

ALL THINGS BEING EQUAL

BY FAYE SHOLITON

CHARACTERS

CARRIE (30s), a social studies teacher; liberal, Jewish; BERTA (30s), a social studies teacher; liberal, African-American

SCENE

A high-school classroom in Liberty Falls, Ohio

TIME

1976

In team-teaching the high-school social studies class, CARRIE and BERTA find that their liberal views are not always in agreement.

BERTA: Tomorrow, we're going to talk about one of those places the Constitution didn't reach: the U.S. Military. How many of you have heard of Port Chicago? ... It's not in the textbook, children. Port Chicago was a naval installation on the Sacramento River. On July 14, 1944, something happened on the docks. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted, in some part, because of what happened that night. Look it up. This, too, is American history. *(Bell rings, scraping of chairs. Then silence.)*

CARRIE: You gonna give me a hint?

BERTA: There was an explosion.

CARRIE: With racial implications.

BERTA: Well, who do you think was doin' all the grunt work? You know, I don't think you ever told me what your daddy did during the war.

CARRIE: Is that what this is all about?

BERTA: I'm asking for a reason.

CARRIE: Fine. He was in the Army. Quartermaster Corps.

BERTA: I see. An officer?

CARRIE: Captain. Why?

BERTA: Then you know that his Negroes were nothin' more than slaves in uniform.

CARRIE: No, I don't. I mean, he never...

BERTA: No, I don't suppose he did. Well, my daddy was Quartermaster Corps, too. Only Navy.

CARRIE: He was at Port Chicago?

BERTA: He got one, maybe two days of so-called "training" before pulling ammo duty.

CARRIE: How many died?

BERTA: Three hundred twenty-some. Hundreds more injured. And the ones who survived? Sent right back to work, ten days later. Except some of them made a stand. Got themselves sentenced to fifteen years' hard labor.

CARRIE: My God.

BERTA: Oh, they were released after sixteen months. But with dishonorable discharges. And you know who defended them? Thurgood Marshall... I told you there was a link.

CARRIE: How come you never mentioned this when we were planning the unit?

BERTA: I just get weary hearing about your mama this and your mama that. It's time we talked about your daddy.

CARRIE: There's nothing to tell. He managed properties... in the city.

BERTA: Properties.

CARRIE: Near downtown. That's all. End of story.

BERTA: But as Captain Rice...

CARRIE: Actually, it was Captain Reisenfeld. And he requisitioned supplies.

BERTA: And he never spoke of the men under his command?

CARRIE: Hill's right. You *do* have an ax to grind.

BERTA: Did he talk about his buddies? Go to any reunions?

CARRIE: It's not as if he landed on Omaha Beach, for God's sake!

BERTA: ... Show you photographs?

(The light dims.)

CARRIE: ... They were all black.

BERTA: Uh-huh.

CARRIE: Look. His point of reference back then was the silver screen. Negroes dug ditches. Indians carried tomahawks.

BERTA: So your sainted mama married Archie Bunker.

CARRIE: Like I said. He was a product of his time.

BERTA: So was she.

CARRIE: They divorced in nineteen sixty-two. And he's been dead for seven years, okay? Could we talk about something else?

BERTA: Carrie. Honey. When are you gonna take off those Pollyanna braids? In case you haven't noticed, we're different.

CARRIE: If you're talking about race,

BERTA: Well *somebody* should.

CARRIE: That's what the whole Civil Rights Movement was for! To make sure it *didn't* matter!

BERTA: Perhaps it has to matter before it doesn't. Sooner or later, race always rears its ugly head. Somebody launches a grenade and we retreat to our bunkers. We're *wired* that way. And pretending we're not won't get us diddly squat.

CARRIE: Well, if we haven't been talking about race these last few months, what the hell have we been talking about?

BERTA: Damned if I know. But I got this feeling, keep asking myself, "What does this woman want from me?" ... Tell me, Carrie. How many black people in your address book? I'm not talking about your old housekeeper; either. I'm talking about heart-friends. Peers.

CARRIE: Well, how many white people in *yours*? Or don't you have any peers?

BERTA: What we just experienced was a moment of pure, unadulterated honesty.

CARRIE: I was merely trying to prove a point.

BERTA: Which was ...

CARRIE: ... I have no idea.

BERTA: Lord, I wish you'd stop trying so hard.

(*Pause.*)

CARRIE: Have you ever had your mouth washed out with soap? When I was in tenth grade, I wrote this amazing essay about the end of civilization. How we had already proven ourselves capable of pushing the nuclear button. My teacher entered it in a citywide competition and told me it was almost certain to win ... Well, she failed to mention she'd entered another girl's essay, too. A black kid who wrote about fair housing—about the office *my mom* had co-founded! ... Well, the day they announced the winner, I have to say, I got a little screamed. I had already planned where I was going to spend the prize money ... Unfortunately, my mother was passing through while I was venting to a friend ... I can still taste the soap. What's so funny?

BERTA: What that black girl was probably saying about *you*.

CARRIE: If I'm to be your heart friend, what the hell am I supposed to be doing?

BERTA: One day you will enter my world.

CARRIE: I've been waiting for an invitation.

BERTA: When you get there, I'll need you to hold it together.

(*Pause.*)

CARRIE: Does this have anything to do with why I've never met your husband?

BERTA: You've never met him, because he's been in the hospital.

CARRIE: Oh. Oh, God! You can't imagine what I thought.

BERTA: About a black man who abandoned his wife and baby. Let me guess.

CARRIE: I'm an idiot.

BERTA: He's at the V.A., Carrie ... It's where I go on Sundays.

CARRIE: ... I'll be damned.

BERTA: What?

(*Bell rings.*)

CARRIE: You know, you can be a royal pain in the ass.

BERTA: You have no idea.