume?..."

She relents, but is still a bit
cool.

DINAH

Good afternoon, James.

JAMES

There. Not as difficult as you might have believed it to be,
was it?

She ignores his attempt at "humor."
He tries small talk.

We've had some decent weather recently. Not too hot.

DINAH

I suppose.

JAMES continues to keep the
conversation going.

JAMES

Not the best conditions, mind you, but if a person must work
at the shipyard coating a deck with hot tar, I would much
prefer a day such as this one.

DINAH

James...

JAMES

Most other days, it can be much too hot to spread tar. It can
make you feel as though you are standing in the depths of
Hell itself.

DINAH

James...

JAMES

No, ma'am, I do not care for it...

A few beats. She gives him a look.

DINAH

James, did you interrupt my chores to talk about the weather
and tar?

JAMES

If it means I get to speak to you, I will discuss whatever
topic you wish, Dinah. The smell of the flowers. The blueness
of the sky above us. (Pause for emphasis) The beauty of your
eyes...

She is unimpressed.

DINAH

You spread flattery with the same ease as you do tar.

JAMES

Thank you. I had hoped you would notice that I...

DINAH

It was not meant as a compliment. I have work to do, James. Mrs. Wanton has little patience for dawdling these days, so unless you have something of importance to discuss...

JAMES

(Miffed) I was merely pausing on my way home from work to say hello.

DINAH

Which you have done. Now, I have laundry to put away, the house is an absolute mess, we are having guests for dinner this evening, and Mrs. Wanton will be returning soon and most likely not in a good mood. Good evening, James.

JAMES

I know you have much to do, as have I, but...

She turns to leave.

Dinah, I swear, you can be the most stubborn...

She relaxes a bit.

DINAH

Which is something I suppose we have in common.

Their moods lighten a bit.

JAMES

One of many things.

DINAH

Again, that was not intended as a compliment, James.

JAMES

Still has some truth attached to it.

A beat.

DINAH

(Softer) James, the Wantons are hosting British officers for dinner tonight, and Mrs. Wanton insists everything be perfect. I'm sorry, but I MUST...

JAMES

Only a moment, Dinah.

She relents and puts down the basket, and he takes her hand.

DINAH

A moment. And I'll remind you we've already discussed tar.
(Pause) I take it work at the shipyard goes well.

JAMES

As well as can be expected these days. But I much prefer it to the fields.

DINAH

Then it's good that Mr. Champlin permits you to work there.

JAMES

The wages he earns for MY sweat probably carry more weight than my desire. But I am grateful nonetheless.

DINAH

You've been drawn to that dock for as long as I have known you.

JAMES

Have I?

DINAH

James, you were there every Sunday when permitted, and every errand Mr. Champlin gave you had somehow included a route that went past it. Believe me, I saw you.

They laugh.

JAMES

Oh, so you noticed.

DINAH

I noticed. (A bit more solemn) These days, you're one of the few who actually seem pleased to work there.

JAMES

Well, work has increased recently, but...

He looks around before speaking
again in more hushed tones.

...so has the anger. The British make demands of everything and everyone. I do as they say, of course, but there are those on both sides who no longer hide their resentment.

DINAH

As it is all over town. The arguments and fighting in the streets... The Wantons welcome the British presence, of course, but Mrs. Wanton still cautions me to limit my contact with the soldiers when I run errands.

JAMES

As do I, but it is difficult. Though the sight of those billowing sails taking those ships far out to sea does lift my spirits. Even the stench of the tar cannot diminish that.

DINAH

You have a wandering soul.

JAMES

You know me well. (Back to regular conversation tone) Speaking of which, if the Wantons will permit, I was thinking that you, Newport, and I might go to the church Sunday evening. There is to be music there.

DINAH

I had already planned on attending with our son.

JAMES

(Mock angry) Did you not think of asking me?

DINAH

(Coyly) I was considering it. I actually have a new duku for the occasion.

She mimes putting on a head wrap and "models" it playfully. They laugh.

JAMES

Perhaps I might even call on you earlier. We can walk through the square before the concert. Just the three of us.

DINAH

Then it will be on you to keep our son under control. He may be only three, but Newport has the same wandering spirit as his father. He scampers away at any opportunity.

JAMES

(Laughing) I know that well. The last time I was forced to run after him, calling, "Newport! Newport!" More than one person shouted back, "We know where we are!"

They share a laugh.

