

The Fertile River

by

Vincent Terrell Durham

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CAST (In order of appearance)

ARTHUR

RIVER

CORA LEE BURDEN (MAMA CORA)

JESSE LEE JOHNSON (UNCLE JESSE)

SARAH WOODS (MISS SARAH)

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CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

(All characters are native North Carolinians and speak with Carolina accents)

CORA LEE BURDEN (Mama Cora) - 64 years old, black, poor, illiterate. She is the head of the household and lives on government assistance.

SARAH WOODS (Miss Sarah) - 28 years old, white, social worker, married, middle class and college educated.

JESSE LEE JOHNSON (Uncle Jesse) - 60 years old, black, Cora Lee's younger brother. His lower left leg and foot are mangled from a World War I injury, causing him to walk with difficulty.

RIVER - 22 years old, black, Cora Lee's granddaughter. The terms of the period, slow, retarded, or feeble-minded would be used to describe her mental challenges.

ARTHUR - 9 years old, mulatto, River's son, highly intelligent, precocious, inquisitive. He is often charged with seeing after his mother. He is a product of rape.

SETTING

1958 rural North Carolina. A large open room inside of a four room house. The floors are wide dull wood planks. The inside walls are exposed boards. They are empty of any sort of adornment. A front door leads out to an uneven porch. A doorway deeper in the room leads to unseen back rooms. A side door leads to the family garden. The main room has been divided into a sitting and eating area. The sitting area sits closest to the front door. A worn sofa and side table occupy part of the space. A well kept Queen Anne chair and matching Queen Anne hall table hold places of honor amongst the worn furniture. The Queen Ann Hall table holds a good number of photographs. A large black family Bible shares the space with the family members held in the various frames. The eating area is deeper into the room, near the doorway leading to the back rooms. A spindly wooden table is surrounded by three chairs and one stool. Every nook and cranny of the front room is exceptionally clean.

CHARACTER NOTES

1. Care should be taken when developing the character of River. The actor and director must establish that River lands on the scale of mild mental retardation - IQ from 50 - 70. River's mental deficiency has been exacerbated by the family's lack of resources and knowledge to assist the girl in progressing past a certain level of functioning.
2. The play takes place in 1958. It's important that the director and actors refrain from judging the characters through a modern day lens.
3. Suggested YouTube viewing, **Klansville (KKK) - The Rise and Fall of the Civil Rights** and **Unfit to Breed: The Eugenics Program of North Carolina**.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

LIGHTS UP:

(ARTHUR sits in a Queen Anne chair with his nose pressed deep inside the pages of his Webster dictionary. He is busy reading out definitions of words and committing them to memory. It's Monday morning but he's dressed in his Sunday church going clothes.)

ARTHUR

Desecrate: To abuse the sacredness of.

(ARTHUR closes his eyes and holds the dictionary tight against his chest to test his memory.)

ARTHUR (cont'd)

Desecrate: To abuse the sacredness of.

(RIVER enters from the back rooms. She is barefoot and wears only a bra and a relative's hand-me-down bloomers.)

RIVER

Arthur come take me swimming.

(ARTHUR speaks to RIVER without looking up from his dictionary.)

ARTHUR

We can't go swimming today. Go back there and keep yourself company.

RIVER

It too hot in them back rooms. Mama Cora won't let me crack the back door none. Can't get no air.

ARTHUR

Mama Cora might let you crack it some if you would stop running out of it. Then we could all get some air.

RIVER

Put down your book and come take me swimming..

ARTHUR

Leave me alone for awhile. I need to memorize my words.

RIVER

I give you a head start when we race.

ARTHUR

I don't need no head start. You know I be letting you win. But it don't matter. Head start or no head start, we can't go to the creek today.

RIVER

Bo might be waiting on me. Can't go by myself.

(ARTHUR looks up from the dictionary.)

ARTHUR

You better not let Mama Cora hear you talking about Bo.

RIVER

Bo and me friends.

ARTHUR

Mama Cora say what you and him was doing was more than being friends.

RIVER

Bo gonna marry me.

ARTHUR

You can't get married to nobody.

RIVER

How come I can't?

ARTHUR

We would have to move to where he lives. You can't see after me by yourself.

(RIVER smacks the dictionary out of ARTHUR'S hands.)

RIVER

Take me down to the creek!

(ARTHUR jumps up from the chair and picks up his dictionary.)

ARTHUR

Don't do that again, Mama. Do you want me to take after you? Not being able read or write. Not knowing all my numbers.

RIVER

None of that my fault. Born like that.

ARTHUR

But you wasn't born mean. Ain't no need to be knocking my book to the floor.

RIVER

Sorry. Ain't you hot? Creek gonna cool us off.

(ARTHUR plops back into the Queen Anne chair.)

ARTHUR

Mama Cora needs for us to stay around this house today. Go back there and put on your church going clothes. Put on that dress you like so much.

RIVER

It too hot for all my clothes. Won't church yesterday? I put one cent in the plate. Don't wanna be in no church. Preacher talk all day.

ARTHUR

Mama Cora say we got company coming. She wants us to look nice.

RIVER

Bo say I look nice.

ARTHUR

Keep talking about Bo and you gonna get a whupping. Mama Cora don't like that.

RIVER

Why she don't? Mama Cora got friends. Uncle Jesse got friends. You be splashing water on that girl down to the creek. Everybody but me got friends.

ARTHUR

Splashing water on some dumb girl don't mean nothing.

RIVER

It mean you like her. I see how you smile. Same way I smile at Bo. He my friend.

ARTHUR

You and me friends. Ain't that enough?

RIVER

Friend ain't the word for you and me. What that new word you taught me?

ARTHUR

Descendent. But I ain't got time to go over new words with you. Go put on your church dress. We need to look nice for this white woman that's coming.

RIVER

Miss Linda? She and Junior coming here?

ARTHUR

Stop asking so many questions. Go back there and put on them clothes.

RIVER

Will you take me to the creek after?

ARTHUR

If it's still light out. We can't see them water moccasins swimming at us in the dark.

(CORA LEE enters from the back rooms. She is dressed in her Sunday church going clothes. She carries a rag and scrubs away dirt that has already been scrubbed away earlier that morning. The room is already spotless.)

RIVER

Cross your heart?

(ARTHUR crosses his heart.)

ARTHUR

Cross my heart.

(CORA LEE isn't happy finding ARTHUR sitting in the Queen Anne chair.)

CORA LEE

You know better then to have yourself sitting in my Mama's Queen Anne chair.

(ARTHUR immediately removes himself from the Queen Anne chair and plops onto the sofa.)

CORA LEE (cont'd)

What you two talking about that creek for?

RIVER

Arthur gonna take me swimming. He crossed his heart so he bet' not change his mind.

CORA LEE

What you want down to that creek?

RIVER

Wanna put myself in the water. Ain't you hot, Mama Cora?

ARTHUR

She wanna race me, Mama Cora. Thinking I need a head start.

CORA LEE

Is that the only thing you want down to that creek?

RIVER

Bo might be looking--

(ARTHUR quickly interrupts. Hoping to save his mother from a whupping.)

ARTHUR

Hush, Mama.

CORA LEE

You ain't going back to that creek no time soon. Get your mind off that boy. And you can't be walking around here with no clothes on. Your Uncle Jesse living here now. Won't be long before Arthur too old to be seeing you like that. I told you to put that church dress on yourself three or four times already this morning.

(CORA LEE abandons her cleaning rag and turns her attention to smoothing out the fabric on the Queen Anne chair.)

(RIVER hugs and kisses ARTHUR.)

RIVER

Don't forget. You crossed your heart.

(RIVER exits to the back rooms.)

(ARTHUR returns his nose to the pages of his dictionary.)

CORA LEE

You've been in them pages since before breakfast. One day I'm gonna find you living inside that book. You gonna have me looking all around this house for you. Come to find out you living on page seventy-two with that B word you taught me.

ARTHUR

Bolsheviks.

CORA LEE

That's the one. Come to find out you living on page seventy-two with them Bolsheviks.

ARTHUR

I need to memorize every word on this page today, Ma'am.

(ARTHUR reads out the next word on the page.)

ARTHUR (cont'd)

Desegregate: To abolish segregation.

(CORE LEE'S tone expresses concern over the word Arthur has just learned.)

CORA LEE

Is that the summer work your teacher give you?

ARTHUR

No, Ma'am. I finished all her work. My dictionary is better than anything Miss Davis ever taught me. I'm up to the D words. My favorite is descendent. I'm a descendent of yours. I'm a descendent of mama's, and I'm a descendent of Uncle Jesse's. It means an individual descended from another.

CORA LEE

I know the meaning. It's just a fancy way to say relative.

ARTHUR

That's an R. I ain't up to the R words yet.

CORA LEE

You don't need to get to no R words. You already know the word relative. Both them words mean the same.

ARTHUR

Descendent sounds better to me. Don't it to you? From now on I think we should always use the word descendent.

CORA LEE

Are you a nine year-old little boy or one of them midgets we seen over at the Negro fair? You seem too smart to be any little boy I would ever know.

ARTHUR

I must be descended from smart relatives.

(CORA LEE goes to the Queen Anne hall table and retrieves an appointment notice from the pages of the family Bible. She hands it to ARTHUR, pointing out the word eugenics.)

CORA LEE

Read out the meaning of that word for me.

ARTHUR

I ain't up to the E words yet.

CORA LEE

Ain't no sin to skip some of them pages. Them D words ain't going no where.

(ARTHUR flips through the pages until he arrives at the word eugenics.)

ARTHUR

Eugenics: The study of hereditary improvement by genetic control.

CORA LEE

That don't help me none. You catch the meaning of some of them words?

ARTHUR

No, Ma'am. You want me to look them up for you? Should I skip to the H words, I words and G words?

CORA LEE

Won't know what them words mean either. We'll be back and forth in that book all day.

(ARTHUR hands the appointment notice back to CORA LEE. His nose goes back inside of the dictionary.)

(CORA LEE returns the appointment notice to the pages of the Bible. She opens the front door and looks out.)

CORA LEE (cont'd)

Mailman should have run. Keep an ear out for your mama and that back door. Don't let her go out it. We don't need that today. You hear me, Arthur?

ARTHUR

Yes, Ma'am. I'll listen out for her.

(CORA LEE exits out the front door.)

(ARTHUR jumps up from the sofa and plops down in the Queen Anne chair. He makes himself comfortable and then closes his eyes, testing his memory.)

