

THE GAS MAN COMETH  
by  
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THE GAS MAN COMETH

Setting: A rustic cabin in West Virginia.

At Rise: In the main room sit ROY OWENS (40) and his special-needs daughter NADINE (12). He plays banjo (or fiddle or guitar) as they both sing.

ROY & NADINE

YOU GOTTA WALK THAT LONESOME VALLEY\*

YOU GOTTA WALK IT BY YOURSELF

NOBODY HERE CAN WALK IT FOR YOU

YOU GOTTA WALK IT BY YOURSELF

(With a riff and final chord, he finishes.)

NADINE

More!

ROY

No, no, that's enough singin' for now.

(He sets the banjo aside.)

NADINE

More!

ROY

No, I told you Mr. Hastings is gonna be here right soon. Him and me is gonna be talkin' business so you can go play in your room if'n you want.

NADINE

You gonna sign them papers?

(Roy picks up some documents off of his coffee table.)

ROY

I don't know. It's a fair amount of money. Lord knows we need it; don't know where else I'd come by it.

NADINE

Is our water gonna smell like Miss Maddie's?

ROY

I don't know; I'll ask.

HASTINGS (O.S.)

Hello?

(There's a knock on the screen door. Roy puts down the papers.  
He crosses to the door and opens it.)

Hey. Come on in.

(Charles Hastings, 40, enters carrying a briefcase. He wears  
a short sleeve shirt, tie and pocket protector.)

HASTINGS

Thank you. How are you doing today?

ROY

Fair to middlin', I suppose.

HASTINGS  
(to Nadine)

Hi there.

NADINE

What's your name?

HASTINGS

My name? Charles Hastings. And you are...?

NADINE

When was you born?

ROY

Nadine...

HASTINGS

No, it's all right. Well, I was born on August eighth.

NADINE

What year?

HASTINGS

Uh...1977.

NADINE

You was born on a Tuesday.

HASTINGS

Well, ha ha...I don't remember about that...

ROY

You were. I guarantee it.

HASTINGS

What?

NADINE

I'll show you.

(She runs off to her room.)

ROY

Sorry about that. It's just her way.

HASTINGS

No, it's OK. But uh...

ROY

See, Nadine's got special powers; her mind don't work like regular folks'. I mean she's smart and all...just different.

HASTINGS

Oh I see. Does she go to a regular school?

ROY

No, she don't rightly fit in there with all them kids teasin' her and all. So she's been goin' over to Miss Maddie's house; she's learnin' her as best she can.

HASTINGS

And Miss Maddie is...

ROY

She used to be a school teacher; retired now. She takes a few kids into her house.

HASTINGS

Well...that's very nice of her. Wait. Maddie Cummings? I think she's a customer of ours.

ROY

That she is. She's the one what told me about you folks.

(Nadine reenters with a stack of old calendars and starts sorting through them.)

HASTINGS

What have we here?

ROY

The old Barkley sisters have this kind of store they run out of a cellar next to the barber shop. People can sell them almost anything; others come in to browse around and maybe buy it.

HASTINGS

Sort of like a pawn shop.

ROY

Well if'n you're sellin' somethin' there, chances are you ain't comin' back; you just really need the money. Anyway, they take almost anything; they let Nadine have this stack of old calendars for almost nothin'.

NADINE

Twenty five cent!

HASTINGS

And she memorized them all?!

ROY

Oh no, she does it all in her mind. She just brings 'em out for proof.

(Nadine crosses to Hastings with an open calendar.)

NADINE

There: 1977, August.

(He looks at it.)

HASTINGS

Well...sure enough. It WAS a Tuesday. How about that?

NADINE  
(taking it back)

Told ya.

HASTINGS

That's...very impressive. Does she do other things too?

ROY

Oh yeah. You can throw out almost any number and then she...

(A tremor hits the cabin. All three suddenly stiffen and involuntarily clutch the arms of the sofa and chairs they are on. Nadine curls into a ball.)

NADINE

AAAAHHH!

ROY

All right, hold on.

HASTINGS

What is this?

