

DEVILS & MEN: AN ADULT FABLE

in Two Acts

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CHARACTERS

RIVA

Played by TWO actresses, one plain, dark skinned AFRICAN AMERICAN, the other WHITE. Early thirties

SAMUEL

The devil. A handsome male figure, probably in his early forties. Should resemble the mythical Satan - horns, et al. He is shirtless and barefoot. He wears old, worn trousers held up by suspenders. He speaks as a poor Southerner

SONNY

Riva's husband. Very handsome, light-skinned African American male. Late thirties

MISS YADWIGHA

God. White female. Fifties. Attractive and sensual. She speaks as an "upper" Southerner

PASTOR BAINES

African American male. Early thirties

SISTER THEA

African American female. Late fifties. The Pastors wife

ROBERT BILLINGS

African American male. Thirties. Pastor Baines' lover

MILLIE

African American female. Late thirties. The Pastors sister. Sonny's illicit lover

NOTE: *Actor/dancers needed to fill various silhouetted figures, male and female.*

PLACE AND TIME

*Mississippi
Mid 1950's*

*“Early this morning
When you knocked upon my door
Early this morning
When you knocked upon my door
And I said hello Satan
I believe it's time to go*

*Me and the Devil
Was walkin' side by side
Me and the Devil
Was walking side by side
And I'm going to beat my woman
'Til I get satisfied”*

Robert Johnson – “Me and the Devil Blues”

“Don't you know there ain't no devil? It's just God when he's drunk.”

Tom Waits

for Gary Arms & Richard Warren

NOTES:

The character name of “God”, Miss Yadwigha, is taken from a painting by Belgian artist Henry Rousseau titled “The Dream”, which depicts a scene from a jungle in which a nude woman lies on a red chaise lounge, her arm outstretched. The woman in the painting, Yadwigha, happened to be the polish mistress of the artist. I felt it appropriate, if you will, to name the character of God in the play, portrayed as a woman, Yadwigha, because – for me – her outstretched hand seems to “conjure” the dream, and I see it as reminiscent of the hand of God in Michelangelo’s creation sequence on the Sistine Chapel creating Adam.

As for the character of the Devil, I chose the name Samuel, which is derived from “Samael” or “Samiel”, the archangel.

ACT ONE

(Lights rise on the Devil, henceforth known as Samuel, in DS limbo)

SAMUEL

In my sleep, I still see Lilith . . . dancing alone . . .

(Lights rise on a silhouetted woman dancing in front of an immense Angel Oak Tree to the blues from a guitar)

. . . at the crossroads, at the little juke joint where we met . . . under that old Angel Oak tree . . . while Robert Johnson still plays.

(Darkness falls over the woman and the tree. It is the mid 1950's. Lights fade in on a beautiful White Woman, cursed. She wears a long silk robe, jewelry and high-heeled slippers. She enters and begins dancing with Samuel to sensuous music. Soon after, God, henceforth known as Miss Yadwigha, appears above. She is reclined on a red chaise lounge, observing them. As they dance, the Woman kisses Samuel. Sister Thea appears suddenly, holding a pouch of black dust. The woman notices and stops dancing. Thea pours some of the dust into the palm of her hand, then blows it toward her. The woman screams and cowers. Sudden blackout. Music stops. A hellhound howls)

(Overhead spot fades in on a dark-skinned black woman in DS limbo, cowering, her face in her hands. Slowly, she opens up and rises)

RIVA

I started to have doubts about Sonny on our wedding night. He barely got through the door he'd been so drunk. For some crazy reason, we started to argue, hollering and cursing at each other until we were breathless. Things got quiet and I undressed and lay on the bed and tried to let him have me. But my body locked him out: I was unable to even will myself into it. With that, he slapped me. Then hit me again and again until I lost consciousness. I awoke and tried again to let him have me. But . . . I couldn't. And he went at me again, thrashing and beating me into senselessness.

(Lights rise in the kitchen of a small house in Mississippi, 1955. Sonny enters in his deputy sheriff's uniform and sits at the table. Immediately, Riva serves his supper)

SONNY

Where the beer at?

(She gets a beer from the Kelvinator, opens it with a bottle opener and sets it on the table)

You oughta heard 'em down there, Riva. I mean, it's one thing for the young'ns to act a fool, but some of these grown folks ought to know better. Carryin' on about some white cat a-singin' and a-shakin' like a nigger in white sheeps clothes. Heard a peep of 'im on the radio down at Busters. S'posed to be from right here in Mississippi, from Tupelo, they say. Whoever he is, he's doin' a number on these folks. Ain't never been nothin' like 'im, they say.

(Riva sits at the table as he eats)

You know who I'm talkin' about. He got a funny sounding name.

(She shakes her head)

What? Don't you listen to the radio all day?

RIVA

At night, I listen to Edward R. Murrow. That's all. By morning, I done turned the radio off.

SONNY

Now that's a damn lie. You gon tell me you ain't rolled them hips when Roy Hamilton or Billy Eckstine get to hollerin' through that box? And jumpin' through your skin when I just happen to step up on you? Huh?

(He laughs)

I wish you could see yourself, girl. There's some devil hidin' up under that apron, sho! You just too 'bove yourself to let 'im out. Let me tell you somethin' – if you was to pull that monkey stick from out your rump, you just might know what it is to be a woman. Or, at least, know how to take better care of your man.

(He finishes the beer)

Fix me another one.

(She gets another beer, opens it, and – again – sets it on the table as he eats. Riva sits and watches him)

Had to lock up two niggers bummin' 'round ol' man Tilley's garage today. Joe Albright's two boys. Back there suckin' on a bottle of rotgut. Picked 'em up and threw their no 'count black asses in the bucket. The law says we can only hold 'em overnight. Loitering and drinking in public ain't what you'd call capitol offenses. It can all be settled with a fine. But I'm gon fix it so they sit pretty in the pen for at least a month. If I can work it, I'll lock 'em down for two months. And put their asses on the rock pile. Let it soak in good. Make them and some of this other black garbage 'round here know that I'm worse than Mistah Charlie when it comes to upholding his law. And Lord smack me if the folks – including you – don't hate my black ass for it.

RIVA

Sonny, I do not hate you. In fact, I pray for you.

SONNY

And you know what you can do with that damn prayin'.

(After a while, he stops eating and drinks his beer)

RIVA

You through eatin'?

(He pushes the plate away. Riva rises and takes it)

This Sunday, after church, I still want to go to the movies with Pastor Baines and Sister Thea. You said last week that I could.

SONNY

Wha' chu asking me again for?

RIVA

I only want to make sure.

SONNY

Wha' chu goin' to see?

RIVA

"The Lady and the Tramp."

(Sonny scoffs)

I want to go, Sonny. Is it still alright?

SONNY

What do you see in them folks?

RIVA

They're good people.

SONNY

Good and odd, if you asked me.

RIVA

Sonny, please. Pastor Baines is a man of the Lord.

SONNY

I don't give a goddamn. He's still odd. Married to some woman old enough to be his grandmammy.

"The Lady and the Tramp." Ain't that for kids?

(Silence. Then Sonny rises)

I spied something that looked like a handprint on the side window of the car when I got home.

RIVA

And I will not go within ten feet of that car. You know that.

SONNY

So, that little smudge, or whatever, won't yours, right?

RIVA

How could it be?

(Sonny eyes her, then exits. Riva takes a moment, then prepares a plate of supper for herself. Samuel appears as she sits)

SAMUEL

You never sup with your husband?

RIVA

Sonny won't allow it. He thinks it proper for a woman to eat when her man is done eating.

(She sits and prays)

Lord, I ask you to bless this food –

SAMUEL

There's nobody up there who'll deign to hear you . . .

RIVA

. . . I ask that you bless this food. And bless Sonny. Forgive him, Lord. He's a man in body, but only a child at heart.

SAMUEL

If the Lord cared, don't you think – Well, if it were me, I'd see fit to . . .

RIVA

Then, why don't you?

SAMUEL

You know how much I want to help you, but . . .

RIVA

I ain't forgot what you told me. And it still makes me laugh.

SAMUEL

Why must you hurt me so?

RIVA

Oh, goddamn Sonny. Goddamn that car. And while I'm at it, goddamn you.

SAMUEL

Riva, you are so weak.

RIVA

Really? I don't see you totin' the world on your shoulders.

(Silence. Then Riva weeps)

SAMUEL

You know where Sonny's going 'bout now, don't you?

RIVA

Stop torturing me.

SAMUEL

If he only knew what he already had –

RIVA

I said stop it – STOP!

SAMUEL

I do wish I could help you.

RIVA

Yet here I stand helping you. Ain't that something?

SAMUEL

And I am grateful.

RIVA

At least . . . Well, if you were a man, I mean . . . a *real* man –

SAMUEL

When I can stop running, when she can find it within her to stay those dogs . . .

RIVA

You'll take care of me?

SAMUEL

Perhaps . . .

RIVA

Yes?

SAMUEL

Perhaps, I could see to a little of that now.

(He kisses her)

RIVA

Once again I've been kissed by the devil.

SAMUEL

I told you – I prefer to be called Samuel.

RIVA

You'll always be the devil to me.

(Another kiss)

If only you were flesh and blood.

SAMUEL

How can I measure to one such as you if I were?

RIVA

Please! Don't ruin it with trying to honey-talk.

SAMUEL

Seems to me you could do with a little honey and sweetness in your life.

RIVA

I'd rather have the truth. And what's real.

SAMUEL

All vinegar and no sugar, huh?

RIVA

It's my pitiful life.

SAMUEL

Riva . . . what did you see in Sonny?

RIVA

It's a long story.

SAMUEL

I'm listening.

(Silence)

RIVA

You think he done come around to pimping those Whitlow sisters yet?

SAMUEL

From what I can see, those girls got the wherewithal to pimp themselves.

RIVA

Not if Sonny can help it. In spite of their daddy, poor man.

SAMUEL

Couldn't see his way around Sonny, huh?

RIVA

Especially when Sonny threatened him. After Mr. Whitlow put the switch to those girls when he got wind of what Sonny was workin' on 'em . . . after he forbade either one to even look in his direction, Sonny pulled a gun and said if he didn't loose his hold on 'em he was gon plug him like a hog.

SAMUEL

I'll ask again: what did you see in that damn Sonny?

RIVA

Truth is, 'bout now, he's headed to Miss Millie's house. He usually stops there and keeps comp'ny with her before he makes way to sit with the Whitlow girls.

SAMUEL

And now that you got somebody to keep company with, it won't be so bad.

(He attempts another kiss. Riva gently pushes him away)

RIVA

I reckon I done had enough temptation for one night. I'm gon have me a bath, pray, and go to bed. Sonny won't be pleased if he comes home and sees me still up. That will make him mad.

SAMUEL

What about your supper?

RIVA

You eat it. I don't have much of an appetite these days.

(Samuel steps forward)

SAMUEL

When I first came upon Riva that night, a dark night in October, I'd stepped into the house like a thief –

RIVA

And tempted me.

(Fade on Riva)

SAMUEL

Sonny lay in bed asleep. Riva walked through the house in her nightgown. She mistook me for a ghost at first, the lost soul of someone she'd known. She asked how her mother and father were, had I spoken to Uncle Willie, and about somebodies' child who'd died as an infant. "Is she a woman now that she's crossed over?" The black clouds that cooled the night broke open a bit, and the pale moonlight shone through the window and warmed the darkness within the house and around me. Her look upon me deepened when she saw me in the light. "Sonny?" No, I said. My name is Samuel.

(He looks with intent at the audience)

I know what you think when you see me. And all you have heard is wrong. I have neither the temperament for malevolence nor the hand for magic or sorcery. I can't so much as define the word *diabolical*. The truth is – I am nothing but a fugitive, a mere renegade. Desperate and running. Always looking for a place to hide, a hole in the fence to crawl through – *a loophole!* Trembling and crying in the lonesome wilderness for someone, some lost, anxious soul who will offer an obliging hand.

