

BLACK RIVER: A LOVE STORY

in Two Acts
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CHARACTERS

RAE JEAN *Black woman. Early thirties.*

DANIEL *Black male. Early thirties.*

MATILDA *White female. Early thirties.*

CYRUS *White male. Seventies. Wheelchair bound. Matilda's father.*

RUTHELL *Black female. Fifties. Rae Jean's mother.*

WANDA *Black female. Sixties. Daniel's mother*

TIME AND PLACE

The fictitious town of Black River, Georgia. Spring, 1981, with RAE JEAN speaking in the present.

for Daniel Shea

ACT ONE

(A woman's blues laden humming is heard – like a moan. Then, silence. Overhead spot fades in on Rae Jean in DS limbo)

RAE JEAN

There is a point along Black River where – for a distance of about ten miles – it narrows, where the trees and tall brush rooted on the riverbank weave a dense canopy that sags like an old mattress over the surface of the water, giving one the sense of floating into an underwater cave, until the widening river pulls the tangled limbs and branches apart, and you re-emerge into the light.

Hence the name, Black River.

All who live near it, who have spent time there, have a personal story to tell.

(Fade on Rae Jean. Spot now rises on Matilda)

MATILDA

I've been there once, when daddy and some other men pulled my brother Simon from the bottom of the river. When they brought him up, he was covered in this slimy muck. It was black and hanging off of him, and it made him like some kind of dead sea monster.

They brought him up from out of the water with long wood poles and a big net. They brought him up and lay him on the soft grass of the riverbank which gave to him like a loving mother. And with their bare hands pulled off all that black sludge. Daddy's knees gave under him, and he fell face first on the grass and cried like a hurt boy when he was able to make out Simon's face.

I've not gone back since. And, though I didn't cry when I saw my dead brother . . . if I go there again . . . I will.

(Fade on Matilda. Lights rise on Wanda singing a few bars of "Knock Me a Kiss" as she enters)

WANDA

I saw somebody step into that river the other night, son.

(Overhead spot fades in on Daniel)

Do you know who it looked like? Myron Turner! Some wicked man who calls himself your daddy.

(Fade on Daniel)

Son, he lied to you. Like the devil he's in the image of, the man is full of lies. If Myron Turner is the father of anything, it ain't to nothin' but a host of lies – damned lies!

By the way – did I say I was comin' to see you? I'm coming to die, son. And I want us to die together. Now, that ain't much for a mother to want from her child, is it?

(Fade on Wanda. Lights rise on Cyrus in his wheelchair)

CYRUS

We'd hung that boy by 'is neck from a tree limb. The limb broke b'fore he got strangled good, though, and he fell in the water. We went on home after that, thinkin' th' boy'd drowned. That night, I'd had a vision of a man steppin' forth from out o' that river. And when he rose from the black water, when his feet touched that Black River bank, I heard him swear on 'is blood he'd visit ev'ry white man'd tried t' kill 'im.

Later on, somebody said they'd seen him walkin' down Stokes Road one night with the look of a man that's got some deadly business t' see to. Soon after, somebody said Tommy Bolton – some jack-legged preacher that'd seen to the rope on th' boys neck – they say he scared Tommy dead as cut meat when he come up on 'im that evenin'. Rev. Bolton was in his kitchen fixin' a sandwich when he spied 'im standing in his pantry way –

(Matilda appears)

Matilda?

MATILDA

Yes, daddy?

CYRUS

Your brother . . . Did you see how good th' undertaker made 'im look? He fixed him so he looked like a ripe and ruddy peach, didn't he?

MATILDA

He sure did!

CYRUS

Yes, now! Just as ripe and ruddy as a harvested peach.

(Fade on Cyrus and Matilda. Again, the woeful humming of the blues. Overhead spot fades in on Ruthell)

RUTHELL

Rae's daddy'd just come out of the Army, and he and I was lookin' for a place to stay. I knew I didn't want to live in no big city. And he didn't either.

Somehow, we found our way here. Rae's daddy said he took to it as soon as he planted his foot in this li'l town. He said he saw it as a place where folks would stay out your way and let you be a man.

From that first day here, though, a pretty good number of them made it their business to fill us in about that curse. I never took to it. In fact, just to show it up to be the lie it was, I went to that river, stepped in and kept on steppin' until the water got all the way up to my chin.

Still, I wouldn't allow Rae anywhere near that water. I didn't think it was the kind of place fittin' for a child, is all.

Since then, I've had no cause to go back there. Oh, I'll keep on in this town. I ain't got no reason to go nowhere, not really. But, that river . . . I don't see no cause in goin' back there.

(Fade on Ruthell. Rae Jean re-enters)

RAE JEAN

At springtime in Black River, the flowers in bloom along the riverbank would reek of death. By summer, the smell was gone. Yet, even then, most people tried their best to keep their distance from it.

Once, a young minister from the north came down and preached to assuage their fear. He even went as far as to propose, then push through the building of a church at a choice spot near the riverbank. One Saturday evening, though, with most of the construction completed, a storm wrecked what had been built and washed it into the river.

No one has sought to build anything along the riverbank since.

Though it started as a plantation, the town itself now lies about four miles inland. Over the years, as the town grew, it expanded eastward – never west, never any closer toward those waters. The people of the town got along well, as long as no one spoke of the river. Unless they were informing newcomers, most folks kept quiet about it: like certain Native Americans who thought it ill-mannered to speak of the dead, many in Black River believed it equally grave to talk amongst themselves of the curse on the river, a curse endured for generations until, one day during the spring of 1981 . . .

(Ruthell enters the house, followed by Rae Jean, who sets down a small suitcase)

RUTHELL

. . . How you like it?

RAE JEAN

It's alright.

RUTHELL

It's not as big as our other house, but I figured it would do. Want some hot coffee?

RAE JEAN

What?

RUTHELL

You want me to make you some coffee?

RAE JEAN

Sure.

(Ruthell exits to make coffee. Rae Jean remains standing as Ruthell speaks from the kitchen)

RUTHELL

Like I was tellin' you on the way up here, after your daddy died, it seemed like I needed me a change – all those memories held up in that old house. It's why I went on and got something new. Although, it ain't so new now – I bought it just after your father passed.

(She re-enters)

And it's better for me here. I've sho took to this side of town. That coffee's brewing. It'll be ready in a little bit – siddown.

(Rae sits, followed by Ruthell)

This town done jumped to about twice its size since you left. With them two auto plants we just got folks've been movin' in from all over. Matter fact, they just finished building two new shoppin' centers over on Stinson Road a few months ago – You know, Jimmy Carter even rode through town last year, tryin' to get folks to re-elect 'im. I always liked Carter. I liked him when he was governor, liked him when he was president. I was sad to see him go.

You know . . . later on, I could go down to Deke's Market, get us some catfish and make a nice little supper – wha' chu think of that?

RAE JEAN

Ol' Deke Smith is still around?

RUTHELL

Deke ain't goin' nowhere.

RAE JEAN

He ought to be as old as country dirt by now.

RUTHELL

He was as old as country dirt before you left.

(Ruthell laughs. Silence)

Let me see to that coffee.

(She exits. Rae looks the room over, then embraces herself, as if she is trying to repel a cold breeze. Ruthell re-enters with coffee)

What's wrong?

RAE JEAN

I can't say, it's . . . I just got chilly all of a sudden.

RUTHELL

Let me get you a blanket.

(She sets down the coffee and exits, then returns with a blanket, which she drapes around Rae. She hands her a cup of coffee. As Rae reaches for the cup, Ruthell touches her hand, then holds it)

Its sho good having you back, Rae. Well . . . ain't you glad to be out?

(She wrests her hand from her mother)

That's what I think I'll do – I'll go down to Deke's later this afternoon and . . . and get us some catfish. Then cook up some rice . . .

(Silence. Ruthell pauses to control her emotions)

Matter fact . . . if I'm gon make supper, I reckon I ought to get myself on to the market now. Why wait.

(She prepares to leave)

I'll be back in a little bit.

(She motions to exit, then stops)

You might be tired from that long trip up here. There's a room made up. If you want, go ahead and lay down for a spell.

(She nods, then rises)

And Rae? I want it known that this place is yours, too. So, stay as long as you like. And, if it's what you want, you can go on staying here.

(She acknowledges, then exits. Fade out)

(Overhead spot fades in on Matilda)

MATILDA

Most of daddy's friends are all gone now. There'd been a time when he'd have them over for poker playing parties. After a while, it got to be too much for mama – all the liquor, the cigars, the cussin'. Daddy still says when the Civil War ended Josiah Stanton hid in this house after being shot in battle with the Union Army. And he died here, too. Nobody believes it . . . but you know daddy.

(Lights rise on Daniel, US of Matilda and sitting on the steps of Cyrus' porch by a suitcase)

Since you've got to live somewhere, and since daddy needs someone to see that he eats and cleans himself and . . . The thing is, I would have done it myself. In fact, I'd moved here from Atlanta because I wanted to be closer to him. Then, well, I thought . . . I thought about you.

You'll only need to look after him at night. During the day, mostly, he's at the senior center, or his old buddy Bill Kelly stops by. So, even with your new job, this can work. And, what's more, he's changed. He's still got some of his nasty little quirks but, these days, he's a different man.

He'd wanted a woman to look after him, but we can't afford a maid –

DANIEL

So, you need a man to stand behind him and clean up his shit for free.

MATILDA

It isn't that bad –

DANIEL

Yet.

MATILDA

I'll tell you what: I'll stop by once a week to do laundry. Otherwise, you can call

me if it gets to be too much. Okay?

DANIEL

What about –

MATILDA

We'll keep quiet about that – he doesn't have to know of it, anyway. Besides, it's none of his business and you're making progress, right?

DANIEL

What about that old rumor?

MATILDA

I told you not to pay any attention to it –

DANIEL

Tildy . . .

MATILDA

What?

DANIEL

I . . . might need to think on this some more.

(Silence, then Cyrus wheels onto the porch)

MATILDA

Hi, daddy. This is Daniel.

(Tense silence)

Now, like I told you, he's thinking about staying here to look after you. At night, mostly. During the day he's gon be working at the auto plant. In the cafeteria.

(He looks Daniel over)

CYRUS

Five years had to roll by b'fore this girl'd let me get so much as a good whiff off you, didn't it? And I'd bet my next meal she didn't waste no time at-all fillin' you in on them damned lies her mama tried t' stick in me, am I right . . . ?

(He suddenly feels pain)

MATILDA

What's the matter!?

(Slowly, it subsides)

CYRUS

Nothing . . . nothing, I'm – I'm fine.

MATILDA

Do you want me to call the doctor?

CYRUS

Wha' . . . ?

MATILDA

Doc Pinter – the doctor? Do you need to see him . . . ?

CYRUS

No – no, child. I'm . . . I'm fine.

(Silence as he settles)

What is it you call y'self, son?

DANIEL

My name is Daniel –

CYRUS

Right! You . . . you did say that.

(Silence as he settles further)

As said . . . whatever she told you . . . all I got t' say is they were *lies*. And they will stay as such, y'hear?

Aside from that, as you've most likely been told, I'm a man with a past – an ass-ugly past, if you know what I'm talking about.

DANIEL

I ain't scared of the past.

CYRUS

That's good t' hear –

DANIEL

And I'm not scared of you, either.

CYRUS

Fine. I'd like t' ask for your help, then.

(Silence)

If y' don't have it in you t' say yes, go on and say no. Either way, won't be no skin off my back.

(Daniel wavers, then looks at Matilda)

DANIEL

Sure.

CYRUS

Thank you. And thank you, Tildy.

MATILDA

You're welcome.

CYRUS

I reckon now you'll have an excuse to come and see your daddy more often. As opposed to not at-all.

(He exits into the house)

MATILDA

I believe this will work . . . if you stay clean. And we keep quiet about . . . you know what.

DANIEL

Of course, if the shit gets heavy, I can always run back to Atlanta.

MATILDA

Come on, Dan. You're finished with that place.

DANIEL

Am I? I wasn't no different from the next guy at that house, or the guy next to him. Which means, I was doing alright.

MATILDA

Alright?

DANIEL

Maybe I'm trying to get you to prepare yourself.

(Silence)

MATILDA

When's your next meeting with your case worker?

DANIEL

Week from tomorrow.

MATILDA

I'll come by and take you. And, for your information, as far as I'm concerned, there's no need to prepare myself. For anything. I'm here because I believe in you.

DANIEL

You mean that?

MATILDA

I wouldn't've said it if I didn't.

DANIEL

If that's the case . . . I won't let you down no more. In fact, I wasn't gon say this, but . . . I'm going right back to the promise I made when – when we started seeing each other.