ROY

Just a tremor. It'll pass soon.

(Nadine begins rocking back and forth rapidly singing to herself.)

NADINE

YOU GOT TO WALK THAT LONESOME VALLEY  
YOU GOT TO WALK IT BY YOURSELF...

ROY

All right baby, come on now.

(He tries to reach out to her; she pulls away.)

NADINE

NOBODY HERE CAN WALK IT FOR YOU  
YOU GOT TO WALK IT BY YOURSELF

(It stops.)

ROY

There. See? It's over. You OK, baby?

(She continues to silently rock.)

HASTINGS

Does that happen often?

ROY

More and more. Ever since all your wells bein' dug.

HASTINGS

Well, I don't know if there's a direct correlation between the two.

ROY

I ain't sure what a correlation is Mister, but it's happenin' all the time now.

HASTINGS

Well, at least they're just minor tremors. (to Nadine) That wasn't so bad, was it?

ROY

Easy for you to say; you don't live here. And you ain't like her.

NADINE

I hate it. I hate it.

ROY

All right now, why don't you take them calendars back to your room? Go git yer dog if you want.

(She gathers them up and exits.)

HASTINGS

Well, that was certainly something. Ha ha. So...have you had a chance to look over the paperwork?

ROY

Yeah. Some of them legal words are a bit rough.

HASTINGS

Yeah, those guys in the legal department...bunch of eggheads, right? But the important thing is the offer: \$4500 per acre to drill. (He takes out his smart phone and taps in a few numbers.) And you have...what...four and a half acres. (He holds up the phone for Roy to look at the final figure.) I don't suppose you've ever seen that kind of money before.

ROY

Not all at once, I ain't; you're right. And since they laid off so many of us from the mine, I ain't seein' no paycheck at all.

HASTINGS

I'm sorry to hear that. So it sounds like Marcellus National is the answer to your prayers.

ROY

I wouldn't go that far. I do have a few concerns.

HASTINGS

OK. What can I help you with?

ROY

You folks drill down about a mile and a half, is that right?

HASTINGS

That's right.

ROY

Then you truck in tons of water from Tygart Lake and shoot it down there under high pressure.

HASTINGS

Exactly.

ROY

But first you load it up with a bunch o' chemicals.

HASTINGS

Well, it's primarily the sand that we add that fractures the shale and causes it to release the gas.

ROY

Then why all them chemicals?

HASTINGS

Well...they're a necessary additive. Look, I'm not a chemical engineer but the ones we have are the best in the business. And if they say that's the best way to do it, then...who are we to argue? Does that answer your question?

ROY

But see, when that gas come up, that water comes back up too. But instead of reusin' it, you drill a bunch o' dry wells and dump that waste water where it don't belong.

HASTINGS

Well, it IS just water.



ROY

And chemicals.

HASTINGS

A few.

ROY

You know how heavy water is?

HASTINGS

Water? I don't know...not that heavy...

(Nadine reenters with a beat-up stuffed dog. She sits and grooms it.)

NADINE

8.344 pounds per gallon.

ROY

Miss Maddie lets Nadine use her computer. I don't know the first thing about 'em but she tells me Nadine's a regular whiz on the thing. She's always lookin' up facts.

HASTINGS

Well, that's wonderful that she can do that like a normal child. Good for you, Darlene.

NADINE

Nadine.

HASTINGS

Right. Sorry.

ROY

How many wells your company dug here in West Virginia?

HASTINGS

I'm not sure of the exact number...

NADINE

2,630.

HASTINGS

Oh.

ROY

And how many gallons of that chemicalized water do you drop into each well?

HASTINGS

I really don't think that...uh...

NADINE

7,743,438 gallons a year.

ROY

So how much weight does that add up to, baby?

NADINE

Uh...a little over 20 billion pounds. Give or take.

ROY

That's a lot o' weight mister.

HASTINGS

I'm sorry but that just doesn't sound accurate.

ROY

You still got your calculator out?

HASTINGS

I really don't see...all right.

(He sighs and picks up his smart phone.)

7.7 million gallons...times...what was it? 8 and a third pounds?