(Lights rise on Riva, seen finishing her bath and drying herself with a towel)

Miss Yadwigha's dogs will keep their distance for as long as I sit in the presence of a woman. Since Lilith, my first love, is gone, those who would give succor have been colored women. Like Riva.

(Riva gets into bed clothes, then kneels to pray as lights fade on her)

Lights rise on the beautiful cursed White Woman in US limbo. She beckons to Samuel, who approaches to dance with her as light fade)

(Lights rise on Sonny with Millie. They are on her sofa, Sonny's head resting in her lap while Millie smokes)

SONNY

Well . . . I reckon it's 'bout time for me to see to them girls.

MILLIE

You pullin' any scratch out of 'em, yet?

SONNY

A little bit here, a little bit there. Nothin' to shake the world, but . . .

MILLIE

In time?

SONNY

In time!

MILLIE

Makes me wanna go into business with you.

SONNY

That would break my heart.

MILLIE

Shit! It'd take more'n the atom bomb to bust that rock you got the nerve to call a heart.

SONNY

It's beats just the same, though.

MILLIE

Be that as it may, I was thinkin' more on the lines of managing them sisters and maybe even more girls for you.

SONNY

As opposed to whoring for me, too?

MILLIE

Baby, if Millie Baines ever gets so hard up to where she's got to whore, you can be sure she gon be doin' it for herself.

SONNY

And be *that* as it may, I don't need no partner. You just tend to what you do best, which is runnin' Buster's . . .

(He rises, then kisses her)

. . . and keepin' it good 'n hot for your man.

MILLIE

Y' know, if I was a fool, I'd get you to leave your wife and take up with me.

SONNY

And get married, maybe?

MILLIE

If I was a fool.

SONNY

But you above all that, ain't you?

MILLIE

Let me put it this way: I hear how you treat your wife. Man, it's enough to make you sick. And you know it. Which makes you a easy man to hate.

(Sonny laughs)

Sonny, if we was to up and marry, it wouldn't take long before I'd be pressed to kill you.

SONNY

Riva is one kind of woman, and you's another, I reckon.

MILLIE

That's right. And you'd try me. I'd have marriage over my head. And for somethin' as low as you, it wouldn't be no better 'n owning a heifer. So, as said: stay planted on your end of the cornfield and keep heatin' my coochie every now and again, and the world will be righteous.

SONNY

Speaking of the righteous, Riva's s'posed to be goin' to the movies with your brother and his wife this Sunday.

MILLIE

Let me guess – “The Lady and the Tramp.” A *good* picture for *good* folks.

SONNY

More odd than good, if you asked me. Especially that brother of your'n.

MILLIE

Won't so much as look sideways at me these days, will he? That bastard!

SONNY

Not since you quit living good.

MILLIE

I've always lived good. I just ain't livin' righteous no more.

SONNY

Rev. Millie! Preachin', prayin' and healin' the sick! What I'd give to have seen you, girl.

MILLIE

Might've converted your evil ass.

SONNY

Maybe. Although, I can still get baptized, if you want to.

MILLIE

That I already do.

(They laugh, then kiss)

These niggers 'round here can't know 'bout us. And I mean that.

SONNY

What? You reckon if enough of these dark folks get wind to what we doin', they'll quit hauntin' Buster's? Is that it?

MILLIE

Buster's is my meal ticket, baby. My bread and my wine.

SONNY

And you'd kill me for that, too, if I was to get in the way of it. Ain't that right?

MILLIE

You a smart man, Sonny.

(He begins getting dressed)

SONNY

When you said you wanted to be my managing partner and bring in more girls, did you mean it?

MILLIE

I don't talk out my hind parts, man.

SONNY

Let me get to these sisters.

MILLIE

And think it over.

SONNY

Or maybe I'll talk it over with God.

MILLIE

Or maybe you'll get further with the devil.

(Fully dressed, Sonny smiles and exits.
Lights fade)

(Samuel appears in limbo)

SAMUEL

They always get it wrong, don't they?

(Miss Yadwigha appears US of Samuel
reclined on the same red chaise lounge,
intimately engaged with the White
Woman. Miss Yadwigha notices Samuel,
then gently sends the woman away)

MISS YADWIGHA

And they will stay wrong. Until I see fit to change the situation.

SAMUEL

Which could be – when? After an eternity, perhaps?

(She laughs)

It never had to come to this.

MISS YADWIGHA

You would say that.

SAMUEL

Is power so important?

MISS YADWIGHA

It's not a question of importance.

SAMUEL

Then, I'll never understand.

MISS YADWIGHA

Oh, you understand. Quite well, in fact.

SAMUEL

And the truth is – she’s right. I see everything. Only . . . I can’t stop running.

MISS YADWIGHA

You are exactly where I want you.

SAMUEL

And when, Miss Yadwigha, will it end?

MISS YADWIGHA

When *you* want it to, my dear.

Truth is, I find all this more than a little ironic, come to think of it.

SAMUEL

Ironic?

MISS YADWIGHA

Sure! Seeing you reduced to a mere criminal on the run, who can only find haven amongst those who live on the wrong side of the track.

SAMUEL

The Wretched of the Earth?

MISS YADWIGHA

And you sit quite well amongst those *wretched*, truth be told. Whom I’ve long since turned my back on. They abide in my shadow. This is why they are black.

SAMUEL

Yet, nevertheless, your creation and your children, too.

MISS YADWIGHA

Outcasts, though, honey. Bastards. And not to be trusted. And with that, I hope the current negress you’re sidling up to won’t betray you.

(We hear the hellhounds howling from afar. Yadwigha smiles, then dissolves. Fade on Samuel. The howling diminishes)

(Fade in on Pastor Baines and Sister Thea having breakfast. It is early Sunday morning. Gospel music plays on the radio)

SISTER THEA

As soon as the picture lets out, I want you and me to sit and talk with Riva.

PASTOR BAINES

Here?

SISTER THEA

Won't nothing in town be open that late. Not tonight. On a Sunday.

PASTOR BAINES

The question, though, is whether she's gon want our help.

SISTER THEA

She won't have no choice.

PASTOR BAINES

I see. You gon make 'er choke on it, anyhow.

SISTER THEA

Fred, I want to help the woman.

PASTOR BAINES

And as bad as the situation is with her, she still got to want it.

SISTER THEA

Are you with me on this, or not?

PASTOR BAINES

I say we leave it up to the Lord.

SISTER THEA

And I say the Lord done left it to us.

PASTOR BAINES

Listen, that husband of hers, who is a deputy-sheriff, by the way –

SISTER THEA

Sonny ain't nothing but breath in body. He don't scare me a wit!

PASTOR BAINES

What is it that you want? To wreck a home?

SISTER THEA

If it means getting that woman to save herself, yes.

PASTOR BAINES

Well, I think it best to save the marriage first.

SISTER THEA

Sonny would have to change.

PASTOR BAINES

And, for that, I keep praying. I want to work through God, Thea. He's the only one who can change the devil. And you know this.

SISTER THEA

But Riva . . .

PASTOR BAINES

If the Lord can change Sonny, He can keep Riva from harm. Trust in that, Thea. And trust in me.

(Pause. The radio plays)

SISTER THEA

'Course, everything'd fall in place right nice if that tramp you call a sister'd just keep the nigger with her.

PASTOR BAINES

Now what did I just say?

SISTER THEA

It's a damn shame! Trying to hide their mess from folks. If them sorry souls could only see themselves . . .

PASTOR BAINES

Let's get ready for church.

SISTER THEA

To think there'd been a day when she was decent. She preached and prayed. She healed!

PASTOR BAINES

And I say it's 'bout time we went on and –

SISTER THEA

And, as a child, kept you under her wing when your own mama fell away. She near 'bout raised you. And loved you something hurtful. What happened to her, Fred?

(Silence. Thea turns off the radio)

Alright. I was raised with the belief that God is real and listens to the heart. If praying is what we need to do, so be it.

PASTOR BAINES

Amen.

SISTER THEA

It's just that, at times, he provides. At other times, it seems like he holds back. And I'm afraid, even with praying strong enough to break open hell, He might choose to let poor Riva . . .

PASTOR BAINES

What are you saying?

SISTER THEA

I'm scared!

PASTOR BAINES

Don't be. Now I want you to think and speak as a woman who is married to a man of God ought to. I want you to pray to wash the doubt and the disbelief from your heart. And I do not ever want to hear this manner of talk again. Understand?

SISTER THEA

You gon lay the strap to me if I don't?

PASTOR BAINES

I am not Sonny. But I am a man. And I will be obeyed.

SISTER THEA

Yes, suh!

(Silence. He touches her hand)

PASTOR BAINES

Everything will be made right. In time.

SISTER THEA

It's something, though, ain't it?

PASTOR BAINES

What?

SISTER THEA

Your sorry sister was the one who got you to ask for my hand.

PASTOR BAINES
Do you regret that?

SISTER THEA
No, Fred. I have no regrets.

PASTOR BAINES
I will always feel her to be a good woman.

SISTER THEA
She's your sister.

(Silence. He starts to exit)

PASTOR BAINES
By the way, tomorrow evening, I'll – I'll be meeting with Mr. Billings.

SISTER THEA
What happened to Thursday?

PASTOR BAINES
He has an engagement this Thursday.

(After a moment, she nods)

Alright, then.

SISTER THEA
Fred?

PASTOR BAINES
Yes.

SISTER THEA
Still . . . only talking?

PASTOR BAINES
With Mr. Billings? Yes. You don't have to worry.

SISTER THEA
Then give him my love.

PASTOR BAINES
Surely.

(He exits. Fade on the scene)

(Lights rise on a juke joint backed by the Angel Oak tree. Samuel is dancing slowly with Robert Billings. The music is low and boozy. After a moment, Pastor Baines enters. Robert spots him, breaks gently from Samuel, then goes to Baines. The two men take a moment before Robert kisses Baines on the lips. Samuel observes)

ROBERT BILLINGS

Let's sit down.

(They find a table and sit. Samuel brings them drinks then exits)

PASTOR BAINES

It's almost like we're on the dark side of the world.

ROBERT BILLINGS

Does it?

PASTOR BAINES

Think about it: you and me, at a juke right between the fork of the crossroads, where a certain guitar picker made his bargain with –

ROBERT BILLINGS

Oh, please! Spare me.

PASTOR BAINES

Cut me some slack, now. As a man of the Book, I've got to put some store in that tale.

ROBERT BILLINGS

I suppose. Although, I can smell the Sunflower River from here. And the smell is sweet. Which tells me it can't be all evil.

PASTOR BAINES

Gotta be the littlest juke above hell.

ROBERT BILLINGS

A place where our breed can sit at peace. Until the law gets wind of it, that is.

(They raise their glasses)

PASTOR BAINES

To long life.

ROBERT BILLINGS

And may we continue to live –

PASTOR BAINES

And drink to pleasure.

(They drink. Silence as the mood quickly turns somber)

My promise to Thea still stands.

ROBERT BILLINGS

And nothing short of death will get you to break it.

PASTOR BAINES

It would kill her.

ROBERT BILLINGS

Thea is a strong woman. More so than you're willing to believe.

PASTOR BAINES

Oh, ain't no doubt there. I only worry about my breaking point, is all.

ROBERT BILLINGS

And does she share that concern?

PASTOR BAINES

In her own way. She might be testing me.

ROBERT BILLINGS

Clearly, you don't know your wife.

PASTOR BAINES

What's this? She been pulling your coattail behind my back?

ROBERT BILLINGS

My eyes are opened, Fred. And they stay opened. And I'll be the one to state flatly that Thea ain't no game player. She's honest. *And strong.*

PASTOR BAINES

What are you getting at?

ROBERT BILLINGS

I want you to live, baby. That's all.

PASTOR BAINES

And my promise?

ROBERT BILLINGS

You want me to talk to her?

