

**A LAYING OF HANDS**

**ACT 1**  
**Scene 1**

Bishop, Georgia. Present day. EXTERIOR: The General Store.

CUE MUSIC: “*Way Beyond The Blue.*”

*Spotlight slowly comes up* to illuminate a faded sign proclaiming, “Bishop General Store, Louella Jenkins, owner.” *Lights come up* to reveal a dilapidated wood-frame house. A sagging porch runs the width of the house. On it is a rocking chair with several slats missing.

ADULT RITA MAE, (age 70s, black), dignified in a hat, old-fashioned church dress and seamed stockings, stares at the sign in wonder. Behind her DARLEEN (age 40s, white), a bleached blond real estate agent expansively waves her clipboard and cigarette.

MUSIC fades.

DARLEEN

*(in a syrupy southern drawl)*

Here we are. Home of the future WalMart! Honey, I can’t tell y’all how pea-green envious I am of you! I work my butt off, and here you’re the one getting’ rich. This place is worth a mint, honey! I had the devil’s own time tracking you down. Why, if someone wrote and told me they’d take a plot of dirt off my hands for what they’re paying you? Shoot, I’d say, “Show me the dotted line where I sign, sugar!”

ADULT RITA MAE climbs the rickety stairs, lost in thought.

Honey, y’all be careful! Them steps about ready to cave in.

ADULT RITA MAE

*(to self, speaking & signing)*

Still here...Old wood, old house, old store...my place. My place and my people’s place.

DARLEEN

Here now, honey! What y’all doin’?

ADULT RITA MAE

Still here after all these years.

DARLEEN

*(alarmed)*

Why, honey, are y'all deaf?

ADULT RITA MAE stiffens, drops her hands, stares at DARLEEN sternly.

ADULT RITA MAE

*(speaking, no signing)*

No, I'm not deaf. *(a beat)* But I sure came close. *(a beat)* No, that's not the whole truth neither. And didn't Grandma bring us up to always tell the truth, me 'n Tyler both?

DARLEEN

Who?

ADULT RITA MAE presses a fist against her mouth, struggling to control emotions.

You want some water, honey? I got some Poland Springs in the car.

ADULT RITA MAE

The truth is, I was deaf, once. Deaf as a stump. Deaf as stone. *(a beat)* But Aunt Sheba fixed Rita Mae. She could fix anything *(a beat)* if she wanted.

DARLEEN

Who you talkin' 'bout, honey? Nobody lives here.

ADULT RITA MAE

*(softly)*

Oh, they're here. Still here. It's like they've all been waiting *(a beat)* for me.

DARLEEN

*(shivering)*

You giving me chill bumps, honey! What say we just go back to the car, get these papers signed and get out of here before the mosquitoes chew us alive?

ADULT RITA MAE

*(running hands over the rocker)*

This here's where she lived, you know. Well, then again, maybe you don't. It was before your time.

DARLEEN

Who, honey?

ADULT RITA MAE

Hepsheba. Hepsheba Jenkins. Aunt Sheba. Lived here all her life. Never stepping out but once. And look what that brung her!

DARLEEN

*(alarmed)*

Oh, honey, don't pay no mind to long agos! Y'all want to pay attention to this fabulous opportunity here. Y'all want to think about your future, honey!

ADULT RITA MAE

Crazy black nigger woman. Crazy black deaf nigger woman. Crazy black deaf'n'dumb nigger woman.

DARLEEN

*(stiffly, clearly offended)*

I'm, I'm sorry, honey. I'm, I'm a Christian. I don't hold with talk like that.

ADULT RITA MAE

*(wearily shaking head and sinking into rocking chair)*

Huh! Only thing they got right was her color.

DARLEEN

Why y'all carrying on like this?

ADULT RITA MAE

It's this place. I thought I'd put it all behind me. But, it's always been there. Always! Seeing it today just brings it all back.

DARLEEN

This place? No offense, honey, but this place ain't nothing special. Why, if it weren't for WalMart, and all them Yankees flocking down here to build them fancy retirement homes? This place wouldn't be worth a plug nickel. It's sure not worth getting all worked up about. Just sign the papers, take the money, and forget about this dump.

ADULT RITA MAE

*(indignant, struggling out of rocker)*

Ain't worth it? Ain't worth it?

DARLEEN

*(backpedaling)*

Oh, honey, you know what I mean.

ADULT RITA MAE

But you don't know what I mean!

She slowly sinks back in the rocker, closes  
her eyes.

I'm gonna tell you a story. The story of Hepsheba Jenkins. (*a beat*) And then you tell  
me this place is nothing special when I'm done.

CUE MUSIC: “*Way Beyond The Blue*”  
refrain.

*Lights slowly dim.*

BEGIN FLASHBACK.

**ACT 1**  
**Scene 2**

1930s. October. Late afternoon. EXTERIOR: Train Station. *As music continues to play, a spotlight comes up to illuminate a sign: “Bishop Depot.” Spotlight widens to reveal RITA MAE (age 9, black), and her little brother, TYLER (age 7, black) at the train station. Both children are travel-weary and sweltering in their fancy city clothes, wool coats, and hats. Hands clasped, they look lost and forlorn.*

TYLER

*(to Rita Mae, speaking over faint strains of music)*

You see her yet?

RITA MAE

*(anxiously looking around)*

No, *(a beat)* not yet.

TYLER

Are we lost?

RITA MAE

*(checking train ticket)*

No. This is the place. “Bishop, Georgia.”

TYLER pulls off his coat and tie.

Tyler! What you doin?’ We gots to look nice!

TYLER

It’s hot down here! I wana go home!

RITA MAE

We cain’t go home, Tyler! Not yet.

TYLER

Ain’t nobody here for us. I wanna go home, Reemie. I want Mother!

*ENTER LOUELLA (late 40s, black), a stern, work-weary woman in a faded, yet carefully mended cotton house-dress.*

MUSIC (“*Way Beyond The Blue*”) fades.

LOUELLA

*(crossing to Rita Mae and Tyler)*

Rita Mae? Tyler?

RITA MAE

*(protectively taking hold of Tyler's hand)*

Yes ma'am?

LOUELLA

I'm Louella Jenkins. Your grandma.

TYLER

*(to Louella)*

You don't *look* like Mother. You ain't pretty at all!

LOUELLA

Huh! Maybe not, child. But I am your grandma. Your mama's mama. Took care of her, and now? Well, now it looks like I'ma gonna have to take care of you young 'uns too. *(a beat)* Come along now. And keep your eyes to yourself, especially 'round here!

She takes suitcase from RITA MAE,

*Lights slowly dim.*

**ACT 1**  
**Scene 3**

Moments later. EXTERIOR: front porch of Dr. Harrelson’s home office. *Spotlight comes up* to reveal VIVIAN HARRLESON (age 42, white), a well-dressed doctor’s wife. She is anxiously watching the face of her son, REX (age 18, white), as he scans a letter.

VIVIAN

Rex? What’s it say? Is it, is it bad news?

REX

*(disgruntled)*

Yeah, you could say that.

VIVIAN

But what does Harvard say?

REX

*(angrily stuffing letter back in its envelope)*

I’m in.

VIVIAN

*(with stunned delight)*

You’re in? You, you mean, you’re accepted? Oh! Oh sweet Jesus! Well, well, congratulations, Rex!

REX

Daddy’s the one you should be congratulating. He pulled the strings.

VIVIAN

*(sighing)*

Oh, Rex, no! He’s not the one who...

REX

*(cutting her off)*

He’s been wanting me to join his practice ever since I was born. “Dr. & Dr. Harreleson.” Huh! Looks like he’s going to get his wish. Just like always.

VIVIAN

Being a doctor’s no small feat. Don’t let him spoil this for you, Rex.

REX

Once, just once I wish he’d ask me what *I* want!

VIVIAN  
(*sharply*)

And what do you want?

REX  
What does it matter what I want? Huh? What difference does it make when he just says, “No, son, you don’t want to do that,” every time I open my mouth?

VIVIAN  
All the more reason for you to go, then. To get away.

REX  
Ma, I don’t want to go away! Don’t you see? Everything I want is right here.

VIVIAN  
(*vehemently*)  
There’s *nothing* for you here! Nothing! Do you hear me? You think I don’t see what’s happening to you? Going off to all those “meetings” with your Daddy at night? (*a beat*) Oh Rex, you’re only eighteen! You have no idea what you want! Don’t you understand what an opportunity this is? I would give anything, *anything*, to be where you are.

REX  
No! (*a beat*) You wouldn’t want to be where I am. (*a beat*) Not in a million years.

VIVIAN  
I just, I don’t want you to have regrets.

REX  
I won’t have any regrets if I can just stay here and work a farm! Mr. Campbell said he’d take me on full-time.

VIVIAN  
A farm? A farm! Rex, I appreciate the fact that you’ve been willing to work summers for Sandy Campbell’s daddy ‘n all.

REX  
You “appreciate” it?

VIVIAN  
I admired your work ethic. Besides, that family can use some help.

REX  
Christ, Ma, you make Mr. Campbell sound like a sharecropper!



VIVIAN

I don't want you wasting your life slaving on a red dirt farm! It's beneath you. *(a beat)* You're going to be a surgeon, Rex! A surgeon! You won't have to stay here, working for your Daddy. You can get away. You can go anywhere!

REX

I don't want to spend my life dealing with something that's broken! I want to plant things and watch them grow.

VIVIAN

Oh, Rex, no, you don't understand!

REX

Really? Oh, I think I do. I think I understand very well.

He turns, heads down the front steps.

VIVIAN

*(calling after him)*

Where are you going?

REX

To the Campbells.

VIVIAN

Now? But, dinner's almost ready.

REX

I'm eating at the Campbells. Sandy invited me to supper.

VIVIAN

You be careful of that girl, Rex! I don't trust her.

REX

*(halting, turning back to confront Vivian)*

Sandy? She's a sweetheart, Ma. She wouldn't hurt a flea.

VIVIAN

I've seen the way she looks at you.

REX

I hope so, 'cause I sure like lookin' at her.

VIVIAN

Rex!

REX

I aim to marry her.

VIVIAN  
*(dismayed)*

Oh, Rex, you can't get married. You're too young!

REX

No, I'm not. Look at me, Ma. Look at me! I'm not a doctor. What will I do in Cambridge? I'd die in a city.

VIVIAN

You'll die if you stay here!

REX stares at her as if betrayed.

Go to Harvard, Rex. Go away and give yourself a chance.

REX

But, but what about the farm? What about Sandy?

VIVIAN

They'll still be here, waiting for you, if you still want to come back.

*Lights slowly fade.*

**ACT 1**  
**Scene 4**

Moments later. Late afternoon. INTERIOR: Sandy’s kitchen. *Spotlight comes up to reveal GLORY COLEMAN (age 30, black), a statuesque woman in a cotton dress and a long white apron. She sets a cup of tea in front of SANDY CAMPBELL (age 17, white), a wan, pretty girl struggling to fight back nausea and a sick sense of dread.*

GLORY

Forget them potatoes, Miz Sandy. Set down and drink that, child. You lookin’ peaked.

SANDY

*(smiling weakly, taking shaky sip)*

Glory?

GLORY

Hmmm?

SANDY

Was it hard for you?

GLORY

Hard?

SANDY

Getting married?

GLORY

*(peeling potatoes)*

No harder than for any woman, I reckon.

SANDY

No. I mean, was it...difficult?

GLORY

All marriages has their ups and their downs, Miz Sandy. There’s things you give up, and things you gain.

SANDY

What do you have to give up, Glory?

GLORY

Child, if you have to be askin’ that question, you ain’t ready to give up nothin’!

SANDY  
How did you do it?

GLORY  
Do it?

SANDY  
Get your husband to propose.

GLORY  
*(softening)*  
Oh, well...we just always...knew.

SANDY  
Knew?

GLORY  
He looked at me, I looked at him, and we just knew.

SANDY  
*(nervously playing with her cup)*  
And, and when you had your baby, your boy...

GLORY  
Willie?

SANDY  
When you had him, was your husband...happy?

GLORY  
He was some proud!

SANDY  
He was?

GLORY  
‘Course he was! Meant my Ben was a man! *(a beat)* Why you askin’ me all this?

SANDY  
I, I don’t know. I was just...curious.

She sips her tea, grabs a napkin and retches.

GLORY  
That the third time this week you sick, Miz Sandy.

SANDY  
*(weakly)*

It's nothing, Glory. Just something I ate.

GLORY  
Hmmp! That the explanation Mister Rex be givin' you?

SANDY  
Oh, Glory! What am I going to do?

*Spotlight fades.*

**ACT 1**  
**Scene 5**

Moments later. Late afternoon. EXTERIOR: Train Depot. *Spotlight comes up on LOUELLA, RITA MAE, and TYLER leaving the depot, walking down Main Street.*

LOUELLA

*(sternly, to Rita Mae)*

Move those feet, child! I ain't got all day.

RITA MAE

*(looking around in wonder)*

Which one of these houses is ours, Grandma?

LOUELLA

*(scoffing)*

Don't play dumb, child. We ain't live in any of these houses. No sir!

TYLER

Then where we gonna live, Grandma?

LOUELLA

Why, where we all live. In the Colored Section.

She trudges on. RITA MAE and TYLER hurry to catch up.

CUE MUSIC: “*Way Beyond The Blue,*”  
1<sup>st</sup> verse. (“I gotta home in Glory Land...”)

**ACT 1**  
**Scene 6**

Moments later. INTERIOR: The General Store. *Lights come up* to reveal a dim store crowded with barrels, cans, mason jars, bolts of cloth, grain sacks, odd’ n’ ends, yet meticulously clean. A hand-lettered sign by the cash register advertises: “Fresh Yams and Nightcrawlers.” LOUELLA ushers RITA MAE and TYLER inside.