ARTHUR (cont'd)

Desecrate: To abuse the sacredness of. Desegregate: To abolish segregation. Eugenics: The study of hereditary improvement by genetic control. Bolsheviks: Members of the extremist wing of the Russian Social Democratic party.

(JESSE enters the side door. He carries a basket of freshly picked vegetables. He's covered with dirt.)

JESSE

What word you up to, Boy?

ARTHUR

(being a smart ass)

Distraction.

JESSE

Good. Keep up on your words. Can't nobody take away what you learn. Mama Cora know you sitting in that Queen Anne chair? You know how she get about it.

ARTHUR

Mama Cora say she don't mind. Who this white woman we gotta get dressed up for?

JESSE

Don't know. But maybe if you phrase that the proper way.

ARTHUR

Who is this white woman we're getting dressed up for, Uncle Jesse?

JESSE

That's better. Don't know.

(JESSE places the basket of vegetables on top of the eating table.)

ARTHUR

Ain't no white person ever come to our house before.

JESSE

Are you testing me, Boy?

ARTHUR

We've never had a white person visit our house before.

JESSE

Whoever she is. She got your Mama Cora riled.

(ARTHUR quickly flips through the pages of his dictionary, searching for the word riled.)

JESSE (cont'd)

Keep treating that book like that and you won't have it for long. And them white folks ain't about to let you walk up into their library hoping to get a new one.

ARTHUR

Riled: To vex, irritate, or anger.

JESSE

Since when you start skipping pages?

ARTHUR

Mama Cora say skipping pages ain't no sin.

JESSE

Ain't no such word as ain't. You keep speaking like that and you gonna spend your life pulling tobacco.

ARTHUR

Mama Cora said it's not a sin to skip pages, but Mama Cora used the word ain't.

JESSE

Where she off to?

ARTHUR

Went out for the mail.

JESSE

Government assistance checks must be coming.

(ARTHUR instantly recalls the word and its definition.)

ARTHUR

Assistance: Aid or help.

JESSE

Tell her to put these vegetables up for me. I'll be back in a spell. One of them watermelons is looking ripe out there. *(pause)* Your mama in them back rooms?

ARTHUR

Yes, Sir. She's putting on her Sunday dress. Mama Cora said she can't be walking around here like she do. You living here now. Won't be much longer before I'm too old to be seeing her like that. What does that mean, Uncle Jesse?

JESSE

It means the heat done went to my sister's head. Keep a listen out for your mama and that back door. I don't wanna have to go fetch her again. Your Mama Cora ain't grab wind of it? Has she?

ARTHUR

Why is it okay for you to say ain't?

JESSE

Because I ain't gonna get the chances that you gonna get. Answer my question.

ARTHUR

No, sir. *(being a smart ass)* She ain't.

JESSE

A fresh mouth gonna make for a sore ass.

(JESSE walks towards the side door to exit.)

(CORA LEE enters through the front door. She fans herself with several envelopes.)

CORA LEE

It's too hot out there for folks today. Jesse, I need you to change out them clothes when you come back to this house.

JESSE

A man in the desert got more chance of falling in the ocean than you got with me changing out these clothes. They good enough for me and they gonna have to be good enough for this white woman.

(JESSE opens the side door and exits.)

CORA LEE

Did your Uncle Jesse just leave them vegetables on top of my clean table?

ARTHUR

He wants you to put them up for him. He needs your assistance.

CORA LEE

He don't think I got enough to do with this white woman coming?

ARTHUR

Did the mailman deliver your aid or help?

CORA LEE

You gonna get tired of me telling you to stay out of my mama's Queen Anne chair.

(ARTHUR quickly springs out of the Queen Anne chair and heads towards the sofa.)

CORA LEE (cont'd)

Close up that book. You done learned enough words for today.

ARTHUR

Are you riled?

CORA LEE

Ask me one more thing and you're about to see.

ARTHUR

There's three more words on this page for me to memorize: desensitize, desertion, desexualize.

CORA LEE

Put that book up! Go make sure your mama is dressed right. Ain't no telling when this white woman coming.

(ARTHUR closes the dictionary and hands it to CORA LEE.)

ARTHUR

Whoever this white woman is she sure got you **irritated**, **vexed** and **angered**.

(ARTHUR exits to the back rooms.)

(CORA LEE places the dictionary and the envelopes on the Queen Anne hall table. She removes the appointment notice from the pages of the Bible. She works to pronounce eugenics.)

CORA LEE

E- yoo - gen - ics.

(JESSE enters through the side door with a large watermelon.)

(CORA LEE tucks the appointment notice back into the pages of the Bible.)

CORA LEE (cont'd)

White woman be here anytime now. Go get dressed.

JESSE

I got on a pair of drawers, pants and a twenty-five cent shirt. A man can't get no more dressed.

(JESSE attempts to place the watermelon on top of the eating table.)

CORA LEE

Take that watermelon back to the kitchen where it belongs and not on top of my table.

JESSE

Don't take this white woman coming here out on me.

(JESSE exits to the back rooms with the watermelon. He returns after a few seconds.)

CORA LEE

Get them vegetables off my clean table too. Put them up in the pantry or somewhere. And while you're back there change out them filthy clothes. I laid out your funeral suit.

JESSE

What for? Is this white woman coming here to die?

CORA LEE

She coming here for something. Ain't figured out what for. I spoke with Sister Washington two days back. She say we need to be the most upstanding Colored folks this white woman ever met. Said we oughta look nice for her.

(JESSE picks up the basket of vegetables.)

JESSE

Unless somebody going in the ground it bring bad luck to be wearing a funeral suit. This white woman gonna have to make do with my drawers, pants and twenty-five cent shirt.

CORA LEE

At least go brush the dirt off of yourself. Why you out there messing with that garden?

JESSE

Trying to get a harvest before your rutabagas choke everything to death. Ain't never seen rutabagas growing so wild.

(JESSE puts down the basket and begins beating the dirt off of his clothes.)

CORA LEE

Not where you're standing. Take that outside. I just swept this floor.

JESSE

Why you so worried about what this white woman see? This your house.

(JESSE picks up the basket of vegetables and exits to the back rooms. He returns with a broom and dustpan.)

CORA LEE

White folks coming to your house. You better worry. This same white woman was over to Sister Washington's house six months back. Asking all kinds of questions about her boy Sonny.

(JESSE goes about sweeping up the dirt deposited from his clothing.)

JESSE

She point a finger at that boy? Ain't been no lynchings this year, but Colored folks best to still be on edge.

CORA LEE

Sonny deaf, dumb and blind. Boy don't do nothing but sit on that porch all day and shell peas. What she gonna put on him?

JESSE

White folks sure to find something.

(JESSE has swept his dirt up into a neat pile. CORA LEE snatches the broom from him and begins sweeping up all the dirt JESSE failed to see.)

JESSE (cont'd)

What Sister Washington had to say?

(CORA LEE sweeps up a new pile of dirt into Jesse's pile. JESSE stoops down with the dustpan. CORA LEE sweeps the dirt into it. JESSE stands and walks to the side door. He opens it and tosses the dirt outside.)

CORA LEE

Ain't much of nothing come out her mouth. Her neighbor Evelyn call me over when I step off the porch. She call herself out there hanging bed linens. She ain't hang one sheet the whole time I was there. Her nose all the way over in my business.

(JESSE closes the side door and walks to the entrance to the back rooms. He leans the broom and dustpan just outside of it.)

JESSE

What Evelyn's nose had to say?

(CORA LEE walks over and picks up the broom and dustpan. She places them just inside the entrance to the back rooms, out of view.)

CORA LEE

Say this white woman spent two hours up in Sister Washington's house. Come back the next morning with two big white men. Both of 'em wearing hospital uniforms. They took Sonny away. Evelyn say she ain't seen the boy for three or four days after that.

JESSE

What Sonny like when he come home?

CORA LEE

Same. Went back to sitting on that porch, shelling peas like before. Evelyn say this woman found her way over to Ida Springfield's house next. Wanting to know how long her daughter been falling out and having fits.

JESSE

Faith been having fits since she was a little girl. Just last week she took and fell out down by the creek. Flopping around like a catfish. She like to scare River half to death. River acting like she could catch it. I tell her you can't catch no fits. You born like that.

CORA LEE

The same two big white men took her away.

JESSE

Where they take Faith to?

CORA LEE

Don't know. Evelyn say she come back home four days later. The girl had a fit in church that same Sunday.

JESSE

Wonder what business this white woman got with Colored folks?

CORA LEE

Evelyn ain't say. If she knew, she sure would tell it. Her teeth about the only thing she can hold in her mouth.

(CORA LEE goes to the Queen Anne hall table and pulls out the appointment notice from the Bible. She picks up one envelope and brings both items to JESSE.)

CORA LEE (cont'd)

Your war pension check come. Read out this notice again.

(JESSE takes both items from CORA LEE.)

JESSE

It ain't change none from the last time I read it.

CORA LEE

Why you always pushing back? Can't you just go along with folks and do like they ask?

JESSE

That's your problem. You always going along. Doing like they ask. Sometimes you need to push back.

CORA LEE

Pushing back got your house burned down. Be careful with mine.

(JESSE reads the notice out loud to CORA LEE.)

JESSE

Mrs. Sarah Woods, Eugenics Board of North Carolina. Now, what you hear that changed?

CORA LEE

What you think they do?

JESSE

Must go around helping deaf, dumb, and blind folks.

CORA LEE

Ain't nobody none of them things in this house.

JESSE

You remember when them white folks come around looking for Cousin Percy? They took him down to that blind school. He come back home four years later. He was looking just as sharp as he wanna look. You remember the color of that three piece suit he had on? Cousin Percy was green and purple from head to toe. Looking like one of them peacocks. Them white folks taught him how to read from special books and play the piano. I still got that record he made. Went to number twenty-two on the radio. Maybe that's what this white woman did for Sonny.

CORA LEE

Sonny was only gone three or four days. Evelyn ain't say nothing about him coming back looking like no green and purple peacock, or reading from no special books. She say he come back just as deaf, dumb and blind as when he left. What concern you think this white woman got with us?

JESSE

Might be to see after River.

CORA LEE

Why she want to see after River? River ain't nothing close to Sonny Washington or Ida Springfield's daughter. She do fine for herself. Ain't nothing wrong with that girl.

JESSE

River do fine for herself but saying ain't nothing wrong with her is different from the truth.