PASTOR BAINES

'Bout what?

ROBERT BILLINGS

I simply wish to consummate our relationship.

PASTOR BAINES

And what of –

ROBERT BILLINGS

Your religion? Don't make me laugh.

PASTOR BAINES

I'm not gon turn my back on it, Robert.

ROBERT BILLINGS

Well, if it's that important, who says you have to?

PASTOR BAINES

Robert, you're an atheist and a science teacher. How could I make you understand?

(Robert scoffs)

Just let me stay true to my word and my wife. And let's keep our meetings sweet, short and *clean* so I can see fit to hold fast to my creed and as much of me as it would take to live by it.

(Silence. Robert touches his hand)

ROBERT BILLINGS

Perhaps we should count our little blessings. It could always be worse. I mean, at least you have no children to contend with.

PASTOR BAINES

I suppose.

ROBERT BILLINGS

What? Thea ain't changed her mind on that, has she?

PASTOR BAINES

Oh, at times, in our quieter moments, I sense her heart.

ROBERT BILLINGS

She loves you just the same.

PASTOR BAINES

Yes, she does. And for this, I am blessed.

ROBERT BILLINGS

I'd been blessed in such a way once. Alice Trueblood. Young girl I'd gone to school with. A little too skinny for most boys, but who cared? I had me a girlfriend. And our time together, while it lasted, was blissful. Then some young soldier intruded. And she was taken. The heartache was insufferable. Insufferable.

PASTOR BAINES

I'm sorry 'bout this, Robert. About us.

ROBERT BILLINGS

Oh, I no longer have room in life to study *sorry* . . .

(Samuel appears again leaning against the tree with an opened bottle of booze which he pulls from. Robert notices him)

. . . or inaction.

(Fred notices Samuel, too, and is shaken. Robert is tempted. Fade out)

(Crossfade to Riva, in the kitchen, screaming as Sonny beats her. Samuel appears and watches in the shadows)

SONNY

Next time . . . you'll do like I say! Won't you? You'll keep your mitts off that car! You'll do that, won't you? . . . I say *WON'T YOU?*

RIVA

Oh, Sonny! . . . Please! PLEASE! . . .

(Sonny is standing over Riva, thrashing her savagely with his belt. After several agonizing moments, he stops. Riva weeps on the floor)

SONNY

Been married close to five years and still ain't learned who runs this house. What in the hell's in your mind, woman? WHAT?

(He puts his belt back on)

You put your hands on that car one more time, I swear . . . I'll break your skull!

(He exits. Samuel emerges)

RIVA

I wish he would, too.

SAMUEL

If I could only help –

RIVA

Oh, be quiet!

SAMUEL

I . . . I do want to help.

RIVA

And seeing that you can't, why did you even show up? Or, for that matter, what the hell good are you?

SAMUEL

I came as one in need.

RIVA

Of what? What can I give you?

SAMUEL

Plenty.

(He motions to help her up. She pushes him away)

RIVA

Don't touch me!

(Slowly, with great effort, she rises)

He said the car was clean when he brought it here last night. This morning, he got up and spied some kind of mark on the left side door handle. I'd been out shopping all day. Old man Barnett is kind enough to take me to town in his truck. I got back and seen that Sonny was mad. I told him . . . I swore it won't me. I know what he'll do if I so much as look at that car. I told him it won't me. It won't! I swear it won't!

If I had any sense, I'd kill Sonny.

SAMUEL

Then yourself?

RIVA

It's usually how it goes.

(She suddenly weeps for a moment, then stops)

Enjoying yourself?

SAMUEL

How? When I hurt, too?

RIVA

Now that's funny.

SAMUEL

I feel more than you'll ever know.

RIVA

You're serious?

SAMUEL

As that which is hurtful.

RIVA

Lord help me! I can't tell what's worse – Sonny's strap or being so utterly confused since you showed up! About everything!

SAMUEL

I'd like to be clear, as opposed to one who brings agony. And lies.

RIVA

Even to one this simple and backward?

SAMUEL

Not you, Riva.

RIVA

Samuel, I can't tell a lie from the bald-faced truth sometimes. And I fear it will be the death of me.

SAMUEL

Others suffer, too, my dear.

RIVA

Well, I appreciate that, but other folk's pain ain't doing me much good.

SAMUEL

You're right. And I still have yet to know what in the world you saw in this man.

RIVA

I was young. And scared. And looking for refuge. Yes, running. Like you.

SAMUEL

Scared enough to run to Sonny?

RIVA

Oh, Samuel . . . I – I don't know.

(She weeps. Silence)

He'd been a good-looking boy who seemed strong. While I won't nothing but a girl of sixteen. A white man in his thirties had been following me off and on since I was twelve. A few times, once or twice, he'd catch hold and put his hands on me.

(We see the silhouette of a woman pursued by a man. He overtakes her. She struggles to free herself)

He'd say he wouldn't hurt nothing, but I won't 'bout to give him the opportunity to prove himself. You know he even had flowers sent? Now ain't that something? The only man in my life and I couldn't do nothing but run from him.

One night, he caught up with me in back of Curtis Brigg's General store when I broke and ran smack into Sonny . . .

(She breaks from the man and runs,
stopping before Samuel. Fade on the man)

. . . who looked and saw how scared I was. Then . . . he looked at that man.

(Fade on the woman)

A few days later, they say he lay in the hospital with his genitals cut off. And that was the last I'd hear of him. By then Sonny was making it his business to stop by the house and keep comp'ny with me.

Who'd've thought he'd turn into just another man to be scared of.

SAMUEL

You're not putting this on all men, now?

RIVA

Why not? To tell the truth, even God is starting to look a little suspect.

SAMUEL

If God were a man . . . maybe.

RIVA

What you mean *if*? Of course, God is a man. It's why they call Him God.

SAMUEL

What if I said God is a woman?

RIVA

I'd say it's a lie . . . or you'd need to get your head set right.

SAMUEL

What if I said that God Herself reared me?

RIVA

Her-self?

SAMUEL

She raised me, Riva. My real mother is gone.

RIVA

You . . . *You* had a mother?

SAMUEL

Yes, I did. And she'd been a beautiful woman, at that.

(Riva laughs)

I did have a mother, Riva.

RIVA

Of course. How the hell else could – wait a minute . . .

SAMUEL

I had a mother! I swear, I tell no lie. And she was beautiful. One night, she was kidnapped by a band of dark angels and taken to a distant star.

(We hear the moaning of dark angels)

And when they'd done their business with her, with the seed already taking root, she begged the Creator to allow her to tear it out and drown it in its own blood. Miss Yadwigha refused.

(Lights fade in on a silhouetted woman cresting a distant mountain)

Hiding within the stone ruins of an old temple, my mother carried a child to term, gave birth, then stole to the top of a mountain and threw herself off, never to be heard from again.

(The woman extends her arms. The moaning intensifies as she throws herself off. Abrupt silence. Lights fade)

Miss Yadwigha would take me beneath her wing and rear me. When I'd grown a little and came into myself, we . . . we shared a bed.

RIVA

Shared a . . . ? Good Lord!

SAMUEL

She'd recognized my nature before I was able even to smell it.

(Miss Yadwigha's silhouette appears US)

Luring me to her room . . . I guess my newfound manhood awakened something inside her.

MISS YADWIGHA

Come to your God, Samuel!

SAMUEL

And I did. Again, and again.

(Fade on the silhouette)

However, behind her back, I'd been keeping company with another younger woman.

(The silhouette of a dancing woman appears behind Samuel)

She called herself Lilith. She'd run away from an overbearing father. And we found each other . . .

(She goes to Samuel. They embrace)

. . . where a song of love and rapture freed itself from our hearts.

(They kiss)

We met at the crossroads, at a little juke joint . . .

(The woman breaks from Samuel, then crosses to the Angel Oak where she dances)

. . . under an Angel Oak tree, a tree as old as the world. Miss Yadwigha hated the place and called it the gutter, and – being a youngster – forbade me to even look in the direction of it. Nevertheless, she'd fall asleep, I'd leave her bed, and steal to that forbidden place, anyway. To be with Lilith . . .

(We hear distant blues arias as Samuel takes Riva's hand and leads her to the tree. He takes her in his arms and dances slowly with her)

. . . and dance with her. It had been so sweet and wonderful that I shared my experience with many of my friends . . .

(The arias segue into blues wailings)

. . . whom I would lead to that little juke at the crossroads where they'd hear the music, partake of the distilled spirits, and dance, angering Miss Yadwigha.

(Lilith approaches and embraces Samuel.
He breaks from Riva and dances with her.
Riva watches)

Worse, she came upon Lilith and myself beneath the tree, naked and in the throes of love.

(A shadow falls across the stage. The voices are silenced. Lilith breaks from Samuel and runs away. We hear Yadwigha's voice)

MISS YADWIGHA

You've hurt me, baby. Yes, your God is jealous. And she feels pain. And I hurt so. Curse you, Samuel. Curse you to your life.

(The shadow recedes)

SAMUEL

She spat on Lilith and changed her into a moth which she smashed between her hands. Then she cursed me, changing me into a wolf. The friends who frequented the juke were driven away.

(The blues wailings become sounds of agony)

She'd curse the little juke to a place that would remain hidden, indecent and forbidden, as she'd always seen it, anyway. And she would curse the tree.

(We see a silhouetted figure approach, then flee as the tree darkens from green to black. The wailing and moaning swell, then stop with an abrupt blackout on the tree)

Meanwhile, I had been reduced to a criminal of the worst kind. Who could run from such a thing? If I could, I would take Sonny's whippings a hundred times over in exchange for one day of living free.

RIVA

But . . . why let you run? Ain't she powerful enough to just swipe you up anytime?

SAMUEL

Yes! And that's the point – she'll have me when she's ready, when she's through tormenting me. She set a pack of feral dogs – hellhounds – to pursue me to the end of the world.

RIVA

The ol' folks say hot powder will throw them hounds off.

SAMUEL

But she and those dogs soon got wise to that powder. I soon found that only the comfort of a woman, a colored woman, will hold them in their stead.

RIVA

What will happen when she and those dogs are tired of running you?

SAMUEL

I'll be imprisoned, bound in the underworld.

RIVA

You mean –

SAMUEL

Hell? Not exactly. You see, the underworld and paradise had been of a piece, one of the other. She created both. When I and my accomplices were expelled, we were tracked down and imprisoned in that underworld and into the hell you now know of.

(Fade in on the silhouette of a man chained and in agony before a burning Angel Oak tree. Then, slow fade)

In time, however, I and about half escaped, while the others were left behind. Those who freed themselves roamed the universe, gathering confederates. A war ensued and continues to this day against Miss Yadwigha and her angels. And until I stop running, and finally confront my pursuer, they will fight on.

As my brethren fought, I broke away. I'd flown with a flock of vultures until I was attacked by two archangels sent by Yadwigha to tear away my wings.

(A silhouetted man enters on all fours and trembles. A wolf is howling in the distance)

I now had to run. I found safety within a pack of wolves, two of whom walked upright as men. From them, I would learn to survive while being pursued. Like me, they were chased. And cursed.

(Slowly, the man gathers himself, rises and stands upright. Lights fade)

RIVA

Next thing you'll be telling me is that Robert Johnson told a lie.

SAMUEL

Perhaps he did encounter someone that night. Perhaps it might have been –

RIVA

Oh, good Lord! NO! . . .

SAMUEL

Look in my weary eyes, Riva. And you'll see.

(Riva approaches and gazes into his eyes for a moment, then touches his face)

RIVA

I . . . I see a woman – a White Woman. *Dancing*.

(The White Woman appears dancing in US limbo)

SAMUEL

Yes.

RIVA

With you . . .

SAMUEL

Yes!

RIVA

And after all this time of running, of fear and hiding with the dogs at your heels, you came to *dance* . . . with one who is just like you?

SAMUEL

There've been others. Her among them.