MUSIC (“*Way Beyond The Blue*”) fades.

TYLER  
(*incredulous*)

A store? We gonna live in a store?

LOUELLA  
(*unpinning hat, tying on apron*)

In it, above it, behind it. Well don’t just stand there gaping like a catfish. We gots work to do! Rita Mae? Unpack that there box ands stack them sardines on the shelf.

RITE MAE hastens to do as told. Satisfied,  
LOUELLA pulls out a stool behind register.

LOUELLA  
Tyler? Climb on up, child. You gonna help me take inventory.

TYLER  
In-ven-what?

LOUELLA  
(*pointing to cans on counter*)  
Powdered milk. Start counting.

A chair creak off in a corner. LOUELLA  
turns towards the sound.

Sheba? You there?

*A light comes up* to reveal SHEBA (age 23, black). Thin, slightly twisted, wearing a sack dress, sweater, heavy knit stockings, and a built up shoe, she sits in the rocker, a cane across her lap.

LOUELLA

*(raising eyes and lamenting)*

Two grandbabies, on top of Sheba. Lord, I’m too old for this! I’m countin’ on you for the strength.

***\*NOTE: While Sheba signs, all her words and inner thoughts are voiced by Offstage Interpreter over a microphone.***

SHEBA

*(signing, Offstage Interpreter voicing over mic)*

Why don’t you try asking for some patience, Mama?

LOUELLA

I ask for that too. Every day. *(offhand, to Tyler)* Tyler? How many cans of milk you got?

TYLER

*(staring at Sheba, dumbfounded)*

Uh, fifteen?

LOUELLA

You better count again, Brother. There was twenty-four last night.

RITA MAE

*(hastening to Tyler’s side)*

I’ll help you count, Tyler.

LOUELLA

Keep to your task, Sister.

Startled, RITA MAE drops some cans.

And don’t go droppin’ them sardines! Folks don’t like dented cans. Tyler can count for hisself.

RITA MAE

Yes ma’am, Grandma, he surely can. It just takes him a little longer. He’s only seven.

LOUELLA

And how old are you? Nine?

RITA MAE

Yes ma’am. I’m in the fourth grade.



LOUELLA

Well...I gotta few things to say to you, Rita Mae. You 'n Tyler both. Come tomorrow we march down to The Watkinsville County Training School and get you enrolled.

TYLER  
(*dismayed*)

Enrolled!

LOUELLA

You 'n Rita Mae both.

TYLER

But, but, we only here for a *visit!* Mama said, right, Rita Mae? For a visit!

LOUELLA

Bishop ain't Chicago, child. Your mama done sent you to me to be raised right. And child, down here in Bishop, Georgia folks *work* for a living.

TYLER  
(*pointing to Sheba*)

Then why ain't she working?

LOUELLA  
(*stiffening with anger*)

What you say, child?

TYLER  
(*swallowing nervously*)

I, I say, why ain't she working?

LOUELLA

Why you heathen child! I don't know how y'all talked to your mama. But I sure as heck ain't your Mama, Brother! And don't you ever go forgetting it, you hear me?

TYLER  
(*fighting tears*)

I hate you!

LOUELLA raises an angry hand. SHEBA's cane strikes the floor.

SHEBA  
Stop! Mama, stop! That ain't the way. Mama, stop!

LOUELLA  
I ain't gonna hit him, Sheba.

SHEBA

But he don't know that! Cain't you see how scared he is?

LOUELLA

Sheba, you know I don't hold with no disrespect.

SHEBA

He's a baby, Mama! He don't know no better. Ain't his fault Madeline didn't bring him up right.

LOUELLA

And if I let him get away with this it gonna be my fault. He gotta learn sometime, and it might as well be here and now.

SHEBA

Mama!

LOUELLA

I won't hurt him, Sheba. I'll be firm, but I won't hurt him.

RITA MAE

What? What she saying? What you gonna do to Tyler?

LOUELLA

*(ashamed, struggling for control)*

Listen to me, Rita Mae. You 'n Tyler both. You ain't living in Chicago now. You living here in Bishop, with me 'n Sheba. And child, here in Bishop we have a thing called, “respect.” There ain't no “she” here. There's only Sister Rita Mae, Miz Louella Jenkins, and Miz Hepsheba Jenkins. That's “Grandma” and “Aunt Sheba” to you, you got that, Brother?

TYLER

*(gulping)*

Y-y-yes.

LOUELLA

Yes what?

TYLER

Y-y-yes'm. *(A beat)* Grandma.

LOUELLA

*(patting Tyler's cheek)*

There now, that's all we need to say about that.

**ACT 1**  
**Scene 7**

Moments later. INTERIOR: The General Store. *ENTER* YVONNE HENDRICKS (age 30, black) a sassy domestic full of flair and dreams. She is carrying a laundry basket piled with ironing. *ENTER* BENJAMIN COLEMAN (age 30s, black) a strapping man in sweat-stained overalls. A huge empty cotton sack is slung around his neck.

LOUELLA  
*(to Tyler)*

Put a smile on that face, child. We gots customers.

She calls out a greeting.

Evening, Brother Coleman. Sister Hendricks, looks like you got some work to take home with y'all tonight.

YVONNE

Evening, Sister Jenkins. Gotta get this batch ironed 'fore morning.

BEN

*(to Sheba, speaking with some pantomimed sign)*

Evening, Miz Sheba. You looking pretty as a picture. Good to see you up and about.

SHEBA limps to her rocker.

Here, let me help y'all there. You feeling alright, Miz Sheba? Something upsetting you?

LOUELLA  
*(to Ben, interrupting)*

You make champion today, Ben?

BEN

*(flexing fingers wrapped in bloody bandages)*

Nawww. Them balls done stuck to the bolls like they was glued.

TYLER  
*(to Rita Mae)*

Reemie! Look at his hands!

RITA MAE

Shhh, Tyler!

LOUELLA

Your luck will change tomorrow, Benjamin.

BEN

Huh, I'll say “Amen” to that, Sister!

LOUELLA

You want some catfish for supper? Fresh caught.

BEN

*(digging in empty pockets)*

Nawww. Lemme have coupla them sardines and some sod y crackers. I still got credit?

LOUELLA

*(glancing at her ledger)*

Two dollars.

BEN

Huh, gotta get me downtown to the Center one of these days. You still taking their powdered milk in trade?

LOUELLA

*(patting Tyler's head)*

Got twenty-four of them last count. Ain't that right, child?

YVONNE

Why, who y'all gots here, Sister?

LOUELLA

These here be my grandbabies. Madeline's two. Rita Mae, Tyler, say “how do.”

RITA MAE & TYLER

*(shyly)*

How do, ma'am. Mister.

YVONNE

*(to Tyler)*

You sure is precious, child! Just like your mama. Mmmm-mmm! I could just eat you right up with a spoon! Mmm-mmm-mmm!

TYLER

You know Mother?

YVONNE

Course I do, child! We best friends! Two peas in a pod, Yvonne and Madeline, all through Watkinsville County. All eight grades of it! Ha! She still married to Big Bill?

TYLER looks helplessly at RITA MAE.

RITA MAE

Uh, yes m’am, I mean, ummm, I mean, no m’am, maybe.

YVONNE

Yes? No? Which is it, child?

RITA MAE

*(hanging her head in misery)*

I, I d-don’t know, m’am.

SHEBA

Oh, Madeline, look what you done to these poor childrens!

YVONNE

*(with dawning understanding)*

Oh, it’s like that, is it? Well, don’t you go getting all tender-hearted, Sister. Your grandma here will take right good care of you. No finer lady in Bishop than Miz Louella Jenkins. Ain’t that right, Ben?

BEN

Right as rain, Miz Yvonne! Ain’t that right, Miz Sheba?

SHEBA pulls herself more upright in her rocker, and crosses her arms defiantly.

YVONNE

Just stating the gospel truth. And speaking of truth, my lady, Miz Grenville, gotta be the richest lady in Bishop! I can’t wait ‘til this here dress gets old enough for her to hand it down to me. Just look!

She lifts a lacy white Victorian gown from her basket, holds it against her body.

Look! Just look at all this fancy lace, and them pleats!

SHEBA half rises, lips parted in wonder, reaching for the dress.

BEN

*(whistling through teeth)*

Whoo-weee! That sure one fancy dress! Maybe I should just take it on home to Glory. Tell her maybe we can git married proper now.

SHEBA limps to YVONNE, fingers dress.

BEN

*(to Sheba, speaking with broad pantomime)*

What you think, Miz Sheba? Would you wanna get married in a dress like that?

SHEBA

*(signing, Offstage Interpreter voicing over mic)*

Married? In a dress like this? Oh, yes! Married. Someone to love? A home, and a family? Yes. Yes, I would like that, so much!

LOUELLA pulls SHEBA away from the dress. SHEBA sighs resignedly.

YVONNE

You know what Miz Grenville wears this fancy dress for? Breakfast, that’s what! Can you believe that? She says this here’s something called a “morning dress.”

BEN

Mourning! Than I sure hope Glory wears it to my funeral!

YVONNE

Hmmph! That might be sooner’n you think, Benjamin Coleman.

BEN

*(with a deep, rich laugh)*

Ha! That so?

YVONNE

I don’t know how Glory puts up with you. If you was mine I’d strung you up and skinned you ages ago.

BEN

Y’all just don’t appreciate my charm.

YVONNE

*(sniffing)*

Charm?

BEN

I got ‘nuff charm to fill buckets! Ain’t that right, Miz Sheba?

He lifts SHEBA’s hand, kisses it. She flinches, pulls hand away.

SHEBA

No, Ben! Don’t. Not if you don’t mean it.

YVONNE  
*(needling Ben)*

Hmmph! Charm.

LOUELLA

White folks got strange ways.

YVONNE  
*(folding dress away)*

Tell it! I been working for ‘em half my life, and I still don’t understand them a lick.

LOUELLA

Huh! Amen, Sister! Now, what can I get y’all for your supper?

YVONNE

Lemme have a pound of flour, some Vienna sausage, coupla them yams there. Oh, and throw in some of them peanut paddies. I need me a treat.

RITA MAE quickly gather the items, lays them on the counter.

RITA MAE  
*(timidly, to Louella)*

Is this right, Grandma?

LOUELLA  
*(with surprise and grudging praise)*

What? Why, yes, child. That’s just fine.

YVONNE  
*(to Tyler)*

You gonna ring these up for me, honey?

TYLER  
*(with a quick look to Louella)*

Uh, yes ma’am?

LOUELLA  
*(instructing Tyler)*

20¢ for flour. 10¢ for paddies. 45¢ for sausage. 5¢ for yams.

TYLER  
*(laboring to ring up sale)*

That be, uh, ummm, 80¢, ma’am. Thank you.

TYLER bags groceries for YVONNE.

YVONNE

Sister Jenkins, y’all got yourself two peaches here!

She gathers her things, heads to door,  
halts, turns back to LOUELLA.

Oh, I almost forgot! Y’all goin’ to the revival meeting this Saturday?

SHEBA sighs, limps to rocker, sits wearily.

LOUELLA

*(pointedly speaking & signing for Sheba’s benefit)*

The revival meeting? Yes, indeed I am, Sister. Praise the Lord, ain’t nothing could keep us from that revival meeting come Saturday. Man don’t live by bread alone.

BEN

Yeah, Lord, that sure the truth!

SHEBA

*(signing, Off-stage Interpreter voicing over mic)*

You need love too, don’t you Ben?

BEN

Glory and I is taking our Willie. You gonna bring your grandbabies, Miz Jenkins?

LOUELLA

*(pointedly speaking & signing for Sheba’s benefit)*

Yes, Brother, I surely am. The Good Book says, “suffer the little children to come unto me.”

BEN

Yes, Sister, it surely does.

SHEBA

*(signing, Off-stage Interpreter voicing over mic)*

And they surely suffer, don’t they, Jesus?

BEN

What that you say, Miz Sheba?

LOUELLA

*(deliberately misinterpreting)*

She said she’s looking forward to it.



SHEBA

*(striking cane on floor)*

That’s a lie, and you know it, Mama!

YVONNE

*(brightly, struggling to smooth over tension)*

I declare, Sister! It’s a wonder watching y’all talkin’ like that.

LOUELLA

I’m her mama. Got to care for her. It’s my cross to bear.

SHEBA bristles. BEN crouches by her chair, lays a comforting hand on her arm.

BEN

It must be hard. Sometimes I think I can understand, Miz Sheba.

LOUELLA

*(speaking, with some occasional pantomimed sign)*

She wasn’t always like this, you know. Sheba was right as rain until that summer. That fever summer. Mosquitoes swarming like flies. Enough to eat a body alive. Remember, Sheba? *(a beat)* The fever came two days later. Had a temp of a hundred ‘n five. Neck stiff as a board. Thought I gonna lose my Sheba for sure. *(a beat)* Lost her daddy instead. More than a man could handle.

SHEBA

Mama! Mama, that’s my story to tell!

YVONNE

Hmmph! Still, it’s a wonder.

LOUELLA

*(with tired resignation)*

A wonder.

SHEBA

*(striking cane repeatedly on floor to get Louella’s attention)*

Mama! Mama! Mama, look at me! Mama!

BEN

*(to Sheba)*

No, don’t fret yourself, Miz Sheba. We be goin’ now. Won’t keep y’all from your supper. C’mon, Miz Yvonne. We done took up enough of these good people’s time. Evenin’ y’all. Miz Sheba.

*EXIT BEN and YVONNE.*

**ACT 1**  
**Scene 8**

Moments later. INTERIOR: The General Store. SHEBA strikes the floor with her cane, struggles to a stand. She signs furiously to LOUELLA as RITA MAE and TYLER look on with frightened eyes.