NADINE

Uh huh.

HASTINGS

OK, that's...huh. It IS 20.2 billion pounds.

NADINE

Uh huh.

ROY

See, the good Lord didn't create the kind o' rocks and whatnot underground here that can take that much extra weight. That's why we be havin' these quakes all over the state now. Never used to have 'em at all.

HASTINGS

I'll admit it must be a minor inconvenience...but at least there aren't any major fault lines here. You're lucky you don't live in California—this place would really be shaking!

ROY

You don't drill out there?

HASTINGS

Well...(beat)...actually we do. But here we are on the East coast, so...

ROY

Yeah see, but the shakin's not all of it. I told you about Nadine's teacher, Miss Maddie. Your company's been drillin' on her land for the better part of a year now.

HASTINGS

And she's being well-compensated for it.

ROY

But the trouble is, her water's no good now. She can't drink it.

NADINE

Smells like farts.

ROY

All right now.

NADINE

Bad ones.

ROY

That's enough.

HASTINGS

That's probably just a little methane gas leaking into the water system. Perfectly harmless.

NADINE

No it ain't. She can't drink it. Can't wash in it neither. Gives her the sickness.

HASTINGS

Well, I'm sure she can afford bottled water now. Probably better for her any way.

ROY

Why don't you just clean up that water and reuse it instead of dumpin' it?

HASTINGS

Recycling you mean? Do you know what the expense would be to build hundreds of recycling stations all throughout the state? And then we would have to pass that added expense on to the consumer, so...

ROY

You could just pay for it out of some of the profits, couldn't you? *(to Nadine)* How much they profit last year?

NADINE

452 million dollars.

HASTINGS

Yes, but every company has to maximize their profits in order to stay in business. If you start cutting into the profits, you make your stock holders very unhappy.

ROY

What about the unhappiness of all the people around here? Look, you can see where we are. I got me a small place...quiet, not near any major highway...and my people have been here for God knows how many generations. Now, some big city folk might hate that kind of thing but I like it. It's a nice simple life.

NADINE

Tell about the canoes.

ROY

No, Mr. Hastings don't need to hear my old stories.

HASTINGS

No, no, go ahead.

ROY

Well...when I was young, we had this church group. Every summer they'd take us kids on a weekend trip to the West Fork River. They'd rent canoes and we'd all paddle out and stay on one of the small islands out in the middle. We'd pitch tents and use empty coffee cans for little stoves—turn 'em upside down, build a little fire under 'em and cook hamburgers on top.

(more)

ROY (CONT'D)

We thought that was just the best thing ever. We'd swim in the river during the day and sleep under the stars at night—we just took that for granted. Well sir, years later I come home from bein' in the army and I thought, "I'm gonna drive to the river and look out over where we used to stay back then." And I drive out there...and there's all these signs sayin' 'No swimmin', no boatin', no nothin''. In just a dozen years, illegal dumping and run-offs had gotten the river that polluted.

NADINE

And it smelled bad too. Like farts.

ROY

Nadine! Yeah, all right it did. And I thought... there's this whole generation of kids...just like her...and they ain't never gonna know what that was like. And that was years ago—I'm sure it's even worse now—but I ain't got the stomach to go look at it again. So now it's not just the river water; all our fresh water under the ground is bein' ruined too by all these chemicals that are bein' dumped in there.

HASTINGS

I understand your concern. Pollution is something that we at Marcellus National are very concerned about. But we're also concerned about America's reliance on other countries for our energy. Now, I can tell you're a patriot, right?

ROY

Of course; I love this country.

HASTINGS

And so do I. And this is a chance for us to work together. Because you see, Roy, we used to have to import our energy from the Middle East—we didn't have this technology back in the day. But now, we've found that this area is like...it's like the Saudi Arabia of natural gas.

ROY

Saudi Arabia? We ain't nothin' like them.

HASTINGS

Just in terms of energy production, I mean. And with your help, we can extract all this American energy out of our very own country and be independent again.

ROY

Independent. You mean like the War of 1776.