RIVA

But she, like the rest, somehow . . . they all let you down.

SAMUEL

She betrayed me by revealing my whereabouts to Yadwigha one night. As of then, she and her kind could no longer serve as a refuge. And I fear her still. Yet . . . somehow . . . I remain under her spell.

(The White Woman approaches, then kisses Samuel. She then exits as Riva embraces him)

RIVA

Take me, Samuel! Take me! I won't let you down! I'll stay! And run with you!

SAMUEL

Sonny will hunt us –

RIVA

Sonny is the devil!

SAMUEL

And I . . . I am no man.

RIVA

And knowing that, I don't need one.

SAMUEL

Be careful what you say.

RIVA

Samuel, please! *Take me with you!*

SAMUEL

The dogs will eat us alive.

RIVA

No, they won't. Like you said, as long as you are within the loving sight of a woman like me, the dogs will let you alone.

SAMUEL

Alright. When I'm ready –

RIVA

I'll wait. *And I'll be the only one?*

SAMUEL

You and I . . . we'll find a *loophole*. Somewhere.

We will. RIVA

Yes. SAMUEL

Amen! RIVA

(They laugh and embrace. Then, slowly, Samuel lifts up her dress and sits her on the table. Riva is hesitant)

It's alright. I'm not Sonny. SAMUEL

(With this, slowly, Riva relents and allows him to make love to her. The White Woman reappears in US limbo, watching them. Soon after, lights rise on Sonny with Millie at her home)

You mean it done crossed your mind? MILLIE

No. And why should it? SONNY

It wouldn't surprise me, is all I'm saying. MILLIE

You don't know Riva. SONNY

(Samuel and Riva, in dim lighting, are making love in silence)

I know a woman. MILLIE

Riva is not gon lay with nobody, Millie. It ain't in her. SONNY

Alright. MILLIE

SONNY

Listen, Riva knows what's in store for her if she so much as sniffs at a man.

MILLIE

What makes you think something ain't in her nose now?

SONNY

What do you know, Millie?

MILLIE

Plenty.

SONNY

Well, I know plenty, too. And I know my wife ain't laying with nobody.

MILLIE

You sure?

(Their lovemaking, still in silence,
intensifies. The White Woman is still
watching)

SONNY

I got sense.

MILLIE

Sense enough to know the difference in shit when you smell it?

SONNY

What the hell am I listening to you for? What do you know now that a man
ain't known already? What, woman? WHAT?

MILLIE

Watch how you talk at me, man.

SONNY

Like you scare me.

MILLIE

Can't nothing scare you. And that's your problem.

SONNY

Might be my strength.

(Riva climaxes, then relaxes. Samuel embraces her. The White Woman exits)

MILLIE

Man, there ain't one strong nut of the two you got between your legs.

SONNY

Keep on, Millie –

MILLIE

Or, what? That's right, you best not even think on it.

SONNY

You put a whole lotta store in yourself, don't you?

MILLIE

Baby, it's your department to think high and proud. I stay satisfied with keeping my business above water and having a man to heat my bed every so often.

SONNY

Somebody other than me?

(Silence. Riva is staring into Samuels eyes)

Oh, I see now. It all boils down to the same thing: I'm just a piece of dick to you.

MILLIE

And knowing that, tell me how it feels to be somebodies' whore?

SONNY

What are you saying to me, woman?

MILLIE

I'm starting to think twice, is what I'm saying.

SONNY

You talking 'bout them Whitlow girls?

MILLIE

They'd walk all over you, Sonny. If they ain't doing it already.

SONNY

To hell with you!

MILLIE

Good. I'm glad you making this easy.

SONNY

Yeah, easy! All the scratch we'll be pulling in will be mine and easier to count 'cause I'll be the only one counting it.

MILLIE

That is, if you able to count.

SONNY

You something.

MILLIE

Like your wife. You know, she just might be making it with somebody under your roof right now. And in your bed, too.

SONNY

Come to think of it, if that's so, it might all be for the best. One less thing to worry my head over. And one less something to get in the way of you and me.

MILLIE

And what gives you cause to think it's gon stay that simple?

SONNY

Wha' chu trying to put in my head?

MILLIE

Nothing, Sonny. Nothing at-all. I reckon if I got to choose between a man who beats the shit out of his wife over something with a limp dick and a chicken heart, well . . . take a wild guess on which way Millie'd go.

(Samuel brings Riva from off of the table and they embrace)

SONNY

It'd be something, though, wouldn't it? Riva with another man. The question is what kind of man'd want her?

(While being embraced, Riva laughs)

MILLIE

It might surprise you.

(Black out on Riva and Samuel. Then fade on Sonny and Millie)

(Lights rise on Pastor Baines and Sister Thea in their kitchen. Riva sits with them. It is night, after the movie. They are having coffee)

RIVA

I sure thank ya'll for this. I don't get out much but, when I do, I appreciate it.

PASTOR BAINES

We enjoy your company. In fact, we ought to do this more often.

RIVA

As often as Sonny will allow, but . . . yes. Let's do.

PASTOR BAINES

We pray for you, sister. We're fully aware of the troubles which beset you. And I want it known that . . . we do pray.

RIVA

I pray, too, but . . . Makes you want to be a dog, don't it? Not no real one, but like one of those movie-dogs. Like the "Lady?"

SISTER THEA

Riva . . . if you like, we arrange it so –

PASTOR BAINES

Mother Thea.

SISTER THEA

. . . Arrange for you to . . .

PASTOR BAINES

What's important is that Gods will be done.

SISTER THEA

She can't keep getting her head beat in, Fred. Look at her face.

PASTOR BAINES

What you are doing is right, Riva. What's important is the marriage.

SISTER THEA

I say look at it!

PASTOR BAINES

Keep praying. The Lord's gon make a way –

SISTER THEA

She used to be such a lovely woman. Beautiful! Where is any of that now?

PASTOR BAINES

Thea, you know better than that. Who do you think you are, talking this-a way in front of –

RIVA

Never mind, Fred. It's okay. You're concerned, is all. And, with everything else, I appreciate it.

PASTOR BAINES

We love you, sister.

RIVA

And I you.

PASTOR BAINES

Amen. Listen, you sit and talk with Sister Thea for as long as you like. I'm going up to bed. Thea – mind yourself? Please?

SISTER THEA

Yes, suh. I'll even hold my tongue.

PASTOR BAINES

I'd like that. And see that Riva gets home. Goodnight.

(He exits)

SISTER THEA

How can I help? What can I do?

RIVA

I ain't gon lie and say it's all Jim Dandy, but . . . I can deal with it.

SISTER THEA

Girl, you sound like a fool.

RIVA

No, listen: I got a plan.

A plan? What?

SISTER THEA

I'm scared to say.

RIVA

Why? *Do you want to kill him?*

SISTER THEA

Kill? . . . Wha' . . .

RIVA

You fixin' to kill him, ain't you?

SISTER THEA

No! I can't kill nobody.

RIVA

You sure?

SISTER THEA

I ain't planning on killing nobody, Thea. Even something as evil as Sonny.

RIVA

Praise the Lord! I just couldn't live with even the thought of the gas chamber looking at you, girl.

SISTER THEA

Well, don't worry.

RIVA

Listen, whatever it is that's cooking, I want you to chew on this – just chew on it, is all I'm asking. Alright?

SISTER THEA

Okay.

RIVA

(She reaches into her cleavage to remove a small pouch attached to a necklace)

SISTER THEA

Now my mother was a Christian woman. But that didn't stop her from working a spell or two on a soul who crossed her. Before she died, she gave me this

pouch of black dust. And she said to use it in those times when God has got too much t' tend to t' help you.

RIVA

Thea, I don't need no dust . . .

SISTER THEA

Listen, girl! All you got to do is blow a little of it his way. And just as sho as you was born, it'll curse the nigger. Curse him to hell! And he just might go crazy. Maybe even crazy enough to kill himself!

RIVA

I can't put no spell on nobody.

SISTER THEA

Woman, it's you or him!

RIVA

And this is why I'm going away!

SISTER THEA

Come again?

RIVA

I didn't want to say nothing with Fred in the room. Sister . . . *I got a man!*

SISTER THEA

You got –

RIVA

A man! I'm a lady who, at last, done found her tramp!

SISTER THEA

Who is he?

RIVA

It ain't none of these niggers 'round here, so you don't know 'im.

SISTER THEA

But you got him.

RIVA

That's right. He's mine! And he's taking me away with him!

(Silence. Thea puts the pouch away)

SISTER THEA

Fred wants you to pray. He says if God can't get you out of this mess, nothing and nobody can. He wants you to try to save your marriage.

RIVA

Even if Sonny don't?

SISTER THEA

And this is exactly why I say . . . Goddamn him! Goddamn Fred and all his Godforsaken praying.

(They hug)

Now you gon with your new man. You won't hear a peep from me.

RIVA

Thank you.

SISTER THEA

I only wish I could lay eyes on him.

(Fade on Thea and Riva)

(Lights rise on the little juke joint. Robert Billings and Samuel are dancing close beneath the tree. As usual, the music is low and bluesy)

ROBERT BILLINGS

I got to say, I've been told some tall stories in my time, but –

SAMUEL

I speak the truth.

ROBERT BILLINGS

You're aware of what they say about you? In relation to the truth, right? That you're nothing but the *Father of Lies*?

SAMUEL

Well, as to that . . .

ROBERT BILLINGS

And, speaking of which, you do know where we are, right?

(Samuel is incredulous)

We're at the crossroads, baby! C'mon, now. Don't you recall that yonder fork in the road? Where you made that terrible Faustian bargain with . . .

SAMUEL

And let me state overtly –

ROBERT BILLINGS

Save your breath, honey. I don't believe it, anyway. And for that matter, in you, either.

SAMUEL

You deny what your eyes see?

ROBERT BILLINGS

I'll just say I find it . . . tempting.

SAMUEL

Sounds contradictory.

ROBERT BILLINGS

Fine. Let's enjoy ourselves and our contradiction. Who will it hurt?

SAMUEL

I like you more and more.

ROBERT BILLINGS

Temptation, and all?

SAMUEL

Worts and boils, too.

(They laugh)

Would that more on this old earth were like you, Robert.

ROBERT BILLINGS

Unafraid?

SAMUEL

If you want to call it that.

ROBERT BILLINGS

Sure. Throw in a little happiness and one could have the makings of a right tasty stew.

SAMUEL

Always been happy, huh?

ROBERT BILLINGS

As a lark, baby. As in tune with myself as Leadbelly's git! It's the reason I'd never stood for nobody's religion. I fear nothing. And, therefore, am free of the need to hide.

SAMUEL

And as far as all of it getting in the way of wanting a man –

ROBERT BILLINGS

Oh, there've been problems, large and small. But nothing which persisted. Even got court marshalled from the army. But, lived to recover beautifully. Mind you, I live under the proverbial *nom de plume* to avoid the stigma of the cursed dishonorable discharge, but . . .

SAMUEL

On the run, I see?

ROBERT BILLINGS

No, honey. I believe the word is *settled*: I beat them! And it. And I've settled quite nicely into myself.

Please, let's sit.

(They sit, toast and drink)

Now, I have to ask: you're not married, are you? Plenty of folks think the devil's got a wife.

SAMUEL

Not married, but . . .

ROBERT BILLINGS

You have a woman.

SAMUEL

Is that a problem?

ROBERT BILLINGS

Oh, I'm used to it. Though, I'd prefer –

SAMUEL

Something all to yourself?

ROBERT BILLINGS

Maybe. Yet, spending time with the devil in the phantasmal – even contradictory – sense is rather refreshing. Besides, I've got enough of the real devil swimming in my blood to keep us burning hot for a thousand Sundays.

SAMUEL

You talk awfully sweet for a man.

(They kiss. Fade)

(Crossfade to Riva, in bed and in the throes of a nightmare. Yadwigha appears and speaks)

RIVA

Samuel? . . . Samuel, I hear you. I . . . feel – Help me. Let me go with you. Please!