SHEBA

*(signing, Off-stage Interpreter voicing over mic)*

Mama, why did you tell them that story ‘stead of what I said?

LOUELLA

*(speaking with some pantomimed sign)*

I told them what they needed to hear, Sheba, the gospel truth.

SHEBA

You didn’t tell them what I *said!*

LOUELLA

They didn’t need to hear what you said. Same goes for the children.

SHEBA

You don’t speak for me, Mama!

LOUELLA

I’m sorry, child, but I do.

SHEBA flinches as though struck.

Go show these childrens the well while I fire up the stove. Gots two more baths to give before supper.

SHEBA, trembling with shock, can’t move.

Go on now.

RITA MAE timidly slips her hand in SHEBA’s. Startled, SHEBA studies her, taking her measure. She folds her fingers over RITA MAE’s hand protectively.

*Lights slowly fade.*

**ACT 1**  
**Scene 9**

Later that night. INTERIOR: the children’s bedroom.

CUE MUSIC: “A Motherless Child.”

*A bluish light comes up* to reveal RITA MAE and TYLER lying under a patchwork quilt in a shared bed. TYLER is on his side, crying.

RITA MAE

*(speaking softly over faint strains of music)*

Tyler? You asleep? Tyler?

TYLER

Reemie?

RITA MAE

It’s me. You awake, Tyler?

TYLER

*(rolling over, sitting up)*

You like this place, Reemie?

RITA MAE

I dunno. It’s different. You like it?

TYLER

I miss Mother! I wanna home, Reemie! I don’t like Grandma.

RITA MAE

Shhh! Quiet, Tyler! She’ll hear you. And then where will we be? ‘Sides, if we’re really, really good maybe she’ll send us back.

TYLER

Nawww, if we’re really, really good she’ll keep us here working forever. What we gotta do is be really, really bad, Reemie.

RITA MAE

You be really bad if you think that’ll work, Tyler.

TYLER

I too scared to be bad. You saw her!

RITA MAE

Then I guess we’re stuck here.

TYLER

I don’t wanna be stuck here! Why’d Mother hafta send us here?

RITA MAE

It might not be so bad. There’s Aunt Sheba.

TYLER

What you mean?

RITA MAE

We can learn things here. What you think that means, Tyler?

TYLER

What’s what mean?

RITA MAE

*(signing the word, “stop”)*

This.

TYLER

What’s that?

RITA MAE

I dunno. It’s what Aunt Sheba did when Grandma looked like maybe she gonna hit you. Aunt Sheba went like this *(repeats sign)* and Grandma stopped.

TYLER

How can she talk that way, with her hands?

RITA MAE

I dunno. Grandma seems to understand her.

TYLER

Huh! All looks like a bunch of chicken wing flapping, you ask me.

RITA MAE

Not really, Tyler. Not if you watch real close.

TYLER

What you care so much ‘bout Aunt Sheba for, Reemee?

RITA MAE

She’s interesting! The things she can say? With her hands? I want to learn to do that!

TYLER

You ain't got enuff *time* to learn how do that! Mother's gonna send for us any day now. Just as soon as soon as she gets everything in order like she said.

RITA MAE

That might take a while, Tyler.

TYLER

What you mean? Mother loves us! She gonna send for us! She said so! She promised!

RITA MAE

Mother loves Mister Leon too. That's why we're here.

TYLER

But Mister Leon wants to marry Mother!

RITA MAE

He wants to marry Mother. (*A beat*) But he wants no part of us.

TYLER

Wh-what? What that mean, Reemee? What that mean?

RITA MAE

It, it means...Mother's gotta work on Mister Leon. Soften him up. (*A beat*) We might be here a while, Tyler. (*a beat*) Tyler? Tyler?

TYLER

(*lying on his side, crying into his pillow*)

I ain't crying, Reemee. I ain't!

RITA MAE

I know you ain't, Tyler. I know.

She gently pats TYLER's shoulder

CUE MUSIC: “*A Motherless Child*” swells and slowly fades.

*Light slowly dims.*

**ACT 1**  
**Scene 10**

Night. A few days later. INTERIOR: Louella’s kitchen.

CUE MUSIC: *“Bluesy gospel instrumental.”*

*Lights come up to reveal LOUELLA sitting at the kitchen table, sewing. SHEBA is sitting in her rocker, assisting RITA MAE, who is crouched at her feet, with her math.*

SHEBA

*(to Rita Mae, signing with Off-Stage Interpreter voicing over mic)*

Not add. Multiply! Two fives. See?

*ENTER TYLER, nose buried in a book.*

TYLER

Reemee? What’s “A-f-r-i-c-a-n?”

LOUELLA

Don’t you be asking your sister for answers, child. That’s your work.

TYLER

But, but this is hard, Grandma!

LOUELLA

‘Course it’s hard, child! That’s why it’s called work. Sound it out.

TYLER

*(mispronouncing with a long “A”)*

AAAA-fri-cane.

LOUELLA

*(with correct pronunciation)*

African.

TYLER

*(still mispronouncing)*

AAA-fri-can.

LOUELLA

Not “A.” “Aah,” like “ask.” African.

TYLER

Af-fri-can.

LOUELLA

That’s it.

TYLER

*(beaming)*

Hey! *(A beat)* But, what’s it mean, Grandma?

LOUELLA

Mean? Why child, it’s who you are.

TYLER

But, I thought I was colored.

LOUELLA

*(stiffening)*

Close the book.

TYLER

But, my homework! I ain’t done!

LOUELLA

Close the book, child. What I ‘ma gonna say won’t be found in any book.

TYLER exchanges wary glances with RITA  
MAE, who motions him to close the book.

LOUELLA

*(to Tyler & Rita Mae)*

You know what “colored” means, child? *(A beat)* It means nothing.

TYLER & RITA MAE

Nothing?

LOUELLA

Nothing. And nothing is how folks what call you that wants you to feel. *(A beat)* But child, you ain’t nothing!

TYLER

*(voice choked)*

I ain’t?

LOUELLA

No! You is a child of God. And that’s everything. That’s plenty. Right, Sheba?

SHEBA shakes her head, turns away. RITA MAE frowns, confused by the tension.

LOUELLA  
*(to Rita Mae)*

Sister, come on over here and try this on for size.

RITA MAE  
*(crossing to Louella)*

A dress? You made a dress? For me?

LOUELLA  
Well, it's too short for Sheba. And Lord knows it's way too small for me. And Tyler surely don't wanna wear it. So I guess that leaves you, child.

She slips the dress over RITA MAE, who twirls in delight.

RITA MAE  
It's beautiful, Grandma! Where you learn to sew like this?

LOUELLA  
From my mama. She taught me just like I taught your mama.

RITA MAE  
*(dumbfounded)*  
Mother can sew? Like this?

LOUELLA  
Last I seen her she could. Her 'n Sheba both.

RITA MAE  
I never saw Mother sew. She gets all our clothes from stores and catalogs.

LOUELLA  
Huh! That'd explain why nothing in your suitcase fit.

RITA MAE  
*(shyly kissing Louella's cheek)*  
Thank you, Grandma.

LOUELLA  
*(stiffly)*  
Don't be tenderhearted, Sister. It's only a white woman's castoff cut down to size.



RITA MAE

*(stung)*

Oh. I, I didn't know.

LOUELLA

But you keep it clean all the same. Cleanliness is next to godliness, the Good Book says. *(a beat)* Now finish up your homework with Aunt Sheba. I gotta see what I can find to spruce up Tyler here for the revival.

TYLER

I don't wanna wear no dress, Grandma!

LOUELLA

Don't be foolish, child. I got some knickers boxed up down in the store.

TYLER

*(glowing)*

With suspenders?

LOUELLA

Those too.

*EXIT LOUELLA & TYLER.*

**ACT 1**  
**Scene 11**

Moments later. INTERIOR: Louella’s kitchen. RITA MAE fingers the dress. Sighing, she carefully wipes a kitchen chair with her hand, carefully sits, and opens her book. SHEBA limps to the table, touches RITA MAE’s shoulder, waits for her to look up.

SHEBA

*(signing, Off-Stage Interpreter voicing over a mic)*

Don’t matter if it belonged to a white woman before. It yours now.

RITA MAE

*(confused)*

What? I’m, I’m sorry, Aunt Sheba. I don’t understand you.

SHEBA

*(signing slowly, touching dress for emphasis)*

Dress. Yours now. Pretty.

RITA MAE

My dress? My dress is pretty?

SHEBA

No. You pretty, Rita Mae. You.

RITA MAE

No? My dress ain’t pretty? Wait. *(A beat)* Me? You think I’m pretty?

SHEBA beams, nods her head “yes.”

You think I’m pretty, Aunt Sheba?

SHEBA

Why you so surprised?

RITA MAE

*(wistfully)*

Nobody ever calls me pretty. Tyler’s the one they notice.

SHEBA

You pretty, Rita Mae. A dress ain’t important. It’s what here that counts.

SHEBA touches her heart, then RITA MAE’s.

RITA MAE

Mother’s beautiful! So beautiful. Everyone says so. *(A beat)* Is she your sister, Aunt Sheba? Your *real* sister? *(a beat)* Can you understand me?

SHEBA

Yes. I understand, if you look at me. I read your lips. *(A beat)* Yes. Different father, but real sister.

RITA MAE

Yes? Huh!

*ENTER LOUELLA.* She stops at the door watching SHEBA and RITA MAE converse. They do not see her.

RITA MAE

Me ‘n Tyler? We went to the movies once, back in Chicago. Mother looks just like that lady in the movie. That white lady. Only prettier.

SHEBA

Why that make you sad, child?

RITA MAE

The man who ran the movie? The, the manager? He told Mother she couldn’t take me to the bathroom there. Said we were dirty. But we weren’t! Mother gave us a bath before we went, me ‘n Tyler both. So why he say we’re dirty, Aunt Sheba?

SHEBA

*(heartbreak mixing with bitterness)*

You gonna see God tomorrow night, child. Why don’t you ask Him?

RITA MAE

I, I’m sorry, Aunt Sheba, but what you say?

SHEBA

God. Ask Him.

She gently strokes RITA MAE’s cheek.

LOUELLA

*(sharply, stepping from doorway)*

Time for bed, Rita Mae.

RITA MAE

*(jumping, badly startled)*

Oh! Grandma! You scared me.

LOUELLA

Time for bed.

RITA MAE

But, but my homework!

LOUELLA sternly crosses her arms.  
RITA MAE hurriedly gathers her book.

Oh. Uh, g-goodnight.

LOUELLA doesn't reply.

SHEBA  
*(smiling, blowing a kiss)*

Goodnight. Sweet dreams.

*EXIT RITA MAE.*

**ACT 1**  
**Scene 12**

Moments later. INTERIOR: Louella’s kitchen. LOUELLA angrily confronts SHEBA.

LOUELLA

*(harshly, speaking with some pantomimed sign)*

What’s wrong with you, Sheba?

SHEBA

*(after sarcastically checking her leg, her ears)*

Nothing. Nothing at all.

LOUELLA

Don’t you play deaf ‘n dumb with me! You know what I mean. Why did you mock the Lord in front of that child? *(a beat)* Answer me!

SHEBA

I didn’t mock, Mama. I simply told the truth.

LOUELLA

The truth? The truth! I’ll tell you the truth, Sheba. The truth is you’re too ashamed to seek the Lord!

SHEBA

*(with a weary sigh)*

Oh, Mama, when you gonna give this up?

LOUELLA

Never! I ain’t never gonna give up! Not while I got breath in my body.

SHEBA

God can’t cure me, Mama.

LOUELLA

The Lord’s the only one can cure you, Sheba. You just too damn stubborn to believe.

SHEBA

*(shaking head sadly)*

No, Mama, no. Not your God. He’s *(a beat)* limited. He’s not enough. Not for me.

LOUELLA

You hush, child!

SHEBA

He's not! He's limited. He should be so much more! *(a beat)* Listen to me, Mama. You never *listen!*

LOUELLA

How can you say that? I, I taught you! I taught you how to talk!

SHEBA

*(cuttingly)*

Oh, yes, Mama. The signs. You showed me all the signs.

LOUELLA

I had to find a book. Find the money to pay for it. Teach myself first, then you. Run the store, earn a living, feed 'n clothe you 'n Madeline both. *I* had to do all that, Sheba. *Me!*

SHEBA

I know all about your sacrifices, Mama.

LOUELLA

*(bitterly)*

No you don't! You, you ain't got no idea. *(a beat)* But let me tell you something, Sheba. Your daddy couldn't take it. He left! But not me. Never me.

SHEBA

Oh, Mama, Daddy didn't leave.

LOUELLA

He left! Up and left me alone with two babies, one a crippled deaf-mute!

SHEBA

*(brutally honest)*

He was shut out! Shut out, Mama! Shut out.

LOUELLA

Sheba!

SHEBA

Just like you shut me out.

LOUELLA

I don't! Sweet Jesus, everything I do been for you.

SHEBA

You know, Mama? I just realized. Reason you 'n God get along so well? You both alike, Mama. *(a beat)* Narrow, rigid, closed-minded.

LOUELLA

*(stunned by Sheba's blasphemy)*

You hush! You hush now!

SHEBA

*(relentlessly plowing on)*

You both think you know what's best, for everyone. And if we don't like it, don't go along? Pfft! You can both just send us straight to hell.

LOUELLA

Hush! You hear me! Hush! Who you think you are talkin' like that?

SHEBA

*(wearily shaking head)*

There's all kinds of hell, Mama. All kinds.

