

The Beautiful Lie

A True Story of Cesar and Lowis Peters

A one-act play

By Glenn Terlecki

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Cast of Characters

CESAR PETERS: Male, Black, late 30s. An enslaved person.

LOWIS PETERS: Female, Black, mid-30s. An enslaved person.

ELIHU MARVIN: Male, White, mid-50s. A Justice of the Peace.

NATHANIEL MANN: Male, White, 20s-30s. An agent overseeing the sale of his uncle's estate.

ELIJAH GRAVES: Male, White, 30s-40s. The town tailor.

Place

Hebron, Connecticut

Time

Late September, 1787

Scene 1.

Lights rise on the inside of a simple colonial meeting house. On one side of the room, CESAR and LOWIS stand alongside NATHANIEL MANN, who holds papers in his hand. An empty bench occupies the other side of the room. ELIHU MARVIN stands behind a small table before them.

ELIHU MARVIN

Order. Order! This court will now proceed. Order! You may be seated.

(ALL sit except for ELIHU MARVIN, who remains standing.)

ELIHU MARVIN

I, Elihu Marvin, justice of the peace for the County of Tolland, in the incorporated town of Hebron, Connecticut, preside over this matter on this 27th day of September. The complaint of the plaintiff, Elijah Graves, alleges that the accused, commonly known by the name of Cesar Peters, and Lowis, his wife, and all negro children of theirs committed the following. That on the night after the 24th day of September, feloniously stole and carried off the following articles: one blue broadcloth coat with white metal buttons worth six shillings, one pair of coduroy britches worth three shillings, one coduroy vest worth two shillings and six pence, and one pair of flower-silver knee buckles worth three shillings.

(NATHANIEL MANN stands.)

NATHANIEL MANN

Your Worship, I appear as the agent for the Reverend Samuel Peters, who authorizes me to act in his stead and who holds legal claim in the matter. If this is about money *and* it would please the court, I will be happy to settle this debt on behalf of the prisoners.

ELIHU MARVIN

Let it be noted that the person who claims ultimate ownership of the accused does not stand in this court, this town, *nor does he stand in this country.*

NATHANIEL MANN

Squire Marvin, I must protest. This complaint is without merit.

ELIHU MARVIN

Dr. Mann. Unlike Reverend Peters, Mr. Elijah Graves is a man of good standing in this town and brings this charge before the court.

NATHANIEL MANN

You call someone who lies a man of good standing?

ELIHU MARVIN

Dr. Mann!

NATHANIEL MANN

There was no theft! Those garments were not stolen. They were given to them. This complaint is a fabrication- *a lie!* That is the only thing that is felonious in this trial.

ELIHU MARVIN

Dr. Mann! You will keep order in this court, or I will have you cited for contempt!

(beat)

The accused has been brought before this court and will answer the accusation.

(beat)

Will the defendants please rise.

(CESAR and LOWIS stand.)

ELIHU MARVIN

Cesar and Lowis Peters, you have been summoned on the charge of theft of clothing from the town tailor, Mr. Elijah Graves of Hebron, on this said 27th day of September, seventeen hundred and eighty-seven.

(beat)

How do you plead?

CESAR PETERS

(long beat)

Guilty.

LOWIS PETERS

(long beat)

Guilty.

Lights Fade

Scene Two.

Three Days Earlier. September 24, 1787. Outdoors. LOWIS washes clothes in a basin. CESAR tills the ground. Sunlight.

LOWIS

Do you smell that?

CESAR

Smell what?

LOWIS

The air.

CESAR

What about it?

LOWIS

It smells different.

CESAR

It's cool. Autumn is here. Cold air has a certain scent. Sharp. Crisp. Almost clean. But that could also be the soap that you're using.

LOWIS

No. No. It smells like....

(LOWIS pauses, looks down, and appears troubled.
CESAR stops tilling.)

CESAR

What?

LOWIS

Do you think he'll ever return?