MISS YADWIGHA

Riva?

RIVA

I'll protect you.

MISS YADWIGHA

Wake up.

RIVA

Nothing will harm you . . . nothing –

MISS YADWIGHA

Riva, wake up!

(Riva awakens and looks upon Miss Yadwigha)

You know who I am, don't you?

RIVA

Samuel was right.

MISS YADWIGHA

For once.

Should I be afraid?
RIVA

What do you think?
MISS YADWIGHA

I'm not sure.
RIVA

You're not afraid of the truth, are you?
MISS YADWIGHA

Again, I'm not sure. I guess it depends on what's said.
RIVA

You've been listening to Samuel, I see.
MISS YADWIGHA

I love him. I trust him.
RIVA

My! You're a much bigger fool than I imagined.
MISS YADWIGHA

How dare you –
RIVA

Careful, honey. I hold all the cards – I own every tomorrow. Be aware of how you speak.
MISS YADWIGHA

What do you want?
RIVA

To tell you something.
MISS YADWIGHA

Which is?
RIVA

Samuel lied to you.
MISS YADWIGHA

Alright. Anything else?
RIVA

MISS YADWIGHA

I see he did a number on you, that devil!

RIVA

I've learned a thing or two, yes.

MISS YADWIGHA

Honey, you've learned nothing. *You have been lied to.* Plain and simple.

RIVA

Well, I believe Samuel.

(Yadwigha laughs)

RIVA

Stop laughing at me.

MISS YADWIGHA

Listen, Riva: I am doing you a rather large favor with my presence. Normally, with colored folks, I simply leave them to their sordid devices. However, this time it involves Samuel. So, I guess one could say I have a vested interest.

RIVA

And I suppose you'll want me to fall to my knees and give thanks for this piddling little favor, right?

MISS YADWIGHA

Sweetheart, he is a liar. He'd meet many women while running. Like you, all of them were colored. And he used them. He took advantage of them sexually. These women, after showing him mercy, upon exhibiting kindness, even allowing him into their beds –

RIVA

The way you allowed him into yours?

MISS YADWIGHA

I would smite you if you were not so utterly silly.

RIVA

You call yourself God when you don't do nothing but use folks and play with 'em like some old harp –

MISS YADWIGHA

And this is why God remains unseen. Me or the devil, one just can't tell the difference, can they?

RIVA

Listen, if Samuel got in those women's britches – I'm sorry, their *bedrooms* – you know as well as me that women, including you, will do such things to get a man to . . .

MISS YADWIGHA

You know better than that, Riva. And do you know something else? Those women are now dead for what Samuel did. Dead to themselves, dead to love. They pursue him out of a dead longing that is consuming . . .

RIVA

Whoever you are –

MISS YADWIGHA

I am Yadwigha – *Miss* Yadwigha, that is.

RIVA

Whatever – I need for you to go. Right now. To wherever you came from. And if you are, in point of fact, the true God, I don't need you. I have Samuel. I love him. He loves me. And we're going away together.

MISS YADWIGHA

He deceived you. And I'm trying to give fair warning as to what you're getting into.

RIVA

I love him.

MISS YADWIGHA

And, like Samuel, you are so weak.

(Yadwigh hands Riva a butcher's knife)

I brought this from your kitchen. Take it.

RIVA

Why?

MISS YADWIGHA

As we speak, he dances with another.

RIVA

Another? Who . . . ?

MISS YADWIGHA

Go and see for yourself. He's at that little juke near the river, on the far end of Sunflower county. That juke in the middle of the fork in the road . . . at the crossroads near Dockery Plantation where Robert Johnson made his bargain with . . . you know who.

RIVA

If you're talking about Samuel, he told me Robert Johnson won't nothing but a gut-faced liar.

MISS YADWIGHA

Then choose whose lie you wish to undo. If it's Samuels, get yourself to that crossroad, to the place you've heard of, where a certain kind of man goes –

RIVA

That place? Somebody'd said the law done shut it down.

MISS YADWIGHA

They will. Soon. Only, he's there now, Riva. With another –

RIVA

Woman?

MISS YADWIGHA

Another man.

RIVA

What!? No. I don't believe it. Besides, I won't go to such a place. It's indecent! And sinful!

MISS YADWIGHA

If you want the truth – GO! And take that Oldsmobile, Sonny's car. Being on night patrol, he won't miss it. Take it, Riva! And to hell with Sonny! GO!

(Riva takes the knife. Yadwigha dissolves. The scene shifts, dreamlike, back to the crossroads, to the Angel Oak tree by the lake, near the juke. Riva approaches the tree where Samuel stands having intercourse with Robert, who moans in ecstasy. Samuel suddenly notices Riva and the knife. He ceases his business with Robert and they both pull up their pants)

Liar! You damn liar! RIVA

No, listen, Riva – SAMUEL

You ain't nothing but a LIAR! RIVA

Please, honey . . . SAMUEL

I'M GON GUT YOU LIKE A HOG! RIVA

(She swings the knife at Samuel. He flees)

AND DON'T COME BACK!

(She looks at Robert)

I know you. You the schoolteacher, right?

What's it to you? ROBERT

Plenty. RIVA

(She stabs him. He falls and dies. Riva looks down on him coldly as Miss Yadwigha fades in and laughs. A hellhound howls)

(Blackout. End Act One)

ACT TWO

(Samuel is dancing once again with the White Woman as lights rise on Miss Yadwigha dancing slowly with Robert Billings to boozy music)

ROBERT BILLINGS

I've never believed in the afterlife. In fact, I still don't. Any more than I believe in a soul.

MISS YADWIGHA

Then what do you suppose happened?

ROBERT BILLINGS

Some crazy heifer cut me in a –

MISS YADWIGHA

After all of that, I mean?

ROBERT BILLINGS

I must be dead, asleep, or . . . somewhere.

MISS YADWIGHA

So, this is a dream?

ROBERT BILLINGS

I won't say what it is, or what I'd make of it.

MISS YADWIGHA

Do you know who I am?

ROBERT BILLINGS

I'm aware of what you represent.

MISS YADWIGHA

That's not what I asked.

ROBERT BILLINGS

And what is this? The so-called Judgment? Am I on trial?

MISS YADWIGHA

Of course not.

ROBERT BILLINGS

Good. I won't have an excuse to cut the fool.

MISS YADWIGHA

I'll ask again: where do you think you are?

ROBERT BILLINGS

And I will repeat my refusal to answer.

MISS YADWIGHA

Why?

ROBERT BILLINGS

Why not? None of this means anything. It will soon vanish like a thin vapor. Ergo, I see no need to psychoanalyze it.

MISS YADWIGHA

Hmph.

ROBERT BILLINGS

Alright, then: I see this as nothing more than the result of a chemical or biological reaction to the shock, or trauma of being murdered. Sort of in the way of what a banty rooster goes through when you ring its neck. Something that, in time, will most likely come to be explained in scientific terms.

MISS YADWIGHA

Or, explained away, I suppose? And, thereby, avoided?

(The White Woman gently breaks from Samuel, then exits)

ROBERT BILLINGS

Convenient, wouldn't you say?

MISS YADWIGHA

More contradictory, if you asked me.

ROBERT BILLINGS

Which is the best that can be said for . . . this.

(They notice Samuel, now alone)

Would you like to cut in?

MISS YADWIGHA

Yes. Please!

(They laugh at Samuel as lights fade)

(Fade in on Pastor Baines and Thea who have been watching them dance)

PASTOR BAINES

Oh, yes! Somewhere he dances with another. How that man loved to dance.

(Thea tries to comfort him)

Riva . . . Somebody said they'd seen Riva in her nightgown. They saw her there . . . at our little juke. They saw her walk up and cut him. To death. I heard she cut him over some other man. What man, Thea? Who?

SISTER THEA

Come and sit down.

PASTOR BAINES

The man who danced with my Robert . . . I hear tell it was Riva's man. They said she'd been running after him behind Sonny's back. Who in the world was this man?

(Thea coaxes him to sit)

They say nobody'd seen the likes of him before. Oh, Lord . . . my Robert.

(Thea hums gently to him)

Thea? . . . I think we need to pray.

(She stops humming and they go to their knees. Fred prays fervently)

Lord of men, I pray with a weeping heart and with sorrow that weighs painfully like a millstone in my soul. One dear to my life was taken from me, a man whom I'd come to love as I love myself.

I pray, Lord, for you to touch my wife's heart. And that she will forgive me for concealing the depth of my love for this man. Oh, Jesus – I loved Robert more than her.

(Thea cries)

I did not will the feelings which rack my being, this love which has done nothing but incarcerate me. This love which gave no joy, no comfort. Only hurt. I want to thank my loving wife for her patience and accommodation . . .

(His breathing becomes shortened)

. . . Keep her, Lord. Abide . . . abide with her . . .

(Thea notices his condition)

. . . None of this . . . none of this was her doing. We men – oh, the burden we lay upon our women!

(He collapses. Thea reacts)

SISTER THEA

FRED!

PASTOR BAINES

Mercy upon me. I can't seem . . . to help myself. The grief in my heart . . . it takes me.

SISTER THEA

My Fred!

PASTOR BAINES

Yes, Jesus. Leave me . . . to the hurt –

(He dies of a broken heart in her arms. Samuel and Riva appear in limbo)

SISTER THEA

Curse you, Riva. Curse you as the black witch you are . . .

(She takes hold of the pouch on the necklace and holds it up)

. . . and the hell you'll crawl through. Curse be upon you, oh woman of wickedness. I will get back at you! BITCH!

(Fade on Thea and Baines)

(Lights rise on Samuel and Riva in her house. They had been watching)

RIVA

She was about to pass that black dust on to me . . . to cast a spell over Sonny.

SAMUEL

It looks like you're about to be on the receiving end of that dust.

RIVA

As if I ain't got enough to fret me as it is – Don't you touch me!

SAMUEL

I wish you'd listen –

RIVA

To what? More of your mess?

SAMUEL

I was tempted. I deceived myself. And all I can say 'bout that is . . . I'm sorry.

RIVA

If only I had the cuss words to spit at you.

SAMUEL

Come on, Riva! *I was tempted!* I didn't plan this. You know I don't have the gumption to sit and weave something this deceitful.

RIVA

Well, if you didn't plan it, what was running through your head while you doing the *deceitful* thing?

SAMUEL

A man can't say what's in his head when sin takes over.

RIVA

Oh, you admitting to sin now? Ain't this a step up!

SAMUEL

Please, you can't throw me away. Please, please . . .

(He is on his knees before her)

RIVA

Look at you! Just as pitiful as a wet puppy dog. Why is that I can't never come across anything decent as far as the male species go? Every swinging dick that trots my way was scraped from the bottom of somebody's slop bucket! And

it's been this way right from the time I got wise enough to know a girl couldn't pee like a boy, 'cause boys peed like dogs – *they all stood up!* And I had plenty dogs to lap at my doorstep. But not a man within smelling distance. Why is that? WHY?

(Samuel rises)

SAMUEL

Come with me and maybe –

RIVA

I SAID KEEP YOUR NASTY HANDS OFF ME, GODDAMMIT!

SAMUEL

Woman, I'm trying to get you away from here!

RIVA

Is that so . . . ?

SAMUEL

Yes! Sonny will be marching up in this house after 'while. With the sheriff! And, no doubt, he's heard everything! *Including you taking that car!*

(Silence)

RIVA

You're right. I need to pack.

SAMUEL

There's no time.

RIVA

I can't leave here with nothing.

SAMUEL

Where will you go?

RIVA

I'll figure something out.

(She gets a suitcase and begins to pack)

SAMUEL

He'll put the word out. And folks'll be watching.

RIVA

For a po' colored woman. And how many of them they got around here living and eating?

SAMUEL

Yet, around here, they all know you.

RIVA

Yes, they do. What's more I got the sheriff and the law to contend with for killing a man . . . however low his station.