LOUELLA raises her hand, as if to strike SHEBA, who freezes her with a glare. LOUELLA guiltily lowers her hand. SHEBA, angrily wiping tears from her eyes, turns and limps to the door.

LOUELLA

*(yelling to Sheba's back)*

Sheba! Sheba! Come back here!

*EXIT SHEBA.*

*Lights slowly fade.*

**ACT 1**  
**Scene 13**

The next morning. EXTERIOR: front porch of Dr. Harrelson’s home office. *Lights come up* to reveal GLORY, apron removed and hat in place, assisting a pale, frightened SANDY to the front door. GLORY knocks. REX opens the door.

REX

*(with delight, stepping out on the porch)*

Sandy!

He pulls her into his arms, twirls her around.

SANDY

Oh, Rex, please, put me down!

REX

*(setting Sandy down, holding her at arm’s length)*

I’m just so happy to see you. I’m always happy to see you.

SANDY presses a hanky to her lips.

Are you okay? You need me to get my daddy?

SANDY

*(with sick anxiety and dread)*

I, not yet. Rex, I...we need to talk.

REX

*(sighing, shaking head remorsefully)*

Yeah. Yeah, we do.

SANDY

You, you mean, you know?

REX

Got told yesterday.

SANDY

*(confused)*

But, I don’t? Who told? How did you?



REX

I got accepted, Sandy. Into Harvard.

SANDY  
*(alarmed)*

Harvard? You mean, you mean you’ll be going away?

*ENTER VIVIAN, standing in the doorway.*

REX

I don’t want to. Sandy, you know I don’t want to leave you! But it’s for our future. Our future!

SANDY

I, I won’t have a future *(a beat)* if you go.

REX  
*(fervently, grasping Sandy’s hands)*

Wait for me, Sandy. Please, God, say you’ll wait! I don’t think I can stand it if I don’t have you to think about.

SANDY  
*(tearfully pulling hands away, pressing them to belly)*

Oh, Rex, I, I don’t think I can.

REX  
*(crushed)*

What? But, Sandy, what are you saying? I thought, I thought we loved each other!

SANDY

I hope we do, Rex. I hope we do.

REX

You, you don’t believe me?

SANDY sobs. REX moves to comfort her  
but GLORY steps between them.

GLORY  
*(to Vivian)*

Miz Harrleson? Is the doctor in?

VIVIAN

Why, yes. Lloyd’s with another patient. Why? Is something wrong?

GLORY

That’s what we’ve come to find out.

VIVIAN  
(*stiffening*)

I...see.

REX  
(*alarmed*)

What? What’s wrong? Sandy?

SANDY

I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! I didn’t do this to trap you, Rex! I never meant for this to happen!

REX flinches, turns away, running his hand over his face as if trying to wake up.

Rex? Rex!

REX

Give me a minute. It will be alright. Just, just give me a minute.

VIVIAN strides to REX’s side. She reaches up, places trembling fingers on his face. Pulling him down to her level she rests her forehead against his. Tears streaming down her face she bunches her fists and strikes his chest repeatedly.

SANDY  
(*crying out*)

Oh! Oh, God, don’t! Stop. Please, stop.

GLORY  
(*stomily*)

Hush, Miz Sandy. You hush now.

SANDY

But!

GLORY

If you gonna be a mama you gotta learn. A child will break your heart. Over and over and over again.

*Lights slowly fades.*

**ACT 1**  
**Scene 14**

Saturday night. EXTERIOR: The General Store. *Spotlight comes up to reveal* LOUELLA holding a kerosene lantern. RITA MAE, TYLER and SHEBA are clustered around her. The children are in their new clothes. LOUELLA wears a dark dress and a prim hat. Only SHEBA, leaning on her cane, looks much the same.

LOUELLA

Listen, childrens. Y'all gots to stick close. Do exactly what I say and keep your eyes on the ground. You hear?

TYLER

Why we gotta do that, Grandma?

LOUELLA

Why? 'Cause we hafta pass through town to get to the revival. That's why.

RITA MAE

We passed through it before, Grandma.

LOUELLA

That was during the day, child. It's dark out now.

RITA MAE reaches for TYLER's hand.

Just be good childrens and do like you told.

She tacks up a “Closed” sign on the door. Holding the lantern high she sets off, leading the way, the others hurrying to follow behind.

*Spotlight slowly fades.*

**ACT 1**  
**Scene 15**

That same night. INTERIOR: Sandy Campbell’s kitchen. GLORY sets soup and milk in front of a dejected SANDY.

SANDY  
*(crying)*

Oh, Glory.

GLORY

There, now. Let’s see you eat that.

SANDY

I don’t think I can.

GLORY

If you don’t feed that baby soon, the two of you are just gonna wither away.

SANDY

Good! *(a beat)* Oh, Glory, I want to die!

GLORY  
*(harshly)*

Hush!

SANDY

I do! I do! It would solve so many things.

GLORY  
*(slamming hands on table)*

Don’t you never let me hear you say nothing so foolish again, child! Long as you got breath in your body you got hope.

SANDY

Oh, hope.

GLORY

The Lord’s got plans for this baby, and there ain’t nothing you can do about it.

SANDY  
*(desperately grasping Glory’s arm)*

You must know something, Glory, someone you can take me to.

GLORY

*(sternly removing Sandy's hand, untying her apron)*

I took you to Dr. Harrleson.

SANDY

That's not what I mean.

GLORY

*(sharply)*

Don't know nobody what do that. *(A beat)* Like it or not, you gonna be a mama, child. Sooner you start to eat, less miserable you'll feel.

*She puts on hers sweater and hat.*

SANDY

*(alarmed)*

Where are you going? Don't leave me!

GLORY

It Saturday night, Miz Sandy. I gonna be with my family.

SANDY

They're more important than me?

GLORY

We goin' to a revival meeting.

*There is a knock on the door.*

That be my Ben and Willie now.

GLORY crosses to door, opens it.

*ENTER BEN and WILLIE. BEN is in a clean shirt and overalls, cap twisted in hand. WILLIE (age13, black) is a younger version of his father.*

BEN

*(with a broad smile, to Glory)*

All set, sugar?

GLORY

*(answering smile)*

All set.

SANDY

*(rising in panic, to Glory)*

But you can't just leave me here!

GLORY

Miz Sandy, you gots a nice, big house, lots of good food, and a mama and daddy what loves you.

SANDY

They hate me after what I've done!

GLORY

They just upset, child. It'll pass.

SANDY

Mama won't even look at me, and Daddy's ready to kill me and Rex both.

GLORY

You'll be fine, child. Y'all be just fine.

She forcefully pushes SANDY back in her chair, puts the spoon in her hand, urging her to eat.

SANDY

But!

GLORY

Just fine. Eat.

After a moment's rebellion, SANDY dips her spoon into the soup, forcing herself to eat. GLORY nods, turns to BEN, takes his arm, crosses to door.

*EXIT GLORY, BEN and WILLIE.*

*Light slowly fades.*

**ACT 1**  
**Scene 16**

Moments later. INTERIOR Dr. Harrleson’s study. LLOYD HARRLESON (age late 40s, white) and VIVIAN are having a heated argument. DR. HARRLESON is a commanding figure, used to getting his way. He is infuriated by what he sees as VIVIAN’s betrayal.

DR. HARRLESON

How could you let that uppity nigger push her way in here?

VIVIAN

Lloyd, please! This isn’t helping. I know you’re upset, but can’t we discuss this calmly? Glory was only helping Sandy.

DR. HARRLESON

That cheap white trash!

VIVIAN

Lloyd Harrleson! We’ve known the Campbells for years!

DR. HARRLESON

Apparently not nearly long enough! What kind of people let their daughter run wild like that?

VIVIAN

And I suppose Rex is blameless?

DR. HARRLESON

Nobody, especially not some uppity nigger, is going to pull my son’s name down in the mud. Rex has a future!

VIVIAN

Rex has responsibilities!

DR. HARRLESON

Rex is going to Harvard and joining me in the practice. And that, Vivian, is that!

VIVIAN

But, what about...

DR. HARRLESON

I’ll handle it.

He crosses to door.

VIVIAN  
*(alarmed)*

Lloyd! Wait! Where are you going?

DR. HARRLESON  
*(calling offstage to Rex)*

What do you say we take a little ride, son? Work off some of this dinner?

VIVIAN  
What? Riding? At this time of *(a beat)* why it's pitch black outside!

DR. HARRLESON  
*(crossing to Vivian, kissing top of her head)*

Don't wait up, dear. This might take a while.

VIVIAN  
*(with growing dread)*

Lloyd! Wait! What, what are you going to *(a beat)* Why are you doing this? Why do you have to drag Rex into your business?

DR. HARRLESON  
He's my son.

VIVIAN  
He's my son too, Lloyd!

DR. HARRLESON  
Don't wait up.

VIVIAN  
I don't understand!

DR. HARRLESON  
*(patting Vivian's hand)*  
I know you don't, dear. I know.

*EXIT DR. HARRLESON*

VIVIAN  
*(to self, nervously twisting her hands)*  
Oh, God.

*Lights dim.*



**ACT 1**  
**Scene 17**

That same night. INTERIOR: the revival meeting tent.

CUE MUSIC: *“This Little Light of Mine,”*

*Lights come up* to reveal GLORY, BEN, WILLIE, YVONNE and CROWD/CHORUS boisterously singing as they set up benches for the meeting.

*ENTER LOUELLA, SHEBA, RITA MAE, & TYLER.*

LOUELLA joyfully dives in, singing jubilantly as she helps set up benches. RITA MAE and TYLER, getting caught up in the spirit, join in. SHEBA, leaning on her cane, is unmoved. There is a rousing finish, then joyful shouts of “Amen!”

MUSIC fades.

YVONNE

*(giving a shout-out to Ben)*

Hallelujah! How you doin’, Brother?

BEN

Ain’t complaining. . Made it through another day. Looks like we got quite the crowd!

LOUELLA

*(with relief, gathering Rita Mae & Tyler to her side)*

Aahh! Here we are, childrens, safe at last. Praise the Lord!

BEN

*(shouting a greeting to Louella)*

Miz Jenkins!

LOUELLA

Evening, Benjamin, Miz Glory, Yvonne. Children, this here is Willie.

TYLER

*(sizing Willie up)*

How old ‘re you?

WILLIE

Thirteen.

TYLER

*(puffing out chest)*

Well, I'm eight.

RITA MAE

You're seven, Tyler.

TYLER

Almost eight. Any trouble 'round here, I can handle it.

WILLIE snorts. RITA MAE rolls her eyes.

YVONNE

*(to Louella)*

You make it here alright?

LOUELLA

Right enough, Sister. Something's up though. Lots of activity in Whitefolksville.

YVONNE

Tell it! Miz Grenville run me near ragged, feeding all her ladies what dropped in today.

BEN

That so?

YVONNE

Yes, that so! She say, “Yvonne, fetch more ice-tea! Yvonne, need some lemon cookies. Yvonne, bring some more crushed mint out here, girl!” All the while they be just sitting there jabbering like magpies, Miz Grenville yelling orders. “Yvonne this, Yvonne that.” I tell you, I is sick of my own name!

LOUELLA

What they all talking about?

YVONNE

They all giggling 'n snickering like a pack of schoolboys hearing their first dirty joke.

WILLIE's ears prick up. He leans in to hear better. TYLER copies, only to earn an elbow in the ribs from RITA MAE.

They gossip all day long 'bout one Rex Harrleson.

GLORY stiffens in alarm.

LOUELLA

Rex Harrleson? Doc’s boy?

YVONNE

Very one. Rich white son of a rich white man. News is he just got hissself accepted into Harvard Un-i-ver-sity.

GLORY

Hmmph! That ‘sposed to be news? Who else ‘sposed to go there?

She grabs WILLIE ear, drags him forward.

Now the day Harvard accepts my Willie here, that be news!

WILLIE

Oww, Mama!

SHEBA

*(struggling to follow the conversation)*

Sign, Mama! Sign to me!

LOUELLA waves her off.

YVONNE

Cain’t argue that, Sister Coleman. But the acceptance ain’t the real news. Real news is that Mister Rex might not make it outa town.

BEN

Why not, Sister? He’d be fool crazy pass up that opportunity.

YVONNE

Seems like he been poking ‘round the wrong hole. *(A beat)* Sandy Campbell’s! Ha!

WILLIE’s eyes pop. TYLER tries to act like he gets the joke. RITA MAE squirms.

BEN

Naaawww! Git outta here!

YVONNE

It’s the gospel truth! Her daddy threatening to shoot Sandy ‘n Mister Rex both. Only thing that saved them was Sandy’s mama pouring a bottle of rotgut down her daddy’s throat.

BEN

Think that’ll hold him?

YVONNE

Miz Grenville’s ladies sure hope so. Way they tell it, and from what I hear, that Mr. Campbell can be one mean son-of-a...

LOUELLA

*(interrupting, with a sharp look at the goggle-eyed children)*

Why don’t we all go find a seat?

YVONNE

*(sashaying)*

Sounds good. I for one am lookin’ forward to a good long sit after being on my feet all day. I got more’n my spirits need reviving!

ALL sit on the benches, looking around expectantly.

CUE MUSIC: “*Were You There*,” playing faintly in background.

BEN

I hear tell this Rev. Moses is the man to do it. “Spoused to be a hell of a preacher.

GLORY elbows BEN sharply in the ribs.

Uh, heck! ‘Spoused to be a heck of a preacher. Yessir, a heck of.

The CHILDREN giggle, then start to fidget as the wait drags on.

TYLER

Revival meeting’s are boring!

LOUELLA

Sit still, child, ‘n show some respect. You is in the presence of the Lord.

TYLER

*(looking around)*

I don’t see him.

