

“Watching Over Me”

A Short Docudrama Screenplay by
James Kemp and Derrald Etheley

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Watching Over Me

Scene 1 – Granddaddy’s Cabin

Setting – In a rural area of southern Tennessee, the year is 1955, at the former slave cabin on a small farm. Corn can be seen in the background and appears almost ready for picking. There is a simple, arrow back chair on the porch.

Characters –

Young Derrald – Dawsen Williams

Young brother Buddy – (not cast as of 9/18/2021)

Shot 1 – Long shot of a cabin with wisps of smoke coming from the chimney.

Shot 2 – Long Shot of Young Derrald and older brother Buddy running around in the front yard. Buddy swings an old corn stalk as if to hit Derrald if the two ever came close to each other. For the duration of the narrative, Young Derrald outmaneuvers Buddy.

DERRALD (Present day prerecorded narrative)

I have hard that over time, bad times fade in our memories and the good memories remain. Especially

the warm and meaningful memories. Perhaps, we remember the mental images those memories have left upon us. Perhaps, when recalled, those images form who we become. Perhaps, over time, those images take the form of the kindness we give, and the love we pass on to others.

As the years pass, feelings and emotions become forms that blow in the wind like pollen. Like seeds from a dandelion drifting on a summer breeze. But somewhere deep inside, there are still images that hold darkness. If you befriend that darkness, you could just stay in that darkness when it's time to move on. If you stir the sediment of those dark memories, they might just blow and drift through the air. For the darkness and hurt in life could naturally fall and settle in the mind.

When enough tears have fallen upon that settled darkness, perhaps in that wet sediment, there comes a place where the roots of wisdom take hold from which kindness can grow.

But if stirred up without wisdom, perhaps a dustbowl of darkness will blow, and those images might become like more coarse like sand, and anger will be ground open. The dark images of hurt and regret emerge until forgiveness is left for dead. Darkness, dust and ashes might be all that remains.

(Fade to Scene 2)

Scene 2 – Derrald’s brother Buddy speaks from present time.

Setting – Derrald’s older brother Buddy as an adult, speaks from an abstract pastiche props.

Characters –

Adult Brother Buddy – Michael Chenault

Shot 1 – Gauzy, out of focus torso shot of the adult Buddy. He wears sporty, contemporary clothes.

ADULT BUDDY

That summer of 1955 was something else. Our poor mother was moving us around from one relative to another. I didn’t really know then why she wanted to leave our home in San Francisco. But first, she packed us all up, me and my younger sister we call Sissy, and our younger brother Derrald and off we went to Texas first.

I don't recall much about the trip. I know Texas has a lot of big cock roaches. That's where I first used a rubber band to snap those boogers. So, I was glad when we packed up again and went off to my Granddaddy's farm in Tennessee.

But we didn't stay long in Tennessee either before Mama decided it was time to go back to San Francisco.

What do I remember about Tennessee? Not much. It was late summer and there was lots of corn growing everywhere, Grampa's cabin was kind of small for him and the four of us. There was an old wood-fired stove in one room where Mama fried up eggs and bacon for breakfast and fried chicken and crawfish for dinner and supper.

My job was to fetch eggs from the hen house. I still recall the smell of that place – like a room soaked in ammonia. I watched Grampa kill a rooster once. Grampa took the oldest rooster in the barnyard, laid him down with a crow bar across his neck and then pulled on his feet. That rooster's head came right off and the headless rooster ran around the barnyard for a minute or so without his head.

Then. Mama and Sissie had a tub of boiling water outside the cabin. Mama dunked the headless rooster in the boiling water and soon, it was easy to pull off his feathers. Supper time!

Anyway, my younger brother Derrald was a pain back then. Always whining about how I mistreated him. I thought Grampa took Derrald's part most of the time and blamed me for everything.

So, when the day came for us to pack up and take the train back to San Francisco, I was glad. Then, all of a sudden this young friend of Grampa’s named Driver, shows up with this magazine. Driver shows it to Grampa and they both got real serious. Something about a murder that took place just across the state line in Mississippi. They said a 14 year-old male who had come South from Chicago, to visit relatives like we did, was kidnapped and beat to death and thrown into a river. His name was Emmet Till.