SAMUEL

And yet again I ask: where are you going?

RIVA

I told you – I ain't got the foggiest idea.

SAMUEL

And what about money?

RIVA

When I cross the state line, I'll find a used car lot. Somewhere. That Oldsmobile is brand new. Ought to get a nice piece of change for it. With that, I'll get me a bus ticket and . . .

(Finished packing, she's suddenly downcast)

SAMUEL

I'm so, so sorry 'bout all this.

RIVA

You're sorry! That's the most honest thing I've heard you say.

Samuel, Samuel . . . *with another man?* I'd be good and mad if I'd seen you wrestling with some woman, but . . . jumping Jesus, Samuel! A man!

SAMUEL

I couldn't help myself. He was – somebody, is all. I . . . most of the time, I just can't help it.

RIVA

But you told me the dogs would get you if –

SAMUEL

Yes! I realize now, though, I'd been wrong. What I need is the presence . . . the warmth, of a *lover*. A mere lover. That's all.

RIVA

Let me get out of here.

SAMUEL

Again, I'm so sorry . . .

RIVA

I loved you, man! And I hoped! I'd not known such hope! On top of that, I could not bring myself to believe there'd be a man – any man who could make me feel so . . . so *good*, Samuel. I got nothing but hurt when I parted my legs for Sonny. But not with you. Never with you!

SAMUEL

Let me . . .

RIVA

No!

SAMUEL

I want to go with you, Riva. I'm scared, too. Can't you see that?

RIVA

Well, ain't you the *devil*? Cook something up!

(Silence. They listen)

SAMUEL

You hear that?

RIVA

Must be Thea.

SAMUEL

Hellhounds! She put her curse on you, sho!

RIVA

So be it.

Memphis! I'll go to Memphis! I can sell the car up there. I don't know nothing 'bout no other big city. In Memphis, a person could melt in right nice, colored or white.

SAMUEL

What about –

RIVA

The curse? That mess don't worry me. If it comes to it, I'll deal with Thea to her face.

Meantime, I'll go to Memphis. And you . . . you just stay out of shooting range.

(Riva exits, carrying the suitcase and leaving Samuel all alone, the hellhounds closing in. Lights fade)

(The barking fades. Lights rise on Sonny at Millie's place)

MILLIE

You saying she ain't left no note or nothing?

SONNY

What kinda note she gon leave after killing somebody, Millie? That is, *if* she did it.

MILLIE

Didn't she? Folks who was there said they'd seen the whole thing, knife and all.

SONNY

And what breed of folks we talking about? A gaggle of white-bellied faggots! I wouldn't be surprised if one of their own killed that two fifths of a man, then put it on Riva just to spite me. Probably put it in her head to take my car. I told you these niggers here'd like nothing better than to nail me to a fence.

MILLIE

They might've been faggots, but ain't a one of 'em blind.

SONNY

I know what I'm talking about. And I know Riva.

MILLIE

Sonny, they say she had a man!

SONNY

It's a damn lie! What man'd want 'er?

MILLIE

You can shut your ears to the truth as much as you like, but –

SONNY

And what truth is that? Did *you* spy Riva with somebody?

MILLIE

All I'm saying is . . .

SONNY

Yes, or no?

MILLIE

What if I did? You think I'd tell you?

SONNY

I ain't gon get mad. It ain't worth it.

MILLIE

Riva took your brand-new car and made a fool outta you. Whatever happens, you got to live with that hole in the rump of your britches until you croak.

SONNY

With kinfolk like your'n, you one to talk. And it's a damn shame, that lowdown reprobate you got for a brother, calling hisself a preacher. If ever there'd been just cause to lynch a nigger, there it sat at your doorstep. Good for him he saved 'em the trouble and killed hisself.

MILLIE

My brother didn't kill himself.

SONNY

You as bad as he is. Keeping something as awful as that under your wig. What's wrong with you?

MILLIE

I had my reasons.

SONNY

And what of all them good folks in his flock? I ain't no church going man, but I got a mighty load of feeling in my heart for 'em, I'll tell you that. Getting in their face on Sunday, preaching what thus sayeth the Lord, and all along worse than the devil cussing in the wind.

MILLIE

You need to shut your mouth, man!

SONNY

Ah! I see it's plenty of shit to go 'round now, ain't it?

MILLIE

I say hush up and let me be! Alright, we both got our own shit to smell. Fine. But just know that Fred Baines had heart and stuck with being good. Which is a whole lot more'n I'd say for certain folks, myself included.

SONNY

A man's always got to die before folks see him right.

MILLIE

And I'm the worse for it.

SONNY

You can always go back to preaching.

MILLIE

Who'd take me seriously?

SONNY

Don't the Bible say if the Lord be for you, who can be against you? Seems to me you'd have it made, with all that wind at your back.

MILLIE

Quit mocking the Bible, Sonny.

SONNY

Listen at 'er. Next thing you know, she'll be trying to get me to pray.

MILLIE

As if it would do something such as you any good.

SONNY

That's right. Just leave me in my sin and pray for yourself.

MILLIE

No, I won't either. I'll pluck out my eyeballs before I traipse down that road again. When I left the church, I swore on my anger never to suck up to another man – God, or otherwise.

SONNY

No use for a man, huh? You'll learn.

MILLIE

Sure. Like Riva did.

SONNY

And damn Riva! My car . . . my brand-new car! Damn that nigger bitch!
DAMN HER!

MILLIE

I bet you foolish enough to think she gon come back.

SONNY

Crawling! Riva ain't like you. She know she can't live without a man. And being a Christian and putting as much store in marriage, ain't but one man what matters to her. And it ain't God, and it sho ain't her goddamn daddy. And if she ain't got my car . . . if any damage been done to it . . .

MILLIE

Sonny's wrath! HA! So terrible it's enough to make the worst man that filled a pair of britches pee hisself.

SONNY

Speaking of peeing, why ain't you somewhere wailing a river over your brother 'bout now?

MILLIE

I don't believe in tears. Though, I'd like to think, on account of his goodness he's laying in a much greener place.

SONNY

If there's grass in hell.

MILLIE

And, Lord, how the picture of that bad end worried me. My brother and his urges! Tsk! When I won't but a girl, since hearing about a soldier who got himself cut to death for messing with a man, I couldn't get through being scared for him. Mama'd been blind to it, but I sure as sin knew.

SONNY

Something 'bout the nigger just didn't sit right, huh?

MILLIE

Nobody knew, but I was sho privy to it. And as Gods lead horn player, I was gon make it my business to right that wickedness if I never did nothing else. What I soon came to see, though, was that the world knew better. And it showed me a thing or two. Starting with my brother, near the pond under the railroad overpass one afternoon. Sixteen years old and in the act of sin with a grown man. I got so beside myself, I near 'bout lost my color. I run the man off quicker than you could've shot at him, and whooped Fred's hind parts till he hurt all over. Then made him sit up all night, tarrying and praying till he finally got sense and agreed to leave the devil to his business.

I'd convinced my silly self he needed a woman to keep him from sin. He'd just turned twenty when I brought him Thea, thirty-five plus years old and a widow. I didn't care. I was that desperate for my poor brother.

After they tied the knot, I thought I'd solved Gods troubles for Him. But just as I said, the world was gon show Millie Baines: I'd lay hands on a crippled man one evening during a revival. I'd pray the devil out of him, then get him to walk. Lord! Didn't we tear the church apart when that lame man got to prancing and a-jumping and a-shouting up and down that aisle! HA! Rev. Millie had preached, prayed and willed a crippled man to walk!

Every so often, after a while, he'd stop to the house with flowers or a cake or a pie, walk long miles just to show his Reverend what he thought of her and how she still lived in his heart. Sonny . . . the angels help me if it won't enough to work you to tears.

One night, I let him drive me to dinner – that is, I *insisted* he drive. I made it known I won't wearing out no shoes for nobody. Well, we went to Miss Ann's Kitchen for chicken dinner. We talked a little bit. I got to know him better. Then, he'd drive me home.

Well, don't you know, we won't two half feet from my doorstep before that devil tried hisself on me. We got to tussling and wrestling and carrying on, and before long I'd thought I'd have to kill that man, strong as he was. So help me – I scratched, bit, kicked – it finally took one or two good smites in his private parts with my knee when I at last drove it home that Millie won't laying with nobody unless she said so.

But he won't finished with me. He'd sneak and tail around for near 'bout a month. I cried and pleaded and prayed for God to visit this man and get him to stop worrying me. One day, I stopped praying. And waited for him on the front porch with daddy's old hunting rifle, which he saw on darkening my presence yet again. He looked at me and realized Millie won't no meek servant of the Almighty no more, but something that was just like him.

And you know what the clincher was? I come to find the story behind that bastard being crippled in the first place was on account of him gettin' shot for messing with a underage girl.

Oh, yes! The world had showed me! I'd healed that devil. And no doubt he's somewhere grinning like a polecat over the bargain.

(Sonny is laughing)

And I'm glad you liked my story enough to laugh at it.

SONNY

I ain't laughing at the story. I'm laughing at *you*, Rev.

MILLIE

Be that as it may . . .

SONNY

What?

MILLIE

Go easy on Riva, Sonny.

SONNY

T' hell with that! I can't respect myself as a man and *go easy*. As a matter fact – when I catch 'er, *I'll kill 'er*. Forget about everything else. When I see her – I *WILL KILL HER!* Simple as that.

(He exits. Fade out)

(Samuel appears in US limbo)

SAMUEL

Sonny looked high and yon for Riva and his car through months and days . . .

(Lights rise on Sonny at home, fast approaching drunkenness, his fist gripping a bottle of liquor. He is sitting, gazing into space)

. . . turning up nothing.

(Fade on Samuel. Yadvigha appears and descends earthward, then wraps a dark hooded cloak over her head and shoulders, concealing her face. She takes off her shoes, takes up a Bible, and knocks on Sonny's door. He stirs and answers. Yadvigha speaks with a flat southern drawl)

SONNY

What's this? Come time for the nigger to die already?

MISS YADWIGHA

Oh, Lord, no! I am not death. I'm one who spreads th' word of th' gospel, brotha. And be 'sured that whats'ever might trouble you, Jesus lives to fill y' heart.

SONNY

What do you want?

MISS YADWIGHA

To speak of th' love o' Jesus!

SONNY

Well, thank you, but . . .

MISS YADWIGHA

And that 'ere –

(She refers to the bottle)

. . . ain't nothin' in there'll do you no good. Liquor don't bring out nothin' but mo' suffering. And worst of all – death widdout Jesus.

SONNY

Well, at least it won't be your hide.

MISS YADWIGHA

Brotha, it might as well be!

SONNY

Look, gon 'bout your business . . .

MISS YADWIGHA

How long she been gone? A month? A year?

SONNY

Gone? . . . Wha' chu saying . . . ?

MISS YADWIGHA

I know th' look. A man hol's it in his eyes. You can't hide it. She meant somethin' to you. And now, she gone.

SONNY
 She'll be back.

MISS YADWIGHA
 You ain't soundin' too sho.

SONNY
 What do you want?

MISS YADWIGHA
 To spread th' good news! To pray awhile. And give hope.

SONNY
 Well, I'm sorry, but –

MISS YADWIGHA
 Was she yo' wife?

SONNY
 Yes, she was.

MISS YADWIGHA
 And you ain't treated her good . . . did you?

(Sonny eyes her)

I don't bring nothin' but comfort. Jesus will f'give you of whatever hurt you levied 'gainst your wife. He'll have mercy and even draw 'er back to you.

SONNY
 And I reckon before I'm able to pull any of this around, I got to – what? Repent? Is that it?

MISS YADWIGHA
 He'll 'cept you like you is.

SONNY
 That's a lie.

MISS YADWIGHA
 Well, brotha . . . I'd like to pray wit' you, if I might.

SONNY
 Alright. Pray.

