

MISSING CELIA ROSE

A PLAY BY IAN AUGUST

EXCERPT

MISSING CELIA ROSE

SETTING: The town of Harlan – Located in the Appalachians, South Western Georgia

TIME: May 1921 – September 1921

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

GEOFFREY PITTS – Young man, white (an actor in his twenties to play a child of 12)

HENRY PITTS – Geoffrey’s father, white, mid thirties to early forties

JUNEY PITTS – Geoffrey’s mother, white, mid thirties to early forties

CELIA ROSE RICHARDS – the Reverend’s wife, black, mid thirties to late forties

REVEREND BUDDY RICHARDS – the Local Baptist minister, black, mid thirties to late forties

AGATHA JOHNSTON – Local Schoolmistress, white, mid fifties

TABITHA “TAFFY” PRULL – Young girl, black (an actor in her twenties to play a child of 12)

AMYRILLIS PECKNEY – Older Woman, black, 60s *

PEONIE HEMLOCK – Older Woman, black, 60s *

POPPIE MAE BLINKS – Older Woman, white, 60s *

* Note: Can be portrayed by younger actresses playing older.

ACT ONE:

(The scene is 1921 Georgia, in a small struggling town called Harlan. The stage is set minimally--set pieces can move on and off, but the story can easily be told through subtle lighting changes.)

ONE: FIRE SKY

(GEOFFREY PITTS enters and addresses the audience directly. He is a young white man, possibly in his early twenties. This story is told entirely through his perspective--but although the play is entirely in flashback, *he should not be portrayed by a 12 year-old boy*. HENRY and JUNEY PITTS enter as well, stand behind him on either side of the stage. HENRY is a handsome white man in his late thirties/early forties; JUNEY is an attractive white woman slightly younger than her husband. They are GEOFFREY's parents.)

GEOFFREY:

We lived with baby's breath on the side of the road.

When the letter come for Pa the night sky was red. Up through the boughs of the trees in the back yard you could see it glowing. We stood there, and the wind was rough, and the trees bent like young men kissin' the hands of they sweethearts, and about a million golden leaves swirlin' high around our heads. My father, he cut his own tobacco from a little patch by the brook, and tapped his pipe bowl on the inside of his foot--like this--and he looked up and he said

HENRY:

Ya see that, Geoffrey? My pappy useta call that a Fire Sky. Said that God pulls a day outta every Autumn to remind us of the blood that was spent gettin' us here, and the blood that was lost showin' us the way.

GEOFFREY:

My Pa could get lost inside-a his head. Pappy was a fighter for the Gray back in the War Atween the States. I know it cause Momma told me so. Said Pappy would never much care for the way we lived in Harlan.

JUNEY:

Georgia ain't never meant to be this way, Henry. Ask anybody. They tell you what's what.

GEOFFREY:

My Pa'd turn and say

HENRY:

We all livin' together, Juney. We all got to do what's right by the Lord.

GEOFFREY:

If he could say it quick and short then it was worth sayin'. Momma would cry and go feed Nathan. Pa would stroke his beardless chin and sit with me in the porch swing and look up at the stars through the holes in the leaves. His hands were scarred and blistered from workin' over at Mr. Casey's lumber mill. I never loved another man so much in my life. That night with the Fire Sky was the first night I ever thought of the end of my childhood. Nathan had just got his second tooth. The leaves was just startin' to fall from the trees. I developed a taste for carrots. It was September 1921, I was twelve years old, and everything was changin'.

(the sound of CELIA ROSE humming "I'm Troubled in Mind" begins)

JUNEY:

Henry... Sherriff Lloyd is here. He says he got somethin' for ya. Says ya might want to walk with him a minute.

HENRY:

Lloyd's here? What is it?

JUNEY:

I dunno, Henry, better go and see.

(HENRY moves to exit, JUNEY stops him)

Henry--?

HENRY:

Yes?