LOUELLA

Child, you don’t see him. You *feel* him.

CUE MUSIC: “*Were You There*.”

LOUELLA rises and begins to sing.  
GLORY joins in, harmonizing. LOUELLA,  
adding sign, sings directly to SHEBA.

LOUELLA & GLORY

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Oh-oh-oh-oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.”

*ENTER REV. MOSES* (age 40’s, black) in colorful choir robe. Holding a bible, he joins in for the final refrain.

LOUELLA, GLORY, REV. MOSES

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Child, were you there?”

*MUSIC FADES.* CROWD claps and cheers.

REV. MOSES

*(boisterously, to Louella, clasping her hands )*

That was moving, Sister. Moving! Thank y’all for that kind welcome.

LOUELLA beams, slowly sits.

REV. MOSES

*(throwing arms wide, shouting jubilantly)*

Prepare ye the way of the Lord, my light and my sal-va-tion! Whom should I fear?

LOUELLA signs and mimes to SHEBA.

REV. MOSES

*(halting, turning to Louella)*

You sign, Sister.

LOUELLA

Yes, Rev. Moses. For my daughter here, Sheba. She’s, she’s deaf.

SHEBA and REV. MOSES face off.

REV. MOSES

Well, now, maybe the Lord and I can work a miracle tonight.

LOUELLA

Oh, that be my fondest hope!

REV. MOSES pats SHEBA’s head. She angrily pull back. He frowns, turns away.

REV. MOSES

*(pacing dramatically, addressing crowd)*

They’s some who’d scoff at y’all being here tonight. They’d say, “What you lookin’ for, nigger? Don’t you know Jesus is white?”

The CROWD gasps.

Oh, really? The Bible says Jesus is dirt!

The CROWD is startled. SHEBA leans forward, intrigued.

REV. MOSES

It says, right here in the Good Book, God scooped up a ball of clay and fashioned man in his own image!

CROWD

Huh! That’s right!

REV. MOSES

It don’t say he used white clay.

CROWD

Nawww, Lord.

REV. MOSES

It don’t say he used black clay.

CROWD

Huh! That right!

REV. MOSES

And all the clay I seen in Bishop, Georgia looks blood red to me, Brothers and Sisters!

CROWD

Huh! That the truth!

REV. MOSES

*(working the crowd)*

Y’all gotta right to be here!

BEN

Amen, Brother!

REV. MOSES

Y’all gotta right to believe in miracles!

LOUELLA

Yes, Lord! Please, Jesus!

REV. MOSES

There’s some what claim I can work miracles. Do you believe?

CROWD

Yes, Lord!

REV. MOSES

*(shouting, whipping crowd into a frenzy)*

I say, do you *believe?*

CROWD

*(frenzied shouting)*

Yes, Lord! Amen, brother!

REV. MOSES throws his arms wide.  
LOUELLA grips her hands in fervent prayer  
when he approaches SHEBA. The  
CROWD leans forward, breathlessly.

REV. MOSES

*(to Sheba)*

I’ve come to save you, Sister. I’ve come to make you in his image.

He claps his hands over SHEBA’s ears. She  
struggles mightily.

REV. MOSES

*(shouting)*

And the Lord said, “The deaf shall hear and the dumb shall speak.” Be gone, oh Satan!

With a flourish he throws SHEBA  
away from himself and steps back.

Hear me, oh Daughter of Zion! Hear the word of the Lord!

SHEBA stares at him defiantly.

I command you, Sister, hear the word of the Lord!

He claps his hands behind SHEBA’s ears.

CROWD jumps. SHEBA doesn't move.

CROWD

Can't she hear him? Can't she hear?

REV. MOSES

*(red-faced, sweating)*

Hear me, oh Sheba! I command you to hear the word of the Lord!

CROWD

*(picking up the chant)*

Hear, Sheba, hear! Hear, Sheba, hear!

RITA MAE, alarmed by the crowd's frenzy, tries to intervene.

RITA MAE

*(to Rev. Moses, struggling to push him away from Sheba)*

No! No, stop! Stop! Leave her alone!

LOUELLA

*(grabbing hold of Rita Mae)*

Hush, child, hush! He's trying to help her.

REV. MOSES

*(grabbing Sheba by the ears,, shaking her furiously)*

Be gone, Satan! I the Lord thy God hath spoken!

SHEBA

*(harsh, full-throated scream)*

*N-n-n-o-o-o-o!*

She tears REV. MOSES' hands away struggles to her feet. The CROWD gasps in fearful expectation.

LOUELLA

*(to Sheba, whispering fearfully)*

Sheba? Can you hear me? Sheba?

SHEBA strikes out with her cane. LOUELLA recoils as the CROWD gasps.

LOUELLA

It's alright. Don't be afraid.



SHEBA

*(howling, shaking her fists)*

N-n-n-o-o-o!

LOUELLA

*(rising, reaching for Sheba)*

Sheba...

SHEBA

*(furiously signing, Off-stage Interpreter voicing over mic)*

Damn you, Mama! Damn you! Why'd you put me through this? Why?

LOUELLA

*(struggling to sign through choked words)*

Sheba, please...I thought...I was trying...I did it for you, Sheba! For you!

SHEBA

*(furiously signing, Off-stage Interpreter voicing over mic)*

You did it for yourself! For yourself, Mama! Yourself! *(a beat)* I learned to accept myself, Mama. Why can't you?

She angrily pushes her way through the stunned crowd. *EXIT SHEBA.*

RITA MAE, seeing no help forthcoming, runs after Sheba. *EXIT RITA MAE.*

LOUELLA sinks onto the bench, weeping. GLORY and YVONNE try to comfort her.

*Lights slowly fade.*

**ACT 1**  
**Scene 18**

Later that night. EXTERIOR: a field on the outskirts of town with a lone tree.

CUE MUSIC: “*This Little Light of Mine*”  
slow, plaintive refrain.

*Lights come up* to reveal LOUELLA & BEN, holding up flickering lanterns. GLORY, TYLER, WILLIE and YVONNE follow closely behind, faces strained as they search for SHEBA and RITA MAE.

MUSIC fades.

LOUELLA  
(*anxiously*)

You think they alright, Benjamin?

BEN

Long as they keep to the road.

LOUELLA

What was she thinking, taking off like that? And with the child behind!

GLORY jumps, grabs BEN’s arm.

BEN  
(*to Glory*)

What you so jumpy about, sugar?

GLORY  
(*shaking head*)

I dunno. It’s (*a beat*) I just won’t rest easy ‘til we be in our own home with the door locked and barred.

YVONNE

Amen, Sister!

TYLER

Where are we, Grandma?

LOUELLA

Almost home, child. Almost home.

TYLER  
We through Whitefolksville yet?

WILLIE  
Left it a mile back.

TYLER  
Cain't we light more lanterns then?

GLORY  
*(to Tyler, sharply)*  
You don't want to do that, child.

TYLER  
Huh? Why not?

GLORY  
First rule of survival is, don't never reveal yourself, 'specially to a white man.

TYLER  
But, but this is our part of town! Why'd a white man wanna come here?

GLORY  
Hmmp! Ain't no part of nothin' ours. It all belongs to the white folks. They want something bad enough, they come get it, simple as that.

TYLER shudders, badly frightened.

BEN  
*(to Glory)*  
Stop, sugar! You scaring the child.

GLORY  
He scared? Good! That's good! He needs to be scared. Keeps him on his toes.

BEN shakes his head, lifts lantern higher.

*ENTER RITA MAE & SHEBA, downstage right.* Gasping for breath, it is clear that they are trying to outrun danger.

YVONNE  
*(pointing to Rita Mae & Sheba)*  
Look! There they are! But, what's that? What all that light up there?

RITA MAE

*(calling to Ben)*

Ben! Ben! Help me! Aunt Sheba, she can't run!

BEN moves to assist RITA MAE.

GLORY

*(sharply, pulling Ben back)*

No! Ben, wait!

SHEBA

*(to Ben, frantically signing, Off-stage Interpreter voicing)*

Go back! Go back! Run! Run!

GLORY

*(with terror)*

Oh! Oh my God, no!

*ENTER KLANSMEN*, swinging lanterns  
brandishing guns, whips, ropes, amid shouts  
and fearful pandemonium

BEN

*(shoving Glory, Willie, and Yvonne aside to safety in a deep roadside ditch)*

Stay there!

TYLER begins to run to RITA MAE.

LOUELLA

*(yelling to Tyler)*

Child, no!

BEN lunges after TYLER, scoops him up  
tossing him to GLORY for safekeeping..

BEN

*(to Glory)*

Keep him safe!

He runs back to get LOUELLA.

BEN

C'mon, Miz Jenkins! Hurry!

LOUELLA freezes as she sees RITA MAE surrounded by KLANSMEN.

LOUELLA

Rita Mae!

SHEBA swings cane, protecting RITA MAE, but KLANSMAN/DR. HARRLESON rips the cane from SHEBA’s hands and clubs RITA MAE on the side of the head. She crumples lifeless to the ground.

BEN

*(loud roar of anguish)*

N-n-n-o-o-o-o!

He throws himself upon KLANSMAN. As they grapple he rips the Klansman’s hood away to reveal DR. HARRLESON.

BEN

*(enraged)*

Doc? Doc Harrleson’s? *(a beat)* She a child! She just a child!

He fights with renewed fury fueled by righteous indignation. DR. HARRLESON whips a gun out from under his robes, points it at BEN’s heart.

GLORY

Ben!

BEN grapples for the gun. The shot goes wide, striking KLANSMAN/REX.

REX

*(crying out, cradling a mangled, bloody hand)*

Aah! Jesus! Oh, Jesus, my hand!

He leans forward, shaking his head, sick with shock and pain. His hood falls away to reveal REX.

DR. LLOYD HARRELSON

Rex? Rex!

DR. LLOYD HARRELSON  
*(to Ben, coldly pointing gun)*

You ruined him! Ruined my boy!

He gestures with gun to the KLAN.

String him up!

BEN is lynched. Dragged upright, a noose is placed around his neck.

WILLIE  
*(struggling frantically against Yvonne)*

Daddy! Daddy!

YVONNE  
Hush, child! Hush ‘fore you get us all killed.

WILLIE  
Let me go! Let me go! They gots my Daddy! I gotta help him! I gotta help him! They gonna...they gonna...

GLORY  
*(pressing hand over Willie’s mouth, tears streaming down her face)*  
Hush! Hush. *(a beat)* Hush...

CUE MUSIC: “Ben’s Lament”

Helpless and horrified, they all watch the lynching unfold. Singing/shouting his lament to heaven, BEN is dragged kicking and fighting to the tree. His hands are bound behind his back and the noose is thrown over the branch of the tree.

*Red spotlights crazily sweep the stage.*

SHEBA throws herself over RITA MAE’s body, fists beating the earth as drums pound and BEN’s last cry rings out.

*Lights cuts abruptly to black.*

MUSIC ends.

**ACT 1**  
**Scene 20**

The next morning. EXTERIOR: The field on the outskirts of town by the hanging tree.

CUE MUSIC: “*Wayfaring Stranger.*”

*Lights slowly come up Downstage Center to reveal GLORY, LOUELLA, YVONNE, WILLIE, and TYLER cutting BEN down from the hanging tree. GLORY falls to her knees, cradling BEN’s lifeless body. At Stage Right, SHEBA frantically tries to revive RITA MAE, who lies unconscious, bleeding from her ears.*

MUSIC slowly fades.

GLORY

*(angrily ripping the noose off Ben’s lifeless body)*

Look what they done! Look what they done to my, my *(a beat)* oh, sugar. Sugar! What I gonna do? What I gonna do without my sugar?

WILLIE

*(vainly trying to revive Ben)*

Daddy? C’mon, Daddy, wake up. Wake up. C’mon, Daddy, stop your foolin.’ Wake up! You alright, Daddy. You always alright! Right? *(a beat)* Ain’t you always told me you gonna always be here for Mama and me? C’mon, Daddy! Please! Please, Daddy, I, I need you! Ya gotta explain it, Daddy! You gotta show me how! I, I don’t think I can do it without you. Please. Daddy? *(a beat)* C’mon!

LOUELLA pulls WILLIE into her arms.

SHEBA, crawling on her hands and knees, crosses to BEN. She reaches out to touch him. GLORY slaps her away.

GLORY

*(furiously, to Sheba)*

Don’t you touch him! Don’t you touch him! My Ben’s been hurt enough.

SHEBA

*(signing, Off-Stage Interpreter voicing over mic)*

I just, I just want to help.

LOUELLA

*(releasing Willie, pulling Sheba aside)*

Leave them, Sheba. You’ve done enough.

SHEBA

*(stung by accusation)*

I tried, Mama! I tried to warn you.

LOUELLA

*(speaking, with pantomimed sign)*

Sheba! What were you thinking, taking off ahead like that? It should've been me up front! Or Ben! Not a crippled deaf-mute couldn't save her own skin, let alone a...

*(a beat)* Look what you done, Sheba! Just look what you done!

SHEBA, pounds her damaged legs with her clenched fists, wails, then furiously signs her thoughts to heaven.

SHEBA

*(furiously signing, Off-Stage Interpreter voicing over mic)*

N-n-n-o-o-o! No, God! N-n-n-o-o-o! You hear me, “sweet” Jesus? *(a beat)* Damn you! Damn you! “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” Phfft! I spit on you. I spit! You grind us into the dirt all our lives, and we ‘sposed to thank you? I spit on you! *(a beat)* No more, God! You hear me? No more! No more hanging my head and bending to your will. No more submit, submit, submit. I, Sheba, “crippled, deaf ‘n dumb Sheba,” I spit on you and I say no more!