(He looks at her with longing. She averts this look)

MATILDA

I'm glad you decided to stay with daddy. You two ought to make out just fine. And, maybe, I'll come by on Sunday and take you with me to church. And, after service, if you'd like, you can talk with Pastor Moore.

(Wanda fades in)

Until then . . . take care. Okay?

(Matilda exits. Daniel stands, watching her leave. Soon after, his eyes focus upon Rae Jean, who is standing on her porch)

WANDA

But why won't you talk to me no more, son?

(Fade on Daniel and Rae Jean. Lights intensify on Wanda)

When my eyes last beheld you . . . I had to threaten your illegitimate ass to get you to stay in contact with me. And, I got to say, you did keep it going. For a

while. Why in the hell did it stop?

Last time we spoke . . . you was going with that used-to-be wife of yours to live near that river. I hear about it, son. All the way up here in Cleveland, I know of the river. They say the devil is in that water! And it's why the water's so black!

(Fade on Wanda)

(Rae Jean enters, awakened from her nap as lights rise in the sitting room of Ruthell's home. Ruthell is seated on the sofa, drinking – a bottle of liquor and a glass are on the coffee table)

RUTHELL

You rest well?

RAE JEAN

Not really.

RUTHELL

Won't the bed comfortable enough for you?

RAE JEAN

The bed was fine.

RUTHELL

Then, what was wrong?

(Rae Jean sits)

RAE JEAN

I was dreaming.

(Silence)

RUTHELL

You 'bout ready for me to start supper?

RAE JEAN

Don't you have anything ready?

RUTHELL

I didn't want to cook them nice lookin' catfish in there and have 'em sit.

RAE JEAN

You could've went ahead.

RUTHELL

It ain't no trouble. Are you alright?

RAE JEAN

I'm fine. Just a little chilly.

(She wraps herself in a blanket and notices the liquor)

When did you start drinking?

RUTHELL

Since your father died, and since I got m'self planted under my own roof, I've become liberated! Better late than not at-all, right? You wanna taste?

(She shakes her head)

You sure you're alright?

RAE JEAN

I'm fine, mama. Now, please, quit asking me that.

(Rae rises and stands by the opened front door and looks out)

RUTHELL

Why didn't you write me? I started to think maybe she's holdin' it all in for when I come to see her. But, when I'd visit, I couldn't get nothin' out of you then, either. You'd sit like you was gnashin' a rock the whole time. Wasn't you able to find nothing to say to your mama?

I'd try like the devil to get your father to come along –

(Rae scoffs silently)

Oh, don't heap so much ire on 'im, child. He was a man who got set in his ways before his time, is all. And . . . I still ain't holdin' it against you for not wantin' to go to the funeral. Even when they told me they was gon give you a furlough and . . . I wasn't gon blame you for that. I understood.

I reckon I'll start supper.

(With Rae Jean at the door, we now see Daniel's silhouette against Cyrus' house)

RAE JEAN

Mama.

RUTHELL

What?

RAE JEAN

Over there – that man. Looking at us from that house down the road. The man on the porch.

(Ruthell looks)

RUTHELL

Oh, ain't nobody but ol' man Cyrus Marsh. You remember him. Some peck who used to be in the Klan whose legs gave out on him when he saw his dead son –

RAE JEAN

But he's standing, mama.

(She takes another look)

RUTHELL

That he is. I wouldn't fret, though. I hear his girl was lookin' for somebody to 'tend to 'im. To wash his nasty drawers and cook for 'im. Maybe that's who it is.

RAE JEAN

I wish he'd stop looking at us.

(Fade on Ruthell and Rae. Lights rise on Daniel standing on the porch. Cyrus' voice is heard from inside)

CYRUS

I'd just turned fourteen when I watched my uncle shoot our mare. Right through the skull. I saw the bullet go in one side of 'er head, come out the other end, then set dead in the heart of the sweetgum tree granddaddy liked t' sit under.

(Lights up on Cyrus in the sitting room of the house)

Daddy got mad and asked Uncle Waymon why he shot the horse t' begin with. Uncle Waymon told 'im she'd gotten old. And as mean as a hard-up wench. He told 'im the horse'd darn near kicked a man's head clean off his shoulders a day, or so ago. No tellin' what evil she'd do next.

That was on my fourteenth birthday. And don't you know Uncle Waymon let me have that same rifle –

(Cyrus is suddenly quiet when Daniel enters the

house)

DANIEL

You ready for supper?

(Cyrus nods. Daniel wheels him to the kitchen table, then serves him his supper. Cyrus eats)

CYRUS

Ain't you eatin'?

(Daniel stands by the kitchen window and looks out, perhaps lighting a cigarette and smoking)

DANIEL

I already ate.

(Silence. Cyrus eats)

CYRUS

This ain't half bad. Where'd you learn t' cook?

DANIEL

Don't you know?

CYRUS

No, I do not.

DANIEL

Didn't Tildy –

CYRUS

She told me nothin' about you. 'Cept that you made your livin' as some kinda cook. Other than that, she told me when ya'll got married, and she told me when you won't t'gether no more – with not much in between. She won't talk to me . . . won't keep comp'ny with 'er daddy.

(He eats)

This eatin' ain't half bad, son. I do mean that.

DANIEL

Thank you.

CYRUS

The woman who used t' take care of me – Miss Hattie Graves? . . . You can near 'bout burn as good as her. When I won't nothin' but a boy, I used t' live for her cookin'. Oh, yes! She took good care of us – cookin', cleanin', workin' in the house, and such. Then, late in the evenin' on one night or another, when mama won't payin' attention, daddy'd take 'er out to the back and go t' work on *her!*

(He laughs)

I was young, but I sure as sin won't blind. I won't dumb, neither. In fact, I could bet the skin off your foot mama knew what shenanigans daddy was perpetratin' with that woman. Mama was good about it, though. For a time, anyhow . . . keepin' herself out of daddy's face, unearthin' his business. Miss Hattie was a good woman, too. And it's surely bad she didn't live long enough t' give me a taste of that black puddin' patch.

(He continues eating)

Yep! She was sure to th' heart good. Until the devil climbed in 'er. And when he did, daddy fixed her. He never told us how, but I knew he fixed her.

Tell me somethin': how come you and Tildy ain't t'gether no more? Is it on account of me?

DANIEL

No. And, please, don't make me talk about it.

CYRUS

How come? You ain't no dope head, are you?

DANIEL

Why would you ask me that?

CYRUS

Well, I can see you won't beatin' on 'er. Which gets me to wonderin' . . .

DANIEL

The answer is no, Mr. Cyrus. I ain't that kind of niggah.

CYRUS

Ain't nobody said you was no niggah. I'm just askin' . . .

DANIEL

Whatever the reason, it's between me and Tildy – it's got nothing to do with you.

CYRUS

Listen, son –

DANIEL

And if you have a problem with it, I'll just take my black ass and . . .

CYRUS

Hold on, son – Hold it a minute!

DANIEL

Well, if you wanna sit up here and –

CYRUS

Alright! If it'll make things better, I won't bring it up no more. Fair?

(Silence, then Daniel nods)

DANIEL

You through eatin'?

(Cyrus nods. Daniel clears the table, then returns to the window)

CYRUS

Bill Kelly's daughter worked with some gal who was livin' with a man as black as you who just happened to be on dope. The man'd worried the woman so that, after a time, her hair'd turned white – it's the truth! He went on and set th' poor child twenty-odd years closer t' death from being on that stuff. Now, it's not to say none of this's got anything at-all t' do with you. I just want it known I will not sit with it. Y' hear?

Damn Matilda! And damn 'er mama! You know she up and got m' own child t' treat me like I got Pharaoh's curse? Her own daddy! The least she could do is come and say "hello, dog" from time to time. Ain't that right?

I'll ask again – where'd you learn t' cook?

(Still gazing through the window)

DANIEL

A Mexican taught me.

CYRUS

A Mexican, huh? Ain't that grand. Wha' cha lookin' at?

(He wheels himself to the window to observe that which has Daniels attention. Overhead spot fades)

in on Rae Jean standing on her porch with a cup of coffee)

Well, now! It must surely be her.

DANIEL

Who?

CYRUS

The “Black Widow”, son! She’s here! Word is her mama moved h’self t’ this side of town thinkin’ she’d out run some of the bad mouth’s been put on her and that child. See, that girl’s been to prison, y’ know. And do y’ know what she did? . . . *She killed ‘er husband.*

(Cyrus smiles, then wheels off. Daniel remains, still staring through the window)

(Lights rise on Rae Jean and the house. It is early morning. She goes indoors and sits at the kitchen table, sipping her coffee. Ruthell stands by the window, dressed for work)

RUTHELL

The smell of the dead lives here in the springtime, don’t it?

That river.

When you were a girl, I forbade you to go anywhere in the direction of it, didn’t I? It won’t for being superstitious, which I won’t –

RAE JEAN

I went anyway.

RUTHELL

You did?

RAE JEAN

Only once.

RUTHELL

And here you are – all grown and throwin’ something like that on me now. I bet you went down there with some boy, didn’t you? Oh, ain’t no use in hidin’ it. I can’t do nothin’ but laugh at your youthful disobedience now, anyhow. Matter fact, I hope you did get to wrestlin’ with some bright-eyed country boy in them tall weeds –

RAE JEAN
I went to drown myself.

RUTHELL
To do what . . . ?

RAE JEAN
You heard me.

RUTHELL
Oh, Jesus!

RAE JEAN
As you can see, I never went through with it.

RUTHELL
Well, I'm surely glad of that!

(Silence)

Somethin' just came to me: I could get a week off work. Maybe even two weeks. I got some vacation time saved up, and . . . I don't know – maybe you and me could go off somewhere for a while. How 'bout it?

(Rae shakes her head)

Ezra used to spend his vacation time working around the house. And I'd beg like a hobo for us to go off somewhere – anywhere. Your daddy won't the goin' around kind, I reckon.

I'm not gon ask what it was like for you in there. I know it had to have been awful. And whatever they did to you –

RAE JEAN
Nobody did anything except keep me locked up.

RUTHELL
Well, you ain't so locked up now, are you? And while we're talkin', what reason did you have in goin' to that river to . . .

(Silence)

Was it on account of your father?

RAE JEAN
No. And why would it be?

RUTHELL

It's just a question. I'm listening.

RAE JEAN

You won't believe it.

RUTHELL

Try me.

(There is a sudden knock on the door. Daniel is standing on the porch holding a boxed pie. Ruthell answers)

Yes?

DANIEL

How do!

RUTHELL

How do to you.

DANIEL

I . . . I'm from down the road.

RUTHELL

Oh?

DANIEL

Yes, ma'am.

RUTHELL

Well, what can we do for you?

DANIEL

I, uh . . . saw a woman. For two nights, I saw a woman standing on the porch.

RUTHELL

That was probably my daughter.

DANIEL

Oh. Well, uh . . .

RUTHELL

You say you're from down the road?

(He nods)

I reckon you the one staying with ol' man Cyrus.

(Rae appears by the door with her mother)

DANIEL

Yes, ma'am.

RUTHELL

The word around was that his girl was lookin' for somebody to 'tend to 'im.

DANIEL

That was my wife.

RUTHELL

Your what?

DANIEL

Matilda. Mr. Cyrus' daughter. We used to be married.

RUTHELL

Well, now!

(Rae turns to leave)

DANIEL

I brought a pie.

(Rae stops)

A peach pie. I made it myself.

RUTHELL

Is that so?

DANIEL

Oh, yes, ma'am. Here –

(He hands it to Ruthell. She takes it)

It's for you. And your daughter. How you doin'?

RAE JEAN

I'm fine.

DANIEL

I saw you standing on the porch the other night –

RAE JEAN

You were the one who was peeping at me . . .

DANIEL

I didn't mean no harm.

RUTHELL

I'm sure you didn't – My! This pie smells heavenly! I'd sit and have a piece with you, but I got to get myself to work. Maybe you and my daughter could sit down and . . .

RAE JEAN

No.

RUTHELL

Why not?

RAE JEAN

I ain't got to say why.

(She exits)

RUTHELL

I'm sorry, Mr. . . .

DANIEL

Daniel. Most folks call me Dan.

RUTHELL

Alright, Dan. I'm Ruthell.

(They shake hands)

And that . . . woman in the house here is my daughter, Rae Jean.

DANIEL

I brought the pie on account of what Mr. Cyrus said about her.

RUTHELL

And what did he say?

DANIEL

He said she just finished doin' time. But it ain't no big thing. Hell, I've been . . .

RUTHELL

Tell Mr. Cyrus he oughtn't be passin' out folks' business.

DANIEL

I hope you enjoy your pie.

RUTHELL

Thank you, Dan.