(she stops herself from continuing, turns, and exits. HENRY watches her, and then exits the other direction)

GEOFFREY:

He was gone for a long time. Momma called me in from lookin' at the Fire Sky and she made me wash up and get to bed. I could hear Nathan breathin' in the crib next to me, his little wheezy sounds only broken by the sing-songy chirp of the crickets. I drifted off to sleep, nice and peaceful, and then woke up in the middle of the night. I could hear somebody sobbin', cryin' outside my window. It was Pa, bent over the back stoop, his head in one hand, sprig of baby's breath in the other. Below him, a piece of writin' paper lay crumbled in the dirt at his feet. But above him, the sky was still red--from the blood that was spent gettin' us here, and the blood that was lost showin' us the way.

TWO: THE HENS

(The HENS enter, one after another after another. There are two old black women—AMYRILLIS, then PEONIE—and one old white woman—POPPIE MAE with a cane)

AMYRILLIS:
Didja hear?

PEONIE:
Didja hear?

POPPIE MAE:
Hear whut?

GEOFFREY:
That very next day all of Harlan was a buzzin' with the tragic news.

AMYRILLIS:
Why, the reverend's wife!

PEONIE:
You know the reverend's wife—sweet thang--

POPPIE MAE:
Yeh I do, but whut's the news!

GEOFFREY:
I was sent to Chauncey's General Store for some corn meal and some butter, and the three Hens of Harlan cornered me lookin' at Chauncey's home made peppermints. Amyrillis Peckney, Peonie Hemlock and Poppie Mae Blinks.

AMYRILLIS:
Geoffrey, now I know you ain't eavesdroppin' on us.

PEONIE:
Honey, you ain't old enough to be conversatin' with us.

POPPIE MAE:
You *is* gonna tell me, isn't you?

AMYRILLIS:
Well,
I hear from Minnie over by the Kennys' that the reverend's wife--

PEONIE:

Poor Reverend Buddy--

AMYRILLIS:

that she done took the keys to his shiny new automobile

PEONIE:

Poor Reverend Buddy's automobile--

AMYRILLIS:

And done drove it out of town--

PEONIE:

Went all the way to Macon to get it, he did--

AMYRILLIS:

And now she long gone.

PEONIE:

Rubber burnt up the side of the road.

GEOFFREY:

Didn't matter if you was white black brown or nothin', gossip was gossip in Harlan.

POPPIE MAE:

I don't believe it, don't believe it none atall. Why, Missus Celia Rose was a goodly, kind-hearted lady.

AMYRILLIS:

Don't doubt it, Poppie Mae, I don't doubt it a whit. *But--*

PEONIE:

And this is quite a *but*, child--

AMYRILLIS:

Minnie done tole me that they found the car run off the road--

PEONIE:

Down the side of Juniper Bluff--

AMYRILLIS:

All smashed up into a tree--

PEONIE:

And ain't nobody found no body inside the wreck!

GEOFFREY:

Whut?

POPPIE MAE:

Lord amighty above! That's terribull sad!

GEOFFREY:

It can't be true--Missy Amyrillis--

AMYRILLIS:

Now you know you ain't supposed to be sneakin' a listen on good people's talk, boy.

PEONIE:

But it sho is true. Sherriff Lloyd jes confirmed it this morning.

GEOFFREY:

(dropping everything, running off stage) Taffy! Taffy!

PEONIE:

That child ain't got a little sense.

AMYRILLIS:

Gets it from his daddy.

POPPIE MAE:

(starting to weep) Oh, poor Geoffrey. Poor Reverend Buddy. Poor Celia Rose.

THREE: HARLAN

(The HENS are frozen in tableau upstage, GEOFFREY enters and speaks to the audience)

GEOFFREY:

The town of Harlan Georgia didn't hold three hundred people. If it did, we would have busted wide open for all the world to see. We was small, we was out in the north hills of Upson County, far from the big cities and the cloud of smoke and wheels that was overtakin' the nation. We had one road into town, and that was the same road outta town. A curvy, dangerous stretch of gravel and rock that wound over Juniper Bluff and down into valleys and dales unseen by most of Harlan. We was small, we was modest, and fifty years after the War Atween the States, we was pretty unchanged in our ways.

TAFFY:

(off stage) Geoffey! You in there?