MISS YADWIGHA
Wit' you, friend.

SONNY
 I don't know how. You go ahead.

MISS YADWIGHA
 I see you have doubts on prayin'.

SONNY
 I have *sense*. And if that ain't sufficient I might as well be left alone to court my misery.

MISS YADWIGHA
 Well, brother, at least . . . at least 'low me to wash y' feet.

SONNY
What?

MISS YADWIGHA
 Many Christians n' glect the impo'tance of washing another's feet. The very act is humbling. And shows love.

SONNY
 Listen, I don't mean no disrespect, but –

MISS YADWIGHA
 Wha's yo' name?

SONNY
 My name is Sonny.

MISS YADWIGHA
 Well, Sonny, please – PLEASE – 'low me to wash y' feet. Lemme serve you. Lemme bring y' peace.

(Silence as he considers)

SONNY
 Crazy ol' woman.

(He allows her in)

MISS YADWIGHA
 D' y' have a basin?

(Sonny points to a basin. Yadwigha fills the basin with warm water and then takes up a bar of soap. She goes to Sonny)

Now siddown. And take y' shoes and y' socks off.

(He does so. She kneels and begins washing his feet)

I'm sho you heard the story in da Bible of the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears. Then dried 'em wit' her hair.

(She continues washing)

Where you from?

SONNY

I was born in Baltimore.

MISS YADWIGHA

What b'ought you down here?

SONNY

The Marines.

MISS YADWIGHA

F' sho?

SONNY

Yep! I'd been in France during the war. I got orders to a base here when it ended. I got out and found I liked the place. So, I stayed.

MISS YADWIGHA

I see. You fought in da war! I'm 'pressed. And you fought in France!

SONNY

That's right. What about you?

MISS YADWIGHA

Me? Oh, there ain't much t' me, at-all. Le's say I've always . . . been here. And leave it at dat.

(She finishes the foot washing and dries his feet)

Riva took yo' brand new car. And you done come to miss 'er. Even more 'n that damn car. Ain't that right?

SONNY

I ain't making it my business to *miss* nobody. Riva's coming back. *With* my car! Might not be today, might not be tomorrow, but – Wait a minute: *how'd you know her name?*

MISS YADWIGHA

She's ain't coming back, Sonny.

SONNY

And how'd you know about –

MISS YADWIGHA

She quite suited to where she at.

SONNY

Which is?

MISS YADWIGHA

It's sho typical for a man to uncover th' love what burned f' his woman. That is, once she gone.

SONNY

Where is my wife? And where is my car?

MISS YADWIGHA

You know, I b'lieve a man such as yo'self'd be more suited to a Cad'llac than a Oldsmobile, don't you think?

(He rises and advances toward her. She stops him with a kiss on his hand)

Ev'rything's fine, Sonny. And I understand. B'lieve me, I do.

Riva's in Memphis. Livin' good! A free woman! And quite diff'ent from the long-suffering wench what married you.

SONNY

Where in Memphis?

MISS YADWIGHA

She at the Peabody. Livin' as a kept woman.

SONNY

And the car?

MISS YADWIGHA

Riva sold dat car.

(Sonny reacts)

And I am sorry.

SONNY

Sure. Now, what I'd like to know –

MISS YADWIGHA

Please, you don't need t' dig up nothin' else 'bout me. It wouldn't do you no good, no how. Just go to y' wife. And, Sonny, do not be surprised to see her *lackin' color*.

SONNY

Lacking color? What are you talking about?

MISS YADWIGHA

Sister Thea done slapped a mojo on that child. And in the wrong way, it seems.

(She laughs, then exits. Fade on Sonny)

(Lights rise on US limbo. We hear Robert Johnson moan. Samuel watches Thea moaning along and working an incantation. Hellhounds howl in the distance. A bell tolls. Riva lies in bed, asleep in a seedy Memphis hotel room)

SISTER THEA

Listen to the dogs, Riva. Hear them! Wheresoever you are, you can't hide. Them dogs will find you. They will come for you – come for your life. Tear through that life. Tear through to death.

(Miss Yadwigha appears above, dancing with the incantation. Soon after, Robert Billings and Pastor Baines appear, dancing cheek to cheek to low moaning blues. Riva begins to stir)

Like the devil, you will run. You will try to hide . . . hearing the howling of the dogs . . . and fall dead into the black night. Fall to death.

(Slowly, Riva rises)

You can't hide from them dogs, Riva. All who hear the dogs tremble. They moan and they tremble! They tremble in the dark. They tremble before that black death.

(Thea takes the pouch of black dust from between her breasts. She pours a small amount in her opened hand)

Look out for the dust! This wicked dust! It will curse you!

(Thea begins a haunted dance around Riva)

Curse you, Riva! Curse you!

RIVA

How did you find me?

(Paster Baines and Robert Billings fade suddenly, as does Yadwigha. Thea stops dancing. The howling ceases)

SISTER THEA

I won't looking for you. This dust found you! And it's gon git you!

(She blows the dust in her hand at Riva, who has grabbed a blanket from the bed, covering herself in an attempt to deflect it)

Too late. Covering yourself won't help. Me and this dust done got you! And it's gon CURSE YOU!

(A short pause, then the blanket falls. The dust has transformed Riva into a white woman)

RIVA

You crazy ol' HEIFER! What did you do?

I – I don't know . . . Oh, Lord!

SISTER THEA

You call this a CURSE?

RIVA

I reckon. I – I s'pose.

SISTER THEA

(Riva looks at yourself, trying to comprehend it all. At first, she is terrified)

Goddamn you, Thea!

RIVA

(Then, slowly . . . she begins to change – then laugh)

Oh, Lord! . . . Lord HELP ME!!

(The laughter build until it is uncontrollable)

Well, what's the matter, Thea? Ain't nothin' to be scared of. *I ain't gon bite you!*

(She relents to mad, hysterical laughter)

(Blackout)

(Slow, sensuous music rises. Samuel and Riva emerge from the darkness, dancing slowly. She is now a beautiful white woman, wearing a long silk gown, jewelry and high-heeled slippers)

SAMUEL

Do you still hear the hell hounds?

RIVA

Yes, I do. And ain't it odd that not a one has so much as come to lick my toes?

SAMUEL

Perhaps you should go to Thea and try to dissuade her from all that wickedness. She was your friend once. A friend who offered help. When no one else would have wanted to know.

RIVA

In other words, you'd like me to make peace?

SAMUEL

It wouldn't hurt.

RIVA

Well, I have nothing to say to that bitch. Except to thank her. For doing me a favor.

SAMUEL

For the fact that Sonny will never find you now?

(She laughs as lights now rise in a deluxe hotel suite at The Peabody Hotel in Memphis. Riva goes to prepare the drinks)

RIVA

That car won't as easy to unload as I'd thought. I came to see that nobody'd think to deal in such a way with some po' colored woman.

(She hands him a drink. Music fades)

I went back to the same car lot. And, don't you know, the salesman – this time – wasted not a minute in paying me a very handsome price. Then I went and treated myself to steak dinner at a “whites only” restaurant on the high side of town. And I won't but half done with my meal before a man who looked just like Errol Flynn offered to take my check. We drank . . . or, how do they say? . . . *we had drinks* . . . after. And it won't long before every other white man at the bar wanted to bathe me in liquor.

(She laughs)

One thing would lead to another and . . . well: this fine hotel suite? One or two senators and a judge take care of that. In the garage downstairs you'll see a shiny new Oldsmobile convertible with a long hood –

SAMUEL

Just like Sonny's, except his was blue.

RIVA

This one's red. And it's mine! Courtesy of the mayor. I have a white ermine coat from a big-time criminal defense lawyer – dresses, hats and enough shoes for a herd of wild horses paid for by my Memphis Mafia boyfriends . . .

(She giggles)

. . . a black sable stole from the son of a rich department store *heiress* – oh, yes! And the gift of a pearl neckless from the heiress herself!

SAMUEL

Herself?

RIVA

Uh huh. One look at me . . . and the woman damn near melted in her sweat.

(She revels in laughter. Then –)

Lord, help me! But I could get used to being . . . cursed.

SAMUEL

I fear you now, Riva.

RIVA

Why? When this is all *your* doing.

SAMUEL

What?

RIVA

That's right! I would not have taken so well to being put on this road of sin had it not been for you. As said, I could not bring myself to have a man before you, Samuel. Sonny could only hurt me. After keeping company with you, though, I at last understood what a man who knew how to work what was below his beltline could do for a woman. I partook of your sweetness, baby. And now . . . I'm spoiled!

(She begins to laugh)

Who would've known after all this time that you were the *devil*, f' sho!

(Again, she laughs hysterically. It is soon cut short with the abrupt, wicked cackle of Thea. The set changes to the crossroads, the area behind the little juke, which has

since been burned down. Thea stands
before the now dead Angel Oak Tree)

SISTER THEA

Well, would you look at here! I was wondering when you was gon show up.
You already got Robert Johnson. And now somebody else stands in that place
at the crossroads, fixin' to make their bargain, too.

SAMUEL

You've got it all wrong.

THEA

Say what now?

SAMUEL

There was nothing to that story at-all. I can't do nothing for nobody.

SISTER THEA

So, Robert Johnson told a lie?

SAMUEL

As big as they come, I'd say.

THEA

Well, ain't that somethin'! And ain't you somethin', too, Miss Riva! As fine
and pink as you'd want to be.

RIVA

Thanks to you.

SISTER THEA

Wait till Sonny beholds you, girl.

RIVA

He won't get the opportunity. Besides, I'm not studying Sonny.

SISTER THEA

Well, let me say this change, or whatever you want to call it, let me tell you – it
won't be none for the better.

RIVA

It suits me well enough.

SISTER THEA

You think this is gon keep the law off you? For killing Robert?

RIVA

Aside from the fact that Robert had the bad luck of being a sissy and aside from the fact that it made me feel good, no – I don't think I'll have to run from the law, at-all. At least, not in my present condition.

SISTER THEA

You just grew into your wickedness, didn't you?

RIVA

I'll take wickedness over being dead.

SISTER THEA

Well, I'm glad you makin' this easy: I'm fixing to get back at you, girl.

(She reveals the pouch of dust)

RIVA

And are you planning on getting the spell right this time?

SISTER THEA

When I behold your insides rotting out of your nose, oh, yes!

SAMUEL

And this would please you?

SISTER THEA

I'll be satisfied.

RIVA

Thea, I'm sorry about Fred. And I had no way of knowing –

SISTER THEA

Nobody did. And it's how we wanted it.

RIVA

Your husband lived two lives. How could a woman stomach something such as that?

SISTER THEA

The fact that you and the world didn't understand never mattered a wit to me. We had an arrangement – a sweet arrangement! Fred and I had found peace. I accepted his condition. And he loved and abided with me. What we had, Riva, you destroyed. You brought pain into our home which my better half has since succumbed to. Now somebody has got to answer for his parting.

SAMUEL

Let me. I . . . I will pay the price.

SISTER THEA

How?

SAMUEL

I'll – I'll think of something.

SISTER THEA

You'll stay out of it, is what you'll do.

RIVA

Listen, Thea: whatever spell is cast can never hurt me.

(Distant sound of barking is heard)

SISTER THEA

You done made a deal with your devil, anyhow, I see?

SAMUEL

No. I'm not the devil you think me to be.

SISTER THEA

Is there another kind?

SAMUEL

Miss Thea, I can protect nothing.

SISTER THEA

Then what *can* you do? And for that matter, why are you even here?

SAMUEL

I'm only . . . running.

SISTER THEA

Running? Now ain't this a knock upside the head. Done finally came to the fork in the road, standing eyeball to nose with the devil himself, and come to find him as useless as a mule put out to stud.

RIVA

Take your dust and go home, Thea. I'll say it again – Fred wouldn't want any of this. And you know it.

SISTER THEA

Oh, quit begging for mercy.

RIVA

To hell with you, then, you silly old bitch! I won't live to beg. And you can't scare me.