(Fade on Ruthell)

(As Daniel exits, the moaning of the slow blues is heard. Daniel stops as lights rise on Wanda in US limbo, humming deeply. Daniel turns away from her and exits. Fade out)

(Lights rise on Matilda, sitting on Cyrus' porch. It is night. Cyrus is heard from inside)

CYRUS

Y' know what I want, Tildy? One of Miss Hatties oatmeal cookies.

(Daniel enters, home from work and carrying sacks of food)

DANIEL

Hey.

MATILDA

Hi . . . Are you alright?

CYRUS

Of all things under Gods glory, of all that Miss Hattie would cook, I took particular pleasure in her cookies – them oatmeal cookies.

DANIEL

I can't say –

CYRUS

Miss Hattie'd bake up a plate of hot cookies, set 'em on the table, and she and I would eat. Mama'd bring h'self in the kitchen a time, or two while we was eatin', but would not partake. Oh, no! She never fancied Miss Hatties cookies, I reckon.

MATILDA

What is it?

DANIEL

I don't know. I guess I'm . . . I don't know.

CYRUS

I overheard mama and daddy fussin' and arguin' one night – heard mama holler Miss Hattie's name, then cry out *nigger-bitch* this and *nigger-bitch* somethin' else. I caught th' smack of daddy's hand – hard – on 'er face. It won't long b'fore mama was on th' floor, cryin' like some whooped dog.

MATILDA

Are you able to stand all that?

DANIEL

He's a old man. All he's gon do is talk.

(He wheels onto the porch)

CYRUS

Now, I wasn't gon 'low m'self t' get shook up over nothin'. I wanted Miss Hattie t' stay! I fell on my knees and prayed for th' very thing. And f' her t' keep makin' them oatmeal cookies –

(He stops suddenly upon noticing Daniel)

DANIEL

How you been?

CYRUS

Fine as I'm able t' be. Wha' cha got there?

DANIEL

I got us some shrimp. From the plant cafeteria.

CYRUS

Shrimp, huh?

DANIEL

Yep. Had more than they could use, I guess.

(Cyrus gazes at Matilda)

CYRUS

You gon stick around and eat with us?

MATILDA

Sure. I'll even help in the kitchen.

(Daniel and Matilda eye one another)

It will be okay this time.

DANIEL

Let me go ahead and do it.

MATILDA

Can't I at least –

DANIEL

No.

MATILDA

Why?

DANIEL

You know why.

MATILDA

But Dan . . .

CYRUS

I b'lieve what the man's tryin' t' say is he don't need some woman messin' with 'im while he's –

DANIEL

That ain't it, Mr. Cyrus.

CYRUS

Then, what's wrong with the girl offerin' you a li'l help?

MATILDA

On second thought, I need to get home.

DANIEL

Why? Are you mad?

MATILDA

There's nothing to be mad about.

DANIEL

You're still mad, though.

MATILDA

No, I'm not.

CYRUS

It ain't so late in the evening, Matilda.

MATILDA

I still need to go.

CYRUS

What's your hurry?

MATILDA

I'm tired.

CYRUS

Of your daddy?

MATILDA

No –

CYRUS

Then why can't y' keep comp'ny with 'im? You don't want t' sit and have a meal or a cup of coffee, y' can't even bring y'self to give y' daddy a good look in th' face.

(Matilda is about to speak)

Yes?

MATILDA

Goodnight.

CYRUS

And stay gone. I'm through with you! Matter fact, I'm as through with you as your used-to-be husband here is.

DANIEL

Wait a minute . . .

CYRUS

Son, you're as done with her as I was her mama. Matter fact, I'd been so good and sick of that woman, I was as glad as a whore with a bank roll when I finally got th' nerve to –

MATILDA

She left YOU, daddy!

CYRUS

And while we're all yet congregated, I'd like to be informed, once and for all, as to why this woman left your bed in the first place. I'm all ears.

(Silence)

Matilda, why did you leave this man?

DANIEL

Mr. Cyrus –

CYRUS

I have re-directed the question to Matilda . . .

DANIEL

You promised me you wasn't gon bring that up –

CYRUS

Which means keep y' black ass out of it!

MATILDA

Don't talk to him that way.

CYRUS

This is my house.

MATILDA

And I'm leaving it.

(She turns to exit)

CYRUS

Why in the hell is it that y' can't be a man and answer my damn question!

DANIEL

Alright, what do you think?

(Matilda stops)

MATILDA

Dan, no!

CYRUS

You want t' know what I think, do ya . . . ?

MATILDA

I said NO! Now, daddy, if you want Dan to stay, you'll leave him alone about this – and I mean it.

CYRUS

Just the split-ass half of y' mama, ain't you?

(Silence as he exits into the house)

MATILDA

It's none of his business.

DANIEL

But it's his house.

MATILDA

I don't care. He'll be better off if he lives and dies without any knowledge of it.

DANIEL

Right. He'll stay blind. Meantime, I'll stay just as blind sittin' up here making a damn fool of myself.

MATILDA

A fool of . . . What are you saying? Dan?

(Silence)

I'll ask again – what's wrong?

(Again, silence. Matilda goes to her knees)

Alright. Pray with me.

(Daniel scoffs)

Come on! We're going to get through this together. That's why you're here. And always remember what Pastor Moore said: he had a son who'd been hooked on

this terrible thing. Just like you. And he said the surest way to get anybody to kick was to get them to pray. And to be sure they feel loved.

DANIEL

That's what he said?

MATILDA

You were right there with me.

DANIEL

Then, as for the part about love, is it still the kind where I'll just get *saved*?

MATILDA

I speak of love which helps one to pray.

DANIEL

To pray the other kind away, right?

(He now faces her on his knees)

Okay . . . to answer your question . . . I just want to be a better man, is all. A better man . . . *for you*.

(Silence. Again, she averts his gaze of longing and rises. After a beat, Dan rises as well)

You know what? Find somebody else to stay here and do this shit.

MATILDA

But where will you . . .

DANIEL

Wherever the hell I please! Which is another way of saying I'm grown.

MATILDA

Or, that you've given up?

(Silence as he calms down. Matilda then comforts him)

Stay. Please. If you want to be a better man for me . . . *stay*.

(After a moment, Dan exits into the house)

(Lights rise on Cyrus inside the house. Matilda

notices as Rae Jean enters)

RAE JEAN

At the bottom of the river the bodies of two young men laid side by side. One was taken up, the other, left. One of those men was Simon. And the one left behind –

MATILDA

It's not true! It's never been true. Daddy never killed anyone.

RAE JEAN

Your mother . . .

MATILDA

You've seen her?

RAE JEAN

I'm afraid not. She wanted no part of your father, the river, or what was said.

MATILDA

She didn't want to believe it either.

RAE JEAN

Yet, she died a troubled soul, didn't she?

(Fade on Rae Jean)

MATILDA

Yes, she did.

(Matilda looks mournfully at Cyrus. Lights fade)

(Night. Rae Jean is sitting on the porch. Daniel enters with a cake)

RAE JEAN

We ain't even finished the pie yet.

DANIEL

Oh. Well, I guess I'll leave this anyhow –

RAE JEAN

Take it back.

DANIEL

But I want you to have it.

RAE JEAN

I won't be needing any cake –

DANIEL

Ma'am, please! I'm a cookin' man. I've enjoyed cookin' most of my life. I work down at the cafeteria in the auto plant. As a cook. Most of all, see, I like to bake: pies, cakes. I think I'm at my best when I can bake somethin' and . . . give it to somebody.

(He hands her the cake)

I'd surely like to leave you with this cake. If I may. Please.

(She takes it)

By the way . . . you can call me Dan. My whole name is Daniel Lee Baines, but Daniel – I mean, Dan, will do.

RAE JEAN

Thank you. Dan.

(Silence)

What?

DANIEL

I been to jail, too.

RAE JEAN

You've been to jail?

DANIEL

That's right. See . . .

RAE JEAN

Why in the hell should I care if you've been to jail?

DANIEL

I don't know. I . . . I guess . . .

RAE JEAN

And who do you think you are coming here . . .

DANIEL

I ain't meant no harm! I thought you'd might like to hear from somebody who . . .

you know, who's, in a way, been through what you've been through. Even though I ain't pulled no hard time –

RAE JEAN

Mr. Dan –

DANIEL

Dan will do fine.

RAE JEAN

Whatever the hell you call yourself – take your cake and go.

DANIEL

But –

RAE JEAN

Now! Before I get ugly.

(She hands him the cake. He does not respond)

DANIEL

Will you at least keep it for your mama?

(Reluctantly, she takes it back)

When I saw you off the porch from where I stay, I felt something in my heart. And all the way in my gut. I didn't know what it was. I only knew that . . . I couldn't bring myself to quit looking at you. I never meant nothin' by it. I just . . . I couldn't help myself.

(They look intently upon one another. A moment passes, and he exits)

(Daniel approaches the porch where Cyrus is sitting)

CYRUS

Back so soon? I thought f' sure you'd be goin' through 'er underclothes by now.

DANIEL

Mr. Cyrus . . .

CYRUS

Hmm?

DANIEL

Nothing.

(Daniel sits on the steps)

CYRUS

They say she shot 'er husband. Killed 'im dead as cut meat.

DANIEL

Why?

CYRUS

Nobody bothered t' say. Eleven years ago. With the way folks talk, I wonder why she and her mama didn't up and leave this town. I sure as the devil wouldn't've stayed here. And, if I was you, I'd watch m'self. A woman who can kill 'er own husband can't have regard f' much. Can't be scared of a whole lot, neither.

DANIEL

These days, ain't much I'm afraid of.

CYRUS

I'm only sayin' t' be careful.

DANIEL

I don't have nothin' to worry about.

CYRUS

The woman shot her husband! Point blank! And did eleven years' time, at that.

DANIEL

So?

CYRUS

So? Ain't no fear in this woman, son. Pull the fear out of a woman and she gets as evil as she wants to be. And I'll bet you a hundred skins this woman down the road, the one y' got your good eye on – I'll bet she ain't been none too kind on the one or two visits y' paid, has she? I knew it!

DANIEL

Jail will do that.

CYRUS

Not t' ev'rybody.

DANIEL

And how do you –

CYRUS

I did two years and a half, son, f' shootin' a man – a white man. No, I did not kill 'im, though I yet wished I had.

(He laughs)

Now, don't it get you? All th' niggers I aimed t' kill, and the only time I see th' insides of a jail is . . .

(Daniel turns and glares at him. Cyrus notices and stops talking. Silence)

DANIEL

Wha' chu want for supper?

CYRUS

Surprise me.

(Daniel rises)

DANIEL

And you're wrong about her. After what she's gone through, she's got nothin' but fear in her. It's why I go there.

Did I hear right? That you shot a man?

CYRUS

You heard right.

DANIEL

Why'd you shoot him?

CYRUS

He insulted me. And he didn't have no business insultin' me, neither. Not in my own house.

We'd just got through with the poker game. And when I tol' him t' pay up, he bristled and called me outside of my name – IN MY OWN HOUSE! And it ain't right.

(Having heard enough, Daniel exits into the house)

'Specially in a house such as this 'n: Josiah Stanton himself – when he got hisself shot down by that scum-bellied Yankee soldier – hid and died here – in this very

house! This I believe. Some nights, I will vow . . . I see a wounded grey-coated man walkin' amongst these walls –

(He feels sudden pain)

Simon! Son, I . . . I got some awful news for you – y' mother . . . Lord! The Father above decided on th' time to . . . wait – wait a minute . . . That boy! That boy ain't dead! AAGGGHHHHH! . . .

(Pain intensifies, then subsides. He settles as lights fade)

(Lights up on Ruthell's porch. Daniel appears with a pie and knocks on the door. Rae Jean answers)

DANIEL

I know – you probably ain't even done with the cake –

RAE JEAN

Mama took it with her to work. She thought it would be kind to . . . share it.

DANIEL

Now, that's . . . that's the idea.

RAE JEAN

Another pie?

DANIEL

Yep. Brandied apple. My own recipe.

(She takes the pie)

RAE JEAN

Thank you.

DANIEL

I'll see you later . . .

RAE JEAN

Would you . . . You want something to drink?

DANIEL

Sure.

(They enter the house. Daniel sits at the kitchen table)

You wanna soda?
RAE JEAN

Yeah, sure.
DANIEL

(She takes a soft drink from the refrigerator, hands it to him, and sits)

Thanks.
(He opens it and drinks)

That cake . . . I liked it.
RAE JEAN

Thank you.
DANIEL

I bet you're a good cook.
RAE JEAN

DANIEL
I'd like to think so. I learned to cook at this restaurant from a Mexican, Javier was his name. I was sixteen when I started workin'. I'd just got out of juvenile detention. They gave me a chance and put me to work. And old Javier . . . he taught me all I know about cookin'.

