

The Shovel
By: Eddie Chase

Characters:

Big Jim- A portly shop owner in his mid-forties, Irish-American.

George- A skinny recluse in his mid twenties, African-American.

The Setting: An early evening in November of 1934, inside an old general store in Philadelphia. The front counter can be seen downstage right, with an old rusted cash register on it. On stage left is the garden tool rack. The entire store is blandly colored save for the bright red shovels on the tool rack. Upstage is the various shelves which are arranged so that the audience can see straight down the aisles.

(Dimly lit stage. Sky is Over by Serj Tankian Plays. As the song progresses lights begin to rise, revealing Big Jim, who is tidying up the store. The song fades revealing a noise of heavy rain. Jim goes to the door, looks out to check the whether. The phone rings. He answers.)

Big Jim: Big Jim's General Store. (pause) Oh hey, Honey! (Pause) Whoa, Whoa, Whoa, Slow down! Whats the matter? (Pause) Oh no, that accident was up the street a bit so I didn't see it. (pause) I know, it was awful. Poor Sally Jenkins, I heard she broke her arm. (pause) And she has no one at home to take care of her. (Pause) Didn't her husband go off to fight in the war a few weeks ago? (Pause) Oh yeah! Isn't she in the Women's Rights group with you. (Short Pause) The leader?! I would more imagine that someone like Big Martha Malinski to be the leader, but not tiny Sally Jenkins. (Pause) Uhuh. (Pause) So how was our baby girl's first day of school today? (Pause) She did! That's great! (Pause) To 23? I can't believe it. (Pause) Oh it's a slow night tonight so I might close up early. (Pause) Yeah I'll give it another half an hour and I'll close up. (Pause) Okay honey. Hey, I love you. (Short Pause) Good bye.

(He hangs up the phone. Standing there with nothing to do he waits for a minute, tapping his fingers over and over on the counter, then walks over to some shelves to straighten things up. Just then the bell over the door rings and George Matheson steps in soaking wet. George is a thin but tallish black man in his early twenty's. Jim walks out to see who it is, as if to greet them but quickly decides against when he sees it is George. Walking briskly back to the counter he, again, begins to tap his fingers on the counter. George walks straight to the garden tools and stares at them for a beat. Then he picks up a shovel and brings it straight to the counter.)

Big Jim: Well hello George.

George: Hello James.

Big Jim: Ya know, George, I prefer Jim. You can even refer to me as Big Jim like most people do. But please don't call me James.

George: I'm sorry Jim. How much for the shovel?

Big Jim: That'll be 20 dollars.

George: Okay. *(He begins digging through his many pockets, bringing dollars and coins out as he finds them.)* Did you hear about that automobile accident down the street?

Big Jim: *(surprised George is talking to him)* Oh yeah, how `bout that. Ya know I never did trust those automobiles. If I need to go anywhere, I'll walk. I remember back when I was a boy, and when they still had horse-and-buggies. From the first time I got in an automobile, and I mean an original Model T Ford, I was scared out of my wits from those loud, noisy, herkie, jerky hunks of metal. Death traps, the lot of them.

George: *(still rummaging)* Do you know who was involved?

Big Jim: Yeah, Old Man Alfred was crossing the street and Sally Jenkins who was driving down lost control and crashed into a lamppost.

George: Sally Jenkins actually managed to get a license to drive a car? I'm surprised. She probably got it after Bob left for the war. I used to work at the foundry with him before he went off a few weeks ago. From what I understood, he ran a pretty tight shift.

Big Jim: You mean you actually talk to some people.

George: No, but even those who keep to themselves can hear a lot.

Big Jim: Come to think of it, this is the first time I've ever had a conversation with you longer than 2 sentences.

George: Yeah I know. I generally dislike people. I hear the whispers behind my back. I'm probably one of the weirdest folks you've had in here, aren't I?

Big Jim: Not necessarily. I've had a lot of drifters come in here. Just the other day this woman came in, curious as ever. She acted all suspicious, like she was about to get busted by the cops. Turns out she had just escaped from an insane asylum. The cops must have been followin' her because she wasn't in the store five minutes and they came in to get her. Made a mess of the store chasin' her around. She was an older woman but

she sure was nimble compared to those bumbling Blues. *(Pause)* Man, crazy people really are crazy.

George: Yeah... *(he stops pulling out the money and sighs. Then he starts pulling out money again)* It must be terrible to be a crazy person, not knowin' who's who, or what's what.