(Fade to Scene 3)

Scene 3 – Tennessee Slave Cabin, Summer of 1955

Setting – The front porch of a Tennessee former slave cabin owned Derrald’s grandfather. Derrald and his older brother Buddy are outside the cabin.

Characters –

Young Derrald – Dawsen Williams

Grandfather – Frederick Walker

Young Brother Buddy – (not cast as of 9/18/2021)

Shot 1 – Close up of Young Derrald seated on the cabin porch, using a stick to stir up a colony of ants in the dirt below the porch.

Shot 2 – Close up of Young Derrald with a shadowy figure approaching him from behind.

Shot 3 – Closeup of two hands with a rubber band stretched between the fingers and pulling back on the rubber band.

Shot 4 – Close up of Young Derrald as the rubber band is snapped against the back of his neck.

YOUNG DERRALD

Ouch! Buddy, that hurt, Buddy. Stop it or I’m tellin’ Mama.

Shot 5 – Torso shot of Buddy repositioning his rubber band between his fingers.

BUDDY

You ain’t gonna tell Mama nothin’, Derrald or I snap you again when Mama ain’t lookin’. And leave those ants alone. They be comin’ in the cabin before you know it. Just like them big cockroaches down in Texas did.

Shot 6 - Torso shot of Young Derrald as he stands up and shakes his “ant” stick at Buddy.

YOUNG DERRALD

See this here stick, Buddy? Less you leave me be, you know what I do with it?

Shot 7 – Torso shot of Buddy stretching out the rubber band and calculating its next snap.

BUDDY

What you gonna do with that stick, Derrald?

Shot 8 – Long shot of the porch with the two boys turning toward a shadow that fills the porch. Buddy hides the rubber band behind his back as Derrald hides his stick.

Shot 9 – Torso shot of Grandfather.

GRANDFATHER

Well, well. What we got here any how? Cain and Abel all over again?

Shot 10 – Long shot of the three characters facing off on the porch.

YOUNG DERRALD

Who is Cain and Abel, Grampa?

Shot 11 – Torso shot of Grandfather.

GRANDFATHER

Who was Cain and Abel? Buddy, can you tell your little brother who Cain and Abel was?

Shot 12 – Close up of Buddy.

BUDDY

I had a friend named Cain in my Sunday School class back in San Francisco. But I ain't got no idea who Abel was.

Shot 13 – Close up of Grandfather.

GRANDFATHER

Well, Buddy, I ain't talkin' 'bout no friend back in San Francisco. I'm talkin' 'bout the two sons of

Adam and Eve. You know who they was don't cha, Buddy? Adam and Eve?

Shot 14 – Close up of Buddy.

BUDDY

I heard of them in Sunday School. They was the first man and the first woman.

Shot 15 – Close up of Grandfather

GRANDFATHER

That's right, Buddy. Adam and Eve had two sons name of Cain and Abel. And one day, when they was out watchin' sheep, Cain got real jealous of Abel and hit Abel over the head with a log and killed him.

Shot 16 – Close up of Buddy.

BUDDY

Grampa, I didn't hit Derrald with no log.

Shot 17 - Close up of Grandfather.

GRANDFATHER

No, but you done somethin' to Derrald or Derrald wouldn't of yelled ouch. What you got behind your back there, Buddy?

Shot 18 – Torso shot of Buddy’s back as he quickly slips the rubber band into a back pocket and then holds out both hands for inspection.

BUDDY

Grampa, I ain’t got nothin’ back there. I don’t know why Derrald yelled ouch. Maybe one of them ants bit him.

Shot 19 – Close up of Derrald.

YOUNG DERRALD

Wasn’t no ant what bit me. Buddy snapped me with somethin’. And it weren’t the first time. He snapped me before. Right on my neck

Shot 20 – Long shot of the three characters on the porch steps as Buddy and Derrald argue back and forth,

YOUNG DERRALD and BUDDY

Did not! Did too! (Etc.)