GEOFFREY:

Ya see, when the war ended, there were a lotta Southern white folk with no homes-- Wilson's Federal Cavalry swept through Upson County in 1865, destroyin' all the textile plants and burnin' cotton and tobacco plantations alike. But doubly on that, most o' the black folk round here also ain't had no homes on account that they lived with the white folk. Fer whutever reason, alla us homeless folk done stumble up the mountainside and end up here in Harlan.

(TAFFY enters--she is a twelve year old black girl and GEOFFREY's best friend)

TAFFY:

(rushing in, speaking over GEOFFREY's last line) Geoffey! Geoffey, you ain't never gonna believe--

(The HENS cross down and walk across the stage, GEOFFREY watches them, but still addresses the audience. TAFFY stands politely by and curtsies to each one in passing)

TAFFY:

Ma'am. Ma'am. Miss Poppie Mae, ma'am.

GEOFFREY:

So whut if white and black don't mix in the outside world. This ain't the outside world. We all don't have the luxury of not gettin' along. My Pa's white, an he work for Mr. Casey who's a colored man. And Ol' Man Jenkins is black, and he helps the stock out back of Chauncey's General Store. We got one school, one church, one store and one mill, and that suits us just fine. The rest of Georgia don't got no part in our business, and we ain't got no part in theirs.

Of course, some people's feelings are rooted deeper than mine.

TAFFY:

(watching the HENS leave) Oh, I sure wish I had a green hat like that.

GEOFFREY:

This is Taffy. Her real name is Tabitha but I couldn't say it when we was growin' up so's I just called her Taffy. And it stuck.

TAFFY:

Ohmigod, Geoffey--(panicky) Whuddya know?

GEOFFREY:

Whuddya know first?

TAFFY:

My momma say that Mrs. Celia Rose done run off with Reverend Buddy's new motorcar!

GEOFFREY:

I jes heard the same thing from the Hens.

TAFFY:

So is it true?

GEOFFREY:

We should go ask the reverend.

TAFFY:

Think a second, fool! If his motorcar is gone, and his wife is gone, whut makes you think he gonna just tell you all about it? "Please Geoffrey, come on in for a bit of lemonade and lemme tell you all about my missing wife and my missing car." You so stupid.

GEOFFREY:

I guess yer right.

TAFFY:

Let's go ask your daddy. He's good friends with the Sherriff.

GEOFFREY:

I don't think that's a great idea, Taffy.

TAFFY:

Well, then, what do we do?

GEOFFREY:

(remembering) Oh dammit! I fergot to get the corn meal and butter for my momma! She's gonna kill me dead.

TAFFY:

(sniffing) Heh. Yer momma.

GEOFFREY:

And whut's wrong with my momma?

TAFFY:

She don't like me none. That's all. And I got a itchin' to not like her either.

GEOFFREY:

Go-wan! *Go-wan!* Yer off yer--Yer off yer gourd. My momma likes you jes fine.

TAFFY:

Y'all'r so stupid.

GEOFFREY:

Shutup. You. Jes shutup.

TAFFY:

Why don't we ask Miss Agatha?

GEOFFREY:

Cuz I don't like *her* none. That's why.

TAFFY:

But she knows ever'thing bout ever'thing, Geoffey. She do--Come on!

(TAFFY races off)

FOUR: PENANCE

GEOFFREY:

(disdainfully) Miss Agatha.

(AGATHA enters. She is a white woman in her early fifties, although she dresses as though she is much older than she is. Her hair is pulled up into a tight gray bun atop her head, and her glasses hang from her neck with a long chain. She also wears a crucifix on a silver chain. She is holding a book, but not reading it.)

Ole White Miss Johnston, as she's known by her pupils. We only got one school in Harlan and Miss Johnston runs it. Teaches all the grades in one big room, has for years. Only the meanest, nastiest, stinkiest schoolmarm that ever was, I'm sure. She once took a switch to me for droppin' my books on the ground--

AGATHA:

I know you are not talkin' when you're supposed to be readin' your Holy Bible, Mister Pitts.

GEOFFREY:

No ma'am.