So . . . how is that man?
RAE JEAN

Mr. Cyrus?
DANIEL

Yes. How is he treating you?
RAE JEAN

'Bout as good as his mind will allow.
DANIEL

Didn't he used to be in the Klan?
RAE JEAN

DANIEL

Yeah, but they threw him out.

RAE JEAN

Oh?

DANIEL

See, me and his daughter, we were married –

RAE JEAN

You were married . . . ?

DANIEL

Right. And the Klan, when they found out, didn't take to it very well. They told Mr. Cyrus that if he'd put his daughter away, that is, if he disowned her, they'd try to back him up. Well, he couldn't do it. But for everything else, he still loves Tildy. Anyway, they voted him out.

RAE JEAN

My goodness!

DANIEL

Yeah . . . Miss Rae? When I mentioned this thing about you bein' in jail –

RAE JEAN

I'd rather not talk about it . . .

DANIEL

But what I mean to say is . . . I didn't mean nothin' –

RAE JEAN

Listen –

DANIEL

Alright! I'm sorry – I'm sorry. We won't talk on it if you don't want to.

RAE JEAN

I'd appreciate it.

(He finishes the drink, then rises)

DANIEL

Thank you for the soda. And I . . . I hope you enjoy that –

(Silence)

Miss Rae?

RAE JEAN

What?

DANIEL

Are . . . are you afraid?

RAE JEAN

Afraid?

DANIEL

I ask because . . . I know I've told some folks otherwise, but . . . I'm sorry to keep puttin' this in your face, ma'am, but . . . jail, I've seen my share of jails. I've seen my share of dead ends. I've cried at night. I've been hungry, weak, lonely and scared. I saw you standing on the porch. And I felt –

RAE JEAN

Dan, you don't have to . . .

DANIEL

Please! What I'm trying to tell you is . . . it's alright. Whatever's going on in your life, I'm going through the same thing.

RAE JEAN

I can't help you.

DANIEL

No, what I mean is . . .

RAE JEAN

And I don't like what I'm hearing.

DANIEL

I'm not trying to be ugly, and I'd cut my head off before I'd even think of showing disrespect toward you.

RAE JEAN

Then, what are you asking?

DANIEL

I . . . I don't know. Nothing, I guess.

(Silence)

Well, actually . . . Rae?

RAE JEAN

What is it, Dan?

DANIEL

Could – Could we sit . . . out there? On the porch? Together? For a little bit?

RAE JEAN

Why?

DANIEL

Please. For a little bit.

(Long silence. Then, slowly, they step out onto the porch and sit side by side on the bench)

RAE JEAN

Is this what you want?

DANIEL

Yes. Thank you.

(Daniel closes his eyes and is comforted. After a moment, Rae Jean begins to shiver)

What's the matter?

RAE JEAN

I'm alright. Just got cold all of a sudden.

(They sit in silence. Fade out)

(Overhead spot fades in on Ruthell, sitting at the kitchen table)

RUTHELL

Now, this is how the tale of the curse was told to me:

Sometime long before the Civil War, where this town sits won't nothin' but a big plantation owned by a man named Stanton – Josiah Stanton and his family who – then, as now – was horse breeders.

Well, one day, he was ridin' along the riverbank on his horse when he heard something squealing. That's when they say he caught sight of a child, a young black girl, runnin' through the thick brush, naked to the world. They say she stopped runnin' when she saw Josiah. And, as it's been told, he brought himself

down from the horse, took his riding coat off, and covered the child's nakedness, as well as the deep rents which cut across her back.

He asked the child from whom did she run. Before she could answer, a man on a pale horse came from out of the brush. They say he was a big man, with fierce eyes. They say he carried a whip, and that his boots shone bright and clean, like two evil black suns. As the story goes, he climbed off his horse, stepped over to Josiah and told him to hand the child over. She was his! And it was his will to take her back with him. Josiah asked if he wished the child harm. The man said it was not his concern. I'm told he then took the whip and lashed it across Josiah's face with such swiftness you'd've sworn he'd cut 'im with lightning!

As they tell it, Josiah jumped the man. And before long they was rolling and wrestling on the ground like Jacob and the Angel. After a while, Josiah somehow got the better of him and threw him in the river. And while the man thrashed and turned in the water like a fish aground, Josiah saw – through the mans' thin, wet upper garment – two long, flat stumps on his back: the man'd had wings at one time, like one of the devils dark angels, he supposed. Wings since torn away.

They go on and tell that, right before the current took him under, he put the curse on the river, sayin' the devil that was in him and the cold death that bound him would remain in those waters until what was his was returned.

(Lights rise on Rae Jean and Daniel seated at the table with Ruthell. They've just finished a meal which Daniel had prepared. Ruthell is nursing a drink)

DANIEL

What happened to the child?

RUTHELL

Nobody knows, nobody's bothered to say. Only she's nowhere near the river.

RAE JEAN

A few folks around here, though, claim to have seen her.

RUTHELL

Well, whatever it was you've heard, or will keep on hearing, don't allow it to spook you. Ain't nothin' to it at-all.

DANIEL

How'd ya'll like everything?

RUTHELL

This was beautiful, Dan.

DANIEL
Good.

RUTHELL
You ought to get married.

DANIEL
I was.

RUTHELL
Oh, yes. And how long was you and that girl married for?

DANIEL
Close to four years.

RUTHELL
You sound like you miss her. Why'd ya'll part ways?

RAE JEAN
Mama.

DANIEL
It's alright, Rae. And it's too long of a story anyway, ma'am. I won't put you to sleep telling it.

RUTHELL
Now, if I'm not mistook, I think there's some of your cake left.

DANIEL
Back at the house, I got a pecan pie I just baked.

RUTHELL
Oh, no, son. You ain't got to trouble yourself and trot all the way back to that house . . .

DANIEL
It's no trouble.

RAE JEAN
Dan. The cake will do fine.

(Ruthell brings the leftover cake from the refrigerator)

RUTHELL

Come to think of it, why don't ya'll go ahead and indulge. I'm a little wearied in the bones. And I got to work tomorrow.

RAE JEAN

Stay and have one piece, mama.

RUTHELL

No, baby. You sit and have cake with Daniel. Keep 'im company.

DANIEL

Besides, I got to stick around and help clean up.

RAE JEAN

I can do it.

DANIEL

I'll help you.

RAE JEAN

But I can do it

DANIEL

I can't leave this awful mess for you to –

RAE JEAN

I'm not an invalid!

RUTHELL

Rae. Let him stay and help if he wants to.

RAE JEAN

Mama . . .

RUTHELL

He wants to be a gentleman.

(Ruthell exits)

DANIEL

I wouldn't feel right leaving this big mess all to you. After I made it. Anyway, it won't take long if –

RAE JEAN

Then, let's get to it.

(She begins cleaning up. Daniel joins her, then stops and laughs)

What's funny?

DANIEL

It ain't you.

RAE JEAN

Then, what?

DANIEL

My ex-wife, Matilda . . . we had our first argument after being married over who would do the cooking and the dinner dishes one night. She wanted to do it. I said I'd help. She said no. I said I wanted to help. She said no. I said it didn't make me no never mind – let me help. She said no. With each time she said no, them "no's" got louder and louder until . . .

(He laughs, then stops. They resume cleaning)

When we were married, whenever we'd try working side by side in the kitchen, it always ended up in an argument. After a while, we learned our lesson about life in that kitchen.

(Silence)

Miss Ruthell . . . she seems like a good lady. And it looks like she cares an awful bunch for you.

(Silence)

I was thinking . . . sometime soon, would . . . would you like to have dinner with me? You could choose the place – any restaurant. There's a couple of nice places in town. From what I hear, anyway. Or we could find a place in Atlanta. In fact, I hear there's a fish place –

RAE JEAN

No.

DANIEL

Well, if you don't like fish . . .

RAE JEAN

I mean no. I don't want to go nowhere.

DANIEL

Alright. Maybe instead, we could –

RAE JEAN

I said I don't want to go nowhere.

DANIEL

But . . .

RAE JEAN

And I don't want to do nothin', either. Not with you.

DANIEL

Look, Miss Rae –

RAE JEAN

Will you please stop calling me "Miss" –

DANIEL

Wha' chu want me to call you? Sweetheart? Baby? . . . *Bitch?*

RAE JEAN

You can call me by my proper name! And after that, you can get the hell out . . . !

DANIEL

I ain't done nothin' to you! NOTHIN'!

(Silence. He turns away)

RAE JEAN

I'm sorry.

DANIEL

Don't worry about it.

(They resume cleaning. Rae stops)

RAE JEAN

Thank you. For the dinner. And for helping in the kitchen.

(He nods. They continue cleaning. Again, she stops)

DANIEL

What is it? . . . Rae?

(Silence. She is shivering)

You alright?

RAE JEAN

It . . . I don't know, it . . . it feels so chilly all of a sudden.

DANIEL

Here. Sit down.

(She sits)

RAE JEAN

That river . . . I think . . . I think the breeze from that river . . . just makes me cold.

(After a while, the shivering passes)

It's gone now.

DANIEL

You want some coffee? Or some hot tea?

RAE JEAN

No, thank you.

DANIEL

You . . . you wanna piece of cake?

(Silence. Then she smiles, in spite of herself)

RAE JEAN

Sure.

(He cuts two slices of cake and places them on saucers. They eat)

DANIEL

Good, ain't it?

(She nods. Silence as they eat)

Javier, the man who taught me to cook, he made this same kind of cake for my birthday. I'd just turned seventeen and he made me a cake, lit some candles, and sang "Happy Birthday." In Spanish. I couldn't do nothin' but cry. It was the first time anybody'd baked me a cake. And sang to me on my birthday.

(Silence)

What did you go to jail for?

RAE JEAN

Don't you know?

DANIEL

I know what I've heard.

RAE JEAN

Then, why ask?

DANIEL

Is it true?

RAE JEAN

Yes, Dan. I spent eleven years in prison for murdering my husband. Which means, I was lucky in that I had a lawyer who, at least, knew how to keep me out of that chair. Furthermore, I am not sorry for what I did. Now, does all this make one such as yourself want to continue cooking and baking pies and cakes for one such as me?

DANIEL

All I know is –

RAE JEAN

Please! No pity. Do not insult me with pity. If what you've been feeling all this time is pity . . .

DANIEL

It ain't pity. Maybe I just . . . like you.

RAE JEAN

Listen, I'm tired. Why don't we go ahead and call it a night?

DANIEL

We're not done cleaning.

RAE JEAN

I know, but . . .

DANIEL

And your mama said –

RAE JEAN

DAMN WHAT MAMA SAID! Now go. Please.

(He rises, yet stays in place)

DANIEL

You know, I must be sick, crazy, out of my head, or in love with getting my ass kicked. I mean, there you stand, ready to throw me out on my face, and hollering at me in a way my sorry-ass mother never even did . . .

RAE JEAN

I apologize for that –

DANIEL

. . . but I can't go. Not until –

RAE JEAN

Let's talk another time, another day, maybe. Alright?

DANIEL

I don't want to go. I mean . . . I'm not ready –

RAE JEAN

Well, *I'm* ready for you to go.

DANIEL

There's something I need to say first.

RAE JEAN

I could give a shit about what you need to say! Now why can't you leave?

DANIEL

'CAUSE WE AIN'T FINISHED CLEANING THIS DAMN KITCHEN! I mean – Look, let me say something first – PLEASE! And after that, I'll go ahead and leave. Alright – See in the first place, I came to you because . . . what I need is –

RAE JEAN

Stop –

DANIEL

WILL YOU PLEASE LISTEN? See . . . there's something in me, Rae. Something I can't sustain anymore. It's about to tear outta me. And when it happens, it'll be worse than dying. When it happens, I'll be praying for death, if prayer will do me any good.

You wanna know why my wife Matilda left me? Tell your mama I wore her

down. That good woman, that sweet, God-fearing woman, I worried her to death. And she finally got tired and left. And, even then, with all she put up with, this woman still had it in her heart to help me. She couldn't live with me anymore; she wouldn't stay married. But she did agree to help me.

You say you killed your husband? I killed something in her. You see, Rae – *I'm a junkie*. I've been on junk since I was fourteen years old. My mothers' boyfriend got me on that shit. She'd even sit and watch us use – she didn't care. She was too preoccupied with fillin' her skull with liquor to even smell her own stink, let alone give a damn if her own child was killing himself.