Shot 21 – Torso shot of Grandfather, Buddy and Derrald. A galvanized bucket can be seen sitting on the porch.

GRANDFATHER

STOP! Both of you stop. One of you is lyin', but I don't spose we gonna find out who any time soon. Buddy, your poor mama and your sister is inside there workin' like dogs to get you all packed up and ready to go to the train station in Jackson tomorrow, so's you all can get back home to San Francisco.

Now Buddy, you take this bucket and go on down to the creek and grab us some crawfish for supper. Derrald you come on with me.

Shot 22 – Long shot of Grandfather taking Derrald's hand and walking around to the back of the cabin as Buddy walks off camera.

(Fade to Scene 4)

Scene 4 – Derrald’s sister Susie speaks from present time.

Setting – Derrald’s older sister Sissie, speaks from an abstract pastiche of prop items.

Characters –

Adult Sister Sissie – Lemon Marin

Shot 1 – Gauzy, out of focus torso shot of the adult Sissie. She wears sporty, contemporary clothes.

ADULT SISTER SISSIE

The day before we took the train back to San Francisco, I was in Granddaddy’s kitchen bakin’ cookies with Mama. Derrald come in a couple of times and tried to grab some out of the cookie jar in the kitchen. Well, it wasn’t really a kitchen room as such; just a part of one big room that happened to have a wood stove on one wall.

Me and mama managed to keep Derrald from getting’ any cookies. Then, Mama got tired of Derrald’s contrariness and she sent out to sit on the porch.

About an hour or so after that, Driver showed up in a brand new station wagon with wood panels. Driver was Granddaddy’s young friend. I seen Driver park the car in the driveway. He got out

and I seen he was wearin’ some mighty fine men’s clothes. Sun glasses. Saddle shoes. Suit with a vest. The whole glamour thing.

ADULT SISTER SUSIE (continues)

Driver was close to Mama’s age. But I liked to think he was more like my older brother. Anyway, that day Driver walked over to where Granddaddy and Derrald was sittin’, where Granddaddy who was whittlin’ on a piece of wood.

Driver had a copy of a newspaper rolled up under his arm. He stood in front of Granddaddy and handed the newspaper to him. Granddaddy set down the piece of wood and grabbed the newspaper. Granddaddy read some and then closed his eyes and bowed his head.

Then a batch of cookies was ready and I had to get back to baking.

The next day, while we was ridin’ to the train station in Driver’s station wagon, this real sad song came on the radio. It was a sad woman, singin’ a sad song ‘bout bloody fruit hanging from trees. I know I heard Mama choke back a sob and ask Driver to change the station. Then Driver told us ‘bout what had happened a few weeks ago down in Mississippi along the Tallahatchie River. Some teenager from Chicago had came down to visit his cousins, kinda like we was.

Driver said the boy wasn’t bloody fruit like the fruit in that song. Just plain bloody and beat to death and drowned.

I was glad when we ‘ventually made it back to San Francisco.

Fade to Scene 5

Scene 5 – Derrald and Grandfather discuss Derrald’s problems.

Setting – Immediately after Grandfather has sent Buddy to look for crawfish, Grandfather and Derrald are seated in the side doorway of the cabin.

Characters –

Grandfather – Frederick Walker

Young Derrald – Dawsen Williams

Shot 1 – Torso shot of Grandfather and Young Derrald sitting side by side on the doorway floor of the cabin. Grandfather is finishing the whittling of a wooden object which Derrald cannot see entirely.

YOUNG DERRALD

Granddady, what you doin’?

GRANDFATHER

Whittlin’ something for you.

YOUNG DERRALD

For me? Really, Granddaddy? But what is it?

GRANDFATHER

Yes child. It’s for you. It’s somethin’ that’s gotta be a secret ‘tween you and me.

YOUNG DERRALD

How come, Granddaddy?