DINAH

I suppose it might have been better for all had the Wantons given him a less confusing name. (Wistful) I suspect they thought it a small tribute to this town... regardless of our situation.

JAMES

Where is he now? I'd like to see him if I may.

DINAH

He is napping. I'm sorry, James.

JAMES is a bit saddened.

(Playfully) You act as if you enjoy our company.

JAMES

I would spend every minute with my family if I could, you know that.

Another smile. Tone shift.

DINAH

And yet...

She pauses. Holding back a tear?

Back to low speaking tones.

Have you made a decision?

He hesitates.

JAMES

Not as of yet. (Pause) But I lean toward enlisting.

DINAH

Which does not surprise me.

He steps closer to DINAH, she pulls back a little. (Do they find a secluded spot for "real talk"?)

JAMES

It now appears General Washington is very eager for us to join the fight. Finally.

DINAH

Eager for fresh bodies is closer to the truth.

JAMES

Dinah...

DINAH

(Loud whisper) James, it is no secret that the Patriots struggle to fill their ranks these days. The passion they once had to fight seems to have been replaced with self-preservation.

JAMES

I will not deny they are having difficulty these days finding men to fight.

DINAH looks around.

DINAH

White men.

JAMES

Fine, white men who are willing to protect their interests behind the barrel of a gun.

DINAH

Their possessions seem to matter more to them than their patriotism. The road out of this town was a busy one when the British first arrived.

JAMES

Yet their departure has forced Washington to see the spirit that WE offer.

DINAH

(Sarcasm) And I am sure you all will be welcomed into their ranks with much fanfare.

JAMES

I do not desire fanfare, merely the opportunity.

DINAH

So you HAVE decided...

JAMES

Not as of yet, but I would be proud to fight for our righteous cause.

DINAH

Do you not mean THEIR cause?

JAMES

Ours, Dinah. I'm sorry, but your tone suggests that you do not understand...

DINAH

My "tone" is not one of confusion, James, but disappointment at how quick you are to surrender your life for them.

JAMES

The situation is not as desperate as you make it out to be. The Patriots may have difficulties on the battlefield...

DINAH

Again, I venture into town occasionally, James, and I hear the stories.

JAMES

As do I.

DINAH

Hundreds at Oriskany. Over one thousand at Brandywine...

JAMES

But there are victories as well. (Quietly) And the British suffer their own defeats.

DINAH

Mr. Wanton said that at Camden, nearly two thousand Patri...

JAMES

(Angry, voice a little too high) I am sure the Wantons make note of every drop of Patriot blood that falls.

DINAH panics. Does what she needs
to do to quiet him. (hand over
mouth?)

DINAH

James, lower your voice! The Wantons may be Loyalists, but they do not derive joy from the death of fellow Colonists.

He relents. A bit.

JAMES

Dinah, I am at the docks nearly every day. Men walk off those ships with stories like the ones you tell... and worse.
(Pause) I wish none of this were happening.

DINAH

And yet here you stand, ready to...

JAMES

Merely considering. Dinah, they offer something a man such as I would be a fool to ignore.

DINAH

...putting your life in their hands for...

JAMES

Freedom, Dinah. Enlisting is one of the few paths men such as I can walk to reach it.

DINAH

I am aware of the prize they dangle, James. Enlistment for freedom.

JAMES

And is that not worth joining the fight?

DINAH

Only if you are positive you will survive.

JAMES

Still a risk worth considering.

DINAH

Apparently. We have friends here who talk of nothing else.

JAMES

And why would they not? The free Negro men who are already serving have proven our worth, as have the Native men who serve as well. For Washington to ignore that would have been foolish. And I am far from alone in considering this. York, Cato, Brutus, and many others are ready to join here in Newport.

DINAH

And Connecticut, and Massachusetts, and Maine, I know, I know. It's clear that General Washington has stirred something with his... First... Regimented...

JAMES

First Rhode Island Regiment.

DINAH

An impressive name. Washington apparently knows how to strike at men's passions.

JAMES

Credit goes to General Varnum as well. It is he who actually convinced Washington to let us show our mettle.

DINAH

After much prodding, I hear.

JAMES

Perhaps, but Mr. Champlin says that even the newspapers cannot avoid reporting on the bravery of Negro soldiers at Lexington, Bunker Hill... Believe me, Washington has no doubt seen the benefits of his decision.

DINAH

(Sarcastic) Then I'll be sure to thank him and Mr. Champlin for permitting you to lay your life on the line for them.

JAMES

Not "them," Dinah, I would be doing this for US. You, our son, myself. Us.