CORA LEE

You fixing your mouth to call me lie? River got a good memory for a list of things. Best I ever seen. Anytime I send her down to Mr. Murphy's store. She come back with everything I ask for. I don't ever need Arthur to write out a list.

JESSE

Saying River don't always learn right or understand ain't a bad thing. It's just how she is.

(CORA LEE snatches the appointment notice out of JESSE'S hands. She returns it to the pages of the BIBLE.)

CORA LEE

I don't need you to tell me how she is. You gonna change out them dirty clothes or not?

JESSE

Ain't no telling what this white woman want. But you and me being dressed like the King and Queen of England ain't gonna stop her from asking for it.

(CORA LEE reacts to a cold shiver going up her spine.)

CORA LEE

A shadow just come cross me. Saying not to have Arthur in this house today. Send him on over to Sister Miller's house for me.

JESSE

You think she coming here to bring up that Junior and Miss Linda mess?

CORA LEE

Don't know. Something tugging on me. Saying not to have that boy in this house.

JESSE

I don't see no reason to run that boy from his own house. White folks gonna run him from enough places. It shouldn't start with where he lives.

CORA LEE

I didn't ask what you thought. Do like I say.

JESSE

She probably coming to see if you keep a clean house.

CORA LEE

What you mean?

JESSE

Anytime you getting money from the government they can come checking into your life. Wanting to know how you keeping yourself, and what you doing with they money.

CORA LEE

What they sending me ain't enough for them to be checking on how I keep my front porch. My house stay clean. Be even cleaner without you in it.

JESSE

Folks say the government come checking on that bowlegged girl. Took all seven of her children.

CORA LEE

You talking about that fast girl who stayed down by the railroad tracks? They took her children because she kept a dirty house?

JESSE

If you dropped a cucumber seed on her floor, you gonna get some cucumbers.

CORA LEE

What you know about her floor? You claiming one of her children?

JESSE

A man can keep company with a woman without making a baby. She kept a clean bed.

CORA LEE

As old as you is? You need to stop.

JESSE

She ain't seem to mind. Didn't want me to stop either.

CORA LEE

Now I know where your war pension check been going. That girl probably gave them children up. She spent most of her time over in them bars and with any kind of man she could find.

JESSE

My foot might be twisted up but I'm more than just any kind of man.

CORA LEE

Gone. Won't nobody talking about you. You might have been the best thing she come across, but the way she was. She didn't need no children. Probably good she gave them up.

JESSE

That girl wouldn't give her children up. The government come and took them.

CORA LEE

White folks just can't come and take your children no more. This is 1958.

JESSE

Being 1958 don't mean we ain't still Colored. White folks still gonna do what they wanna do when it come to Colored folks. They took Sister Washington and Ida Springfield's children.

CORA LEE

Ain't that more reason for you to go take Arthur over to Sister Miller's house? Tell him to stay put till you come fetch him. Take yourself out the back way.

JESSE

What you gonna do about River?

CORA LEE

I worry more about Arthur on account of who he favor. I'll see to River.

(JESSE exits to the back rooms.)

(CORA LEE takes time to smooth out the fabric on the Queen Anne chair and fan the air where Jesse had been.)

CORA LEE (cont'd)

(yelling to the back rooms)

River, come on out here. Let me take a look at you.

(RIVER enters. She still wears only the bra and hand-me-down bloomers.)

CORA LEE (cont'd)

Why you still walking around here with no clothes on? I told you to put something on yourself. Your Uncle Jesse can't be seeing you like that.

RIVER

It too hot for all my clothes. Arthur need to take me to the creek.

CORA LEE

You gonna get tired of talking about that creek. I need you to look nice for this white woman that's coming. And I'm gonna need you not to be saying everything that come to your mind.

RIVER

Lots of things come to my mind. Gotta get them out. Hurt too much if they stay inside.

CORA LEE

I need you to do a better job listening.

RIVER

I listen. Corn meal, stick of butter, eggs, jar molasses, half pound flour. Don't forget nothing you ask for.

CORA LEE

Ain't nobody talking about that store list. I need you to listen when I say put clothes on yourself. When I say don't go out that back door. When I say don't be around no boys. That's the kind of listening I need from you.

RIVER

Put clothes on yourself. Don't go out that back door. Don't be around no boys. I listen.

CORA LEE

Well, you need to listen and do.

(JESSE enters through the front door. RIVER quickly covers herself and runs out to the back rooms.)

RIVER

You can't be looking at me Uncle Jesse.

JESSE

What got into her?

CORA LEE

Some shame I hope.

JESSE

I been seeing that girl since she was born.

CORA LEE

She don't look the same as when she was born. Girl need to keep clothes on herself. You know it's bad luck to come through a door you ain't go out of. We don't need no bad luck today. Go back out that front door and come in the way you left out.

JESSE

You about the most superstitious woman I ever seen.

CORA LEE

Then stop looking at me and leave out that front door, and turn around seven times before you come through the back way.

JESSE

What's that gonna do?

CORA LEE

Make you dizzy. Now get out of here.

(JESSE exits and slams the front door.)

CORA LEE (cont'd)

And put on that funeral suit!

(RIVER enters wearing a shapeless white dress. She has removed all of her underclothes and remains barefooted.)

RIVER

Arthur ain't back there.

CORA LEE

Your Uncle Jesse took him on over to Sister Miller's house.

RIVER

Why he take my baby over there?

CORA LEE

Arthur ain't no baby no more. You ain't got no more babies, River.

RIVER

He was a baby when he come out me. Uncle Jesse say he look like a white baby. Arthur is the prettiest baby I seen. You think my other babies gonna be pretty?

CORA LEE

You ain't having no more babies. Get that out your mind.

RIVER

(soothing herself)

All my babies gonna be pretty.

(CORA LEE takes notice of RIVER'S missing underclothing.)

CORA LEE

Ain't you got nothing on underneath your dress?

RIVER

It too hot for all my clothes. Can't wear everything.

CORA LEE

When we get done talking I'm gonna need you to go back there and get dressed proper.

RIVER

Ain't you hot, Mama Cora?

CORA LEE

Not hot enough to forget how to be a lady.

RIVER

How hot you need to be to forget?

CORA LEE

It ain't ever gonna get that hot. I need for us to play a game today. We gonna play a game with this white woman we expecting.

RIVER

Miss Linda coming?

CORA LEE

Miss Linda ain't the only white woman in the world. Gonna be some other white woman.

RIVER

She white like Junior or almost white like Arthur?

CORA LEE

What I tell you about listening?

RIVER

Why you don't keep house for Junior mama no more?

CORA LEE

I need you to fix your mind to listening.

RIVER

Arthur look like Junior.

(CORA LEE slaps RIVER.)

CORA LEE

Everything that come to your mind ain't gotta come out your mouth.

(RIVER runs to a wall and begins to bang her head against it.)

CORA LEE (cont'd)

I told you never to say that. I don't want you talking about Junior, Miss Linda or who Arthur look like no more today. Do you hear me?

RIVER

Cornmeal, stick of butter, eggs, put clothes on yourself, don't go out that back door, don't be around no boys, cornmeal, stick of butter, eggs--

(CORA LEE hurries to RIVER and sternly halts the girl from banging her head.)

CORA LEE

Stop trying to hurt yourself. Calm yourself down. Do like I taught you.

(RIVER begins to play patty-cake by herself. The game quickly calms her.)

(CORA LEE joins RIVER in the game of patty-cake. They both smile as their hands touch the other's.)

CORA LEE

If this white woman ask you something, say I don't remember.

(CORA LEE and RIVER continue playing patty-cake.)

RIVER

If the white woman ask me something, say I don't remember. I don't remember.

CORA LEE

See how smart you can be. You're my sweet baby.

RIVER

I ain't no baby. Bo say I a woman.

(CORA LEE'S hands drop and she stops playing patty-cake. RIVER continues playing alone.)

CORA LEE

You always gonna be my baby. Can't no man change that.

(RIVER stops playing patty-cake.)

RIVER

Ain't Arthur always gonna be my baby?

CORA LEE

Yes, but not while this white woman is here.

(JESSE enters from the back rooms.)

JESSE

White woman here!

CORA LEE

I wish you would go put on that funeral suit.

JESSE

Just as soon as somebody dies.

(Several KNOCKS come from the front door.)

CORA LEE

(to RIVER)

Do you remember what I say?

RIVER

I remember what you say. I don't remember.

CORA LEE

Good.

JESSE

How is that good? The girl say she remember and she don't remember.

RIVER

We playing a game. If the white woman ask you something, say I don't remember. Don't talk about Junior, Miss Linda or who Arthur look like.

CORA LEE

What did I just get done telling you?

RIVER

I don't remember.

CORA LEE

Are you playing the game or you really don't remember?

RIVER

Playing the game. Remember to don't remember. Remember to don't remember.

JESSE

I better go put on that funeral suit. Maybe this white woman will pass away before she sit down good. Have her two big white men come carry her away.

(JESSE exits to the back rooms.)

(KNOCKS come from the front door.)

CORA LEE

Go on back to that room. I'll call for you if she wanna talk with you. Don't come out for nothing else.

RIVER

Yes, Ma'am.

CORA LEE

River, who Arthur?

RIVER

Arthur my baby.

CORA LEE

River.

RIVER

But I don't remember him.

(RIVER exits to the back rooms.)

(CORA LEE rushes around the room giving it one more straightening up.)

(KNOCKS come from the front door.)

(CORA LEE goes to the door but quickly turns and runs to the back rooms. She returns with a glass of lemonade. CORA LEE steadies herself and puts on the mask that Colored folks wear when dealing with white folks in the South. A mask that makes white people feel at ease, respected and in charge.)

(CORA LEE opens the front door to find SARAH WOODS standing in the doorway holding a leather satchel and her purse.)

MISS SARAH

Good morning. I'm Mrs. Sarah Woods from the Eugenics Board of North Carolina. I left an appointment notice saying I would be stopping by.

CORA LEE

Yes, Ma'am. Good morning. We've been waiting on you. I'm Cora Lee Burden, but most folks call me Mama Cora.

MISS SARAH

That sounds nice, but perhaps I should address you as Cora Lee. We shouldn't allow things to become too informal. May I come in?

(MISS SARAH enters the home without waiting for the answer. She roams around the room, casually inspecting her surroundings as CORA LEE speaks.)

CORA LEE

Yes, Ma'am. I poured you a glass of lemonade. It's nice and cold. It's too hot out there for folks to be walking around.