She suddenly flinches, cries out as though wounded. She stares at her hands, trying to control their shaking, stunned by the surge of power she feels coursing through her. Shaking, guided by a force outside herself, she staggers to BEN's side, drops to her knees, plunging her hands down on his chest.

GLORY

*(alarmed)*

Hey! What you doin'? What you doin' to my Ben? What you doing, Sheba?

SHEBA, clenches her eyes, grits her teeth. her entire body trembling with strain.

GLORY

What you doin' to my Ben?

BEN's body twitches. TYLER and YVONNE jump back in fright.



WILLIE

Mama? Mama, what’s happening? What she doing to Daddy?

BEN moans.

WILLIE

*(staggered, dropping to his knees)*

D-daddy? *(a beat)* Daddy? Oh, Daddy. Please, Lord! Please! Just let him *(a beat)* please. Lord, I’ll do anything, anything you want. Only just, please, Lord, please.

BEN opens his eyes and slowly sits up, rubbing his neck.

BEN

*(hoarsely)*

G-glory? W-Willie?

All stare at BEN, stunned and shaken. With a cry, GLORY throws herself at BEN, hugging him fiercely.

GLORY

Oh, Ben! Ben!

BEN

*(comforting Glory)*

Easy, sugar. Easy now.

WILLIE

*(breaking down, crying harshly)*

Oh! Oh, D-daddy, oh!

BEN

*(reaching for Willie)*

It’s alright, son. It’s alright.

WILLIE

I, we thought, we all thought you was...where’d you go, Daddy? Where’d you go?

Helpless to answer, BEN pulls GLORY and WILLIE to his chest, holding them tightly.

TAYLOR runs to RITA MAE, drops to his knees, and shakes her limp body.

TYLER

*(calling to Rita Mae)*

Reemie! Reemie, wake up! Wake up, Reemie, wake up!

LOUELLA drags SHEBA to RITA MAE.

LOUELLA

*(to Sheba, speaking & signing)*

Heal her, Sheba.

SHEBA

*(backing away in terror)*

No. Oh, Mama, no!

TYLER

*(shaking Rita Mae, beginning to cry)*

Please, Reemie! Please. Don't leave me here by myself.

LOUELLA

*(to Sheba)*

You healed Ben.

SHEBA

*(shaking head in denial and disbelief)*

No, no I, I didn't. I couldn't! I wouldn't know how. *(a beat)* I'm scared, Mama! I'm scared! I didn't ask for *(a beat)* Mama, I don't know what this is!

LOUELLA

*(with righteous anger)*

Scared? Child, it's nothing to be scared of. It's a gift! Use it!

SHEBA

No! No, Mama! Mama, no.

LOUELLA

It's a gift! A gift from God!

SHEBA

No! It ain't! *(a beat)* It can't be! I cursed, God, Mama. Cursed him!

LOUELLA

*(grabbing hold of Sheba's chin, forcing Sheba to look at her)*

Listen to me. Listen! From God or whoever, I don't care. It's still a gift. Use it!

TYLER

Reemie! Reemie, wake up! Please!

YVONNE

*(trying to pull Tyler away and comfort him)*

C'mon, child. C'mon now.

TYLER

*(striking out at Yvonne, struggling to revive Rita Mae)*

Leave me alone! Leave me alone with Reemie!

LOUELLA

*(to Sheba)*

Hurry, Sheba! Hurry before that poor child bleeds to death. Look at her ears! She's bleeding from her ears.

SHEBA

*(stricken, dazedly touching her own ears)*

Her ears.

SHEBA drops to her knees, places a hand over RITA MAE's heart, grows alarmed.

Her heart's not beating, Mama!

LOUELLA

You ain't trying, Sheba.

SHEBA

I'm trying, Mama! I'm trying! Her heart's not beating!

LOUELLA

Reach into yourself! Down deep! Hurry, before you lose this child!

Trembling, SHEBA presses her hands over RITA MAE's heart, head, eyes, lips. She deliberately does not touch her ears.

RITA MAE stirs, but does not awaken.  
SHEBA slumps back, exhausted.

SHEBA

She's breathing, Mama. She's breathing. But she needs a doctor, Mama. I done all I can for her.

LOUELLA

*(sagging with exhaustion and relief)*

You done fine, child, just fine.

GLORY

*(to Ben, anxiously)*

You need a doctor, Ben.

BEN

*(weakly)*

No, sugar. No doctor. I just need time with my wife ‘n my family.

GLORY

Don’t you worry, Benjamin Coleman. I’ma gonna get you home. And then I ain’t never lettin’ you outta my sight again.

BEN

Never?

GLORY

Never!

BEN

*(stroking Glory’s cheek)*

That’s a long time, sugar.

GLORY

It ain’t nearly long enough.

She and BEN share a warm kiss.

TYLER

*(struggling to lift Rita Mae)*

Reemie? C’mon, Reemie, you gotta get up. We’s gotta get you to a doctor.

WILLIE crosses to TYLER, reaches for RITA MAE’s limp body.

TYLER

*(to Willie)*

I got her.

WILLIE

I know you can handle trouble. Question is, can y’all handle help?

TYLER

*(taking Willie’s measure)*

*(a beat)* Yeah, I can handle it. *(a beat)* Thanks.

WILLIE

Sure.

CUE MUSIC: “*Wayfaring Stranger*”  
swells and slowly fades.

*Lights slowly fade to black.*

***INTERMISSION***

**ACT 2**  
**Scene 1**

9 months later. Early summer. Late afternoon. INTERIOR: The General Store.

CUE MUSIC: “*Let It Shine*,” refrain.

*Lights come up* to reveal SHEBA, dressed much as before minus her sweater. Sitting in her rocker, she signs to RITA MAE who, in a sleeveless cotton dress, sits facing her. They share a silent, signed conversation as the music plays, ( *i.e.*, “*Yes, that’s right. Really? Wonderful! Good! I understand!*”).

MUSIC FADES.

SHEBA

*(to Rita Mae, signing, Off-Stage Interpreter voicing over mic)*

No, you sign “remember” like this.

She demonstrates. RITA MAE copies the correct sign.

Yes! That’s it! Very good! You learn fast, Rita Mae. Nine months, and look at all you know!

RITA MAE

*(speaking, with some slow, awkward sign)*

I remember the first sign you ever taught me, Aunt Sheba. It was this.

She signs, “I love you.”

SHEBA

*(reading the sign)*

“I love you.” Yes, that’s right!

RITA MAE

Why you teach me that sign first?

*ENTER LOUELLA.* Wearing an apron over a faded summer dress she eavesdrop from doorway. SHEBA and RITA MAE do not notice her.

SHEBA

Because I meant it. And because it was important for you to know after your life done (*a beat*) changed.

RITA MAE

I love you too, Aunt Sheba.

SHEBA

You do? Why?

RITA MAE

*(speaking, dropping sign, knowing Sheba will read her lips)*

‘Cause you understand. And you help me understand. (*a beat*) Aunt Sheba? Do you ever feel lonely?

SHEBA

Before, yes. (*a beat*) Not so much now.

RITA MAE

Why not now?

SHEBA

Now I have you.

RITA MAE

*(speaking with slow, awkward sign)*

You had Grandma before.

SHEBA

Yes. I guess that was lucky. But it’s not the same.

RITA MAE

What you mean?

SHEBA

She’s not like you and me, Rita Mae. We the same.

RITA MAE

The same?

SHEBA

Same, Rita Mae. Deaf. *(a beat)* Same.

LOUELLA stamps her foot. The vibrations  
get SHEBA and RITA MAE’s attention.

LOUELLA  
*(sharply, to Rita Mae)*

Rita Mae!

RITA MA

Yes, Grandma?

LOUELLA  
*(speaking, with some pantomimed sign)*  
You been sittin’ doing nothin’ long enough. Go help Tyler feed the hogs.

SHEBA  
*(gently, to Rita Mae)*

Go on. We’ll talk more later.

*EXIT RITA MAE.*



**ACT 2**  
**Scene 2**

Moments later. INTERIOR: The General Store. LOUELLA paces angrily, glaring at SHEBA.

SHEBA

*(to Louella, signing with Off-Stage Interpreter voicing over mic)*

Well, Mama, what is it?

LOUELLA

*(speaking, with some occasional added sign)*

Nothing, Sheba. Ain't nothing.

SHEBA

Don't give me that! Your eyes been shooting me dead for months now. What is it?

LOUELLA

You know what it is! I don't need to tell you.

SHEBA

*(with a sigh of resignation)*

Ah, we're back to that, are we?

LOUELLA

*(vehemently)*

Yes, we're back to that alright! And I'll keep comin' back to that 'til you swallow your damn foolish pride and do what needs to be done!

SHEBA

I'm doing what needs to be done, Mama! Rita Mae is learning sign.

LOUELLA

Damnit, Sheba! That's what I mean. That! Rita Mae don't need you teaching her sign language.

SHEBA

*(sighing)*

Mama.

LOUELLA

That's a hearing child!

SHEBA

She can still talk, Mama, but Rita Mae’s deaf. Deaf! Like me.

LOUELLA  
*(lashing out)*

She’s deaf because of you!

SHEBA flinches from shock and anger.

What’s wrong with you, Sheba? You need company that bad you’d go on letting that child suffer?

SHEBA

She ain’t suffering! Nothing’s wrong with Rita Mae! She’s happy!

LOUELLA

Happy? Happy! How can you say that? *(a beat)* Here you sit, Hepsheba Jenkins, The Miracle Woman of Watkinsville County. You can cure boils, toothaches, even cure rheumatism with just a touch of your hand. Yet you won’t lift a finger to help that child out there.

SHEBA crosses her arms defiantly.

I’ll send her away.

SHEBA  
*(alarmed)*

Away?

LOUELLA

Back to Madeline.

SHEBA

Mama! You can’t!

She struggles to her feet.

Madeline can’t care for her. Not like me!

LOUELLA

Then cure her, Sheba.

SHEBA  
*(with a ragged sob)*

Don’t you think, if I could, I’d cure myself first, Mama?

LOUELLA

I don't know what to think, Sheba. I just don't know.

SHEBA shakes her head in disbelief.

Hmmph! I don't know why I waste my breath.

She turns away with a huff. SHEBA reaches out and stops her.

SHEBA

I'll try, Mama. I'll try.

LOUELLA

*(face lighting up)*

When? Oh, Sheba, when?

SHEBA

When the time comes.

LOUELLA

*(fixing Sheba with an unwavering stare)*

*(A long beat)* I'm gonna hold you to that, Sheba. Don't think I won't.

SHEBA

*(holding Louella's glare for a long moment before looking away)*

I'm gonna check on Rita Mae.

LOUELLA

You do that, Sheba. You do that.

SHEBA

*(frowning)*

We still talkin' 'bout Rita Mae?

LOUELLA

Oh yes, Sheba. Oh yes.

SHEBA and LOUELLA face off. SHEBA stiffens, turns away, limps to door.

*EXIT SHEBA.*

**ACT 2**  
**Scene 3**

Moments later. INTERIOR: The General Store. LOUELLA crosses to the store’s counter. She pulls out a feather duster, starts dusting.

*ENTER YVONNE & TYLER, sweating  
in faded summer clothes..*

YVONNE  
*(fanning face)*

Lordy, it’s hot!

LOUELLA  
Summer’s barely started, Sister. It’ gonna get a lot hotter ‘fore we through.

TYLER  
*(with dismay, wiping his arm over his sweaty face)*  
It gonna get hotter?

LOUELLA  
You in the south now, Brother. The deep south. We ain’t got cold down here. We’s got hot ‘n hotter.

TYLER visibly droops.

You finish with your chores?

TYLER  
Yes’m.

LOUELLA  
Then c’mon over here and dust the tops of them cans, child. I take pride in running a clean establishment.

TYLER wilts. LOUELLA takes pity.

Grab yourself a soda first.

Lighting up, TYLER hurries to the cooler before LOUELLA can change her mind. He pulls out a soda, drinks deeply.

*ENTER GLORY & WILLIE*, in sweat-stained summer clothes. It is clear they’ve been arguing.

WILLIE  
*(to Glory)*

Why cain’t I go, Mama?

GLORY  
*(snapping)*

Why? ‘Cause I done said so, that’s why.

WILLIE  
Aw, Mama, c’mon! You always treatin’ me likes I a baby!

GLORY  
I do no such thing.

WILLIE  
You do! Even Daddy says you holdin’ the reins so tight you’s choking me.

GLORY  
*(tightly)*  
This here’s between you ‘n me, child. Y’all leave your daddy outta it.

WILLIE  
You impossible, Mama! Ever since Daddy done “come back,” y’all impossible! Nobody can live you with. Nobody!

GLORY stiffens, hands fisted, fighting the urge hit WILLIE. LOUELLA steps forward to diffuse the tension.

LOUELLA  
*(to Glory, voice overly bright)*  
Sister Coleman, what can I get y’all?

WILLIE  
*(appealing to Louella for support)*  
Y’all can git my mama to listen to reason.

*ENTER BEN*, shirtless in sweat-stained overalls. He stands in the doorway, overhearing WILLIE and GLORY.

GLORY

*(harshly, to Willie)*

Reason? *Reason!* I only listen to reason when I’s talking to somebody with sense, boy!

WILLIE

C’mon, Mama, everybody goes to the swimming hole!

GLORY

*(snapping)*

That’s a white folks place! Y’all stay away from it!

WILLIE

Aw, Mama!

BEN

*(to Willie, stepping forward from doorway)*

Your mama’s right, son.

WILLIE

*(whirling round, to Ben)*

Aw, c’mon, Daddy! You on my side now!

BEN

That right, I am.

He crosses to GLORY. She folds her arms, freezing him with a look.