Big Jim: Aww George, why you so upset? I never said you was crazy.

George No, maybe not. But you musta thought it some time or another. I may keep to myself, but I'm not deaf. I know what everyone calls me, "George the Strange." Children the lot of them, who have the indecency to make fun of someone who keeps to himself.

Big Jim Well you can't really blame them, George. You do kinda give everyone the cold shoulder. It's no surprise they'll be saying stuff about you.

George: What do you think my being solitary is for nuthin'? I had to protect my sister. I had to be there for her. My parents were warm to people and look where it got them. I can't let Annie lose.... *(He stops himself.)* Sour... who knew loss could have a taste.

Big Jim: Oh yeah, George, I heard about Annie. That tuberculosis, it'll get the best of 'em.

George: She died, the day before yesterday.

Big Jim: But I thought the doctors just diagnosed her last month. I didn't know it could happen so...

George: They caught it late and it was all my fault. I just thought it was a cold that wouldn't go away. If I wasn't working so much then...

Big Jim: Hey George, don't you dare blame yourself for this. You were trying your best for that little girl. And you did a mighty fine job raising her. Young man, you took care of her since she was an infant, so you was the only parent she got. And she grew up to be so polite and friendly. You may have given everyone the cold shoulder, but you didn't teach her to.

George: You think I did a good job?

Big Jim: I know you did.

George: Well, at least I did good for her before she died.

Big Jim What do you mean?

George: ... *(He stands there for a moment staring at the ground, then he takes out one last coin.)* Is this enough?

Big Jim: Boy you've really been saving up *(starts counting)*. What do you need this shovel for anyway?

George Just keep counting and tell me if it's enough.

Big Jim: Okay, whatever you say.

George: Thank you.

Big Jim: Okay... that comes to.... George I'm afraid you're 23 cents short.

George: What!?! NO!?!

Big Jim: I'm afraid so.

George: But I counted it! I counted it 5 times!

Big Jim: Well maybe you counted wrong, or maybe you dropped a quarter on the way, either way its not enough.

George: *(He begins to pace back and forth, very angry)* Ugh!!! You... I.. SHE NEEDS IT!! NO! No no no nononononro no no no! *(he turns to big Jim)* Jim, you gotta gimme the 23 cents! You gotta let me owe it to ya.

Big Jim: George, I'm very sorry about your sister and all, but I can't do it for you.

George: Why!? Come on Jim, its 23 cents! It's 2 pennies under a quarter.

Big Jim: I'm sorry. I swore I'd never keep a tab again.

George: I can't afford the funeral expenses, James. They wouldn't bury her!

Big Jim: But that's outrageous

George: Well it's true. So I gotta bury her myself.

Big Jim: Aww George...

George: Don't you "George" me. Don't you ever condescend me or my name. I busted my ass for that girl and what do I get? A dead body and not even a shovel to bury it. She is in the freezer in the cellar, Jim. I brought her home before I came here. And now I can't even bury her because your tight ass won't let me. You Mic's are SO ungrateful. If it weren't for us black folk moving up north there'd still be NINA signs everywhere. But for

us they don't even show us the dignity to be official about it. They kill us right off the street, leaving poor teenage black boys to take care of and bury their little black sisters.

Big Jim: (*obviously hurt by the mic comment*) Mic, huh. Well I sure didn't deserve that but you had every right to say it. I can only imagine what you must go through everyday. Lemme try and guess, George. There's a reason why you keep to yourself. A reason why you do the things that gets you the name George the strange. You must hear everyday, "Nigger this" and "Nigger that." Huh? Am I right? The "white folk keeping you down?" You've been at that foundry what, 10 years, since you was a boy? And have they even give you a 10 cent raise?

And I'm sure you must hate me. The Mic who's so cheap he can't spare 23 cents for a shovel. Well let me tell you something: I know what it's like to be hated for something you can't control. They all loved to blame the Irish for taking the jobs. Well they were dead set on getting their jobs back. So much so that they'd send an innocent man to prison.

George: Jim, look, I'm sorry... I...