MISS SARAH

I'm perfectly fine with the heat. Besides, I drove.

(CORA LEE places the glass of lemonade on the side table close to the Queen Anne chair.)

CORA LEE

I'll leave it right here. Just in case you change your mind.

MISS SARAH

Thank you.

CORA LEE

Won't you make yourself to home? You may have a seat in my mama's Queen Anne chair. It was one her favorite things, same with her Queen Anne table.

MISS SARAH

They're both lovely pieces. You keep them up nice.

(MISS SARAH puts down her satchel. She takes out a handkerchief from her purse and drapes it over the cushion of the chair, prior to sitting.)

CORA LEE

My brother just went to putting dirt all over my house. I made him sweep it up right away, but you know how men folks are. They don't see dirt like us women do. Most times they leave more dirt than they sweep up. I keep a clean house.

(CORA LEE sits down on the sofa.)

MISS SARAH

I'm well aware of how nice you can keep a house.

CORA LEE

Ma'am?

MISS SARAH

Cora Lee, you're going to have me feeling as old as my mama if you keep addressing me as ma'am. Call me Miss Sarah.

CORA LEE

Sorry, Miss Sarah. But what you mean? You know how nice I can keep a house.

MISS SARAH

I recall when you used to keep house for Miss Linda. Now, I am not a gossip but Miss Linda's house ain't been clean ever since.

CORA LEE

How you know Miss Linda?

MISS SARAH

She and I are third or fourth cousins on our mothers' side. We can never really remember. Certainly you recall me attending her infamous Saturday night bridge parties.

CORA LEE

I can't say that I do, but it's been a lot of years since I served them bridge parties.

MISS SARAH

No hard feelings.

CORA LEE

Is Miss Linda the reason for your visit?

MISS SARAH

I've been visiting families in the Colored section for the past three years. It's my job to meet with families and assess their needs. Why were you thinking I needed to see how you kept your house?

CORA LEE

My brother say the government come checking on folks when they getting assistance. Make sure they keep a clean house and living right. A while back a girl had her children taken away from her. My brother say it was due to her keeping a dirty house.

MISS SARAH

I know the young lady you're referring to. I'm not at liberty to discuss her case, but it had little to do with how well she kept a house.

CORA LEE

Will she get her children back?

MISS SARAH

I can't discuss her situation. But to ease your mind, I'll tell you that her children are doing well. All seven have wonderful new homes. And the mother has received proper medical care. She won't find herself in the position of having anymore children she can't properly see after.

CORA LEE

She always spoke when I crossed by the railroad tracks. She seem like a nice enough girl, just fast. I'm glad you were able to help her.

MISS SARAH

The public welfare of the United States of America calls upon its best citizens to lead its worst citizens away from the paths of their births. I'm grateful to be born of a higher path. It was not only my job, but my duty as an American to offer help to that young lady.

CORA LEE

I understand. Two summers ago my rutabagas took to growing all over the place. I brought her a bushel every time I passed her way.

MISS SARAH

I'm sure that was helpful.

CORA LEE

Do you care for rutabagas? They growing wild again this summer. I can have my brother bring you up a basket or two.

MISS SARAH

I wouldn't want him to bother.

CORA LEE

Won't be no bother. Just let me know what time your husband be home. I can have him bring them up to you in his truck. Just like you was saying. The public welfare of the United States of America calls upon me to help you.

MISS SARAH

Well, that certainly was the sentiment.

CORA LEE

I could have my brother carry me up there with him. Show you how to cook them up real nice and tender. I could even show you how to dry out the leaves and make a tea for yourself. Good to sip on during your woman time.

MISS SARAH

We really should be making our way around to my investigation. We don't want the day to get away from us.

CORA LEE

Investigation? Did the sheriff send you? My brother had that trouble some time back--

MISS SARAH

Jesse.

CORA LEE

Yes, Ma'am. He been staying with me--

MISS SARAH

Since his house caught fire.

CORA LEE

He say it was the Klan.

MISS SARAH

The Klan? This is North Carolina not Mississippi. Whites and Coloreds get along just fine. We all keep to our place and don't think another thing about it. There's no need for such a thing here.

CORA LEE

Yes, Ma'am.

MISS SARAH

Be more careful of the things you say. North Carolina is the example for the South.

CORA LEE

Yes, Ma'am. So the sheriff got you here checking on Jesse?

MISS SARAH

My visit has nothing to do with your brother's troubles. The members of the North Carolina Eugenics Board sent me. I'm a social worker. I'm here to spend some time with you and learn about your family.

(MISS SARAH removes a note pad and pen from her leather satchel. She takes notes through out the question and answer session.)

MISS SARAH (cont'd)

Were you born in North Carolina?

CORA LEE

Ain't never been nowhere else.

MISS SARAH

What year were you born?

CORA LEE

Eighteen, ninety-three. I'll be sixty-five at the end of November, God willing. I still remember when nineteen hundred come in. Everybody was so excited. Some folks even scared it was gonna be the end of the world.

MISS SARAH

People can be strange about things like that.

CORA LEE

People without God mostly.

MISS SARAH

How much schooling did you receive?

CORA LEE

I come out as soon as I started. Mama and daddy needed me to work the fields with my older brothers and sisters. But I remember my letters. I can spell and print out my full name. C O R A - L E E - B U R D E N, Cora Lee Burden. And every so often, I try to learn a new word out the dictionary. Arthur always showing me new--

(CORA LEE catches her mistake and fakes a pain in her knees.)

MISS SARAH

Are you alright?

CORA LEE

Arthritis. It must be gonna rain.

MISS SARAH

That should be good for your rutabagas.

CORA LEE

Good for my summer squash too. Do you like summer squash?

MISS SARAH

Let's not find our way around to another distraction.

CORA LEE

Have you ever made summer squash fritters? The recipe is real simple: Two summer squash, cooking grease, a small onion, two eggs--

MISS SARAH

Cora Lee, I'm not here to exchange cooking recipes. We still have quite a few questions to get through.

CORA LEE

Sorry, Ma'am. I was just thinking your husband might like 'em. My secret is adding molasses. Makes your tongue do flips. They go real nice with a glass of sweet tea.

MISS SARAH

What's the rest?

CORA LEE

Ma'am?

MISS SARAH

The rest of the recipe. You have my mouth watering for some summer squash fritters and sweet tea. How much cooking grease should I use?

CORA LEE

Half way up to the top of your skillet. You don't want it spilling over when you get to adding your fritters. But first you wanna shred up your summer squash.

(MISS SARAH begins writing down the recipe.)

MISS SARAH

What comes after the two eggs?

CORA LEE

Don't forget your onion. You need to chop that up into small pieces.

MISS SARAH

Mince.

CORA LEE

Is that what they call it?

MISS SARAH

Yes. A proper cookbook would use the word mince.

CORA LEE

You wanna mince up your onion. Put it in a big bowl with your summer squash, two eggs, a handful of flour, a handful cornmeal, half a stick of butter, a little salt, pepper and as much molasses as you dare. Stir that all up together, real good. Then you get to the fun part. Scoop up that mix into your hands and start patting. Get them fritters nice and round. Give them some time in your hot grease. Three or four minutes on both sides and they gonna be done. Then you call your husband to the table.

MISS SARAH

They sound delicious.

CORA LEE

Your husband gonna have you making them all the time. My brother just brought in some vegetables this morning.

(CORA LEE jumps up and hustles to the back rooms.)

CORA LEE (o.s.) (cont'd)

Jesse always helpful like that. Don't know what I do without him being in this house.

(CORA LEE returns with two summer squash. She plops them into MISS SARAH'S lap and then sits down.)

CORA LEE (cont'd)

There you go. Now I still owe you them rutabagas.

MISS SARAH

Thank you. This is very kind of you. May we get back to my questions?

CORA LEE

Unless you need my sweet tea recipe.

MISS SARAH

No, hopefully my mama's sweet tea recipe will work just fine.

(MISS SARAH finds a place between her hip and the Queen Anne chair to allow the summer squash to rest.)

MISS SARAH (cont'd)

How many children did you give birth to?

CORA LEE

Thirteen. Ten of them living.

MISS SARAH

Were all thirteen children by one man?

CORA LEE

I ain't understanding.

MISS SARAH

Were all your children by the same man?

CORA LEE

I ain't never had but one husband.

MISS SARAH

Oh, I didn't mean any harm. In my line of work, I don't always find that to be true. The young lady who lived down by the railroad tracks. She didn't know the fathers of any of her children.

CORA LEE

Was it okay for you to tell me that? I don't wanna know some of her business if I shouldn't know none of it.

MISS SARAH

I think you might be right. Let's just keep to your business. How old were you when you got married?

CORA LEE

Fourteen. I started courting Alvin that summer. It was behind my daddy's back at first. Daddy was a preacher. He ain't allow no dating.

MISS SARAH

You grew up with your father in the house?

CORA LEE

Yes, Ma'am. Once he caught wind of it. Alvin had to march himself on up to our house. I was afraid daddy had scared him off. Ain't see Alvin for seven days after that, but then he showed up with a ring.

(CORA LEE holds out her hand and admires the ring on her finger.)

CORA LEE (cont'd)

He walked all the way to Raleigh to get it for me.

MISS SARAH

How many children did your mother give birth to?

CORA LEE

Seventeen. Eleven of them gone.

MISS SARAH

Your parents were able to support such a large household?

CORA LEE

With everybody working the field, grown folks right down to us children. My first job was pulling hornworms off of tobacco plants. We was poor, but we managed.

MISS SARAH

How would you describe your family's current economic situation?

CORA LEE

I ain't understanding.

MISS SARAH

Are you still poor?

CORA LEE

I suppose I still am.

MISS SARAH

I didn't just shame you, did I? Cora Lee, those were not my intentions. I apologize. Your economic situation has very little to do with you. The genes passed down from your parents, your grandparents, and those before them are to blame. Prior to the study of eugenics people wouldn't have thought it better to discontinue your gene pool. The institution of slavery required the master to care for your people and not the government. Over-population was beneficial to plantation owners, but after the Civil War the burden of the Negro fell upon the government.

CORA LEE

Did you make all that up yourself?

MISS SARAH

No, those aren't my words. They're from the North Carolina training manual on eugenics and the compiled works of Francis Galton. He's considered the father of the Eugenics Movement. *(pause)* How old were you when you had your first child?