GRANDFATHER

‘Cause it’s somethin’ that’s gonna help you to keep Buddy from pickin’ on you. But, if anybody sees you with it, you gotta tell everybody you found it out by the shed.

YOUNG DERRALD

OK, Granddaddy. But what is it?

Shot 2 – Grandfather stops whittling and holds out a wood carved children’s pistol. Grandfather reaches in his overall pocket and pulls out a rubber band.

Shot 3 – Closeup of Granfather’s hands inserting the rubber band onto the pistol which has an old wooden clothespin at the area of what would be the pistol’s breech. Grandfather loads the rubber band and then triggers the clothes pin as the rubber band flies off the barrel.

Shot 4 – Closeup of Derrald’s expression of joyful surprise.

YOUNG DERRALD

Wow! Granddaddy, it’s a gun that shoots rubber bands!

Shot 5 – Torso shot of Grandfather and Derrald still seated with Grandfather still holding the gun.

GRANDFATHER

Child, let’s call it what it is. It’s a rubber band shooter. It’s not a gun.

YOUNG DERRALD

OK, Granddaddy. Rubber band shooter. But is it mine?

GRANDFATHER

It is yours if you make me a promise.

YOUNG DERRALD

I promise, Granddaddy! I promise!

GRANDFATHER

Wait child. You ain't heard the promise yet.

YOUNG DERRALD

I'm listenin', Granddaddy. I'm listenin'.

GRANDFATHER

Derrald, you gotta promise not to shoot anybody so's to hurt them.

YOUNG DERRALD

Like in the eye or somethin'?

GRANDFATHER

Like in the eye or anywhere’s it might hurt.

YOUNG DERRALD

But Granddaddy, when Buddy shoots me with a rubber band, it hurts!

GRANDFATHER

Child, Buddy ain’t got no rubber band shooter. So, you also gotta promise to only shoot from far away.

YOUNG DERRALD

Only shoot far away and don’t hurt nobody. Is that all, Granddaddy?

GRANDFATHER

And you can’t tell nobody I made the shooter for you.

YOUNG DERRALD

I found it behind the shed. I don’t hurt nobody and I shoot far away. Is that all, Granddaddy?

GRANDFATHER

Almost. There’s one more thing, child.

Shot 6 – Close up Grandfather’s hands as he pries up nearby floor boards, revealing some jewelry and small boxes beneath the floors.

Shot 7 – Close up of Derrald’s surprised expression.

Shot 8 – Close up of Grandfather’s hands as he pulls a small jewelry box from beneath the floor and opens it, revealing gold-colored coins inside. Grandfather removes three coins and holds them up.

GRANDFATHER

Child, these here golden coins is also yours. And you don’t ever show them to nobody.

Shot 9 – Torso shot of Grandfather and Young Derrald still seated in the doorway.

YOUNG DERRALD

I promise, Granddaddy. I won’t show them gold dollars to nobody.

GRANDFATHER

Hold on, child. Here’s the thing. If I ever hear of you hurtin’ anybody with this here rubber band shooter, you gotta give me back one of them golden dollars. You get that, Derrald?

Shot 10 – Torso shot as Young Derrald stands up and faces Grandfather.

YOUNG DERRALD

Granddaddy, I pinky swear I will never hurt anybody with my rubber band shooter. But if I ever do, I will give you back one of them golden dollars.

Shot 11 – Long shot of the driveway to the cabin as Driver can be seen from behind the steering wheel of his late model station wagon.

Shot 12 – Torso shot of Grandfather and Derrald standing up in front of the side cabin door as Grandfather hands Young Derrald the rubber band shooter and gold-colored dollars.

GRANDFATHER

OK, Derrald. We got us a deal. Now you run off and play whiles me and Driver have us a chat ‘bout him drivin’ you and your brother and sister and your mama to the train station down in Jackson tomorrow.

Shot 13 – Long shot as Driver emerges from his car and walks toward Grandfather as Young Derrald runs off with his new gifts.

Fade to Scene 6.

Scene 6 – Driver and Grandfather red the news from Mississippi.