(whispering to the audience) Rumor has it that Ole White Miss Johnston's granddaddy ran a tobacco plantation near Thomaston afore the war. And with the first sign of trouble, Miss Johnston's daddy grabbed her and as much valuables as they could stuff in the linings of their coats and followed the crowds of homeless up the side of Juniper Bluff to settle here in Harlan. They paid a lotta people to build her big ole house at the eastern part of town. And then loaned out a bunch of moneys to have people start up they own businesses. Course, that means that their businesses are really her businesses. Chauncey's and the mill and Mrs. Bartlett's bakery and the barber and the smithys—they're really Ole White Miss Johnston's properties. Well, that's the rumor.

AGATHA:

And whut, praytell, do we do with rumors, Geoffrey?

GEOFFREY:

(reciting) "Don't pay rumors no mind, because mindin' rumors don't pay."

AGATHA:

And you're gonna write that how many times?

GEOFFREY:

A hundred and fifty, Miss Johnston.

AGATHA:

And I'm gonna tell your momma whut?

GEOFFREY:

(beneath his breath) That you just a crazy skinny white witch.

AGATHA:

(slamming her book closed) Whut was that?

GEOFFREY:

That you didn't have to give me the switch?

AGATHA:

Keep it up, boy, and we'll jes see bout that.

GEOFFREY:

(back to audience) But if Miss Agatha Johnston ruled Harlan's pockets, it was another figure altogether who held Harlan's souls.

(organ music pipes in)

Reverend Buddy Richards.

(REVEREND BUDDY enters, tall, black and handsome--he's in his mid forties, but has the charisma of a man in his early twenties. Charming to the core. He's followed by the HENS, who all enter, shaking his hand vigorously as though a sermon has just let out, and then exiting across the other end of the stage)

You see, Reverend Buddy ran the little Baptist Church at the west end of town. He called it the First Baptist of Harlan, which was only funny cause their never was no Second Baptist of Harlan. But Reverend Buddy... He had a smile like nobody's bizness and a pair of hands just itchin' to shake yours. Smooth and brown and strong. I heard Mr. Bartlett say that Reverend Buddy got the wisdom of an ole hounddog and the fire of a wolf pup in him.

Course that didn't make no difference to me. Least not when I was up to my knickers in hot water.

REVEREND BUDDY:

Geoffrey, my boy--come here, son, come here.

GEOFFREY:

Yessir.

REVEREND BUDDY:

Answer me this, Geoffrey. You and your Ma an your Pa an your baby brother come up to my church nigh every Sunday, right?

GEOFFREY:

Yessir.

REVEREND BUDDY:

And every Sunday, right as rain, I'm up on that pulpit extollin' the Glory of the Lord, ain't I?

GEOFFREY:

Yessir.

REVEREND BUDDY:

So you know that when the Lord's praises are bein' sang that it ain't appropriate for nobody to be... how I say this... pokin' at people in the back pews with a stick.

GEOFFREY:

It's jes that Taffy was pullin' on my sleeve, Reverend Buddy--

REVEREND BUDDY:

Now I won't be the first to tell you that Miss Tabitha works herself very hard to get you all riled up, even though she done it before...

GEOFFREY:

But I was jes--

REVEREND BUDDY:

Only every week that ya'll set together. And that's nearly every week. And nearly every week I have to set y'all aside and talk to yer mommas bout your bad behavior, but this week... this week I thought I'd save you a strappin'. So here's whut I'm a-gonna do for you.

MISS AGATHA:

Now mind how you're writin', Geoffrey, lest you get too sloppy for the page. I want this neat, ya hear me? Pristine. Mind your margins.

REVEREND BUDDY:

From this day on--every day, after Miss Agatha lets you outta her classes, you're gonna report to the rectory out in the back. And every day, in the sun, in the rain, if the devil blows snow through the Georgia valleys, you're gonna be working your hardest--for me, for your congregation and for your everlastin' peace in Heaven. Do I make myself clear?

MISS AGATHA:

I see your hand shakin'. You stop now you'll be writin' a hundred-fifty more. I mean it, Mister Pitts.