CESAR

It's been thirteen years.

LOWIS

I know. I know. It's just... Sometimes it feels like yesterday when I was first brought here. The seasons change, but the scars remain.

(She looks at her wrists.)

CESAR

It's different now. He's not coming back. We made a life for ourselves here.

LOWIS

A Life? The last I checked, we're still slaves.

CESAR

To who? A man who fled to England to avoid being hanged himself?

LOWIS

He may be gone. But we're still here.

CESAR

Yes. But we're here together, in a town that has accepted us. We're part of this community. Many have it worse than we do.

LOWIS

I know. But that doesn't stop me from longing for the day when the air we breathe will be inhaled as free people.

CESAR

If God wills it, it will happen.

LOWIS

Do you think God sees the smallest deeds? The washing of a shirt, the tilling of a field?

CESAR

I believe he sees it...and measures it. Our choices are what matter in this life he has given us.

LOWIS

And someday our choices will be completely ours to make.

(CESAR gives LOWIS a warm embrace.)

(ELIJAH enters. He walks with the aid of a crutch and carries a bundle of clothing.)

ELIJAH GRAVES

Good afternoon, neighbors.

LOWIS

Good afternoon, Mr. Graves.

CESAR

Good afternoon, sir.

ELIJAH GRAVES

I finished the garments you requested. Strong seams. They'll last.

(He hands the bundle to LOWIS.)

LOWIS

I'm sure they will.

CESAR

What do we owe?

ELIJAH GRAVES

(gently)

Winter does not wait for coin. Pay what you can when you can.

LOWIS

Thank you.

CESAR

How is your leg healing, sir?

ELIJAH GRAVES

Too slow for my liking, Cesar. I should be at militia training today. But at least my hands still work.

CESAR

You do fine work, sir.

ELIJAH GRAVES

Thank you, Cesar. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must be getting back to Patience. She just took the first batch of apple pies out of the oven, and I promised to help her load more firewood.

LOWIS

That's what I smelled in the air.

CESAR

Would you like a hand with the firewood, sir?

ELIJAH GRAVES

No. But thank you, Cesar. I refuse to let my injury stop me from doing every *small task*.

(beat)

Come by later. The pies will be cooled by then. Bring the children. There'll be plenty to share.

CESAR

She sure does make a wonderful pie, sir. We'll be happy to come by.

ELIJAH GRAVES

Good day.

LOWIS

Good day, Mr. Graves.

(They share a quiet, human moment. ELIJAH exits.)

Lights Fade

(Off stage, the sound of muffled shouts, scuffling, and a door slamming. Chains rattle. A horse neighs, hoofbeats, and the rumble of wagon wheels.)

Scene Three.

Later that evening. Inside Elijah Graves' house. ELIJAH sits at a table, heavy in thought. Candles light the room.

(A knock at the door. ELIJAH hobbles to the door and opens it. ELIHU MARVIN enters.)

ELIJAH GRAVES

Elihu. Please, come in.

ELIHU MARVIN

I would say "good evening," but today's circumstances have proven otherwise.

ELIJAH GRAVES

I keep replaying it in my head. I can't believe what I saw.

ELIHU MARVIN

You witnessed it?

ELIJAH GRAVES

Yes. From a distance at least. I heard a commotion, but by the time I got to the door, Cesar, Lowis, and the children were already loaded in the wagon. Elihu, they put them in shackles! Why would Nathaniel do this?

ELIHU MARVIN

There is no doubt that this is the work of his loyalist uncle. He must be trying to recover money from his abandoned estate. He's selling Cesar and his family to slave traders in South Carolina. We should have tarred and feathered that traitor before he fled to England before the war.

ELIJAH GRAVES

What can we do?

ELIHU MARVIN

(thinking out loud)

Well, abandoned loyalist property may be claimed from afar. He has that right. Connecticut law still defines enslaved people as property. They have little to no rights.