Setting – Grandfather and Driver stand in the side doorway of the cabin. Driver carries a newspaper with the story of Emmett Till’s murder on the front page.



Characters –

Grandfather – Frederick Walker

Driver – Darnell Williams

Shot 1 – Close up of a well-dressed Driver pulling a newspaper from beneath his arm.

DRIVER

Evenin’ Mr. Chamberlain, sir.

GRANDFATHER

Evenin', Driver. You ready for the trip into Jackson tomorrow?

DRIVER

I hope so, sir. I mean, I'm ready. But is the world out there ready?

Shot 2 – Close up of Driver handing the newspaper to Grandfather.

GRANDFATHER

What you got there, son?

DRIVER

A newspaper and a whole lot of trouble down over the border in Mississippi.

Shot 3 – Close up of Grandfather opening the newspaper.

GRANDFATHER

I heard 'bout the murder of that young man from Chicago. Found him in the Tallahatchie River at the end of August. They caught the good old boys what killed him, didn't they?

Shot 4 – Close up of Driver removing his fedora.

DRIVER

They caught ‘em alright, sir. They even put ‘em on trial. But this here story says they might get off Scott free.

Shot 5 – Close up of Grandfather reading the newspaper and shaking his head.

GRANDFATHER

Um-um. This here picture is one of the killers and his wife. She say that Till whistled at her or some such.

Shot 6 – Close up of Driver.

DRIVER

She say shit, excuse me sir. That Till was a good lookin’ boy. Only 14. Come down from Chicago and didn’t know nothin’ ‘bout Jim Crow and the white man’s laws. Maybe he was just whistlin’ some Chicago song.

Shot 7 – Torso shot of Grandfather and Driver standing in the doorway.

GRANDFATHER

Kinda like my two grandsons, huh? They from San Francisco. Never heard ‘bout the way things is done here in the South.

DRIVER

That’s what scares me, Mr. Chamberlain, sir. I gives them a ride to the train station in Jackson tomorrow morning, and what if we needs to stop and pee along the way? Or stop for anything else out there in Jim Crow country?

GRANDFATHER

You ain’t backin’ out is you, Driver?

DRIVER

No sir, Mr. Chamberlain. It’s just me bein’ concerned is all. We gonna look like an uppity Black family tomorrow. I already get enough crap from Johnny Law ‘bout my car and my drivin’ and stuff.

GRANDFATHER

So you got anythin’ in mind for the trip tomorrow? In the way of stayin’ low so to speak?

DRIVER

No sir, Mr. Chambers. We just gotta do that - stay low somehow. Not draw any attention to us. Drive slow. Not too slow. No stops along the way. Dress respectable and just look like a peaceful family. No fightin' or arguin' kids. No loud music on the radio.

GRANDFATHER

You want me to tell this stuff to my family tonight? They already upset at havin' to leave.

DRIVER

With all due respect, Mr. Chamberlain. I would rather it come from you. They respect you. They barely even know me. I'm just the driver.

GRANDFATHER

You wanna join us for dinner tonight? Buddy is grabbin' crawfish outa the creek. Eleanor makes a fine gumbo.

DRIVER

All due respects again, sir. I need time to be alone tonight. Maybe I think of somethin'.

GRANDFATHER

I get you, Driver. I’m gonna do some serious prayin’ tonight. I pray for you and my family and I pray for that poor woman back in Chicago what lost her son to Jim Crow.

DRIVER

Thank you, sir. I’m glad you understand.

GRANDFATHER

I do understand, Driver. See you tomorrow bright and early?

DRIVER

You will sir. And my prayers will be that your family understand what’s goin’ on down here where we got all this strange fruit hangin’ from the trees.

GRANDFATHER

The children is still pretty young. Derrald is ‘bout to turn six. But maybe it’s time for Granddaddy to have the talk with his grandchildren. You know, that talk where we tells them how we managed to survive the past 400 years in captivity?

DRIVER

Blesings on you and your family, sir. I see you all in the morning.