Big Jim: Do you wanna know why I'm so tight? Why I can't spare 23 cents for a guy who thinks he's the only one who's had it rough? When I was younger than you I managed to squirm my way into a job as a grocery store clerk. I finally found a place with no NINA sign in the window. I did pretty good for myself for a while. Then one day this lady walks in with her daughter. That little girl had the brightest beautiful green eyes I ever did see. And the mother had such a smile on her face. She needed to buy rope, nothing fancy. Just a couple yards worth. But of course she left her wallet at home and only had a few pennies in her pocket. She asked if she could go get the money at home, which she said was only a few blocks away, while she left her daughter there as collateral. My god, people were so trusting back then. So she took the rope and went on her way, the little girl standing there, so quiet, so well behaved. Hours passed by and the mother still hadn't shown. And all the while that sweet little girl just sat there keeping to herself, humming a sweet little tune. By then I called the police. They checked the house and came back. They told me they would need to escort the little girl home. And so they did.

The next day a band of police officers showed up at the front door of the shop. 5 guys just to take me. Now keep in mind that I hadn't gotten the title "Big Jim" at the time. I was just Jimmie the store clerk. They arrested me and charged me with Murder and Kidnapping. As it turns out, the mother had just found out her husband had cheated on her and proceeded to hang herself. To this day I could never understand how a woman could take her own life and leave that beautiful child behind. I got 25 years but managed to get out after 15. My lawyer, a damned public defender didn't do shit. As it turns out he was a member of that KKK. Apparently they hate Mics as much as they hate you.

George: How do you know you got charged because you were Irish?

Big Jim: I was called up to the witness stand once and the only question I was asked was if I was Irish. As you might guess, my lawyer didn't object for relevancy.

George: Wow... I am sorry.

Big Jim: I worked so hard to get this store. And I'm not letting anything ruin that now.

George: (*cuts in*) But Jim, you know me. I would never do anything like that.

Big Jim: I can't be sure.

George: (*nervous laugh*) Jim, come on please. I need the shovel. She needs to rest.

Big Jim: I can't.

George: But if I don't get it then I... (*he zones out*) Do you know how my parents died? How I ended up having to raise Annie all by myself at the ripe full age of 16?

Big Jim: Well I only heard what everybody else heard. You found them dead in the living room after they lent a room to a stranger.

George: The newspapers and the police twisted my story.

Big Jim: So then what actually happened?

George: I.... (*he hesitates*) I was never that happy to have a sister. I grew up an only child and was the apple of my parents eye. My father was a bell hop at the hotel, my mom a dutiful house wife. Sure, we weren't the richest family in the world but we were still happy. When we were at home, closed off from the outside world of white supremacy and universal hatred, we were at the top of the world, floating on Cloud Nine. When they sat me down after dinner that night my mind was wondering with ideas of what it could be. Maybe dad got a better job or maybe they were gonna get that new puppy I was always asking for.

At first I was happy, no, excited to get a baby sibling. But as the weeks passed and mom kept getting bigger and bigger, she kept getting sicker and sicker. Every time I saw my mom run to the bathroom to vomit, or bleed from god knows where I began to hate... no not hate, resent the baby for doing this to my mother. This... resentment... still continued after she was born. And though I resented her I loved her. I loved her more than both my parents put together. Which is why hate is not the right word. I loved her as a person but resented the responsibility that she posed to my mother and father. And so I tried to help them as much as I could. When she cried at night, I would not let them get up for her. Instead, I would. I fetched her bottle and took her home when she got fussy at a restaurant, the few restaurants that took in coloreds that is. Then one night, I didn't get up for her. I figured letting my parents get her one night wouldn't stress them

to much. In my lucid thinking of half-consciousness I forgot about the man that had stayed, the man who they let into our home that night.

My parents were always ALWAYS too kind for their own good. They didn't look at a person white or black in prejudice. Everybody was innocent until proven guilty in their eyes. They didn't resent whites for their treatment of blacks, just prayed to god to rid their race of their sinful pride. Hate the sin, love the sinner. This I never understood. I did hate the whites, every white even the Irish for how one person treated my mother in the store, or how my father worked at that hotel all his life and was never raised above a bell hop. So as they welcome this man into our home ESPECIALLY this man I could do nothing but hide my anger by hiding in my room. The man was hideous, bug-eyed with a crooked nose. His clothes were shabby and unclean. But that's not what warded me off about him. The way he talked made him sound like he was holding back the worst curse he could think of. So I kept my eyes shut, trying to ignore Annie's sorrowful cries. Eventually it got louder and louder, so I got out of bed and finally walked over to her crib in their room. I was shocked to find the baby gone and their beds empty. I walked downstairs just in time to see Annie dangling by the leg from the guys raised arm, and my mother, covered in blood falling to the floor as he pushed her off of him. My dad was already on the floor, dead. The man didn't see me. But I saw him. I grabbed a nearby candlestick and smashed him in the back of the head. I grabbed Annie as she fell from his clutches and watched him fall to the floor. When the cops came they were cold. Asked questions, took us downtown. We stayed at a shelter while the investigation went on. They didn't even include me in the investigation and it only lasted a week. So when it was all over, they just brought me back to the house with Annie in my arms. I got a job at the foundry and watched as Annie grew into that beautiful little girl. And now she'll never become a young woman. She may not even be buried. So as you stand there now, James tell me who deserves 23 cents, 23 FUCKING CENTS! TO BUY A GODDAMN SHOVEL.