ELIJAH GRAVES

I was just speaking with Cesar and Lowis this afternoon. I gave them garments I had repaired. I can not make sense of this.

ELIHU MARVIN

Wait. You gave Cesar and Lowis garments?

ELIJAH GRAVES

Yes.

ELIHU MARVIN

Did they pay you for the garments?

ELIJAH GRAVES

No. I did not collect any money. I told them to pay when they could.

ELIHU MARVIN

That's it! That's how we get them back!

ELIJAH GRAVES

I'm not sure that I understand.

ELIHU MARVIN

Don't you see? They cannot be carried out of this town without answering to the law if they have committed a crime. They never paid you for the garments, Elijah. That is a crime. They must answer for that crime here, in Hebron! I'll draft a warrant for their immediate arrest.

ELIJAH GRAVES

Wait. What does that mean?

ELIHU MARVIN

It means Cesar and Lowis *must return* to Hebron to stand trial. I'll order the constable to form a posse. We'll ride hard and intercept them before they leave the shipyard in Norwich at dawn.

ELIJAH GRAVES

Elihu, you know I would do anything to have Cesar and his family returned to our town, but... must I testify to what you say in court? I am a church-going man, and in court, I will be sworn to speak what is true, not what is convenient.

ELIHU MARVIN

Elijah, even in scripture, God's people spoke *around* the truth to save lives. When Rahab hid the Israelite spies, she lied to the king's men to save them, yet God rewarded her. If God accepted her actions, do you not believe He would accept ours as well?

ELIJAH GRAVES

But Rahab was not upon oath, nor were her actions done in sight of the whole town. You're asking me to lie.

ELIHU MARVIN

I'm asking you to keep them from a ship.

(ELIJAH turns away from Elihu in contemplation.)

ELIHU MARVIN

Elijah, when we reach the end of our lives, we will not stand before man; we will answer before God. It is always righteous to do what is *right*, especially when others do what is *wrong*. That is what brings about change. This country is new, and we have not yet set all things right, but we are learning. If we were not, we would still be under the thumb of the Crown.

ELIJAH GRAVES

Yes. Yes, of course.

ELIHU MARVIN

You are a good man, Elijah. I know you will do what is right. I must go now. There is no time to waste. I'll inform you upon our return.

(ELIHU MARVIN exits.)

Lights Fade

Scene Four.

The next day. Outside Elijah Graves' house. ELIJAH walks toward his door with the aid of a crutch. NATHANIEL MANN interrupts him. Daylight.

ELIJAH GRAVES

Nathaniel.

NATHANIEL MANN

Elijah.

EILJAH GRAVES

What's on your mind, Nathaniel?

NATHANIEL MANN

You are. I heard of your intentions, and I am quite surprised.

ELIJAH GRAVES

Surprised?

NATHANIEL MANN

I've known you to be a man of high integrity. But your recent behavior does not reflect that.

ELIJAH GRAVES

I could say the same of you.

NATHANIEL MANN

Look, Elijah, I am just doing my uncle's will. He hired me to oversee the sale of his estate. That includes Cesar and his family. You may not like it, but the law does not forbid me from doing that.

ELIJAH GRAVES

The law? How about your conscience? A half-day ride on horseback to Massachusetts, and they are free people, yet here in Connecticut, they are considered property. They are not livestock, Nathaniel.

NATHANIEL MANN

If you take issue with the law, I suggest you petition the Connecticut General Assembly to change it.

ELIJAH GRAVES

That would take years, and you know that. Why now? Your "tory" of an uncle fled this town thirteen years ago. Why didn't he free them when he left?

NATHANIEL MANN

That is my uncle's business. I cannot answer for him.

ELIJAH GRAVES

Cesar and Louis have raised children here. They have provided for themselves. They are productive members of this community. They are our neighbors!

NATHANIEL MANN

They are slaves.

ELIJAH GRAVES

They are people!

NATHANIEL MANN

They are property.