A look. They connect on a different level.

DINAH

You would be enlisting because Mr. Champlin cannot be bothered to stand up himself and fight for the "freedom" he claims to hold so dear.

JAMES

He has a trading business to maintain AND must do it while in exile. (Checks surroundings) But he is contributing to the Patriot cause.

DINAH

And that contribution is you. He avoids spilling his own blood, but would gratefully receive compensation so that you can spill yours. How much does he receive, James? How much are you worth to him?

Pause while he contemplates how
much his life is worth.

JAMES

It may not be an ideal situation, but it is the one I must
consider.

DINAH

It is a confounding way to build a nation based on "liberty."

JAMES

But why would I reject the opportunity it provides me?

DINAH

You do know the British make a similar offer.

JAMES

Of course.

DINAH

Freedom in exchange for service. The same as the Patriots.
Why have you not considered...

JAMES

I know you spend most of your time attending to the Wantons'
needs, but must I hear their words out of your mouth?

DINAH

MY words, James. Mine. Why would you not join the fight with
the British? Their rule is far from perfect, but it has
served us well. What do the Patriots offer but uncertainty?
They cannot even raise a proper army.

JAMES is about to speak...

AND I remind you it was the British who first made the offer,
who saw men like you as worthy of fighting by their side. If
we show loyalty to the crown now, why would it not be
rewarded later? Might our future not be better in their
hands?

JAMES

The nation's future, but not mine. Dinah, it is under their
laws that we currently live. With the Patriots, there is a
chance that things could change, start anew. And joining the
British would mean I would have to run away. Mr. Champlin
would not be compensated for my service in battle, and
instead, there would be a price on my head that would be an
even bigger target than a red coat on my back.

DINAH

You would still be free.

JAMES

Would I? The British will not be here forever. They will return to England, and I will still be here. Would my freedom be honored once they are gone? You know what they do to recaptured slaves, don't you? Where they send them? I would have to give up everything. Give up you and Newport.

Another moment.

DINAH

But, James, so many others have taken the offer.

JAMES

It makes it no less of a risk.

DINAH

The British possess the most powerful army in the world. Joining them is far from a risk. Their arms open wider to you than those of the Patriots. They treat their Negro troops like actual MEN. Give them guns instead of a shovel or a cook's apron. Are the Patriots willing to put a musket in your hands?

JAMES

They may have been hesitant to do so at the start, but these days Negro soldiers fight alongside whites, muzzle to muzzle. They WANT us to help free this country, and free ourselves.

DINAH is miffed at being proven
wrong.

DINAH

Well... I am still skeptical of any promises made by the Patriots. They were quick to run from this town rather than stand and defend their beliefs. They are not to be trusted.

JAMES

Meanwhile, the British fight to keep things as they are and keep US as we are. Dinah, the Patriots want to set a new course for this land. And if we can be a part of that...

DINAH

They shout of freedom and liberty on one hand and carry a whip in the other. And they have not loosened their grip. Their "new course" leads back to a familiar place, I suspect.

JAMES

Then this is where we disagree.

DINAH

Again.

Pause.

JAMES

Apologies again, Dinah. I did not come here to cause strife.

DINAH

I know, James. Our imagination sometimes interferes with the reality of our...

Over JAMES' shoulder, DINAH sees
SARAH approach. She alerts JAMES
silently, and both stiffen and
quickly end their conversation

SARAH

There you are, Dinah. Have you finished the laundry?

DINAH

I have it here, Mrs. Wanton. I was just about to put it away.

SARAH

Very good. Elizabeth and Ruth are...?

DINAH

Preparing for the dinner.

SARAH

Make sure the girls' dresses are crisp. Again, British officers. It's important they make a good impression. And Joseph Jr.?

DINAH

Napping, Mrs. Wanton.

SARAH

Excellent. And, Dinah, there will be eight of us, so set the table accordingly. The best dinnerware, flowers perhaps...

DINAH

Of course, Mrs. Wanton.

She finally acknowledges JAMES.

SARAH

And how are you today, James?

JAMES

Just fine, Mrs. Wanton. I was just on my way home from work and stopped to speak with Dinah.

SARAH

Have you seen your son? He looks more like you each day.

DINAH

He is napping as well, Mrs. Wanton.

JAMES

Perhaps I can see him tomorrow?

SARAH

Certainly. And how are things at the shipyard? I hear activity there is increasing.