Big Jim: You... I... I CAN'T DO IT! Listen George, just calm down! Go home get some rest, look around for a quarter tomorrow morning and come back! The shovel will be right here waiting. I'm never keeping a tab. It'll come back to me, I know it. We'll both be charged with something. I dunno, desecration of graves, or maybe worse. Maybe murder. Just pay it off completely and keep me out of it.

George: MY GOD! HOW CAN YOU BE SO STUBBORN!

Big Jim: Because my daughter is 5 years old. If something happens, and I get dragged into this for something ridiculous, she could be 20 years old before I see her again.

George: Well at least she'll be alive. I don't have that luxury. Hell, if my sister were alive, I wouldn't need it in the first place!

Big Jim: George, your upset. I'm going to have to ask you to leave. Go home and get some rest. I was supposed to close up shop an a hour ago anyways.

(Glaring at Jim, George begins to back to the door (offstage left). he gets just off stage and pauses for a moment. Then he rushes back on, grabs the shovel and uses it to smash the cash register)

George: YOU STUPID IDIOT!!!

Big Jim: GEORGE, WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU!!! Y

George: IS THAT ENOUGH FOR YA! IS THAT WORTH 23 CENTS!

Big Jim: YOU'RE CRAZY, YOU'RE REALLY OUT OF YOUR HEAD! *(He runs out of the store.)*

George: UGH!! NOO!!! NO NO NO!!! YOU LIKE YOUR MONEY JAMES!? YOU LIKE YOUR 23 CENTS!? HERE'S TWENTY THREE FUCKING CENTS!

(He goes through the store on a rampage destroying every single thing he can, all with the shovel. He takes a glass jar and smashes it on the ground, down center. This whole time he ad libs curses at Jim and his 23 cents. This continues for a good five minutes. Finally when the shop is completely in shambles he kneels down on the broken glass, doing the best to ignore the pain.)

George: God, why? Why do you take away all good things in my life? What did I do to deserve this? I'M SORRY! ANNIE, I'M SORRY! I wasn't there for you... I was working too hard. How could you forgive me!? I KILLED YOU! MY GOD, I KILLED YOU! I KILLED YOU, AND MOM, AND DAD, AND I'M A KILLER! My god, it's sour. The pain is so sour. Is this my punishment? This sour, sour burn on my tongue? I can't take it anymore. What did I do, what did I do to be a killer? I've killed so many people. *(in a high pitched voice)* Brother why are you crying? *(regular low voice)* Annie!? Annie, where are you? *(high pitched)* You killed me brother. We're all dead and it's all because of you. *(low)* No! I did what I could! I didn't mean to let mom and dad wake up. I didn't mean to hold off the doctors appointment! I'M SO SO SORRY!! *(high)* I hate you George. You're gonna rot in hell. *(low)* You don't love me Annie? But I tried so hard. I tried so take care of you. I loved you *(high)* You are a liar, George, and I hate you. We hate you. You're gonna burn forever with that man, the man. The other man you killed *(low)* WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?! I DID MY BEST BUT I COULDN'T SUCCEED! YOU'RE RIGHT TO HATE ME. YOU HAVE EVERY RIGHT! BUT DON'T LET ME BURN ANNIE DON'T LEAVE ME WITH HIM! ANNIE! ANNIE! Annie? Annie where'd you go? Annie? ANNIE? God she's gone! She's never coming back. *(Realizes he's sitting on glass.)* These pieces cut me and i don't even notice. Where is the pain? . . . My god what have I done? I'm sorry, Annie, I killed you . . . I killed you.

(He curls up into a fetal position, sobbing, clutching the shovel.)

(blackout)