That why I’m tellin’ you to keep away. They’s been a po-li-o outbreak in town.

YVONNE

*(with a gasp)*

*Polio!*

TYLER

Po-li-what? That bad?

YVONNE

You sure that what it is, Brother? Polio? I heard was just a bad summer cold.

TYLER

That what polio is? A cold?

GLORY

*(darkly, to Tyler and pointedly to Willie)*

That how it starts. First it takes your breath, then your legs.

TYLER

*(flinching, backing away)*

Your legs? You mean *(a beat)* like Aunt Sheba?

*ENTER SHEBA and RITA MAE.*

They are having a silent signed conversation, *(i.e. “Come with me.” “Why?” “It’s okay.”)* They pause when they see everyone in the store staring at them with various degrees of guilt and dark fascination.

RITA MAE

*(warily, speaking & signing)*

What’s wrong?

SHEBA

*(to Rita Mae, signing with Off-Stage Interpreter voicing over mic)*

I don’t know.

LOUELLA

*(to Sheba, speaking and signing)*

They be a polio outbreak, Sheba. In town.

SHEBA visibly flinches.

RITA MAE

*(to Sheba, alarmed)*

What? What is it?

SHEBA signs the word, “polio,” striking her legs and her cane for emphasis. RITA MAE’s eyes widen in terror.

Polio! Here?

BEN

*(crosses to Rita Mae, kneeling, speaking slowly with pantomimed sign)*

Y’all got nothin’ to worry about, Rita Mae. We all gonna take good care of you. ‘Sides, you a lucky girl, child.

RITA MAE

*(struggling to understand)*

Lucky?

BEN

You got your very own miracle worker. Aunt Sheba! She ain't gonna let nothin' happen to you, child.

YVONNE

You ask me, Miz Sheba here should git herself down to town and stop this here po-li-o epidemic in its tracks.

WILLIE

Yeah! See, Mama, I told you ain't nothin' to worry 'bout!

GLORY

*(sharply)*

Hush, boy! Y'all hush your mouth!

YVONNE

*(to Glory, taking Willie's defense)*

Go easy on the child, Sister. He just stating the truth. Miz Sheba here can fix anything!

GLORY

*(rounding on Yvonne)*

How you know that? Power like that, where'd she get it from? God? The devil? Where?

LOUELLA

*(to Sheba)*

Can you cure them Sheba? Polio? In town?

SHEBA

*(agitated, signing with Off-Stage Interpreter voicing)*

Polio? I, I don't know.

TYLER

*(in disbelief)*

She cain't fix it?

SHEBA

I don't know, Mama. I don't know!

LOUELLA

*(face knitted in concern)*

Sheba?

SHEBA

This is different, Mama. Different! This is like what happened to me!



LOUELLA

Sheba, you gotta have faith!

SHEBA

Faith’s got nothin’ to do with it, Mama!

GLORY

What? What she saying?

BEN

*(solemnly)*

She’s not sure.

GLORY

*(with sick dread)*

What? Not sure? You mean, we, Willie could get it?

BEN

No, we won’t get it. And Willie won’t neither.

GLORY

*(protesting)*

But...

BEN

‘Cause we all is gonna go ‘bout our business ‘n live our life.

YVONNE

But Glory’s...

BEN

*(interrupting, with quiet conviction)*

Glory’s gonna be just fine. Just like we all be if’n we keep to ourselves ‘n goes ‘bout our business. No cause to be burdening Miz Sheba here with our concerns.

LOUELLA, GLORY, YVONNE, WILLIE  
and TYLER look away, shamed.

BEN

*(to Glory)*

Y’all done with your shopping, sugar?

GLORY

*(crisply, straightening shoulders)*

I just need a few more moments.

BEN

Take your time.

He crosses to SHEBA, takes her hands.

*(to Sheba, speaking directly with some pantomimed sign)*

Miz Sheba? Miz Sheba, I want you to listen to me real close now. I know y'all cain't hear me. But we's got an understanding. Don't we, Miz Sheba?

RITA MAE follows conversation, enraptured.

I want you to know, Miz Sheba, that no matter what happens, I believe in you. You hear me? I believe in you, Miz Sheba. I always believed in you.

SHEBA

*(to Ben, signing with Off-Stage Interpreter voicing over mic)*

You a good man, Ben Coleman.

She strokes BEN's cheek.

GLORY

*(sharply, crossing to Ben, grabbing his arm possessively)*

Let's go, Ben. I want to get home.

BEN

*(to Glory, still holding Sheba's hand)*

Ready when you are.

GLORY

*(tugging Ben's arm)*

I'm ready. Now.

BEN

*(softly, to Sheba)*

You remember what I said, Miz Sheba. You remember.

GLORY pulls on BEN's arm.

GLORY

*(over shoulder, to Willie)*

Willie, you come too.

WILLIE

Aw, Mama, I didn't get my soda!

GLORY

Now!

WILLIE

*(sullenly crossing to Glory, muttering to self)*

I dying of thirst but Mama don't care a lick. She impossible. Impossible! Nobody can live with her, nobody.

BEN

*(nodding polite farewells)*

Miz Jenkins, Miz Yvonne.

He raises SHEBA's hands to his lips,  
reverently presses a kiss to her fingers.

Miz Sheba.

GLORY

*(tugging insistently)*

Now, Ben!

GLORY pulls BEN and WILLIE to door.  
*EXIT GLORY, WILLIE, and BEN.*

SHEBA slowly lifts her hand, presses her  
fingers to her lips.

*Lights slowly fade.*

**ACT 2**  
**Scene 4**

Later that night. INTERIOR: Sheba’s bedroom. *A bluish spotlight come up* to reveal SHEBA sitting on her bed, staring at her legs, hands fisted in prayer.

CUE MUSIC: “*A Motherless Child*” *reprise*

As the music plays, SHEBA struggles with herself, tentatively laying her hands over her legs, only to snatch them back, twisting her fingers, wearily shaking her head.

MUSIC fades softly to background.

SHEBA

*(signing, Off-Stage Interpreter speaking over mic)*

Oh, God! *(a beat)* What is this power you gave me? And why you give it to me, God? Me, Sheba. I don’t deserve it, not after what I said to you. Oh God, I don’t! I don’t, I don’t. *(a beat)* Talk to me, God! Please!

Oh, you angry at Sheba, ain’t you, God? Oh yes, you are. You ain’t listening to Sheba, ‘God, ‘cause Sheba ain’t listened to you. Not for a long time. *(a beat)* But God? I’m listening now, God. *(a beat)* Talk to me, God. Please! Oh, God! *(A beat)* Alright. Alright. If you won’t talk to me, then give me a sign. Okay, God? A sign. Just so I know you listening.

*ENTER LOUELLA.*

She hovers in the doorway. SHEBA does not notice her

SHEBA

*(signing, Off-Stage Interpreter speaking over mic)*

There’s polio in town, God. Polio. You put it there to test me, God? *(a beat)* You let me cure Ben. You gave me back Rita Mae. You telling me I can cure polio, God? You saying, are you saying *(a beat)* I can cure *myself*? Is that what you were telling me? I can *cure myself*? *(a beat)* Ben believes in me, God. Do you?

Hands in prayer, SHEBA bows her head, whispering a fervent plea.

Okay, God. Okay. Okay, okay, okay. *Please!* Please, please, please, please.

LOUELLA silently joins in the prayer from the doorway.

SHEBA draws a deep breath, runs her hands over her legs, body trembling with strain. Drained, she folds over her legs, sobbing.

LOUELLA steps from the shadows, thinking the miracle has happened.

LOUELLA

*(crossing to Sheba, embracing her)*

Oh, Sheba, at last, at last!

SHEBA

*(angrily pulling away from Louella's hug)*

Damn you, Mama! Damn you!

LOUELLA

I, I just wanted to see! Oh, Sheba, I've waited for this moment for so long.

SHEBA

*(bitterly)*

Well, Mama, looks like you're just gonna have to wait a little longer.

LOUELLA

*(with sinking dread, speaking with pantomimed sign)*

What? What do you mean? Sheba? Your legs?

SHEBA

If I cure myself it'll be for me, not you, Mama. For me! Same goes for Rita Mae. And I'll be damned if I let you watch!

She reaches for her cane, struggles to her feet. LOUELLA clenches her fists.

*EXIT SHEBA.*

LOUELLA frantically shakes her head, strikes her thighs with her fist, unable to hold back hot tears of despair and defeat.

CUE MUSIC: swells then fades out.

*Lights slowly fade.*

**ACT 2**  
**Scene 5**

A short time later. Day. EXTERIOR: The General Store.

CUE MUSIC: “*Amazing Grace*” instrumental.

*Lights come up* to reveal SHEBA in her rocking chair shelling peas with RITA MAE while TYLER runs in the yard, playing with a hoop and stick, and LOUELLA folds laundry off a clothesline.

*ENTER BROTHER SIMON* (age 50, black).  
A traveling bible salesman, he is dressed in a white suit, his hair and manner greasy.

**BROTHER SIMON**

*(calling out as he looks around)*

Where is she? Where is she? Where’s the so-called famous Miracle Woman of Watkinsville County?

**LOUELLA**

*(cuttingly, stepping defensively in front of Sheba and Rita Mae)*

Ain’t no one here by that name, “Brother.”

**BROTHER SIMON**

Well, that ain’t the way *I* heard it. I heard there’s a crippled up deaf black woman here who can work miracles with her bare hands!

**LOUELLA**

There’s no miracle worker here.

*ENTER REX and SANDY, their BABY*  
swaddled in a wicker bassinett . They look around frantically.

MUSIC fades.

**SANDY**

*(to Rex)*

Is she here? Rex, is she here?

**TYLER**

*(racing to Louella’s side, badly frightened)*

The white man, Grandma! The *white* man!

LOUELLA

*(firmly)*

Hush, child. You’d best *hush* now.

REX

*(to Louella)*

Miz Jenkins? Please, you gotta help us!

LOUELLA

*(folding her arms)*

What makes you think I can help you?

REX

My mother? She’s, she’s heard things. Incredible things! She, she said that you could, that Miz Sheba might *(a beat)* Please, Miz Jenkins, my baby, little Lanie? She needs help real bad!

LOUELLA

*(coldly)*

Then you’d best take her to your daddy.

SANDY

Oh, no, please, you can’t just turn us away! He won’t help us. He won’t hardly even talk to us, not since Rex and I got married. Oh, God, this is all *my* fault!

REX

*(consoling)*

No, Sandy.

SANDY

If Lanie was anyone but mine he’d help.

REX

No, Sandy, he can’t! There’s not a doctor alive can cure polio.

LOUELLA

And there surely ain’t no one here can cure your baby neither.

SHEBA

*(to Louella, signing with Off-Stage Interpreter voicing over mic)*

What is it, Mama? What they want?

LOUELLA

*(sharply, speaking with pantomimed sign)*

Stay out of it, Sheba! Ain’t no way I’m gonna let you lift a finger to cure that white baby after what they done to Rita Mae!

RITA MAE

*(to Louella, speaking with some pantomimed sign)*

But Grandma, that little baby ain't guilty of nothing. She's just a little innocent baby.

LOUELLA

*(harshly, to Rita Mae)*

Hush, girl, you hush!

RITA MAE

*(pressing on)*

If Aunt Sheba don't help her, she gonna die. Even if she don't she gonna grow up all twisted *(a beat)* inside.

She emphatically touches her heart.

BROTHER SIMON

*(to Louella, with oily delight)*

Well, now, no deaf black cripple here, huh?

LOUELLA

*(coldly, to Brother Simon, with)*

I said no “miracle worker” lives here.

REX

*(to Louella, stepping forward with hat in hand)*

Please, Miz Jenkins, don't hold my mistake against my baby.

SHEBA struggles to her feet, takes a few limping steps before LOUELLA stops her.

LOUELLA

*(to Sheba, blocking her way)*

No! Sheba, no!

SHEBA

Rita Mae's Right, Mama. I hafta help if thing's are ever gonna change.

LOUELLA

*(with incredulous dismay)*

You'd fix that, that Klansman's baby when you won't help your own flesh and blood?

SHEBA

Mama, I done told you time and again, Rita Mae don't *need* fixing. There's nothing wrong with her.



LOUELLA

*(shaking with barely suppressed anger)*

She's deaf!

SHEBA

So am I, Mama! So am I!

LOUELLA

That ain't the same and you know it!

SHEBA

No, I don't know, Mama. How is it different?

LOUELLA

I don't want her to be like *you!*

SHEBA and RITA MAE flinch, stricken.

SANDY

*(screaming, shaking the Baby in her bassinet)*

Lainie! Lainie!

REX

*(to Sandy, shouting over her screams)*

What is it? What's wrong?

SANDY

*(hysterical)*

She, she's stopped breathing. She's turning blue! Do something! *Do something!*

RITA MAE clatters down the porch steps, grabs the BABY in her bassinet and races back to SHEBA.

LOUELLA

No! Sheba, no!

SHEBA looks from RITA MAE, holding the BABY in her bassinet, to LOUELLA. Defiantly she raises her hands. Trembling, she lays her hands over the top of the bassinet, her entire body shaking. With a cry of alarm, she fists her hands, striking the BABY's chest repeatedly.

SANDY

*(screaming in horror)*

Lanie! Lanie! Oh God! Stop her! Stop her!

BROTHER SIMON

*(to Sandy, holding her back)*

Y'all don't want to be messing with her, girl.

SANDY

*(hysterical, trying to break away)*

She's hurting her! She's killing my baby!

BROTHER SIMON

That ain't killing, m'am, that's sal-va-tion! She's the Miracle Woman!