CORA LEE

Fifteen. Seems like I had a baby as soon as I said I do.

MISS SARAH

Was the child full term?

CORA LEE

He come out of me weighing eleven pounds. If he stayed in there any longer, he would have come out walking. Every time I turn around here come another baby, but Alvin Jr. is the only one come out big like that. All my other babies were just tiny little things.

MISS SARAH

Did you and your husband rely on the government to raise your children?

CORA LEE

No, Ma'am. Alvin always said you can't go hungry as long as you got some dirt and something to put in it. I keep a garden to this day.

MISS SARAH

Rutabagas and summer squash.

CORA LEE

Along with tomatoes, watermelons, collards and a few flowers. It don't hurt to have something pretty to look at. Can I send you home with some daffodils?

MISS SARAH

I'm allergic. Which of your thirteen children didn't survive?

CORA LEE

My third son and twin girls was stillborn. I lay flowers on they grave every Palm Sunday.

MISS SARAH

Nature has a way of deciding which of our children should survive.

CORA LEE

I went to a funeral when I was carrying my boy. Older folks used to say it was bad luck to look upon the dead when you with child. I ain't never had no time for superstition when I was young. Wish I had.

MISS SARAH

You think your going to a funeral caused your child to be stillborn?

CORA LEE

That's how it seem. I don't know why my twin girls was taken from me. I didn't go to nobody's funeral while I was carrying them.

MISS SARAH

Cora Lee, I hope you haven't blamed yourself all these years. You going to a funeral or looking upon the dead-- Those aren't the reasons you lost your babies. Most times our bodies know enough to terminate an unhealthy pregnancy. Most often we're none the wiser. But on those occasions that we're fully aware, a women's mind is designed to survive it.

CORA LEE

You speak like you lost a baby, Miss Sarah.

MISS SARAH

Obstructed labor. Complications is the gentler term. Either terminology, the child was not meant for this world.

CORA LEE

Did you and your husband try again?

MISS SARAH

We were advised not to. Mr. Woods is very understanding.

CORA LEE

It's a shame to hear that. I'm sure you would be a good mother.

MISS SARAH

I'm an absolutely horrible mother.

CORA LEE

I ain't understanding, Ma'am.

MISS SARAH

My husband has a younger sister. A woman who should have never been allowed to give birth once let alone three times. Two years ago she ran into some trouble. We did the Christian thing and took in her children. They are monsters.

CORA LEE

Go on, Miss Sarah. They can't be all that bad. What you got? Three boys, three girls, two and one?

MISS SARAH

Last I checked they were two boys. Urinating everywhere in my bathroom but inside the bowl. I don't think I was cut out to raise boys.

CORA LEE

Didn't you say she gave birth to three children?

MISS SARAH

We thought it best for another family to raise her third child, on account of who the father was.

CORA LEE

You and your husband should try again. The Lord might just give you a little girl to go with them boys. Doctors ain't God.

MISS SARAH

The baby we lost was a girl. I named her after both of our mamas, Helen Louise. She looked to have curly strawberry blonde hair. She'd be turning four years old come this December. Probably loving on her daddy more than her mama. You know how daughters-- We've found our way around to another distraction. I'm not here for a visit. Did you practice sexual relations before you married?

(CORA LEE'S mask, worn when dealing with white folks, slips off her face a tiny bit.)

CORA LEE

You ain't write down in your notes that my daddy was a preacher? I would have never shamed my folks. I don't feel comfortable with you being all up under my dress. We don't know each other.

MISS SARAH

Anything you tell me will be kept confidential. I'm from the government.

CORA LEE

Can I freshen up that lemonade for you? Let me put it in the ice chest and get it cold. I'm sure I got some caramel cake back in the kitchen to go with it.

MISS SARAH

You're not about to share your caramel cake recipe with me, are you? We haven't made much progress as it is.

CORA LEE

My caramel cake take first prize every Juneteenth celebration. I wouldn't share that with my best friend.

MISS SARAH

Juneteenth? I'm unfamiliar.

CORA LEE

When word of freedom come to the slaves.

MISS SARAH

How pleasant.

CORA LEE

You sure I can't get you a glass of something to cool you off some from this hot house?

MISS SARAH

Don't bother yourself. Were any of your children born with infirmities?

CORA LEE

I don't know that word.

MISS SARAH

Disabilities; deaf, dumb, blind, feebleminded, epileptic, missing limbs.

CORA LEE

All my children are grown, Ma'am. I don't understand why you need this information.

(MISS SARAH rises from the Queen Anne chair. She walks to the Queen Anne hall table. She picks up picture frame after picture frame and examines the people in the photographs.)

MISS SARAH

I'm trying to form an understanding of your family's genetic make-up. Do you know what genetics are? I made mention of genes a short while ago.

CORA LEE

No, Ma'am. I don't know what that is.

MISS SARAH

Well, you're certainly not in the minority. Most people don't. I can't claim to be an expert, but the Eugenics Board has given me extensive training. I know enough to discover bad genes on a family tree when I run across them.

CORA LEE

I still don't know what you're talking about.

MISS SARAH

There's no need to. You have me. The Eugenics Board of North Carolina has chosen me to be your family's advocate. I'm here to help you make the proper decisions.

CORA LEE

But we don't need no help.

MISS SARAH

I'm here to show you that you do.

(MISS SARAH sits back down in the Queen Anne chair.)

MISS SARAH (cont'd)

How old is your granddaughter River?

CORA LEE

She turned twenty-two this past Fourth of July. Every year we let her think the fireworks over the creek are just for her.

MISS SARAH

At twenty-two she's unaware of what the Fourth of July really means?

CORA LEE

Everyone but me done forgot those fireworks are for America's freedom.

MISS SARAH

Is River her given name?

CORA LEE

My youngest daughter Mildred was always different. She's River's mama. Mildred took to naming her children after things in the world instead of after people. She got a son named Wheat. I always felt bad for that boy. She named her oldest daughter Sunflower. It does sound kind of pretty as a name though.

MISS SARAH

Did your daughter Mildred have problems understanding things? Did she exhibit any learning abnormalities or behavioral problems?

CORA LEE

She ain't had none of them things.

MISS SARAH

She finished all of her schooling?

CORA LEE

No. She went and got her leg broke.

MISS SARAH

I beg your pardon?

CORA LEE

She got pregnant.

MISS SARAH

I've never heard that saying before. How old was she, when she got her leg broke?

CORA LEE

Thirteen.

MISS SARAH

That's even younger than you were. How many children did Mildred give birth to?

CORA LEE

Six, Ma'am. I thought River was gonna be her last but she had a baby boy after moving up to Chicago. She named him Waterfall.

MISS SARAH

Cora Lee, you're still doing it.

CORA LEE

Ma'am?

MISS SARAH

Addressing me as ma'am. Do you have any difficulties I should be aware of? Is it hard to remember to call me Miss Sarah? Has it been hard to understand the things I've been asking?

CORA LEE

No, Ma'am-- Miss Sarah. I just might be a little nervous. I ain't understanding why you're here or what these questions are for. What is the Eugenics Board?

MISS SARAH

The Eugenics Board of North Carolina is your friend. We're here to provide assistance to you and your family. There's no need to be nervous. These questions will help us achieve that. Does that put your mind to ease?

CORA LEE

I wouldn't be honest if I said it did.

MISS SARAH

You don't have a thing to worry about. A petition was filed on behalf of your family. You're very lucky. Shall we continue?

CORA LEE

Yes, Ma'am-- Miss Sarah.

MISS SARAH

Did Mildred abandon River with you?

CORA LEE

I asked Mildred to leave River with me. She wasn't like her other babies. I seen it right away. River was behind on everything. I know what babies should be doing from one day old, to three months old, to all the way up to them growing taller than me. I knew my daughter had no patience for a child that would stay a child. My fourth baby was born like River. Esther was her name. She passed away when she was twelve. Both her and the baby died during childbirth. You was just holding a picture of her.

MISS SARAH

I asked earlier if any of your children were born with any disabilities. Why didn't you mention Esther?

CORA LEE

Esther ain't had no problems speaking or hearing. She could see just as good as you and me.

MISS SARAH

Those were not the only disabilities I mentioned. Epileptic, missing limbs, feebleminded.

CORA LEE

She ain't had none of them things either.

MISS SARAH

Your description would lead me to believe she was born with limited mental capacities.

CORA LEE

Esther was born with what?

MISS SARAH

Feebleminded.

CORA LEE

I know the kind of folks they use that word for. I ain't gonna call none of my children that. My oldest boy never got the hang of sounding out or reading words, but he fixed fighter planes during the second war. My daughter Josephine take to stuttering something awful. But when she get to singing, you would never know it takes her two minutes to say her full name. My son Peter is a falling down drunk. You might pass him by on Saturday night if the sheriff ain't already dragged him off to the drunk tank. All ten of my children ate different, slept different, learned different. Esther was different. She won't nothing else.

MISS SARAH

How would you describe River?

CORA LEE

She's different.

MISS SARAH

A child that would remain a child. Isn't that what you said?

CORA LEE

River ain't ever gonna read or write if that's what you asking. She know how to wash what she need to wash. Put on her own clothes. Her mind ain't ever gonna be her age. She don't bring no harm to nothing. Is that what somebody been saying? Ain't no truth to it if they did. You here investigating something about River? The girl is sweet as molasses. She always hugging and kissing on folks. River ain't no danger.

MISS SARAH

I'm not here because we think you're granddaughter is a danger.

CORA LEE

But you are here asking after River. Why? She in the house with me most days. Any other time she with her Uncle Jesse. The only time she ever alone is when I send her down to Mr. Murphy's store. She go and she come right back. She remember everything I ask for. She got a good memory when it comes to a list of things.

MISS SARAH

Does River engage in the activity of hugging and kissing on just anybody she runs across?

(JESSE enters and stands in the doorway leading from the back rooms. He's wearing his funeral suit. He goes unnoticed by the two women. JESSE does not put on the mask that's required of Colored folks when dealing with white folks.)

CORA LEE

Only family members.

MISS SARAH

Does she hug and kiss your brother?

CORA LEE

He family.

MISS SARAH

Are they alone very often?

(JESSE makes his presence known.)

JESSE

My grand-niece and I do a lot of fishing together, but we don't be alone. We take worms with us. If we lucky the fish be there too. Morning, Ma'am.

MISS SARAH

Good morning.

CORA LEE

Jesse this be Miss Sarah. She the white woman we been-- she the woman we been waiting on. She here asking after River. Tell her River don't cause us no trouble.