REVEREND BUDDY:

We got us a plot of land in the back of the Church, Geoffrey. A plot of land rich with soil and richer with soul. Now I know that this is only April, but I can think of a good way

for you to spend your summer months. And you, Geoffrey--are you listenin' to me, Geoffrey? You, Geoffrey Pitts, are gonna turn our little plot of love into the Lord's own garden.

MISS AGATHA:

And I'll keep you here as long as I see fit, son.

REVEREND BUDDY:

We gonna see some roses and some violets and some azaleas, hoo-ee! Gonna give the Garden of Eden a run for its money, we are!

MISS AGATHA:

You hear me, Geoffrey?

REVEREND BUDDY:

Now, I talked to your Pa last Sunday after the sermon and let him know I was plannin this for you. Seems to me Geoffrey, we'll wrest the devil outta your restless brain yet. I'm sure Miss Agatha would agree with me.

MISS AGATHA:

As long as I see fit.

GEOFFREY:

I'm gonna be out there on my own ever' day after school, Reverend?

REVEREND BUDDY:

Well, son, though I trust you ta work hard, I know that I'ma gonna have to keep an eye on you somehow, ain't I? So I went and asked the missus if she wouldn't mind helpin' out some with the education of a nice young man.

MISS AGATHA:

I'm gettin' the switch.

(she exits)

GEOFFREY:

Missus Celia Rose?

REVEREND BUDDY:

Ain't nobody know flowers like Missus Richards, Geoffrey. Not in all of Georgia.

GEOFFREY:

(with reverence) Missus Celia Rose. Missus Celia Rose.

REVEREND BUDDY:

“Have I not commanded you, be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified, and do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God shall be with you wherever you may go.” Joshua, 1:9.

FIVE: CELIA ROSE

(enter CELIA ROSE RICHARDS)

GEOFFREY:

There are certain memories of my childhood in Harlan that remain in the forefront of my mind, even to this day:

I remember when I was seven and Taffy poured a jar of honey in my hair. Mr. Chauncey had to take a razor to my scalp and I walked around bald as a plucked chicken for a month.

I remember when I tumbled into the crick and broke out my front tooth.

I remember the night of the Fire Sky.

I remember when Nathan first called me my name.

But I think the strongest memory I have was in the April of 1921. Back before the summer rains hit, before Momma and her spells. I was sentenced to a summer's worth of hard labor for Reverend Buddy—I don't even remember what for—but it was the day that I had my first real talk with Missus Celia Rose Richards.

CELIA ROSE:

Hello, Geoffrey.

GEOFFREY:

“Hullo, ma'am,” I said.

Ain't none of us ever spoke to Missus Celia Rose before. Stayed in the small house behind the café. Hardly left cept to get to Chauncey's or to church. She sat allathuh way up in the front pew during Sunday sermons, wearin' a wide brimmed purple hat with a great white bow. Most Sundays you could see a piece of scarf trailin' down her back, and when you couldn't you craned yer neck around to try anyway. When she stood up after a service or during a spiritual, mouths went dry. Tongues went slack. Knees went weak. Men and women alike gaped at her. Taffy and I were doubly frightened and amazed by her.

CELIA ROSE:

You gonna help me and the reverend with our garden, Geoffrey?

GEOFFREY:

“Yes ma'am,” I said.

She was beautiful like a painting, though I never did see me no good paintings in Harlan. There was a glow around her--as though Reverend Buddy picked Celia Rose outta the Heavens and plopped her right in the middle of town. His own personal angel, we thought. Just like in the bible stories.

CELIA ROSE:

We gotta clean it up a bit, don't we Geoffrey? The spot's all cluttered with rocks and weeds. We'll show the reverend what we can do, right sugah?

GEOFFREY:

“Yes ma’am,” I said.

And I hadn’t even noticed that she wasn’t in her Sunday dress, wasn’t wrapped in her Sunday scarf, didn’t have the wide brimmed purple hat with the great silk bow atop it. To me, Celia Rose was still in church, humming with the hymnals, shoutin’ “Amen” up to the pulpit, getting a wink and a nod of the head from Reverend Buddy. Even in a dusty summer dress and a pair of green stained garden gloves, Missus Celia Rose was all Sunday. Sunday every damn day of the week.