SISTER THEA

Gon play it tough, huh? Suit y'self!

(She opens the pouch. The sound of barking swells, then explodes into a cacophony of yelps, screeches and moans. Thea covers her ears)

RIVA

Call them off, Thea! Stop this! PLEASE!

SISTER THEA

NO! No . . . you . . . you took my . . . you took – Oh, DAMN YOU, RIVA! GODDAMN YOU –

(Thea is now on her knees, screaming in agony)

RIVA

You ain't got to go like this.

SISTER THEA

What do it matter? Whatsoever happens to me . . . you still gon get yours! Miss Riva might've got away . . . but, she sure as shit ain't getting by!

(She tries pouring dust into her hand yet spills it on herself. Thea screams, then is engulfed by a sudden flash of fire. When the flames and the smoke have cleared, we see that Thea has been transformed into a toad. Croaking is heard)

RIVA

Still couldn't get that dust to work right. Poor thing.

SAMUEL

You tried to tell her.

(Riva steps closer toward the toad)

RIVA

I'm going home. After all that, I need a drink and a long, hot bath.

(She turns, and Sonny appears holding a gun. Lights fade on Samuel watching the toad hop offstage. The scene changes back to the hotel suite. Sonny is still holding a gun on Riva)

SONNY

I'll be damned!

RIVA

You should be so lucky.

SONNY

And I'll take that luck and live in that damnation, baby doll. Yes, Lord! A cat could live ninety-nine years and never know the thought of seeing what my eyes behold.

RIVA

I'm happy you're impressed.

SONNY

My Riva –

RIVA

Miss Riva, to you.

SONNY

Excuse me! Done went on and forgot my manners in the presence of a *white* woman. And one that smells like new money, at that.

RIVA

Is that all you want, man? Money?

SONNY

You think you can buy the nigger off?

RIVA

If you like, I could call the po-lice. And see how that suits you.

SONNY

Sure! Go ahead! With all the cards in your favor, ain't no limit to what you can drag me through now.

RIVA

Sonny, I'll – I'll give you the chance to go. Unharmmed.

SONNY

Unharmmed? Something as lowdown as me? After telling the doorman, in fact, that I was damn near your servant? And calling me *boy*? “Oh, that's fine, Hubert. The *boy*'s coming up to do some work for me.”

RIVA

You had a gun at my back.

SONNY

Tell me something: where'd you learn them white ways? “Gone With The Wind”?

RIVA

I only learned to be myself. That's the extent of it.

SONNY

Well, shit! You mean all this time I been putting my size eleven up Scarlet O'Hara's ass?

RIVA

Look, Sonny, if it's what you want, go on downstairs, take the car and leave. We both know it's why you're here.

SONNY

You figure the car is gon settle this?

RIVA

It won't about nothing but that godforsaken car! That, and *you*, you gut-groveling dog! You ain't fit to pee on! And if I had a gun, I'd plant ten bullets in your narrow heart, niggah! Now gon 'bout your rotten business and let me be!

SONNY

I see turning white's done made you crazy or put some fire in your gullet.

RIVA

Just like being a pathetic ass makes you one black brokedick mutherfucker!

(Sonny slaps her. Riva laughs)

You know how long I've wanted to say that? *To you?*

(He goes to the bar and prepares a drink)

SONNY

This old white thing came to the house the other day. Preaching the Bible. Offered to wash my feet. Said it was Christian. Ain't that something? Said the washing of feet was what church folks didn't do enough of. Anyhow, I went on and let the ol' woman in to do her business. While she was washing, she got to talking. And what do you know – she mentioned your name. Even knew where you was and what *condition* you was in. Imagine that.

RIVA

I haven't the darkest clue as to what you're talking about.

SONNY

Alright, then. Play it ignorant.

(He drinks)

RIVA

Now, *you* tell me: how does this wind up? You plan to take that car and drive off into the Memphis sunset? Or do you plan to kill me first?

SONNY

I can't stand no red car. It's why my Oldsmobile was blue. You know this.

RIVA

I guess that narrows it down, doesn't it?

SONNY

That's right. I'm here to slap the death sentence on you, bitch.

RIVA

They'll put you in the gas chamber, man.

SONNY

For knocking off some no 'count white minx?

RIVA

You idiot! Look in the mirror and ask yourself, is it worth it? Or do you care?

SONNY

I can't say. And I'm being honest.

RIVA

Well, I don't know. Maybe you're more of a man than I'd thought you were.

SONNY

Man enough to settle a score without even poppin' a sweat? Oh, yeah! I'd stand on that.

RIVA

You make it all sound so reasonable.

SONNY

You know I ain't never been no reasonable man.

RIVA

Maybe you need to start.

SONNY

And maybe you need to stop putting off the inevitable.

RIVA

And then what? You'll go home and brag to whoever will listen about how you took care of that ol' black wench who wronged you, is that it?

SONNY

Black wench? What black wench? . . . Where the black wench at? I don't see nothin' black.

RIVA

Of course, not. What you see is a white consolation prize.

(She rises and steps temptingly toward him. Samuel appears)

SONNY

Scarlet O'Hara?

RIVA

If that's what you want.

(She kisses him. He laughs)

Please, don't laugh.

Miss Riva –
SONNY

No, just . . . Riva. That will do.
RIVA

Fine.
SONNY

(He pushes her away and shoots her. She falls to the floor, dead. He then goes to her purse and takes the car keys)

I believe I will take that car, come to think on it.

(He finishes his drink and exits)

(A lone hell-hound howls as Samuel enters and observes Riva's body. He kneels and lifts her tenderly)

My Riva. My . . . sweet Riva.
SAMUEL

(He kisses her)

You *were* the only one. I see that now.

(A tear falls from his face. He is shaken, then smiles mournfully, acknowledging the gravity of his loss. The set then changes. We are beneath a starlit night sky. Yadvigha hovers above, backed by an ominous glow)

You win, Miss Yadvigha. I'm finished. I cede everything. And I stand accused.

(Samuel lays Riva on the ground, then bows before Yadvigha. The howling fades)

She meant a lot to you, didn't she?
MISS YADWIGHA

SAMUEL

Plenty. More than any other. More than a lover, even.

MISS YADWIGHA

We'd been lovers once.

SAMUEL

Lovers? Are you sure about that?

(Silence)

MISS YADWIGHA

What are you proposing?

SAMUEL

I refuse to spin myself into butter and argue right versus wrong with you. All I want is to quit running and return home. I'll not bother you with my presence where you live – that place is yours. Let me stay in the underworld. Allow me to claim it as my own. There will be others – my subjects – but I will do nothing to stir them. I plan to live with my brethren and keep my mouth shut. You'll have no trouble from them, for as long as I may have influence over them. They will listen to me, Yadwigha – *Miss* Yadwigha.

MISS YADWIGHA

You're telling me you'd convince them to do nothing?

SAMUEL

Against you, no – nothing at all. And something else – the juke . . .

MISS YADWIGHA

You want it restored.

(He nods)

That place is nothing but a cesspool –

SAMUEL

Fine. No one will see it as anything more than that.

MISS YADWIGHA

And I suppose you'll want something for her, too.

SAMUEL

I need Riva *as she was*.

MISS YADWIGHA

Sans the curse?

(Again, Samuel nods)

That's a pity. She looked awfully delicious as her new self –

SAMUEL

I need her as she was. And she will live as my queen.

MISS YADWIGHA

My goodness! You *are* in love.

SAMUEL

Come, now. You and I . . . we never had a chance. Admit it.

(Silence)

MISS YADWIGHA

Alright. You'll stay in the underworld and rule with your . . . your queen –

SAMUEL

And keep out of your business. For good.

MISS YADWIGHA

If I didn't know better, I'd say you were humoring me.

SAMUEL

I'm out of your business for good, my dear. That's a promise.

MISS YADWIGHA

But you are so weak, Samuel.

SAMUEL

Yes. There comes a time, though, when even the weak realize that they, too, must stand, live and walk upright as humans.

MISS YADWIGHA

You impress me after all.

SAMUEL

Then we're okay?

MISS YADWIGHA

You are at last willing to stand accused. You've learned your lesson. The hard way, of course, but learned, nonetheless. And that pleases me.

The war will cease, but the illusion, the lies, the false accusations . . . they will stand: I see no reason in allowing the blind to see. You'll have your juke, as putrid and sordid as it is. As for you and I baby – it's all settled. You no longer have anything to run from or worry over. Hence forth, you'll sleep and live well . . . you and your queen.

You've come to terms with who runs things. And, with that, you are blessed in witnessing how everything falls into place.

Now don't you feel better, my darling?

(Yadwigha dissolves into the light as Riva rouses and awakens)

RIVA

Bitch.

SAMUEL

Quiet! She'll hear you!

(Black out)

(Lights rise in the underworld. Two ornate thrones are placed side by side, facing out. Samuel appears from behind SR throne. He looks immaculate in a long, shimmering cape, leather pants, boots, jewelry, et al)

SAMUEL

Sonny took the car and went on home to Millie and to the Whitlow sisters. And kept on with their "arrangement."

A year rolled by, and Millie would grow quite tired of Sonny. She wanted him out of her face, but he wasn't having it. He'd park outside her house at night and sit for hours on end, worrying the woman to the point of wanting him dead, which she'd take care of soon enough when Sonny burnt Buster's down, the juke she'd built with her life. She'd shoot him at the Whitlow girls house in their presence one evening.

(Lights rise on Sonny reclining in an easy chair at the Whitlow sisters house, pulling from a bottle of liquor. Millie suddenly bursts in with a drawn shotgun and fires into his chest. Sonny drops the bottle,

futilely gasping for air. Millie turns and exits)

While Sonny agonized in his blood, the girls would pack, take what money he had in his pocket, and leave . . . with the car.

Soon after, an old woman would come into the house . . .

(An old woman enters, her head, face and upper body covered in a black cloak)

. . . whom Sonny believed to be the woman who'd washed his feet that day . . .

(She turns to Sonny, her back to the audience, then lifts the shroud and bares her face to him. He reacts in horror as lights fade on the scene)

. . . and who would be the last face he'd see while breathing.

(Riva steps from behind the SL throne as her former self. She is an absolute knockout in an elegant, revealing evening gown and high heels, her hair set to perfection)

Yes, I conceded to Miss Yadwigha and convinced her – more or less – that I had finally come around and was willing to accept guilt, however false the charges were. So, if there is a moral to this tale . . . perhaps it would be that, yes – *even God can be humored.*

(Samuel steps over and kisses Riva, then helps her to the throne)

RIVA

Awfully high up here.

SAMUEL

You're the queen. You've got to keep an eye on things.

RIVA

I thought I was s'posed to watch you.

SAMUEL

There are those who will see to that.

(Samuel now takes his place on his throne. Silence as they savor the moment)

I hear Sister Thea's her old self again.

RIVA

Yep. Back to working for the church.

SAMUEL

Hmph.

RIVA

Even Robert has found comfort.

SAMUEL

Yes. He and the Pastor dance. And are at peace.

RIVA

And who is that?

SAMUEL

Oh, that's Lilith. She's a child, now. Playing and dancing around that old Angel Oak Tree.

By the way – you're beautiful.

RIVA

Thank you.

SAMUEL

Are you happy to be here?

RIVA

In hell? Cheek to cheek with the devil?

(She laughs. Samuel soon joins in, laughing with Riva for a moment, then silence)

Looks like we had it wrong about you. 'Bout all of it.

SAMUEL

Hmm.

RIVA

But . . . I got what I wanted, after all. It took dying to get it, but I sure got it!

We both did. For me, a queen.

SAMUEL

And for me . . . a *man*.

RIVA

A *Lady*.

SAMUEL

And a *Tramp*.

RIVA

(They kiss)

Amen.

(Samuel and Riva laugh. Robert Johnson plays “Me & The Devil Blues” as lights fade)

(End of Play)