And you wanna know what else? This thing I got in me? I know what it is: *it's the devil!* He's in me! I swear he's in me. And he owns me, too. THE MUTHAFUCKER IS IN ME *AND HE OWNS ME!*

In the Bible, it says you come into this world naked, and naked you shall return. I heard some preacher say our lives are not our own. *The way of man is not in himself*. All belongs to God. Why is that? If you ain't got nothin', at the very least, you ought to have ownership of yourself. But, according to the so-called "Good Book", you ain't even got that. GODDAMMIT! I got a right to own myself! I got a right to that! I got a right –

RAE JEAN

I never believed in the Good Book.

DANIEL

Do you believe in the devil?

RAE JEAN

If I don't believe the Bible, why should I –

DANIEL

'Cause the devil . . . the devil is in me.

RAE JEAN

Stop it.

DANIEL

He's got me.

RAE JEAN

No, he doesn't . . .

DANIEL

He's all over me. He won't take his hold off me.

RAE JEAN

That's not true!

DANIEL

How would you know?

RAE JEAN

My daddy . . . he was a church going man. While he lived, he had his hold on us – me and mama. He tried and tried and tried with all of his strength to instill the fear of God in us. But we could never fear God – neither of us knew God, not in the way he did. Yet, we knew and feared *daddy*. He's dead now. He died while I was doing time. And since his death, mama drinks. She calls herself a liberated woman. And she expresses her liberation with liquor.

DANIEL

How do you express *your* liberation? And what, exactly, do you believe in?

(Silence)

Alright, let's do this: let's face each other, and look one another directly in the eye without blinking. And let's hold on to one another, too. And be damned twenty times over before we even think of letting go.

RAE JEAN

You sound so sure of yourself now.

DANIEL

I ain't sure of nothing. Except for the fact that I'm –

RAE JEAN

Still scared?

DANIEL

Yes.

RAE JEAN

Still so afraid?

(He nods)

I'm afraid, too.

DANIEL

So, what do we do about it?

RAE JEAN

I . . . oh, Daniel –

DANIEL

What? Are you cold again?

RAE JEAN

Yes.

(Slowly – they embrace. Ruthell enters in robe and bedclothes, unbeknownst to either of them. Fade as she observes)

(End Act One)

ACT TWO

(Rae Jean enters)

RAE JEAN

What keeps us in love? What binds us to a fate that accords with our blood? And who sets that fate? Can the tethers of fate be broken? If so, how would they be broken? And, for that matter, how is a curse broken?

There'd been talk of a woman walking along the riverbank, at night, carrying a sack of bloodied fruit. The next morning, a dead infant was pulled from the river. And no one – the sheriff, no one – sought to investigate this incident.

The child was soon buried, and anyone in Black River who'd heard of what had happened tried mightily to drive it from their thoughts.

The following night, the woman's screams were heard.

Then, except for a small commotion . . .

(Lights up as Matilda steps from the house and onto the porch, crying)

. . . a merciful silence descended on the people and their town.

(Cyrus enters and shouts after her as Rae Jean fades)

CYRUS

Shoulda done like the Klan wanted me t' do t' start with.

MATILDA

Daddy, please –

CYRUS

You hush up! I ain't about t' hear another crack from you – you ain't nothin' t' me no more.

(Daniel enters)

DANIEL

What's wrong?

(He goes to Matilda)

CYRUS

I'll tell you: you and this half-bitch here tol' me a damn lie!

MATILDA
 Quit calling me that!

DANIEL
 Does he know?

CYRUS
 Hell, yes!

(Daniel is about to respond)

Don't even try it! Now, get out. I want y' black ass gone by sunrise.

MATILDA
 No, daddy.

CYRUS
 What was that?

MATILDA
 I said no.

CYRUS
 This is my house.

MATILDA
 Who's gonna take care of you in it?

CYRUS
 Anybody but this . . .

MATILDA
 And how'd you find out?

CYRUS
 Bill Kelly told me.

MATILDA
 How in the world did Bill Kelly –

CYRUS
 He talks t' folks.

MATILDA
 Who did he talk to?

CYRUS

It ain't no concern of your 'n.

MATILDA

It is too –

DANIEL

Tildy, stop – I said STOP! I ain't got to stay where I'm not wanted.

CYRUS

That's right! I'll have no dope heads sittin' under my roof. No sir! Not this 'n.

MATILDA

What about Simon?

CYRUS

What of 'im?

MATILDA

Simon smoked pot.

CYRUS

What did you say?

MATILDA

You heard me!

CYRUS

And you better shut your lip! Simon wouldn't've brought hisself t' step over that hippy filth. Although, he was a drunk – we all knew that.

MATILDA

And he sure as sin did his share of contraband, too – didn't he?

CYRUS

I ought t' snatch your tongue clean outta your mouth.

MATILDA

You knew it, daddy.

CYRUS

I never knew no such of a thing.

MATILDA

You caught Simon that night – the night before he died from falling in that river.

CYRUS

Hush!

MATILDA

He ran out of here as high as a jaybird in the wind!

CYRUS

I SAID SHUT YOUR YAP! YOU LYIN' WENCH!

(He cries out, suddenly feeling a debilitating pain.
Long silence as he settles)

Damn you, Simon! Damn you!

(As he agonizes, Daniel turns to go into the house)

Where th' hell're you goin'? Wait a minute . . .

(Daniel ignores him)

I SAID HOLD IT A MINUTE!

(He stops)

Come 'ere.

(Daniel resists, then relents and stands before
Cyrus)

Now, you look me in the face, and don't you tell me no lie: did you ever once
indulge in that mess whilst in my house?

MATILDA

Daddy, how could you . . .

CYRUS

Well?

DANIEL

Since I've been here, have you ever missed a meal? Well?

CYRUS

I reckon not. No.

DANIEL

And, since I've been here, don't I make good 'n sure that you clean your teeth, take your damn medication and even wash your ass before I let you turn in at night? Huh? I work a eight to ten hour day, five days a week. On top of all that, I keep this damn house in order, I try to stay on good terms with Tildy . . . and every day – every night! – I work like a crazy man to keep hold of myself well enough and not jump back on that horse – if you know what the hell I'm talkin' about. Now, I'll ask you, 'cause – despite everything else – I know you ain't no fool: with all this, as far as using that stuff go, what do you figure?

CYRUS

You don't think much of me, do you?

DANIEL

When I'm gone, I won't have to think of you at all.

CYRUS

And that would suit you? To trot off and never have t' worry y' proud head not one quick minute 'bout this good f' shit ol' peckerwood no more.

DANIEL

You'll be sittin' right here in the good graces of your daughter. So, ain't no worries.

(Matilda is silent as she scowls at Daniel)

And quit looking at me like that.

(She turns away)

CYRUS

What's the matter? If something needs brushin' off y' chest, daughter, go on and get t' brushin' – speak up!

(Long silence. Then, to Daniel –)

How long y' been off that stuff?

MATILDA

He's . . . been making good progress . . .

CYRUS

I asked him.

DANIEL

Like you give a shit . . . !

CYRUS

Son! I'd like an answer to my question. Please.

DANIEL

Almost a year. And I ain't got cause to get back on it.

CYRUS

Oh, the devil take it all – all of it! Daniel – I apologize. I'm sorry. And, if you would, I'd like for you t' stay. I do enjoy your cooking, and – I will confess – I need the comp'ny.

(He exits into the house)

DANIEL

You think I ought to stay?

MATILDA

I don't know. And I don't care anymore. He can . . . Let him go to hell.

DANIEL

Is that what you want?

(She laughs)

MATILDA

Did you know Simon got me to try some of his marijuana? He did! And I liked it, too. And, I would have kept on with it if I hadn't –

DANIEL

Got religion?

(Laughter stops)

MATILDA

Mama had to show me how to be tolerant of daddy while he was in the Klan. Before she died, though, she said God would punish her. She told me when she left daddy, there'd been sin in her heart toward him. And for this, she believed, she would be punished.

DANIEL

What about you? What's in your heart?

I won't say.

MATILDA

(Daniel offers to embrace and console her. She succumbs and weeps softly in his arms. Rae Jean enters)

Daniel?

RAE JEAN

(They suddenly break the embrace)

Maybe I ought to –

(Matilda pulls herself together)

No. I'll . . . I'd better go.

MATILDA

Wait – this is Matilda.

DANIEL

How're you doing?

RAE JEAN

Pleased to meet you.

MATILDA

And this is Rae Jean.

DANIEL

Hello, again.

MATILDA

She's from down the road.

DANIEL

Oh?

MATILDA

Yeah. That house there.

DANIEL

(He points)

MATILDA

I see.

DANIEL

Like I told you, Matilda used to be my . . .

(Silence)

MATILDA

I reckon I ought to be on my way.

DANIEL

You gon be alright?

MATILDA

Sure.

(She exits)

RAE JEAN

What's the matter with her?

DANIEL

She's fine.

RAE JEAN

I wanted to see you.

DANIEL

Let's sit on the porch.

(They move toward the bench on the porch and sit)

RAE JEAN

You work tomorrow?

DANIEL

Tomorrow's Sunday.

RAE JEAN

Oh. Do you go to church?

DANIEL

Naw. Tildy – I mean, Matilda . . . she goes to church. She tries to get me to go with her, but –

RAE JEAN

You've got the devil in you.

(They laugh. Silence)

When my husband was alive, he went to church regularly. He was a deacon. And he demanded that I go as well.

DANIEL

Did you like it?

(She shrugs)

RAE JEAN

I want you to know I have no regrets in taking my husbands' life. I've tried, but I can't feel sorry. I know what I did was wrong, and I was punished, yet . . .

Do you believe in the curse on that river?

DANIEL

Can't say.

RAE JEAN

I believe it. Every so often, I dream, as I did when I was younger, of the little girl, naked and running from the man on the horse. I hear her scream as she runs. Then, I find myself standing waist deep in the river, looking at myself as I stand looking at her. Both of us feel the pain aching in the water, and we feel and smell the awful fear rising like smoke from our skins. We want to hold on to one another, only we're too scared to move. When I was a girl, I ran there one night to drown myself, so those dreams would stop.

I should have stayed in prison.

DANIEL

Why?

(He touches her)

Why would you want to do that?

(He kisses her. She is still)

RAE JEAN

I need to go.

DANIEL

You just got here.

(He kisses her again. She responds slightly)

RAE JEAN

Daniel, let me go . . .

(Again, he kisses her. She responds fully)

Please –

DANIEL

No.

(Still kissing and embracing, he brings her onto his lap)

RAE JEAN

You don't want me – you can't . . . want me.

(He silences her with a kiss. Then, slowly lifts her skirt)

Are you sure?

DANIEL

Yes.

RAE JEAN

Are you . . . sure?

DANIEL

Yes, Rae.

RAE JEAN

Then . . . help me.

(She succumbs to his embrace. Fade out)

(Lights up on Ruthell walking onto her porch with a drink. Wanda appears in limbo)

WANDA

That woman, son – I've seen her! I've seen her in the blackest corner of my sleep.

RUTHELL

Rae! Rae Jean!

WANDA

She was kneelin' by the river. And crying . . . cryin' into the river so her tears could wash the evil from the water.

RUTHELL

Honey? Rae, where are you? RAE!

WANDA

You can't let that woman take you from your mama. Don't let it happen. She ain't the only woman with tears chokin' her life – I got tears inside me, too.

(Fade on Wanda. Ruthell gives up and sits, sipping the drink and humming a few bars of the woeful blues)

(Fade on Ruthell. We now see Rae Jean sitting on Cyrus' steps, buttoning her blouse. Daniel enters with two soft drinks)

DANIEL

Wanna soda?

(She takes it, opens it, then drinks as Daniel sits beside her)

You still want to go back to jail?

RAE JEAN

Not if you don't want me to.

DANIEL

Why's it got to be up to me?

(He kisses her)

RAE JEAN

Do that again.

(He does so)

DANIEL

You ain't never had sweetness such as this, have you?

RAE JEAN

No. Well . . . In high school, me and this white boy were sweet on each other.

We'd see one another for a while, off and on, in secret. Then, as things got stronger between us, we'd hold hands and walk together. I liked him. One day, though, he turned cold, so cold to me. He wouldn't speak, would not even look my way anymore. As I live and breathe, I will never come to understand what came over him. And why he turned so cold.

(Daniel kisses her face. She turns and kisses him again)

Daniel?

DANIEL

Hmm?

RAE JEAN

Do you still want to go to dinner?

DANIEL

Where you wanna go?

RAE JEAN

I don't care.

DANIEL

C'mon – pick a place. Anyplace, anything's fine by me. I trust you.

RAE JEAN

You trust me?

DANIEL

Yeah.

(She laughs)

What's funny?

(She continues to laugh)

I only asked you to pick a restaurant . . .