JESSE

River don't cause us no trouble.

MISS SARAH

Perhaps we should change the subject for awhile. How are you this morning, Jesse?

(JESSE does as River instructed him to do earlier. If the white woman asks him a question, say I don't remember.)

JESSE

I don't remember.

CORA LEE

Stop fooling. He's fine, Miss Sarah.

MISS SARAH

How many children do you have?

JESSE

I don't remember.

MISS SARAH

How could you not remember a thing like that?

JESSE

River say if the white woman ask me something, say I don't remember. I don't remember.

MISS SARAH

Your family was discussing my arrival?

JESSE

I don't remember.

CORA LEE

Jesse, answer Miss Sarah's questions. The sooner she gets her answers. The sooner she can be on her way. We don't wanna keep her all day.

JESSE

I never found my way around to getting married. I ain't got no children, Ma'am.

MISS SARAH

Certainly you know you can have children outside of marriage. The young lady who lived down by the railroad tracks-- Did you know her?

JESSE

I put in some cucumbers at her house once.

MISS SARAH

That was neighborly of you. She had quite a few children. She never came close to being married. We find illegitimate births to be common amongst Colored families.

JESSE

I must be a different color. I ain't got another answer to your question. I don't have no children.

MISS SARAH

Most likely for the better.

JESSE

Your meaning?

MISS SARAH

Your affliction. I couldn't help but notice. It's most certainly hereditary. Surely you had one or two other relatives born with a club foot. You did well to spare your offspring those limitations.

JESSE

This foot ain't from birth. I earned it during World War I, but sending Colored men off to die just might be hereditary.

MISS SARAH

Please accept my apology. Sometimes I get carried away with my profession. Genes are very powerful. I'm constantly on the look out for their influences on a family.

CORA LEE

Is that why you was asking all them questions when you first get here?

MISS SARAH

Exactly. The study of genetics has determined that traits are passed down from one generation to the next. Your son Peter for instance. Certainly there are other alcoholics in your family. These traits are passed down by way of genes. Do you drink, Jesse?

JESSE

Not to the point of being dragged off to the drunk tank.

MISS SARAH

Well, certainly not. While the theory behind eugenics has shown that man can take measures to prevent undesirable genes from polluting the next generation and the human race in general.

JESSE

Like a club foot?

MISS SARAH

I believe I offered my apology. My father was wounded during the first war as well.

JESSE

By soldiers from his own country?

MISS SARAH

We really should be getting back to my investigation and not talking about some long forgotten war.

JESSE

Only forgotten by those who ain't fight it. The first war suppose to change things. A lot of Colored men thought that. We was gonna go help beat the Germans and come home heroes, but when we come back we was still Colored. I spent most of the war digging trenches and dragging dead bodies to they graves. The one time I did see combat ain't had nothing to do with the Germans. Them good ole' boys from the south ain't waste no time teaching the French about Jim Crow. The white soldiers had they booze halls and the Colored soldiers had none. One night I felt like changing all that. I puffed out my chest and walked into Cafe Napoleon. Four southern crackers made sure I ain't walk back out.

MISS SARAH

That sounds like an unfortunate incident.

JESSE

Was your father stationed in France? We might have almost shared a drink.

CORA LEE

Mind your tongue.

MISS SARAH

My father never saw race. He would have seen you as an American soldier in a foreign country.

JESSE

How would he see me back in North Carolina?

CORA LEE

Jesse.

MISS SARAH

You sister says her schooling was limited. How far did you get?

JESSE

I had to come out after the second grade. White folks too lazy to pull they own tobacco, and too southern to pay a Colored man a fair price to do it.

MISS SARAH

I don't think I care for your words.

JESSE

My sister probably been too polite to ask this outright. What business you got with our family?

MISS SARAH

I'm here to make an assessment. I'm here to evaluate your family's needs.

JESSE

What did Sonny Washington need? What you do to that boy after y'all took him away?

MISS SARAH

I'm not at liberty to discuss any other cases.

JESSE

What about Sister Springfield's daughter? Faith come up missing for three or four days too.

MISS SARAH

(to CORA LEE)

I see you and your brother took to asking your neighbors about me.

CORA LEE

We ain't mean no harm.

JESSE

What y'all do to that girl?

CORA LEE

Jesse.

MISS SARAH

We gave her medical care.

JESSE

It ain't work. Faith still falling out and having fits.

MISS SARAH

We weren't treating her for the epilepsy.

JESSE

What else would you be treating her for?

MISS SARAH

Those two cases are private and have nothing to do with your sister's. I won't answer anymore questions regarding other families.

JESSE

What does the Eugenics Board of North Carolina do when they take folks away from they homes? Is it only Colored folks y'all taking?

MISS SARAH

We provide medical services, free of charge. Those services are never based on color.

JESSE

Ain't nobody sick in my sister's house.

MISS SARAH

We offer preventative services. We take care of health issues before they become problems. And before they stand a chance of being passed down to another generation.

CORA LEE

(to MISS SARAH)

Did you come here thinking River was gonna have a baby? Thinking she would give birth to a baby like herself? Do I understand you?

MISS SARAH

Perfectly, but the petitioner didn't indicate that your granddaughter is with child. But there is a concern of her becoming pregnant. And yes, her limitations and defective genes would be passed down to that child. And that child would then pass down those same defective genes.

CORA LEE

We don't allow River to keep company with men.

MISS SARAH

I take it you don't keep the girl under lock and key.

CORA LEE

River don't go nowhere without me.

(MISS SARAH flips back one page in her notebook and reads Cora Lee's words back to her.)

MISS SARAH

"The only time she ever alone is when I send her down to Mr. Murphy's store. She go and come right back. She remember everything I ask for. She got a good memory for a list of things."

CORA LEE

She come right back, Miss Sarah. She don't be gone long enough for something to happen.

JESSE

Did the state of North Carolina fix it so Sonny Washington couldn't pass down no deaf, dumb or blind genes?

CORA LEE

How would they go about doing that?

JESSE

Remember when our daddy did the breeding over at Mr. Wilkes' horse farm? He took to snipping off the balls of the weaker stallions so not to mess up the bloodline.

CORA LEE

They did that to Sonny?

JESSE

I don't know. Miss Sarah ain't found her way around to answering my question.

MISS SARAH

Those two families have the state's full confidentiality as your sister does.

JESSE

Did you turn that boy into a gelding? Did the state of North Carolina castrate some harmless deaf, dumb, and blind child?

MISS SARAH

Sonny Washington is a full grown man.

JESSE

He ain't no man no more.

MISS SARAH

The members of the Eugenics Board carefully reviewed his situation. Our decision was unanimous. He was capable of having adult relations and producing damaged children.

JESSE

Sonny wouldn't know what to do with a woman. He don't do nothing but eat, piss, shit and shell peas. The state of North Carolina had no right to mutilate that boy.

MISS SARAH

I would remind you to watch the manner in which you address me. And you're in no position to question what the state of North Carolina can or cannot do.

CORA LEE

What they do to Sister Springfield's daughter?

MISS SARAH

I'm not here to discuss Sister Springfield, Sonny Washington or any more of your recipes. I'm here to discuss the possibilities of you becoming the caretaker of another feeble-minded child. A child that will require the white tax payers of the state of North Carolina to feed and clothe it as they are doing with River.

JESSE

River don't spend no time around men. We see to that. You and your white tax payers can go back to sleeping at night.

MISS SARAH

You're still a man. Unless your foot wasn't your only war injury. According to your sister's answers, you spend time alone with River. The girl is fond of hugging and kissing. Has anything inappropriate ever happened between the two of you?

JESSE

Do you practice being vulgar, Miss Sarah or does it come easy?

MISS SARAH

The members of the Eugenics Board has given me a list of questions to ask. I intend on asking every last one of them, regardless if they bring offense. Sometimes things happen between family members. It wouldn't entirely be your fault. Studies show that certain urges are passed down through genes. Your sister's answers indicate that the women in your family tend to have a strong urge to breed. I don't imagine that skipping a generation and missing River.

(CORA LEE'S mask slips further from her face.)

CORA LEE

Is that what you wrote down in them notes? You think me having children come from urges?

MISS SARAH

I believe there's evidence. You were fifteen when you first gave birth and your daughter Mildred was just thirteen. Despite Esther's mental limitations she found her way around to conceiving. And I'm concerned with the large number of children being produced by one female. It goes strongly against the national average. Promiscuity, poverty, a lack of self control and mental deficiencies seem to run in your family.

CORA LEE

You got me and my children sounding like an animals. The Bible says to have children. It ain't had nothing to do with urges. My daughter Mildred was a silly young girl who thought she was in love. My baby-girl Esther was dragged out into some woods by a man she ain't even know. She ain't had no say in it. And when did being poor become something other than just being poor? How my family become your concern?

MISS SARAH

I need your family's history to make the proper decisions.

CORA LEE

What you trying to decide for my family? River is a sweet girl and don't cause us no trouble. She far from being what you say. Tell her Jesse. You can call it slow if you want to but she ain't feeble-minded.

(The front door burst open. RIVER enters into the room. Her white dress is soaking wet. The thin material clings to her and completely reveals her naked body beneath it. Her hands play a solitary game of patty-cake.)

RIVER

Mama Cora, what the game you want me to play with the white woman?

FADE TO BLACK.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE

LIGHTS UP:

(RIVER stands in the doorway in her wet dress. She still plays a solitary game of patty-cake.)

CORA LEE

What are you doing all wet?

RIVER

Took myself down to the creek.

(RIVER stops playing patty-cake. RIVER realizes she's failed at listening. She walks to CORA LEE and buries her head into CORA LEE'S chest.)

(JESSE closes the front door.)

MISS SARAH

She don't go nowhere without you.

CORA LEE

You trying to use my words against me?

MISS SARAH

You must be River.

RIVER

I don't remember.

MISS SARAH

She doesn't remember her own name or she doesn't remember who she is? Which answer should I write down?

(CORA LEE makes RIVER stand upright on her own.)

CORA LEE

It ain't either. She remember both. She's just playing a game. Jesse run and fetch something to cover this girl.

(JESSE exits to the back rooms.)

CORA LEE (cont'd)

River, say hi to Miss Sarah.

(RIVER runs to MISS SARAH. She hugs the woman, but stops short of showering her with kisses. MISS SARAH protest the action.)

MISS SARAH

She smells something awful.