Breaking free, SANDY frantically tears up the steps, REX and BROTHER SIMON right behind. SHEBA, leaning over the bassinet RITA MAE holds up, strikes the BABY a final blow. *WE HEAR a lusty wail.* SHEBA, trembling, unfists her hands, holds them out above the bassinet, running them over the BABY's legs repeatedly. Finally she steps back, drained.

SANDY

*(anxiously)*

Lanie? *(a beat)* Lanie?

SHEBA

*(nodding an affirmation to Sandy)*

She fine, now. Your baby girl gonna be just fine.

SANDY

*(sagging with relief)*

Oh. Oh! Oh, Miz Sheba!

SANDY reaches for the BABY in bassinet, hugs her tightly to chest, cradling her, crying.

REX

*(humbly, nodding thanks to Sheba)*

Thank you, Miz Sheba. Thank you.

SHEBA stares at REX for a long moment,  
then solemnly, with dignity and grace, nods.

SANDY and REX, cradling their BABY,  
back away, nodding their thanks.  
*EXIT SANDY, REX and BABY.*

**BROTHER SIMON**  
*(to Louella)*

No miracle worker, huh?

Louella angrily pushes past him.  
*EXIT LOUELLA.*

**ACT 2**  
**Scene 6**

Moments later. EXTERIOR: The General Store. SHEBA, RITA MAE, and TYLER, standing on the front porch. BROTHER SIMON laughs and saunters to SHEBA’s side. He grabs hold of her hands, studies them intently.

CUE MUSIC: “*Amazing Grace*” refrain

TYLER  
(*to Brother Simon*)

Hey, mister! What you doing?

BROTHER SIMON  
(*to Tyler, with snake-oil charm*)

Brother Simon’s the name, saving grace is my game. (*a beat*) My card.

With a showman’s flair he hands TYLER  
his calling card.

TYLER  
(*scratching head*)

Huh?

BROTHER SIMON  
(*expansively, to SHEBA*)

Sister, you are amazing, simply *amazing!* But you’re wasted in a small town like Bishop. We need to branch out!

SHEBA shakes her head, baffled.

(*waxing on*)

Exposure! We’ll travel the country: “Brother Simon’s Traveling Revival Show.” I’ll make a fortune! (*a beat*) You ‘n I is gonna be famous, Sister, famous! Even get invited to the White House! How’d you like to be the woman who cured President Roosevelt?

SHEBA  
(*to Tyler, bewildered*)

What’s he saying, child?

TYLER  
(*to Sheba, speaking with clear pantomimed sign*)

He wants you to put on a show with him. Travel ‘round and save people so he gets rich.

SHEBA  
*(bemused)*

You tell him if he wants to change anything, start with himself. I have no miracles for him, child.

BROTHER SIMON  
*(charm faltering)*

What’s that y’all saying? We in agreement now, right?

TYLER  
*(to Brother Simon)*

She say she ain’t got no miracles for you, Mister. So long. *(a beat)* Oh, and here’s your card.

BROTHER SIMON shakes his head in disgust, pockets his card, turns away.  
*EXIT BROTHER SIMON.*

SHEBA pulls RITA MAE and TYLER close, hugging them tightly.

*Lights slowly fade.*

MUSIC “*Amazing Grace*” fades.

**ACT 2**  
**Scene 7**

Later that night. INTERIOR: Children’s bedroom. *Bluish light comes up to reveal RITA MAE lying in bed alone, silently crying.*

CUE MUSIC: “*Motherless Child medley*”

*ENTER SHEBA.* She crosses to bed, gently turns RITA MAE to face her.

SHEBA

*(signing, Off-Stage Interpreter voicing over mic)*

Rita Mae? What’s wrong, child? Tyler said you were crying.

RITA MAE

*(collapsing heartbrokenly against Aunt Sheba)*

Oh, Aunt Sheba!

SHEBA hugs RITA MAE fiercely, then gently pushes her away, strokes her cheek.

SHEBA

Why you crying, child?

RITA MAE

*(speaking with pantomimed sign)*

I, I don’t know. I feel so bad.

SHEBA

*(frowning in concern)*

Are you sick?

She lays hand on RITA MAE’s forehead.

RITA MAE

Not there, Aunt Sheba. *(a beat)* Here.

She pulls SHEBA’s hand to her heart.

SHEBA

*(with understanding)*

Ah. *(a beat)* Tell me, child.

ENTER LOUELLA. She hovers in the shadows of the doorway. SHEBA and RITA MAE do not notice her.

RITA MAE

Why does Grandma hate us so much?

SHEBA

*(after a long introspective pause)*

Grandma doesn't hate you, child. It's me she's angry with.

RITA MAE

But why?

SHEBA

*(ruefully)*

Why? Why, because I guess I done ruined her life. That's why. *(a beat)* Don't worry about it, child. That's between Grandma 'n me. It don't concern you.

RITA MAE

*(vehemently)*

But it does!

SHEBA

*(taken aback)*

What you mean, child?

RITA MAE

*(anguished)*

Is, is that how it gonna be with my Mama? And, and Tyler? Are they both gonna end up hating me?

Stricken with guilt and remorse, SHEBA slowly stands, steps forward.

*Spotlight comes up to frame SHEBA.  
Background lights over RITA MAE dim.*

SHEBA

*(signing soliloquy to God, Off-Stage Interpreter voicing over mic)*

Oh, Lord, what do you *want* from me? “Heal this, Sheba. Cure that, Sheba.” I give and give, and still it ain't enough! Not nearly! Everyone wants, wants, wants. Wants this cursed gift! But nobody wants *me!* To them, I'm just poor crippled deaf Sheba. And now you want the same thing to happen to this child?

SHEBA

*(continuing soliloquy)*

You gave me this gift for a reason, Lord. A reason I still don't understand. *(a beat)* Lord, she just a *child!* A sweet, innocent child! Sweetest child I ever known. Only person ever loved me for *myself*.

I might not be able to cure myself, Lord, but I'm begging you, grant me the power to cure *her*. Please, Lord! After that, you can do what you want with me. But, please Lord, let me. If you won't, then what's this all mean?

Lord? God? *(a beat)* Please, *talk* to me! If, if you turn away, then who's gonna love me? Who I gonna love? *(a beat)* God? Please, God! You made this child, this child I love so much. And if you made her, then, God that means I must love you too.

Oh! Oh! *(a long beat)* I do! I do love you, God, I do! And I'm *sorry*, God! *I'm sorry!* I don't know why it was so hard for me to say those words. So, please God. Please, if you love me at all, please let me help this child, God. Please.

SHEBA clasps her hands and bows her head in anguished prayer. *(a beat)* Staring at her hands in wonder, SHEBA raises her eyes towards heaven, crying out with relief. She turns towards RITA MAE.

*Spotlight over SHEBA fades as background lights over RITA MAE come up.*

RITA MAE

*(to Sheba, with growing concern)*

Is it, Aunt Sheba? Is that the way it gonna be for me?

SHEBA slowly sits on bed, and strokes RITA MAE's cheek.

SHEBA

*(compassionately, fighting back tears)*

No, child. That's *not* the way it's gonna be. Not for you.

She gently places her hands over RITA MAE's ears. RITA MAE stares at SHEBA in wonder, then begins trembling. After a long beat, SHEBA lifts her hands. RITA MAE touches her ears in awe.



SHEBA  
*(bittersweetly)*

There.

She studies her hands, and we sense from  
her sad expression that the power is gone.

RITA MAE  
*(with quivering astonishment, touching ear, studying hands)*  
What, what did you do?

SHEBA  
*(gently wiping tears from Rita Mae's face)*  
I worked my last miracle.

RITA MAE  
But...why?

SHEBA  
*(through tears)*  
Because...I love you.

RITA MAE throws herself over SHEBA's  
lap, hugs her crippled legs. Crying,  
SHEBA cradles RITA MAE.

LOUELLA steps forward. SHEBA looks up.

LOUELLA  
*(crossing to Sheba, speaking and signing)*  
Sheba! Oh, Sheba. *(a beat)* Heal yourself now, Sheba. Please! Heal yourself!

SHEBA  
*(sadly, shaking head with resignation)*  
I can't, Mama.

LOUELLA  
*(begging)*  
Please, Sheba! You proved you can do it! Why deny yourself?

SHEBA  
Because you denied me, Mama.

LOUELLA flinches with the pain of  
comprehension finally penetrating.

SHEBA

I've worked my last miracle, Mama.

LOUELLA

*(softly, with compassion)*

Yes. Yes, child, you have. *(a beat)* All those years, just you 'n me once your daddy took off? I always claimed I was doing for you, but all the time I was just thinking of *me*.  
*(a beat)* Oh, Sheba, what would I be without you?

SHEBA

*(miserably)*

Happy?

LOUELLA

Oh, no, child! No! I'd be empty! Empty. *(a beat)* You might be the one who's deaf. But, Sheba, I been the one who's blind.

RITA MAE

*(to Louella)*

Grandma? Are you saying you love Aunt Sheba?

LOUELLA

*(choking on rueful laughter and tears)*

Yes. Yes! That be *exactly* what I'm saying. *(a beat)* Oh, Sheba, forgive me. Please, forgive me.

SHEBA

*(crying)*

Oh, Mama!

She opens her arms. With a cry of gratitude, LOUELLA sweeps her into a heartfelt hug, then, after a beat, sweeps RITA MAE into the hug as well.

MUSIC fades.

*LIGHTS SLOWLY FADE.*

***END FLASHBACK***

**ACT 2**  
**Scene 8**

The present. Day.

CUE MUSIC: “*Way Beyond The Blue*” refrain

*Lights come up* to reveal EXTERIOR: The General Store’s porch. DARLEEN sits on porch steps, dabbing her eyes while ADULT RITA MAE rocks in Sheba’s old rocker.

DARLEEN

*(wiping eyes with hanky, cigarette dangling from lips)*

All that! All that happened, right here! Who would’ve thought it?

ADULT RITA MAE

*(acknowledging)*

All that.

DARLEEN

*(exhaling cigarette smoke)*

What happened to them, to y’all?

ADULT RITA MAE

Tyler went back to Chicago, after Mother and Mr. Leon got married. *(a beat)* I went back too, for a while. But not for long. Mother loved me in her way, but she Mr. Leon more. Child that I was, even I could see that.

DARLEEN

I’m so sorry!

ADULT RITA MAE

It was all right. After all, I had Aunt Sheba waiting for me. *(a beat)* She sent me a letter once, Aunt Sheba. After I was accepted on the staff of Gallaudet University. First black woman from Watkinville County, a college professor. Lecturing to a room full of students in our language. Our beautiful language, the one me ‘n Aunt Sheba shared.

DARLEEN

*(stutting out cigarette)*

What happened to her?

ADULT RITA MAE

To Aunt Sheba? She ‘n Grandma lived here until they died, Grandma first, then Aunt Sheba in her seventies.

DARLEEN

*(with wonder)*

You mean, she lived that long? Here?

ADULT RITA MAE

Ben watched out for her.

DARLEEN

Ben!

ADULT RITA MAE

They cared for each other, Aunt Sheba ‘n Ben. Cared for each other even more after Miz Glory passed. *(a beat)* Aunt Sheba was always deaf. But after that day? When she cured me? Well, after that day, her legs were some better.

DARLEEN

*(rueful laugh)*

You were right.

ADULT RITA MAE

I was?

DARLEEN

*(fishing cigarette from purse)*

Oh yes!

ADULT RITA MAE

About what?

DARLEEN

*(lighting up, inhaling deeply)*

This place.

ADULT RITA MAE

*(looking around with sad dismay)*

It’s in sad shape. Ben was getting’ old.

DARLEEN

*(fervently)*

You can’t sell it honey!

RITA MAE

*(surprised)*

W-what?

DARLEEN

*(waving cigarette)*

Y'all probably think I'm crazy. I must be crazy, cheating myself out of a commission like that! Oh, honey, WalMarts are a dime a dozen. But this place? Oh, this place!

She stops, doubled over by a wracking smoker's cough. RITA MAE slowly rises, crosses to DARLEEN, solemnly lays her hands on DARLEEN's back. The wracking cough slowly subsides.

DARLEEN

*(dazedly, slowly sitting up and staring at Rita Mae in wonder)*

Oh...oh!

RITA MAE

We should be going. It's getting late.

DARLEEN

*(grasping Rita Mae's hand)*

Don't sell this place.

ADULT RITA MAE

What would I do with it? I'm an old woman. Retired. I couldn't keep this place up.

DARLEEN

I might look like a blonde-haired-bimbo-gone-to-seed, but honey? Let me tell you, under all this here bleach is a brain as sharp as tacks.

ADULT RITA MAE chuckles.

*(pressing on, waxing expansive)*

Honey, open your eyes! Look around you! Just *think* what you could do with this place, what you could make of it! *(a beat)* I could help you, raise fund, write grants. I can sell people on this place, honey, I'm good at that. *(a beat)* “The Hepsheba Jenkins Center.”

ADULT RITA MAE

*(lifting a brow, considering)*

Hmmm. *(a beat)* And what would that be?

DARLEEN

I don't know. A hospital, or a school? It'd be someplace special, honey! Someplace people can come, people in need. *(a beat)* There's *power* here, honey. I can feel it!

ADULT RITA MAE turns, studying the store thoughtfully. Closing her eyes she lifts her hands to heaven, breathing deeply in mystical communion.

She lowers her hands, resting one on the back of SHEBA’s rocker, stretching the other out at waist level, over The General Store’s front porch.

ADULT RITA MAE  
*(eyes closed, to self, savoring)*

Hmmm, *power.*

MUSIC SWELLS: *“This Little Light of Mine.”*

ENTER CAST for curtain call, singing, some singing and signing. The song swells, feet stomping, hands clapping, fingers signing.

**CURTAIN**