RAE JEAN

I know you did. I'm sorry. Only . . .

(Laughter stops)

In the Bible, in the book of Exodus, Pharaoh says to trust no woman. And when daddy was alive, he took those words to heart. So, poor me, poor mama, we never stood a chance.

If we go to dinner, could we make it somewhere away from Black River? We can go to Atlanta, if that's still what you want to do. As long as it's not around here. Alright?

(He nods)

I ask because, while I was gone, people talked. I know they did. And it made things hard for mama. She says otherwise, but I know it's why she left daddy's house.

DANIEL

You can't put much store in talk.

RAE JEAN

And that's true, but . . .

(Silence)

It hadn't always been so bad, though. Especially when they talked of how I'd grow into a fine-looking woman. For some reason, though, daddy never took well to that. Such words could only move him to watch and eye me suspiciously: what in this world did he find so intolerable about his own daughter and how she looked?

At nineteen, I found myself married to a man twenty years older – a man of my fathers' choosing. And, as young as I was, I would try to be a wife. However, over time, I lost the will. My husband picked up on this. And at supper one night, he asked me if I was unhappy. I kept quiet. He asked me again – “Are you unhappy? With me?” I didn't know what to tell him. He was right about how I felt. I just didn't know how to say it.

I watched in silence as he ate his supper. Then drank a beer. When he'd finished, he looked at me. And I swear, it seemed as if that man looked through me, past me, and directly at me – all at the same time. Everything in the house was completely still, like he had suddenly willed the earth into silence. Then he said: *“I'm going to kill you.”*

“What was that?” I asked.

“I'm going to kill you,” he said. And he got up from the table, went into the bedroom, stretched across the bed and went to asleep.

I tried to confide in mama, but she laughed. She said she was sure he didn't mean anything by it. I said no, mama – he meant it. She said, “Stop being foolish.” I said mama, please – PLEASE! Do not call me a fool. She said – “Rae, you've always been one to take everything seriously.” I said how can anybody not take something like this seriously? Then she laughed at me again and asked if I

was staying to supper. I said damn you, mama.

“What did you say?”

“I said – DAMN YOU! DAMN YOUR SUPPER! *And when he blows my brains through the bedroom wall I’LL BE DAMNED, TOO!*”

Daddy had been listening and walked in. He looked at me, shook his head, then went back to whatever he had been doing. Mama looked shocked for a few seconds, then went on to fix supper.

I wanted to run away, yet I feared he’d track me down. Instead, I waited until he’d fallen asleep to get close enough. And still hold on to my nerves . . . as I did it.

Daniel? Is it possible to love someone such as me?

DANIEL

Anything’s possible.

(Silence as she looks at him)

What’s wrong?

RAE JEAN

Look me in the face – tell me you *love me*. Go on. Please –

DANIEL

Rae . . . listen: I’m trying. Alright? I’m . . . *Help me*.

RAE JEAN

Help you?

DANIEL

Yes. See, I know I can be a better man – I know this! Only, just yet, I’m not sure if I’m able to . . . Just help me. Please.

RAE JEAN

Is it your wife?

DANIEL

No. She ain’t in this.

RAE JEAN

I don’t believe you.

DANIEL

What do you mean?

RAE JEAN
You say she's not in it, but I think . . .

DANIEL
You got it wrong.

RAE JEAN
Show me. If I'm wrong, if it's all a lie –

DANIEL
Alright! I can change.

RAE JEAN
Don't.

DANIEL
Rae, I can change. Just let me –

(She motions to exit. Daniel tries to stop her)

Where you goin'?

RAE JEAN
Let me go . . .

DANIEL
I want to talk.

RAE JEAN
I said let me go . . .

DANIEL
You can't leave just yet please –

RAE JEAN
STOP TOUCHING ME! I SAID STOP!

(He releases her)

Keep away from me.

DANIEL
Rae. You're starting to shake again –

RAE JEAN

I'll deal with it. Now leave me alone.

(She exits and returns to her house, finding Ruthell sitting in the kitchen, a bottle of liquor and a glass on the table. She is drunk)

RUTHELL

You could've at least told me where you was goin'.

RAE JEAN

I'm grown.

RUTHELL

Yes, you are. But it still would be nice to know where you went. Thought somebody'd abducted you, or . . .

RAE JEAN

Have you been drinking?

RUTHELL

What do you think?

RAE JEAN

I don't care – I don't give a damn. That's what I think.

RUTHELL

Well, thank you.

RAE JEAN

If you could only see yourself –

RUTHELL

And if I could, I'd take me a good look – a long good look – and like it, and not have a damned thing to be ashamed of! Don't think you can plant your behind in my house and start tryin' to change me. What you see here is . . . what's here! And I'll be dragged naked through the devil's barbeque pit before I let you, or anybody else . . .

RAE JEAN

This is what it all comes to.

RUTHELL

What?

RAE JEAN

Fighting me, mama. Fighting each other. Like a pair of old hens.

RUTHELL

Ain't nobody fightin' you.

RAE JEAN

You're right. You are the last person this side of Mars who I would expect to fight anybody over anything –

RUTHELL

Was you with that man?

RAE JEAN

What . . . ?

RUTHELL

I spied the two of you that night – all hugged up and fixin' to do Lord knows what. Which means, I got every right and every reason to be . . .

RAE JEAN

Good night, mama.

RUTHELL

Did he use anything to keep you from gettin' pregnant?

RAE JEAN

Are you serious?

RUTHELL

If you were dumb enough to part your legs for him without even knowing his whole name, I thought you'd at least have the mother-wit to keep from gettin' in the family way.

RAE JEAN

Alright, his whole name is Daniel Lee Baines.

RUTHELL

Oh, God . . .

RAE JEAN

It was nothing, mama.

RUTHELL

I hope you know what you gettin' into –

RAE JEAN

It was nothing! Now stop trying to make more of it than what it was. I won't be seeing him anymore after tonight, anyway. And besides . . .

(Silence)

I'd not had sweetness such as that in my life. Other than some little white boy I knew in school. He'd been sweet, so sweet to me. Then one day, it all turned cold.

RUTHELL

And you can't make yourself forget him, can you?

RAE JEAN

It was so long ago. And I was a child.

RUTHELL

And that's what makes the hurt linger. In fact, it broke my heart, too, when –

(Silence)

Ezra came home from work one day and told me he saw you with him. He said ya'll was walking up the road holding hands. When I heard it, I smiled to myself. Then . . . I cried. Rae, he . . . he tracked him down and put something – I don't know – something in the child's head to get him to quit talking to you.

RAE JEAN

Which was?

RUTHELL

I can't say. I don't know. And I talk too damn much.

RAE JEAN

What did he say, mama?

RUTHELL

It ain't nothin' but the liquor in my head, Rae. Now let it alone. Please.

RAE JEAN

The way you let it alone while that man tried like Satan to destroy me?

RUTHELL

He won't trying to destroy nothing, baby. You were his child. A man won't allow nothin' to possess him to where he'd do something as terrible as that to his own blood. He loved you.

RAE JEAN

And he loved you, too, right?

RUTHELL

He married me, didn't he?

RAE JEAN

That's not what I asked.

RUTHELL

We got married, Rae! And we did the best we could. We were even fool enough to raise a child. And when that didn't work out, when the child grew up to get thrown in jail for turning into somebody's –

RAE JEAN

Somebody's what? Go ahead!

RUTHELL

No.

RAE JEAN

Why? What are you scared of?

RUTHELL

I ain't scared of nothing. I'm just not gon let you do it. I will not allow you to stand over me like Queen Cotton and throw all your shit on my head – I won't let you do it!

RAE JEAN

It's a hard thing to live down, isn't it?

RUTHELL

I done put it outta my head, Rae. I'm through with it. And you ain't got no cause in talkin' out the way to me. I'm your mother!

RAE JEAN

And is that the liquor still talkin', or do you know what you're saying now?

RUTHELL

Goddammit! I said that's ENOUGH!

(Long silence)

Whatever you think of me, I'm still your mother. And it means something. And whether you like it, or not, it's gon always mean something. So, you go on and

think whatever the hell you please. As a matter of fact –

RAE JEAN

I'm tired, mama. I'm tired of thinking, I'm tired of you . . . just leave me alone.

RUTHELL

Rae . . . you are a young woman. Do you hear me? A young woman. And I'm sorry I even lent a hand in diggin' this mess up. And I believe it would serve you better if you'd go on and get past it –

RAE JEAN

Could you get passed it? In fact, will you ever get passed it? That's it, ain't it? If you live for another hundred years, no matter what I come to do, it's *you* who won't ever wash this from your heart.

RUTHELL

And that would suit you?

RAE JEAN

No, it would not suit me because it might have been helped. We could have spared ourselves eleven years of a living hell if you'd only listened to me. And all of this might have been helped.

RUTHELL

No. It wouldn't have helped nothin'.

RAE JEAN

Why not?

RUTHELL

After you spoke your piece that day, I'll confess to being a fool for going to your daddy. "*He said he'd kill her*", I told him. "*Come to think of it . . . that ain't something to shrug your shoulders at. Is it?*" That man grabbed me by my arm and squeezed it to where I thought he'd pull it off. "*Quit makin' more out of it than what it is. Besides, it's something all men say – women, too. Didn't you know that?*"

I told him, "*You never said it to me.*". Then he looked down at me with them cold, black eyes. "*Would you like for me to?*"

I held my tongue.

The li'l white boy you was runnin' after? . . . The truth is that your father didn't give a shaking dog's leg about the boys color – anybody with that jumping in their head would have been wrong. No, it won't that. And I ain't got no other word for it . . . whether it was sickness or jealousy, or what. All I know is that he went off and got some older man for you to marry knowing it wouldn't eat him up so much with somebody more like him having their way with you.

And just so you'll know – you were right. 'Bout all of it. And what's hard for me to stomach is just that: how stupid I'd been. As stupid as a damn log!

RAE JEAN

Stop.

RUTHELL

Oh, Lord . . .

RAE JEAN

Mama – stop! Please.

(Ruthell pulls herself together, then takes up the glass of liquor. Rae touches her mothers' hand)

RUTHELL

Wha' . . .

RAE JEAN

Put it down.

RUTHELL

But –

RAE JEAN

I said put it down.

(Ruthell sets down the glass)

We won't talk on it no more. Alright?

(Silence. Then Matilda approaches, then knocks. Ruthell answers)

RUTHELL

Yes?

MATILDA

Hi. I'm sorry to bother you so late at night . . .

RAE JEAN

Matilda.

MATILDA

Hello, Rae.

RAE JEAN

Let her in, mama.

(She enters)

MATILDA

We haven't met. I'm Matilda.

RUTHELL

Ain't you ol' man Cyrus' girl?

MATILDA

I am. And I don't know if Daniel's said anything about us –

RUTHELL

He did.

MATILDA

Good. I'll try not to be long. I'd gotten down the road a piece before I realized . . . Anyway, when I got back to the house, Daniel said you'd gone. Then, I thought, since I'm around, this would be a nice time to talk – if it's okay?

RUTHELL

I reckon it's alright.

MATILDA

I'm not sure if you're aware of Dan's . . . condition.

RUTHELL

Condition?

MATILDA

Yes, ma'am.

RUTHELL

What's wrong with him?

MATILDA

Nothing. He's just got this . . . problem.

(Ruthell looks at Rae)

RAE JEAN

He just got off dope.

RUTHELL

He did?

MATILDA

But his progress in staying off of it has been good. His case worker is happy and he's doing well. Very well.

(Again, Ruthell looks at Rae)

RAE JEAN

He seems alright.

RUTHELL

I see.

MATILDA

Anyway, I'd appreciate it if you'd do me a favor: I'm still very concerned about him –

RAE JEAN

What happened between me and him wasn't anything . . .

MATILDA

Oh, I'm not worried about that at all.

RAE JEAN

Then, what is it?

(Matilda writes a number on a business card)

MATILDA

I want to give you my phone number. And my work number – which is on the card. Like I said, I still care about him, and I want him to stay clean . . .

(Rae Jean takes the card)

RAE JEAN

You want me to contact you if he should happen to . . . take a fall.

MATILDA

I'd like that. I'm sort of a go-between for him and his case worker.

(Silence)

Anyway . . . thank you for your help. Goodnight –

RAE JEAN

Matilda . . . he still cares for you.

MATILDA

I know he does, but . . .

RAE JEAN

And I'm not sure – about him and me, that is. And it's the truth. In fact, here –

(She hands the card back)

I'm not planning on seeing him again.

MATILDA

Could you at least hold on to it?

RAE JEAN

Why should he all of a sudden become my responsibility?

RUTHELL

That's not what she's asking, Rae.