GRANDFATHER

You be safe, Driver. You be brave, but sometimes, that bravery can work the wrong way for us Black folk. So don't be too brave. You hear me?

DRIVER

Mr. Chamberlain, I survived Korea. I can survive anything.

GRANDFATHER

Driver, you a good man. I only wish Eleanor knew that. Anyway, you get along now.

Shot 8 – Long shot as Driver puts on his fedora and salutes Grandfather, before getting into his car and driving off.

DRIVER

Sir, yes sir!

Shot 9 – Close up of Grandfather reading the newspaper, shaking his head as a tear falls from one eye.

Fade to Scene 7

Scene 7 – Mama and Sissie Cook

Setting - Mama and Sissie are in the area of the cabin where there is a woodburning stove. They are frying chicken to take on their trip the next day. There is a “Watching Over Me” cookie jar on the table across from the stove with the lid off ready to receive more cookies.

Characters –

Eleanor/ Mama – Stephanie Williams

Young Sissie – Alexandria Williams

Shot 1 – Close up of an iron frying pan with chicken frying in it on a woodburning stove.

Shot 2 – Zoom out to stove and table containing the cookie jar. Young Derrald crawls into camera range, stops below the table at camera range and reaches up and fumbles around for the cookie jar.

Shot 3 – Close up of Sissie’s hand slapping Young Derrald’s.

Shot 4 – Close up of Mama pulling on Derrald’s camera side ear. Derrald winces as Mama talks to him.

MAMA

Derrald, you been told three times today to stay away from them cookies. Them’s for the trip tomorrow. Eat ‘em now and you won’t have none tomorrow.

DERRALD

Mama, you always say that. Save it for tomorrow. Save it for tomorrow. But your Derrald is hungry now.

Shot 5 – Close up of the “released” Derrald at eye level with Mama.

MAMA

My Derrald oughta remember his birthday last year. My Derrald got up in the middle of the night and ate half of his birthday cake I worked so hard to bake.

YOUNG DERRALD

I was hungry then too.

Shot 6 – Close up of Sissie.

SISSIE

Brother Derrald, you are always “hongry” like you say. And it ain’t because you are a growing boy. Shrimp!

Shot 7 – Torso shot of Young Derrald as he pantomimes boxing movements aimed at Sissie.

YOUNG DERRALD\

Don’t call me Shrimp. I ain’t no shrimp.

Shot 8 – Close up of Mama

MAMA

Calm down, son. Calm down. You recall that time you more than ate your share of shrimp? That time your Daddy took us all to Alioto’s for dinner? Larry... Daddy had just just come off the ship from duty and hadn’t hit the ba...the taverns. He had some coin from some card game he won and he wanted to treat his family to a nice

seafood meal. We did have to eat out on the dock. But it was a warm night for San Francisco. Derrald, you ate your shrimp and all the shrimp everybody else was too full to eat. Including that nice lady from church. You even charmed her out of her own leftover shrimp.

Shot 9 – Close up of Sissie

SISSIE

So, that’s where your Derrald got that stupid “Alioto’s” sailor’s hat he always wants to wear to school.

Shot 10 – Close up of Young Derrald who pulls a wadded up paper sailor’s cap from his back pocket and puts it on defiantly.

YOUNG DERRALD

It’s not stupid and I ain’t no shrimp. So, Sissie, you stop sayin’ that or I’m gonna tell Granddaddy. And Granddaddy’ll cut a stick and beat your bottom.

Shot 11 – Torso shot of Mama as she waves her apron and tries to shoo Young Derrald out the door.

MAMA

Skeedaddle, Derrald! Git out of this house. You ain't gonna tell Granddaddy anything, but you are going to sit outside and think of ways you can try to behave tomorrow when Driver takes us to the train station.

Shot 12 – Torso shot of Young Derrald as he pulls his sailor's cap lower on his head and backs out the door.

YOUNG DERRALD

Ok. Ok. I'm goin'. But if Granddaddy asks me, I might just tell him Sissie called me a shrimp and said my cap was silly. I might! Yes, I might just do that!

Fade to Scene 8