ELIJAH GRAVES

They are not property in the eyes of God!

NATHANIEL MANN

They are property in the eyes of the State!

(beat)

You call God into this matter? Yet you choose to sin?

(Uncertainty creeps into ELIJAH.)

NATHANIEL MANN

Need I remind you, the commandments forbid bearing false witness? God does not bless a liar, Elijah.

ELIJAH GRAVES

Nor does he bless the wicked.

NATHANIEL MANN

Look... I know you are a good man. All I suggest is that you leave this matter alone. If you drop your complaint, you avoid perjuring yourself in court and sinning before the Lord. Why bring that guilt upon you and your family? What good does it do for you? My business is of no concern to you... You are an excellent tailor. You are well respected in this town. I'd hate to see your reputation tarnished over slaves. I'm just trying to help you.

ELIJAH GRAVES

You're trying to help yourself.

NATHANIEL MANN

Elijah, the truth *will* set you free.

ELIJAH GRAVES

And your truth needs shackles! I will not help you sell a family.

NATHANIEL MANN

I don't need your help. I just need you to stay home. Tend to your injury. Absent yourself from court, and this matter will soon be at an end. Then we may all return to our lives, and all will go on as before.

Lights fade

Scene Five

Lights rise back in the meeting house—the continuation of the trial. Tension is thick. CESAR and LOWIS stand alongside NATHANIEL MANN, who holds papers in his hand. An empty bench occupies the other side of the room. ELIHU MARVIN stands behind a small table before them.

CESAR PETERS

Guilty.

LOWIS PETERS

(long beat)

Guilty.

NATHANIEL MANN

Your Worship, the accused has been coerced. Their admission is corrupt. How can this court condemn them when the owner of the allegedly stolen garments does not even appear? The goods are not proved, and the warrant itself limps upon its facts. Such a proceeding cannot stand.

ELIHU MARVIN

The complainant's body is not required where his property interest is plain.

NATHANIEL MANN

There is nothing plain about his property interest. There can be no theft with charity. Where is tailor Elijah Graves? Your Worship, without his testimony, this complaint is without foundation and ought not to proceed.

ELIHU MARVIN

The law does not wait upon a man's tongue when the facts speak well enough.

NATHANIEL MANN

(angrily)

You are manipulating the facts!

ELIHU MARVIN

Dr. Mann!-

NATHANIEL MANN

This groundless charge serves neither God nor the peace of the town!

ELIHU MARVIN

Dr. Mann!-

NATHANIEL MANN

These proceedings are defective in law and must not be maintained!

ELIHU MANN

Dr. Mann! Order! Order!-

NATHANIEL MANN

The charge is false and malicious! And I will also add-

(The meeting house door opens, ELIJAH GRAVES enters.)

ELIHU MARVIN

Mr. Graves.

ELIJAH GRAVES

Your Worship.

(ALL eyes are on ELIJAH as he walks forward and stands in front of the empty bench on the other side of the room from Nathaniel, Cesar, and Lowis. He glances over at them.)

ELIJAH GRAVES

I am here to testify to what I have seen and know.

ELIHU MARVIN

Very well.

(ELIHU MARVIN approaches ELIJAH GRAVES and holds a Bible before him.)

ELIHU MARVIN

Let your hand rest upon the Bible.

(beat)

Do you, Elijah Graves, of Hebron, swear to speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

ELIJAH GRAVES

I do so swear.

(beat)

So help me God.

(ELIHU MARVIN returns to the spot behind the desk.)

NATHANIEL MANN

Let's hear it then, *as God witnesses this, Elijah.*

ELIHU MARVIN

Dr. Mann! You have said quite enough today. You will be quiet now.

(He considers his line of questioning carefully.)

Mr. Graves... you have accused Cesar and Lowis Peters of possessing garments that you repaired for them. Is that true?

ELIJAH GRAVES

(long beat)

Yes.