HASTINGS

That's a great way to put it; in fact if you don't mind I'm going to use that phrase at our next stock holder's meeting. 'This is the 1776 of natural gas'. And I want you to be part of this, Roy. I want you to be part of this Revolution. And I want you to have that money. What do you say?

(beat)

ROY

Don't suppose many of them coal jobs are comin' back.

HASTINGS

I'm afraid not.

ROY

So...yeah, maybe this IS the only way I'm gonna have any kind of income.

(Hastings hands him a pen and slides the papers toward him.)

HASTINGS

That's right. And you won't have to do a thing; just sit back and wait for those checks to arrive.

ROY

Yeah but see, that's not how it should be. I WANT to work.

HASTINGS

Of course you do. But as you say, jobs are hard to come by now, so...I think this may be your only option.

ROY

Yeah...maybe so.

HASTINGS

Think of it this way: you're doing the right thing for Nadine here. With this money, you might be able to find a school not too far from here that specializes in retarded children.

(beat)

ROY

Say what now?

HASTINGS

Sorry, I guess that's not how they say it nowadays.

ROY

My daughter is not retarded.

HASTINGS

Of course not. Uh... 'special', is that the phrase they use now?

ROY

She IS special.

HASTINGS

Well of course she is. I'm just saying that terminology has changed. You know, they used to have this other phase 'idiot savant'...

ROY

All right, listen! A while back some man from Child Services come by...said since I didn't have no job and Nadine wasn't in school, I was an unfit father. And they was fixin' to take her away from me. So I picked up my shotgun and explained how that wasn't gonna happen. I ain't seen that man since.

NADINE

You want I should go get the shotgun?

HASTINGS

Now wait just a second...

ROY

I don't appreciate your words mister. And I don't appreciate havin' my arm twisted

NADINE

I'm gonna go get it.

(She exits.)

HASTINGS

Mr. Owens, I think we just got off on a tangent here.

ROY

I guess you could say that. Now you wanna leave them papers, go right ahead...but I ain't signin' nothin' till I have more time to think on it.

(Hastings stands.)

HASTINGS

All right. But I suggest you don't take too long.

ROY

I'll take as long as I need.

HASTINGS

Don't misunderstand me, Mr. Owens. I checked with the local bank branch; you missed your last two mortgage payments. One more and this property will be in default. And it wouldn't be difficult for an interested company to snap it up. In which case, there would be no need to pay for a drilling lease.

ROY

Is that a threat?

HASTINGS

Not at all; just the economic reality of the world we live in now.

ROY

And ain't that a sad statement. You can show yourself out.

(Hastings exits. Roy slumps into his couch.)

NADINE (O.S.)

I can't find the shells.

ROY

Nadine, leave that thing alone.

(She enters.)

NADINE

Are you gonna send me away to some special school?

ROY

No baby, I would never send you away.

NADINE

Good. I like Miss Maddie.

ROY

I like her too.



NADINE

You sign them papers?

ROY

No.

NADINE

You can get the money somewhere else, right?

ROY

I dunno. Maybe I'll check back with the mine, see if they're gonna take any of us back anytime soon.

NADINE

OK. (beat) You wanna sing some more?

ROY

Naw. I'm not really in the mood for singin'.

(She sits for a moment watching him. She then retrieves the banjo. She holds it out; he shakes his head 'no'.)

NADINE

“THE SUN CAME SHININ’\*\*  
AS I WAS STROLLIN’  
THE WHEATFIELDS WAVIN’  
AND THE DUST CLOUDS ROLLIN’...

C'mon Dad...

(He reluctantly takes the banjo. They sing the next stanza almost as a dirge.)

ROY & NADINE

“THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND  
THIS LAND IS MY LAND  
FROM CALIFORNIA  
TO THE NEW YORK ISLAND  
FROM THE REDWOOD FOREST  
TO THE GULF STREAM WATERS  
THIS LAND WAS MADE FOR YOU AND ME.”

END OF PLAY

\*You Gotta Walk That Lonesome Valley – words and music by Woody Guthrie

\*\*This Land is Your Land – words and music by Woody Guthrie