CELIA ROSE:

Now I’m not gonna let you stand there like a lump of coal when we got work to be done. You start over there, and I start over here, and we gonna just clear these stones and weeds away. Put the rocks in one pile, and the weeds in another.

GEOFFREY:

Yes ma’am.

CELIA ROSE:

Look, Geoffrey, if we gonna be workin’ together all summer on this garden, I can’t have you callin’ me “ma’am” for four months. Call me Celia Rose, sugah.

GEOFFREY:

But Missus Richards, ma’am—

CELIA ROSE:

“Celia Rose.” And I’ll call you “Sugah,” Sugah. Now let’s get to work.

GEOFFREY:

And work we did. Missus Celia Rose and I rolled up our sleeves and started rippin’ weeds outta the dirt.

CELIA ROSE:

Slow down, Sugah, some of them pricklers is sharp--You gonna cut yourself wide open if you don’t be careful.

GEOFFREY:

And I did. I drew back my hands and strings of blood ran across my palms, trickles of thick red that slid down my forearms and dripped into the ground below. I felt my cheeks flush as red as my hands.

CELIA ROSE:

Why jes lookit you! Honestly, Geoffrey, have you ever worked a day in your life? Come here. Come on, come here, Sugah, I don’t bite none. (GEOFFREY moves to her) Whatcha gotta do, Sugah, is pull itchgrass from the root. Like this. Ya see how I’m doing this? From the bottom up. All gentle like.

Lord, I'ma gonna have to wrap your hands. You're just a plain ole mess, you know that? Lord-a Lord Lord. You gonna get blood on my nice gardenin' gloves.

GEOFFREY:

I know, Missus Celia Rose. I'm awful sorry.

CELIA ROSE:

Never you mind. I can't send you back to your momma lookin' like this. She'll have my head on a platter. Hold on a minute--I gotta clean you up.

GEOFFREY:

She went to the well that stood behind the rectory and took off her green gardening gloves. One, two. Then with those delicate, graceful hands, Celia Rose Richards grabbed holda the rope--one hand then two hands--and lowered the bucket to the water below. And one two three four she began to pull it back up, and as she pulled she opened her mouth and she sang:

CELIA ROSE:

(sings "I'm Troubled In Mind")

Oh, Jesus, my Saviour, on Thee I'll depend
When troubles are near me you'll be my true friend
I'm troubled
I'm troubled
I'm troubled in mind
If Jesus don't help me
I surely will die

When laden with troubles and burdened with grief
To Jesus in secret I'll go for relief

I'm troubled
I'm troubled
I'm troubled in mind
If Jesus don't help me
I surely will die

GEOFFREY:

Now, I heard her sing in church, but never like this. Her voice was thick and rich--honey cakes and toffees and strawberry cream--and she sang and my teeth ached and my hands bled, and no sooner had she begun but she had ceased... and only the faintest echo of her voice hung in the whisper of the winds that swept through the Georgia pines.

(beat)

That was beautiful.

CELIA ROSE:

Thank you, Geoffrey.

GEOFFREY:

Are you alright? Ya seem so... sad.

CELIA ROSE:

(trying to shake it off) Sometimes, Sugah, we get sad. The Lord don't give us joy without a askin' price. (she places the water beside GEOFFREY, looks at his hands) Now I just need... I'll be right back.

GEOFFREY:

She disappeared inside the rectory, but it was only a moment before she came back out.

CELIA ROSE:

Now let's rinse those off

(she dips his hands in the bucket of water)

GEOFFREY:

Ooh!

CELIA ROSE:

and I'll wrap 'em as good as I can, Sugah. Here.

(She pulls out his wet hands and begins to wrap them with something)

GEOFFREY:

But Missus Celia Rose--this is your Sunday scarf!

CELIA ROSE:

(laughing) I think God'll forgive me my transgression this once, don't you Sugah?

GEOFFREY:

(nervously) I'm more concerned about the reverend, ma'am.

CELIA ROSE:

So you are, Geoffrey. So you are.