JAMES

Indeed, it is. Ships arrive every day bringing goods from Europe. Linen, wine, wax... the other day we received a shipment of...

SARAH

(Cutting him off) It seems the British presence has brought some much-needed stability to our town. Even if so many others fail to appreciate this.

JAMES

Yes, ma'am.

SARAH

And the extra work it affords you should please Mr. Champlin.

JAMES

Indeed, ma'am.

SARAH

Perhaps his continued good fortune will convince him of the benefits of loyalty to the crown.

JAMES

I'm sure he appreciates it, Mrs. Wanton.

SARAH

And yet so many don't, James. Frankly, the way some people in this town have treated British soldiers - not to mention my own husband - has been dreadful. Of course, conflict between the enlisted men and residents is to be expected, but the officers don't deserve such scorn. Do they, James?

JAMES

No, ma'am.

SARAH

They merely want to keep the peace. You see them every day, do you not, James? And things have gone well for you, have they not? You have employment, and little want for anything else. As does Dinah.

DINAH

We were just saying that, Mrs. Wanton. James was telling me how much he enjoys his work.

SARAH

As he should. You are a fortunate person, James. I realize you may have no substantial stake in the outcome of this war, but your people, the free and the servants, will still benefit when this is all over. You will all be well taken care of.

JAMES and DINAH share a look.

DINAH

He knows that, Mrs. Wanton. We're grateful for the opportunity. (Pause) Aren't we, James?

JAMES seethes a bit underneath but keeps it in check.

JAMES

Indeed, we are, Mrs. Wanton. I hope to see many more opportunities in the near future.

SARAH

And more to come. Well, good evening, James. Dinah has work to do. Say your goodbyes, Dinah, and meet me in the parlor.

SARAH leaves. They wait until she is out of earshot.

DINAH

Thank you, James. I know how difficult it is to hold your tongue, and she can be a particular test of one's patience these days.

JAMES

You no doubt know better than I. I feared not only offending her but enduring an even longer lecture. Speaking of which... (Pause, look around, whisper) You've heard the stories of Mr. Wanton.

DINAH

From Obour and Duchess and several other women at the church. He seems determined to live up to his name. They have been wed but three years, and yet he already strays from his vows. The presence of the British seems to have emboldened him. (Pause) But Mrs. Wanton remains loyal to both him and the crown, even though both have cost her.

JAMES

It will cost her even more should the British lose.

DINAH

And us as well. Our fate...

JAMES

Yours, mine, our son's...

DINAH

...is unfortunately tied to this family.

JAMES

And to Mr. Champlin. (Pause) The devil we know...

DINAH

...is still a devil.

SARAH calls from the distance.

SARAH

Dinah! Please! I need you now!

DINAH

(Calling back) Yes, Mrs. Wanton, right away! (To JAMES) James, when you do go...

JAMES

I have not made up my mind.

DINAH

You have already decided.

JAMES

Dinah...

She motions for him to hold for a moment.

DINAH

Fine, IF you decide to enlist, I do not think you should...return. Here. To Newport.

JAMES

What? I don't understand...

DINAH

When this is all over... you should not return.

JAMES

Nonsense, Dinah. We are a family. I will be free, and we will have a life together, the three of us. Here.

DINAH

James.

She grabs his hands, pulls him closer.

Do. Not. Come back.

JAMES is puzzled.

James. I will miss you. WE will miss you. More than anything. Our child will be taken care of here. Mrs. Wanton will make sure of that. But what opportunities await you here should you return?

JAMES

WHEN I return...

A moment. They both realize he's made a decision.

DINAH

You will be yet another free Negroes walking these streets. Opportunities are already scarce. Where will you work? Who will pay another free Negro to work when a slave stands at the ready?

JAMES

I will find work at the shipyard again. There will be much to do there after this battle is over and regular trade resumes. I now have skills that...

DINAH

This town may never be the same ever again. If the British win, they will make every Patriot pay for their defiance.

JAMES

And if the Patriots win?

DINAH

They may enjoy nothing more than the chance to flaunt their newly won power over Loyalists - and others. The Wantons will not be welcome here, and if they leave, Newport and I...

JAMES

You don't know that. This will be a new place.

DINAH

If they want to give you your freedom, take it and find somewhere where it will best serve you. That will allow you to flourish. We will all be with each other again, I am sure of it. But let it be somewhere other than this place.

JAMES thinks. A beat. They embrace.
He begins to leave.

JAMES

Sunday, Dinah.

DINAH

Sunday.

END