MATILDA

I'm asking as neighbor to neighbor for your help.

(Silence)

RUTHELL

I'll take it, Matilda. If I see, or hear anything, I'll call you.

MATILDA

Thank you, ma'am.

(Matilda exits. Ruthell eyes Rae, then exits as well)

(Fade on Rae. Lights up on Daniel, sitting on Cyrus' steps. A woman's singing and humming is heard. Then Wanda enters, wearing a black sequined dress, high heels and a mink coat. Though in her sixties, one can still see the vestiges of a stunningly beautiful woman)

WANDA

Death done come knocking, son.

DANIEL

Mama!?

WANDA

Oh, no! I ain't y' mama no more. I am the death angel! And I've come t' take my boy away from here –

DANIEL

Hold it – Where did you . . . How? . . .

WANDA

The Greyhound brought me all the way from Cleveland. And you won't hard t' find at-all. Just had t' ask around. If you do that long enough, you can locate anybody ain't already dead. Now, as I live and recollect, the last time we spoke, you told me your no-longer wife was bringin' you down here to live –

DANIEL

What do you want?

WANDA

I already told you! Come time for y' mama t' die. And I want you to cross the river with me.

(She begins singing “Knock Me a Kiss”. Cyrus wheels onto the porch)

CYRUS

Who in the devil's makin' all that fuss this time of night?

WANDA

I am the Angel of –

DANIEL

Mama, stop that shit.

(Silence)

This is my mother. Her name is Wanda. Mama, this is Mr. Cyrus Marsh.

CYRUS

Li'l hot t' be wearin' mink, ain't it?

WANDA

It's what I come to die in.

CYRUS

Is that so?

WANDA

Yes! And amen!

CYRUS

She ain't aimin' on droppin' no shoes 'round here, is she?

DANIEL

She ain't doin' nothing but talkin' out of her head.

(Wanda hums, then sings more of "Knock Me a Kiss")

CYRUS

Excuse me, Miss – EXCUSE ME!

WANDA

Who you talking to?

CYRUS

I'm talkin' at you! And I wanted t' take time and say the hour is late. Quite late. And, as old as I am, I'd like a little bit of peace 'tween now and –

WANDA

You got anything t' drink in your house?

CYRUS

These days, I'm not much of a drinkin' man. Now, if you would kindly . . .

WANDA

You got any money on you, boy? If you do, go somewhere and get y' mama –

DANIEL

Ain't no liquor stores open this time of night.

WANDA

You sure?

DANIEL

Look, this is Mr. Cyrus' house. And he wants to rest. Now show the man some respect and –

WANDA

Wait a minute! I gotta ask him something – Hey! You there! I got somethin’ I wanna ask you.

CYRUS

What is it y’ want?

WANDA

Folks ‘round this way say you scare them. And won’t nobody have nothin’ t’ do wit’ you because of it.

CYRUS

That’s what folks say, huh?

WANDA

It’s what I’ve heard.

CYRUS

I see. You ‘press me as th’ kind of black woman likes t’ listen to talk.

WANDA

Can’t help but listen to it.

CYRUS

Well, let me leave you with a dab of advice: if you want t’ live out this piece of worthlessness you call a life, Miss, you won’t put too much store in talk. See, talk is like a watchdog: it don’t matter how long y’ kept ‘im, don’t matter if you raised ‘im from a pup, don’t care if he drops y’ slippers in front of you after you’ve put in a full day of the devils work, then licks your face – you can’t trust him too much – *he still might bite you.*

WANDA

The talk here, though, since I put out the word I was lookin’ for my boy was that you had a hand in lynchin’ somebody.

DANIEL

Oh, Jesus . . .

CYRUS

Don’t fret, son. I’m quite used t’ folks runnin’ their lyin’ yaps ‘bout me. Matter fact, these days I get a right nice kick out of it, truth be told. Speaking of which – do I scare *you*, Miss Wanda? C’mere! Look me in th’ face and see if I scare you.

(She approaches and studies his face closely for a moment. She then parts, and they both laugh)

WANDA

I ain't never looked no white man in the face before.

CYRUS

Oh, no? Well, how was it for you?

WANDA

I'm not gon say.

CYRUS

Why not?

WANDA

It might scare you!

(They laugh)

CYRUS

Although, I can't be too put off, whatsoever it is. After all, you ain't nothin' but a woman.

WANDA

I can live with that.

CYRUS

Oh?

WANDA

At least you didn't call me no bitch.

(They laugh)

CYRUS

You know what? I just might have me a bottle of Jim Beam tucked under somethin' in the kitchen. I don't touch the fire water as often as I once did. Not since my son died.

WANDA

Oh, I'm sorry.

CYRUS

Of course. Son, in the kitchen there –

DANIEL

I know where it is.

(He exits into the house)

CYRUS

Well, Miss Wanda, since y' got me up, and since I can't scare you away, I reckon y' won't mind bringin' y'self inside for a drink.

WANDA

I wouldn't mind that for a little bit.

(They enter the living room as Daniel enters with the bottle of liquor and two glasses. He pours for each of them. Wanda removes her coat. Daniel sits)

CYRUS

Have a taste for y'self, son.

DANIEL

No, thank you.

WANDA

Oh, go ahead, boy –

DANIEL

I said no.

CYRUS

I reckon he ain't no hard drinkin' man.

WANDA

He goes for something stronger, though.

DANIEL

Not anymore.

WANDA

In time.

CYRUS

If you mean what I'm thinkin', he said he ain't on that stuff no more.

(Wanda laughs)

DANIEL

You want me to smack you?

CYRUS

What's this? You talkin' 'bout raising a hand to your own –

WANDA

It won't be the first time.

CYRUS

Say what, now?

WANDA

Oh, we used t' have at it all the time. When he won't nothin' but a boy . . .

DANIEL

Are you gon drink this liquor, or not?

(They raise their glasses)

CYRUS

To life.

WANDA

To dying.

(They drink)

CYRUS

And let me say, in spite of the fact that it was getting' on m' nerves, that it was some mighty fine singin' you was doin' there a minute, or so ago.

WANDA

I used to sing professionally.

CYRUS

Is that right?

WANDA

Um hmm. I sang with a band run by a man named Sandy Joe Simms. Back in the forties. He played sax. I sang lead.

CYRUS

Well, now.

WANDA

And I didn't just sing for Sandy Joe.

CYRUS

Oh?

WANDA

Uh uh! He was my man, too. For as long as he had that band, he was mine – my lover. He bought this coat. And I’ve kept it all these years.

(She hums more of “Knock Me a Kiss”)

He looked after me like he was my daddy. Until he wound up dead one day. Then, I quit singing. When Sandy Joe got killed, he didn’t leave me nothin’. And I didn’t know ‘bout managing no singing career.

CYRUS

I see.

WANDA

Although, I did get something out of knowin’ him: he left me a son.

DANIEL

You sure about that?

WANDA

I ought to be.

DANIEL

What about Myron Turner?

WANDA

Wha’ . . . ! Wha’ chu know about Myron Turner? And who . . . wha’ . . . who told you –

DANIEL

He did.

WANDA

He lied.

DANIEL

You think so?

WANDA

I know it’s so!

DANIEL

Well, he told me all about it –

WANDA

He told you all about nothin'! And how in God's glory'd you come t' think somethin' such as you could have even a drop of Myron Turner in your blood?

CYRUS

How, indeed!

WANDA

I mean, you m' son. But you ain't within twenty miles of Myron's prettiness. His manliness, either.

DANIEL

As if that shit means anything.

WANDA

It means plenty! Like a whole world of difference between a man who could move the world to where it suited 'im, to one so damn white-livered he got to play house nigger t' some lame peckerwood!

DANIEL

Bitch! I oughta . . .

WANDA

Go ahead!

CYRUS

Son –

DANIEL

What!?

CYRUS

Pass me the liquor bottle.

(Daniel hands him the liquor. Cyrus pours himself another drink)

WANDA

Myron was dirty, he lied, he cheated, he stole like Satan, but the good Lord still knows –

DANIEL
 The truth.

WANDA
 And what, exactly, is that?

DANIEL
 I'm goin' to bed.

CYRUS
 What's this? You gon slip off and leave y' poor mama to 'er own devices?

WANDA
 Oh, let 'im go on. He never gave more than a damn for his mama, anyway.

DANIEL
 I would've gave at least one damn if you'd acted like one.

(He begins to exit. She rises quickly and stops him)

WANDA
 Wait a minute . . .

DANIEL
 Let go of me.

WANDA
 Not till you say what it is you know.

DANIEL
 I'm tired.

WANDA
 What do you know?

DANIEL
 Why do you need me to say it? Why should I be the one to tell you what you've been running from?

WANDA
 And why do I need to hear anything at-all from you – I don't need you!

DANIEL
 Fine! I'll go on up to bed . . .

WANDA
 WAIT! I thought –

DANIEL
 What?

WANDA
 Damn Myron! Damn his evil soul! DAMN HIM! . . . What did he tell you?

DANIEL
 Myron caught up with me in that restaurant where I learned how to cook. See, he was looking for me, too, just like you were, only for a different reason. He came up to me and said he was my father. And I laughed. But, when he told me his story, I believed him. He said he needed to find me and tell me about himself for no other cause than to make a fool – a damned fool – out of you.

WANDA
 What did he say?

DANIEL
 He said you tried to kill him.

WANDA
 I did kill him.

DANIEL
 He also said, knowing you, you'd break your head on a wall trying to convince yourself that he was dead.

WANDA
 I got his blood on my hands! Myron Turner's blood still stains my hands!

DANIEL
 He was alive enough to tell me –

WANDA
 HE WAS LYING!

CYRUS
 Dead men don't –

WANDA
 Be quiet!

DANIEL

Or, what? You gon't try to kill him, too?

WANDA

It's in my heart, son. Myron Turner's death weighs in my heart. He died a hundred times in my heart. My heart killed him – KILLED HIM! My heart killed that LOW MUTHAFUCKER! I feel him dying every day and night in my heart. And that heart hates him. To death.

(Cyrus laughs softly)

CYRUS

Talkin' 'bout killin'! Well, seems t' me I've been in the thick of the talk of killin' most of my life. So, talkin' and killin' ain't much, at least from where I'm able t' look at it.

Matter fact, I won't nothin' but a boy when I heard tell of how my own daddy took part in th' killing of another.

There'd been a woman who kept house for us – Hattie Graves. Prettiest black woman you'd ever pray t' see. Could cook, too. Oh, yes! She sure took care of us.

She had a boy who liked t' gamble and bet high. One time, he made a wager with a white man, a wager he soon found himself unable t' see. This white man – my family knew 'im – Milton Conley was his name; his daddy was a deputy sheriff. Well, he let the payment on the bet go for a while. Then one day Milton had t' threaten that boy: he told him if he didn't see 'im on that wager soon, he was gon set one of his daddy's dogs – a evil bitch-Doberman he called Dixie, he was gon set the dog on 'im and she wasn't gon let up until she ate off both 'is kneecaps.

I reckon talk such as that'd scare the hair off Samson! Well, don't you know Hattie's boy up and tried t' run? He surely did! That's when Milton and his boys – of whom my daddy was a member – got tipped off by Milton's daddy: he caught him tryin' to make it 'cross the state line. And he was well informed as to the condition the boy was in. Thus, he confined 'im to the jail. Then called Milton, my daddy and the rest of his gang.

As he had promised, Milton brought Dixie. Well, he went ahead and let the dog loose in the jail cell with the boy. She didn't kill 'im, but she sure as sin put a hurtin' on 'im. They was all lookin' in on that dog a-tearin' the boys right leg up t' where you could make out the white his bone, or so I'd been told. And when ol' Dixie bit into his private parts, they say the boy hollered so it made a crack in one of them bricks in the wall.

When they figured he'd had enough, they bound up his hands and feet, then drove out and chucked 'im in the river.

Well, his mama, Hattie, she'd got wind as t' what had happened to her son. The weight of it all fell on 'er so to where she could no longer work for my daddy. She said she could not find it in her t' even look him in the face from that point on without spittin' at 'im. Thus, she quit. And just as she took herself out

the door, she swore to daddy she'd get back at 'im. Daddy tol' 'er to watch 'er mouth. She said she didn't care. She said he could go and rot in hells corner. Then, she left.

After a time, one afternoon, I was walkin' up the road. And, as usu'l, I would soon happen upon Miss Hattie's house. Well, she seen me, stuck 'er head out th' door and said, "How do?" I said, "How do t' you?" She asked me if I wanted a *oatmeal cookie!* "A oatmeal cookie?" I asked. "That's right", she said. Now, bein' the child I was, and knowin' full well how things stood with her and daddy, I all of a sudden won't too sure 'bout steppin' in that woman's house. Miss Hattie goes on to say she ain't got no tiff with me. She said I was a sweet boy. And that she raised me – to a point. Then, I let the sight of hot cookies fix in m' head – WHOOH! As young as I was, her cookies would prove to be too much f' me. So, I went on in the house.