JESSE (o.s.)

You ain't never smelled the Eno Creek before?

CORA LEE

River come back over here. You know better.

(RIVER goes back to CORA LEE.)

(JESSE enters with a towel.)

JESSE

Come here, Girl.

(RIVER goes to JESSE. He tenderly dries her off. MISS SARAH stands observing the action.)

JESSE (cont'd)

What did I tell you about that creek?

RIVER

It dangerous.

JESSE

What else?

RIVER

Never go by myself. Always ask you or Arthur take me.

(RIVER looks at CORA LEE apologetically.)

RIVER (cont'd)

Sorry. Don't talk about Arthur no more today.

So why you go?
JESSE

Bo be waiting for me.
RIVER

Take your mind off that.
CORA LEE

(JESSE finishes drying RIVER and leaves her with the towel to cover up.)

Is Bo one of her friends?
MISS SARAH

He a boy she know from church. Ain't nothing else.
CORA LEE

Do you care for this boy, River?
MISS SARAH

I don't remember?
RIVER

She don't know nothing about that.
CORA LEE

When you meet him at the creek do you hug and kiss him?
MISS SARAH

I don't remember.
RIVER

I recall you saying she had a good memory.
MISS SARAH

If the white woman ask you something, say I don't remember.
RIVER

Is that something you told your granddaughter to do?
MISS SARAH

Say I don't remember, Mama Cora.
RIVER

CORA LEE

She ain't use to no company.

(RIVER notices MISS SARAH'S wedding ring and crosses over to her and takes MISS SARAH'S hand.)

RIVER

Is you married?

MISS SARAH

Yes.

RIVER

Who you married to?

(MISS SARAH gently pulls her hand away from RIVER.)

MISS SARAH

Mr. Robert E. Woods.

RIVER

Why he marry you? What you do for him to ask?

MISS SARAH

I was nice to him. I learned how to cook his favorite foods, and I kept myself looking pretty.

RIVER

I ain't pretty. Mama Cora say I can't use no stove. I can be nice. You think Bo gonna marry me if I'm nice?

MISS SARAH

How far has her liking of this boy gone?

JESSE

It ain't go nowhere. I watch out for her.

RIVER

We kiss and hug but not where nobody can see. Bo say his friends gonna laugh. Say, he kissing on a dummy. *(singing)* He kissing on a dummy. He kissing on a dummy. *(stops singing)* I ain't like other girls.

CORA LEE

Go on back to your room until I call for you. Let Miss Sarah and me finish up.

MISS SARAH

I need River to stay. I have a list of questions for her to answer.

CORA LEE

River ain't got no place in grown folks business. Go on back to your room. Change out that wet dress.

MISS SARAH

Do you receive eighteen dollars and seventy-five cents in government assistance once a month?

CORA LEE

Seventy-four cents, Ma'am. And I don't waste a bit of that money. I even manage to put a little away each month for a rainy day.

MISS SARAH

I can't imagine that to be very much. Nonetheless, the Eugenics Board can stop those payments if you interfere with our investigation.

CORA LEE

Sit down, River.

JESSE

Can't the girl change out her wet clothes first?

MISS SARAH

We have time.

CORA LEE

(to RIVER)

Go on out that front door and come in the way you left out. Find something dry to put on and make sure you put something on underneath it. Don't go nowhere else.

(MISS SARAH gestures towards the entrance to the back rooms.)

MISS SARAH

Can't she go through this way?

CORA LEE

She ain't leave out the front door. Bring bad luck to come through a door you ain't leave out of--

(CORA LEE relinquishes her superstition and gently pushes RIVER towards the entrance to the back rooms.)

CORA LEE (cont'd)

Go on and change out them clothes, Girl. Seem like bad luck already here.

(RIVER exits to the back rooms.)

(MISS SARAH sits down in the Queen Anne chair.)

MISS SARAH

Thank you.

(CORA LEE takes a seat. The mask slips further off of her face.)

CORA LEE

What was in that report? What did somebody say about River?

MISS SARAH

My report indicates that your granddaughter is having urges.

CORA LEE

What kind of urges?

MISS SARAH

Urges of a sexual nature.

JESSE

Who telling that lie?

MISS SARAH

River just spoke about this boy Bo. She spoke about wanting to be married. The girl certainly has desires.

CORA LEE

She ain't got no mind for the desires you talking about. She repeating what she hear other girls her age be saying.

MISS SARAH

I know River has a little boy named Arthur, and I suspect you don't have arthritis. So the girl does know more than you say.

JESSE

If you know all that, then your first visit should have been up to Miss Linda's house?
Asking her family about urges?

CORA LEE

Jesse be still.

JESSE

This woman can't come in your house saying anything she want. Saying I got urges for my grand-niece and my grand-niece got urges for me. Did you go up there asking Miss Linda what kind of urges she got? What kind of urges her boy Junior be having? Did you ask them if they got urges for one another or do you just be asking Colored folks them nasty things?

MISS SARAH

I won't sit here and let you speak to me just any kind of way. I've tried to hold my tongue up to this point.

CORA LEE

Jesse, say you sorry.

MISS SARAH

I won't have you speaking ill of Miss Linda or my family. As I told your sister, Miss Linda and I are distant cousins. Her blood line traces back to the highest office of the American Confederacy. She is a direct descendent of Jefferson Davis. There are no urges in her household.

JESSE

You don't know nothing about her household because you too busy looking for Colored folks to cut things off of. You need to send your Eugenics Board up there after her boy Junior. Cut off his nuts. Maybe I'll do it for you.

(JESSE storms out the side door.)

MISS SARAH

I hope your brother didn't mean that threat. I have no choice but to make a note of it.

CORA LEE

Jesse ain't no fool. He wouldn't threaten no white man. He upset. Them questions you asking ain't right.

MISS SARAH

My questions are not meant to be taken personally. These are standard questions. The Eugenics Board asks the same questions of all the families we investigate.

CORA LEE

All families or just Colored families?

MISS SARAH

It seems your brother took to putting something in your head that isn't true. I think his absence is for the better. Race simply isn't a factor.

CORA LEE

Sister Washington and Ida Springfield are Colored women with Colored children. Seem to me being Colored might play into it. I ain't just been laying out in the sun.

MISS SARAH

Those two women have adult children with genetic defects. I would have prescribed the same treatment if they had been white. The same for your friend who lived down by the railroad tracks. The Eugenics Board is after defective genes of all races.

CORA LEE

For not being able to talk about somebody. You sure do a lot of talking about that girl who lived down by the railroad tracks. Is you gonna be talking about me to the next family you investigate?

MISS SARAH

You seem to have forgotten your place.

CORA LEE

I know my place. I'm reminded of it every time I step outside this house. Can't you make your way around to seeing things through my eyes? I ain't never met you, and them questions you been asking. I wouldn't dare ask my oldest friend some of the things you ask me just after saying good morning. I don't know what you want with us.

MISS SARAH

I want to improve your granddaughter's life. I want to remove your worry. Sonny Washington's mother is caring for a full grown man with some very difficult needs. Would it be right for him to burden the state with children he could never take care of? Children who might inherit his same physical and mental limitations. The same for Ida Springfield's daughter. The Eugenics Board has improved the lives of those two people and hundreds of others. I need you to see that.

CORA LEE

What's wrong with River's life now? What you know?

MISS SARAH

Miss Linda found your granddaughter in her house two weeks ago. She was naked.

CORA LEE

That ain't true.

MISS SARAH

Miss Linda doesn't take to telling lies.

CORA LEE

So Miss Linda is the one who sent you.

MISS SARAH

The members of the Eugenics Board sent me. The records are sealed on who filed the petition.

CORA LEE

You take me for a fool? Miss Linda's name keep coming up but you keep saying it ain't her.

MISS SARAH

Does it matter who filed the petition? Miss Linda found your granddaughter in Junior's bedroom. She was in a state of undress.

CORA LEE

Who undressed her?

MISS SARAH

She was by herself. She was confused and highly combative. Miss Linda had to call for her kitchen help to calm the girl down.

CORA LEE

Where was Junior?

MISS SARAH

He wasn't in the house.

CORA LEE

So you fixed it in your mind that River wandered up to Miss Linda's house and saw fit to take off all her clothes?

MISS SARAH

Those are the facts reported to me.

(The mask slips further from CORA LEE'S face.)

CORA LEE

You good with questions. Why didn't you ask more of Miss Linda? I cleaned that house for twelve years. She got fourteen rooms. Out of all them rooms, River picked Junior's room to be naked in. That don't strike you as strange?

MISS SARAH

Miss Linda thought the girl might be waiting for Junior to come home. She did make a point of telling me that River had always been fond of hugging and kissing Junior back when you kept house for her. Being that they were children she didn't pay it much mind.

CORA LEE

We're both grown women, Miss Sarah. River won't always in that room by herself. How am I the last to know about this? How did River get home?

MISS SARAH

Miss Linda sent for your brother. He came and got her.

CORA LEE

(yelling to the back rooms)

River, you done in there? Come on out here.

(RIVER enters. She has dressed herself in the bra, hand-me-down bloomers and black church shoes.)

CORA LEE (cont'd)

I told you to put something proper on? Sit yourself down at that table.

(RIVER sits at the eating table.)

(CORA LEE exits to the back rooms.)

(MISS SARAH and RIVER are alone for the first time.

Allow this moment to settle over us. MISS SARAH walks over to the entrance to the back rooms, trying to keep her connection to Cora Lee.)

MISS SARAH

She's having a hard time. Isn't she?

(Silence.)

(RIVER begins to play a game of patty-cake by herself. This action makes MISS SARAH nervous.)

MISS SARAH (cont'd)

It's quite alright that the girl's not dressed proper.

(Silence.)

MISS SARAH (cont'd)

I won't make note of it.

(Silence.)

MISS SARAH (cont'd)

(A bit frantic.)

Cora Lee.

(CORA LEE enters with a house dress. The mask used when dealing with white folks has been completely removed.)

CORA LEE

This day got her confused. She needs to keep to her routine. She's fine when everything stays the same.

(CORA LEE gently puts an end to RIVER'S solitary game of patty-cake. CORA LEE stands RIVER up and slips the house dress over RIVER'S head without problem. They both sit once the task is complete.)

MISS SARAH

Nothing in life remains the same. That's why I'm here. I know what you're dealing with. I come across it all the time. I can help.

(MISS SARAH retrieves her pen and notepad. She then takes a seat at the eating table.)