ELIHU MARVIN

Did they pay you for the garments?

ELIJAH GRAVES

(beat)

No.

ELIHU MARVIN

Did they leave town with those garments?

ELIJAH GRAVES

(beat)

Yes.

ELIHU MARVIN

Did you *expect* compensation for the repairs you made to those garments?

ELIJAH GRAVES

(beat)

Yes.

ELIHU MARVIN

Your testimony is received.

(beat)

Cesar and Lewis Peters, you have been charged with theft. Based on the evidence, witness testimony, and your own admission, I find you guilty as charged. I'm setting the damages at two pounds, the fines at six pounds, and the costs at... seven pounds, two shillings.

NATHANIEL MANN

Your Worship! That is nearly two years' wages!

ELIHU MARVIN

Indeed. Dr. Mann, your skill in arithmetic is most evident.

NATHANIEL MANN

For theft of garments?!

ELIHU MARVIN

Theft is a serious crime, especially when committed by enslaved people.

NATHANIEL MANN

There is no way to pay a sum that large.

ELIHU MARVIN

If that sum can not be paid, I hereby order Cesar and Lowis Peters to be "bound over" to Mr. Elijah Graves for two years of servitude. Mr. Graves, do you accept the court's ruling?

ELIJAH GRAVES

I do accept the court's ruling, Your Worship.

NATHANIEL MANN

Two years of servitude? But I have papers to sell them.
(He holds up the papers.)

ELIHU MARVIN

Well then, I suppose your papers will have to wait two years.

NATHANIEL MANN

This is profane. This would never happen under the King!

ELIHU MARVIN

Dr. Mann! Seeing that *you* removed Cesar and Lowis Peters from Hebron, one could assert that *you* were an accessory to the theft.

NATHANIEL MANN

(fumbling over his words)

But..that..that..that.. That's preposterous. I..I..I-

ELIHU MARVIN

There is also a written complaint from Patience Graves that you brandished a sword *at her* during this incident.

NATHANIEL MANN

I..I..ahh..I..ahh..that..that was...ahh..I-

ELIHU MARVIN

If you'd like to respond to *those charges*, I can draft a warrant for *your arrest*.

NATHANIEL MANN

I..ahhhhh..I..ahhhhh...

ELIHU MARVIN

I didn't think so. This court is adjourned.

(CESAR, LOWIS, and ELIJAH GRAVES share a heartfelt embrace.)

(ELIJAH GRAVES steps forward and addresses the audience, breaking the fourth wall, followed by EACH ONE as they say their lines.)

ELIJAH GRAVES

Cesar, Lowis, and their children spent the next two years as guests of Elijah Graves and his wife, Patience, and remained productive members of the community.

ELIHU MARVIN

After those two years, in 1789, Cesar and Lowis formally petitioned the Connecticut Legislature for emancipation. Several Hebron residents supported the petition through testimony, including Elihu Marvin, Elijah and Patience Graves, and the entire Hebron Board of Selectmen. The petition was granted.

NATHANIEL MANN

The sale of Cesar and Lowis to slave traders never occurred. It was later revealed, through letters from London, that the Reverend Samuel Peters did not wish to sell Cesar and Lowis. Dr. Nathaniel Mann and his father, John Mann, acted against the wishes of the Reverend and sought to profit themselves.

CESAR PETERS

Four years after Cesar and Louis's emancipation, in the spring of 1793, they moved to Tolland, Connecticut, where Cesar supported his family through farming. Tragically, Louis succumbed to illness and passed away on December 18, 1793.

LOWIS PETERS

Cesar, widowed at 43 and with young children to care for, soon remarried a widow named Sim. Around 1803, Cesar and Sim returned to Hebron, and in 1806, the couple purchased a large dwelling with two acres of land and a barn identified through extensive land records research, as the property once owned by... Dr. Nathaniel Mann.

(CESAR throws his hands in the air. Victory!)

End of Play