I et that cookie she'd gave me. And got as sick as a cursed man. Next thing I recall was fallin' out, then wakin' up on th' side of the road and fallin' out again.

It took the doctor two days t' work the poison outta me. Daddy sat by me and said the good Lord had prevailed. He asked me how I'd come t' get so sick. And I told 'im – 'bout the oatmeal cookie, 'bout Miss Hattie. Daddy put it all together in his head, then got with Milton. Later on, I overheard 'im say t' mama he and the gang caught up with that woman. He declined t' say what they did to 'er. Yet, I do know the place where she stayed – the black section of town they used to call Elmira – they all got t'gether with a bigger bunch and went through and tore the town asunder – put Gods' wrath on them folks. And don't you know not one stone was left atop another, not one scrap of wood was left unburned, and not one niggah life was left t' live when they got through.

WANDA

You *is* in the Klan, ain't you? Just like folks 'round here said?

CYRUS

I once was.

WANDA

Lord! I know I got t' get away from here! . . .

CYRUS

Sit down, Miss.

WANDA

Uh uh! I'm getting' myself outta –

CYRUS

I said sit down! I ain't in no condition to . . .

(He feels pain)

What's the matter? DANIEL

Oh, Lord! CYRUS

Mr. Cyrus, what is it? DANIEL

Get Matilda. CYRUS

What . . . ? DANIEL

Call Matilda. My girl . . . Get me Matilda. CYRUS

(Daniel exits)

I hear you lynched somebody. WANDA

What of it? CYRUS

It's true, then. WANDA

I was young. It was a long time ago – CYRUS

(More pain)

He was black, won't he? WANDA

What makes you think he won't white? CYRUS

'Cause I know. WANDA

How do you know? CYRUS

WANDA

I just know . . .

CYRUS

How? How can you know anything, y' black wench . . . !

(More pain. Daniel re-enters)

DANIEL

Let him alone.

WANDA

I want to get away from here.

DANIEL

Go.

WANDA

Come with me.

DANIEL

I got to stay and wait for –

WANDA

Damn that woman! Let's go.

CYRUS

MATILDA! . . .

DANIEL

I called her. She's coming.

(His pain grows)

CYRUS

That boy . . . He raised his black soul from out the water – he raised up and got t' them others. But, why – why in Sherman's whiskers didn't he come for me?

We . . . we took 'im . . . we took 'im to the river. We hung 'im on that tree . . .

WANDA

. . . Like they hung Jesus on a tree . . .

CYRUS

. . . I had t' shoot 'im, though, shoot him in the head with the same rifle my Uncle Waymon'd gave me. Th' boy . . . he wouldn't die quick enough. He swung like a

cows ripe tit from that tree, and with th' few thin whiffs of breath still in 'im, cussed and hollered at us somethin' fierce! *HE WOULD NOT DIE FAST ENOUGH!* I shot him. The limb broke –

WANDA

Did he fall in the river?

CYRUS

YES! *And I hope to God the niggah drowned . . .*

(He convulses, then dies. Silence as Daniel stands and absorbs Cyrus' confession)

WANDA

Son? . . . You see now I was right?

(She takes his hand)

I bring death with me –

(He pulls away)

DANIEL

Leave me alone.

WANDA

It's our time to leave here now.

DANIEL

Shut up.

WANDA

Baby . . .

DANIEL

I SAID SHUT THE FUCK UP –

(She takes a small pouch from her handbag, opens it, then spreads paraphernalia on the coffee table)

WANDA

I brought you something . . . I brought you what you need.

DANIEL

Where did you –

WANDA

From the same man who got you on it. You remember him, don't you? He stayed with us for a time. He kept my bed. And satisfied me, too. He had that tattoo on his chest – it looked like a knife goin' in him. One night, he left me. And the next morning you ran away from home to go and look for him. As young as you were, you packed what little shit you had and went off to track him down. He had what you wanted. And now, your mama's here to give it to you.

DANIEL

Listen – I'm well! I'm clean! And for the first time in my life, I feel good about being clean.

WANDA

You sure about that?

DANIEL

Alright, I'm on my way to feeling good.

WANDA

You don't sound very sure of . . .

DANIEL

I feel better – will that do?

WANDA

Who're trying to convince, son? Me, or yourself?

DANIEL

I ain't tryin' to convince nobody of nothin'.

WANDA

Who are you trying to fool, then?

DANIEL

Mama . . .

WANDA

Take your time, son. Take your time and think about what it is you want –

DANIEL

I DON'T WANT TO DIE!

(She takes his head in her hands and kisses him on the mouth – slowly and tenderly)

Why did you do that?

WANDA

I ain't never showed you no sweetness before, have I?

DANIEL

No. In fact, I have yet to even hear you say you love me.

WANDA

I never said that t' nobody.

DANIEL

You never cared for nobody. Not even yourself.

WANDA

I wanted to care. I wanted to care when you quit calling me. And when you got married and wouldn't let your new wife see me. Why wouldn't you show me to your new wife? Was you ashamed of me?

DANIEL

No.

WANDA

Then why, son?

DANIEL

I wanted to forget you. When I came to you, I swore in my heart it would be the last time my eyes took sight of you. And after that, I wanted to kill you in my head. I wanted to strangle you out of my memory.

(She takes up the syringe from the array of paraphernalia on the table and places it in his hand)

WANDA

Let me care for you, son. Let me – this one time – express love for my only child by giving you the chance to join me in dying.

DANIEL

This don't make no sense. You're crazy.

WANDA

I know.

DANIEL

Alright – if you’re planning on dying, how are you . . .

WANDA

I’m gon find that river.

DANIEL

The river . . .

WANDA

I’m gon step in the water.

DANIEL

How do you know if it?

WANDA

It knows of me: a man I laid with once, he came to me one night in some ol’ joint back in Cleveland. He danced with me. Poured liquor over me. Then brought me home where we set fire to my bed. And kept it goin’ all through the black night. He told me where he was from, and all about the river. That’s when I knew in my soul what I needed to do.

DANIEL

Look for death?

(He looks at the syringe in his hand)

Mama?

WANDA

Yes, baby?

DANIEL

Why?

WANDA

You already know.

(She takes up her coat. Daniel takes it from her and helps her into it, then embraces her from behind)

DANIEL

Oh, mama.

(She sings the final bars of “Knock Me a Kiss”)

WANDA

Sandy Joe used t’ like that one. It was his favorite. And he sure loved it when I sang it for him.

If I hadn’t said nothin’ to Sandy Joe, he might still be alive. See, Myron . . . he made me lay with him. I’d been so young. I didn’t want to lay with nobody but Sandy Joe. But Myron made me have him. And y’ know what? I liked it! It was so good! So good I hated him for it. And I tried to kill him. Sandy Joe tried to kill him, too. All for what he did with me.

I ain’t had no need t’ tell Sandy Joe. It won’t nothin’, no way.

(She smiles, then kisses him again, as before. She parts from him, his eyes awash in longing.

As she steps from the house, Rae Jean fades into view. Wanda steps toward her. Rae Jean points, and Wanda exits following her directive)

RAE JEAN

Wanda took off her shoes and made her way to the river . . .

(Overhead spot on Wanda removing her shoes, then standing in place)

. . . where she stepped in, wearing the mink coat. She moved deeper and deeper into the water until the current overtook her.

(Fade on Wanda)

A week later, a mink coat washed ashore. By the time it was discovered, river rats had burrowed inside it.

(Lights rise to show Cyrus’ body on the sofa in his sitting room. Matilda slowly covers it with a sheet. Afterwards, she clasps her hands in prayer as lights fade on the house)

One night in my sleep, I heard a splash in the river. Awakened, yet still submerged inside the dream, I saw the horseman rising from the black water on restored wing and carrying the body – not of the girl, but –

(Rae Jean bolts out of the door in night clothes, Having awakened from a nightmare)

OH, GOD! Somebody . . . MAMA!

(Silence. Lights up slowly inside Cyrus' house. Daniel is sitting at the kitchen table. Rae Jean notices and runs toward the house. She stops upon mounting the porch steps and observes Daniel through the screen door. She watches him prepare a fix, then take hold of the syringe, inject himself, then set the syringe down as lights fade on the house.

She steps away, then returns home. She enters the kitchen, takes up the phone, searches for Matilda's card, and dials)

Yes? Matilda? It's Rae – Rae Jean . . . First, I'd like to say I'm sorry about your father. Deeply sorry . . . That's fine. Now, I've got something else to tell you – it's about Daniel . . .

(Blackout)

(Fade in on Rae Jean, still in bed clothes)

I had just one more nightmare of the horseman and the girl. In the dream, she told me to wait for her at the river. And when I awoke, I made my way there and stood on the damp riverbank, looking far off into the black heart of the night, trembling as if afflicted by the cold. I spotted the limb of a tree. And I saw what hung from it.

(We hear a large splash)

I guess she grew tired of seeing, of hearing of people who were bound by a curse. Tired of seeing people afraid. And tired of seeing *me* afraid.

(Rae Jean is now anguished)

I watched the limb break. And I saw her fall into the river. Like the boy Cyrus helped to kill.

(She is nearly overwhelmed with fear and pain)

And I saw the horseman rising again from the black water with the dead child in his arms! Had the curse been broken? Had I witnessed it?

(She suddenly begins ripping off her bed clothes)

NO! No – I am who you want! I am the girl. I was the one who ran from you.

(Naked, she extends her arms)

All those years – all those days! Through the nights of blinded sleep. It was me!
ME! Let her alone!

(She is on her knees)

TAKE ME! PLEASE! TAKE ME!

(Blackout)

(Lights rise US. The scene is the riverbank. Daniel enters with a picnic basket and a blanket. He spreads the blanket, then opens the basket and brings out sandwiches, plates, sodas, et al – as well as a pie.

Rae Jean is heard offstage)

The first indication that the spell was broken came the following year, at springtime. The smell of death was gone. A mild and atoning sweetness graced the air, which drew folks to the river. Very slowly. First one. Then three. Ten. Then more.

(She enters, a few months pregnant)

I suffered and cried for a time over the sacrifice which had been made. Yet, as life soon blossomed inside me . . .

(Noticing her condition, Dan helps her sit beside him on the blanket)

DANIEL

It was all true.

(They laugh. Silence)

Looks like I'm going back to that house in Atlanta after all.

RAE JEAN

You won't be there long.

DANIEL

No?

RAE JEAN

Uh uh. I have a feeling about it.

(He touches her belly)

DANIEL

Wha' chu wanna name him?

RAE JEAN

I haven't thought of a name.

DANIEL

Do you want to name him?

RAE JEAN

If you want me to.

(Silence)

DANIEL

Rae Jean?

RAE JEAN

What is it?

DANIEL

I . . .

RAE JEAN

Say it.

(He breaks down and weeps. Rae comforts him)

Matilda still prays in you. And she'll always believe in you.

DANIEL

Ain't much left to pray for.

(Rae takes his face in her hands)

RAE JEAN

What did you want to tell me?

DANIEL

I . . . I've been doing a lot of thinking, working through my heart and my head,

trying to find something that feels a little like me.

Rae, I need you. And, in time, I know, I just know, I will grow to love you.

RAE JEAN

And I'll keep myself here – right here – and put off death itself just to live and hear those words spoken.

DANIEL

Good! As for this one – you won't have to worry. He's mine. And I'll give him every damn thing I got.

Y' know, I like it here. It's quiet. And the water . . . so clear. Clear enough to see straight to the bottom of the world. Clear enough to wash your soul in.

RAE JEAN

And the cold . . . it doesn't torment me anymore.

What kind of pie is that?

DANIEL

Coconut crème. Want some?

(She nods. He cuts two slices of pie. Daniel eats in silence. Rae Jean rises)

RAE JEAN

Daniel stayed with me until he found the love he'd been looking for. Just as I knew he would.

I gave birth to a son. And the boy couldn't have prayed for a better father, for Daniel did as he had promised: he gave his son every damn thing he had. Until the day when Daniel would die suddenly from heart failure. I'd raise the child alone for the rest of the way, often telling him of his father, of my abiding belief in him, and of how blessed I still feel to have known him. I would tell him of the young girl, of the river . . .

(Daniel has finished the pie, and now looks upon Rae Jean)

. . . about myself, and of the love still so alive in my heart.

(She turns and looks lovingly at Dan. The humming of the slow blues is heard as lights fade slowly)

(End of Play)