MISS SARAH (cont'd)

How are you today, River?

RIVER

I don't remember.

MISS SARAH

Are you still playing the game your grandmother told to you play with the white woman?

RIVER

I don't remember.

CORA LEE

Stop playing the game and answer Miss Sarah.

RIVER

Fine. How you, Ma'am?

MISS SARAH

Happy that we're getting a chance to become better acquainted. Are you enjoying the heat?

RIVER

It too hot, but I can't be walking around here with no clothes on. Uncle Jesse living here now.

(MISS SARAH scribbles something on the notepad and continues on.)

MISS SARAH

Do you know your numbers? Can you do any counting?

RIVER

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.

MISS SARAH

Can you count any higher?

RIVER

7, 8, 9, 10.

MISS SARAH

And what comes after ten?

RIVER

Don't know.

MISS SARAH

Do you know which state you reside in?

RIVER

Don't know.

CORA LEE

Where you live, River?

RIVER

North Carolina.

MISS SARAH

Do you know how long you've lived in North Carolina?

RIVER

Don't know.

CORA LEE

Since you were a baby.

RIVER

Since I was a baby.

MISS SARAH

Do you know how many years that would be?

RIVER

Don't know.

CORA LEE

How many candles was on your cake?

RIVER

Twenty-two. I ain't no baby no more. Arthur ain't no baby no more either. Ain't got no more babies. Sorry. Don't talk about Arthur no more today.

MISS SARAH

What else aren't you suppose to talk about?

RIVER

The store list, Junior, Miss Linda or who Arthur look like.

(CORA LEE rises from her seat and leaves the table, allowing the inevitable.)

MISS SARAH

He's your little boy. I would think he looks like you.

RIVER

Arthur don't look like me. He ain't nothing like me. He pretty, he smart, he can read. Don't ever say Arthur like me. 'Cus he ain't.

CORA LEE

Calm down. Miss Sarah just asking questions.

RIVER

Ain't good questions. What she care about Arthur for? She don't know my baby.

MISS SARAH

You're right. I don't know Arthur but that doesn't mean I can't care for him. We've only just met and I care for you. That's one of the reasons I'm here. I'll try to ask better questions. *(pause)* What's your favorite part about going to the creek?

RIVER

Racing Arthur.

MISS SARAH

I bet you're a fast swimmer.

RIVER

I beat Arthur every time.

MISS SARAH

I'm a fast swimmer too. Maybe the three of us could race one day.

RIVER

Arthur might like that. Give him somebody to beat.

MISS SARAH

What else do you like about going to the creek?

RIVER

Bo be waiting for me.

MISS SARAH

The boy you want to marry?

RIVER

(Something has broken this dream)

I can't marry Bo. Won't be able to see after Arthur by myself. We gotta stay here.

MISS SARAH

Is there something wrong with living here? You can tell me if there is.

RIVER

Something in my mind making me want more.

MISS SARAH

What more do you need? You have your grandmother. You have her caramel cake and summer squash fritters. And a little boy you get to call all your own. That's more than some people. Fix it in your mind that you don't need anything else.

RIVER

I fix it in my mind. *(pause)* Is we friends?

MISS SARAH

Of course we're friends. Tell me what we're going to do as friends.

RIVER

Play together.

MISS SARAH

What else?

RIVER

Don't know.

MISS SARAH

Tell secrets to one another. Things we only want the other to know.

RIVER

Tell secrets to one another

MISS SARAH

How did you find your way up to Miss Linda's house? The time she found you waiting in Junior's room.

RIVER

I don't remember.

MISS SARAH

Now, I thought we were friends. I ain't never told a soul about how I went about getting Mr. Woods to marry me. I only ever told you.

RIVER

Junior take me.

CORA LEE

You got your answer. You let Miss Linda know she ain't had no cause to file that report. She done wasted your time. Junior the problem. He always been. Somebody need to see to it that he leaves my granddaughter alone.

MISS SARAH

Why did you ask Junior to take you to his house?

CORA LEE

Why you got it in your mind to change things?

MISS SARAH

I need to be clear.

CORA LEE

It ain't gonna get no more clear. Junior took her up there against her say and took off all her clothes. I'm sure you can figure out the rest.

MISS SARAH

River didn't say any of those things. The child simply said Junior took her. She might not be clear about any of it. Her being feeble-minded and all.

CORA LEE

Now she back to being a child? She fixing to tell you what Junior done to her and you take her back to being feeble-minded. Just a second ago you had her as a full grown woman. Having all types of urges. Waiting naked in some man's bedroom.

MISS SARAH

(to RIVER)

Do you miss hugging and kissing Junior? Do you enjoy being with men?

CORA LEE

River don't know about those things.

(MISS SARAH stands up and leaves the table. RIVER remains seated.)

MISS SARAH

She has a nine year-old boy. We're all too old to believe in the stork anymore.

CORA LEE

Junior showed her how to hug and kiss different from what she know.

RIVER

That where Arthur come from. Mama Cora say no more hugging and kissing like Junior show me. Only hug and kiss like you do for family. Junior see me and he say come. I say Mama Cora need her list from the store; corn meal, stick of butter, eggs, jar molasses, half pound flour. She gonna make summer squash fritters. Junior say Arthur his baby. If I don't come, his mama gonna take him. So I go.

MISS SARAH

This is why I'm here. Your granddaughter can't speak up for herself. If these are the things that happened, she should have told Miss Linda.

CORA LEE

You think Miss Linda gonna allow herself to believe something River say?

MISS SARAH

The girl didn't even have the mind to tell you. Your brother kept it from you as well. River can't see after herself. What if another baby comes?

CORA LEE

I see to it that River ain't around no men that I don't know. She ain't the one you need to be following behind. Junior the one with urges. He the one who took her someplace, and long before that he was doing all kinds of things to her. While I was keeping house for his mama he had her doing whatever it is he had her doing.

MISS SARAH

That's the problem you're facing. Your granddaughter lacks the ability to make proper decisions. I have no idea what Junior might be responsible for.

CORA LEE

Don't you think you should find out? River might not be the only one.

MISS SARAH

Junior's actions have nothing to do with this case. We're not investigating who River is having relations with. Our concern is her bringing more children into the world. The Eugenics Board would like to eliminate that possibility.

CORA LEE

By doing what?

MISS SARAH

Sterilization. The doctor would fix her body. You'll never have to worry about anymore babies. River will suffer no ill effects. She'll be the better for it. You'll find that you have more control over her. The young lady who lived down by the railroad tracks-- Ida Springfield's daughter recovered just fine.

CORA LEE

Faith still falling out and having fits. She needed help for that.

MISS SARAH

My sister-in-law benefitted from the procedure as well. She's a better person for it.

CORA LEE

I ain't never met your sister-in-law to know. I'll keep a better eye on River.

MISS SARAH

The same eye you kept on her while keeping house for Miss Linda? The same eye you keep on her down at the creek? Will you be using the same eye that you used for your daughter Esther? There are unscrupulous men who will see fit to take advantage of your granddaughter's mental limitations. You won't always be able to see after her. They will drag her behind buildings, into tall grasses, or into ditches by the side of the road. They will have their way with her and then go about their business. Leaving you to deal with the consequences. One of which you're already raising.

CORA LEE

But what about them men? It ain't right if they were to do that. Why all the blame going against my granddaughter?

MISS SARAH

Those men will say she gave consent. No one will believe otherwise.

CORA LEE

You say she feeble-minded for something and able-minded for it at the same time. That don't make no sense.

(The front door opens. JESSE and ARTHUR enter. JESSE pushes ARTHUR directly in front of MISS SARAH.)

JESSE

Who he look like?

(RIVER gets up from the eating table.)

RIVER

Arthur, if the white woman ask you something, say I don't remember.

CORA LEE

Why you bring that boy back here?

JESSE

Who boy you think he is?

MISS SARAH

The boy's paternity is not why I'm here.

(JESSE grabs the dictionary from the Queen Anne hall table and hands it to ARTHUR.)

JESSE

Open that dictionary and read something for this woman.

(ARTHUR is puzzled, but opens the dictionary.)

ARTHUR

Good morning, Ma'am. What word don't you understand? I'm only up to the D words, but Mama Cora said it's not a sin to skip pages.

MISS SARAH

There's no need in the boy reading for me.

JESSE

Him reading that book will show you what you been saying ain't true. River might be what she is but it don't mean her boy is. *(To Arthur)* What's eugenics?

ARTHUR

The study of hereditary improvement by genetic control.

(MISS SARAH ignores ARTHUR. She removes a packet of papers and a pen from her leather satchel. She walks them over to CORA LEE.)

MISS SARAH

Your signature is required on these papers but your printed name will suffice. I've placed an X on the pages you need to sign.

JESSE

What them papers for?

CORA LEE

Miss Sarah say River needs an operation.

JESSE

River ain't been to no doctor to say she need anything. That girl ain't leaving out this house, and she ain't getting no operation.

MISS SARAH

That's not your decision.

CORA LEE

It's mine and it be the same.

(CORA LEE drops the papers and pen into the seat of the Queen Anne chair.)

MISS SARAH

(to CORA LEE)

We spent all morning going over her situation. This operation will be beneficial to everyone concerned.

(ARTHUR opens the dictionary to the word OPERATION.)

JESSE

Is River included in that or just the white tax payers of North Carolina?

(ARTHUR arrives at the word and announces it like he's at the start of a spelling bee.)

ARTHUR

Operation--

CORA LEE

Close up that book.

MISS SARAH

Ask River about Mr. Murphy.

CORA LEE

What he got to do with this? Did he file a report too? River took from his store once and I whupped her good for it. He ain't had a problem since. He a lie if he say anything other.

MISS SARAH

Ask her what happens most times you send her down to his store.

JESSE

Seem like you could tell it better.

CORA LEE

River, tell me what happens when you go to the store for me.

RIVER

I go and come right back. I don't forget nothing.

CORA LEE

Do Mr. Murphy keep you in his store longer than you wanna stay? Do he stop you from coming home?

JESSE

Get to it, Cora Lee. *(to RIVER)* Do Mr. Murphy be touching on you?

(RIVER begins to play a solitary game of patty-cake.)

RIVER

I don't remember. Remember to don't remember.

ARTHUR

What's that mean, Uncle Jesse?

JESSE

We ain't got time for you not to remember. What Mr. Murphy do to you?

RIVER

He say I don't have enough. If I wanna come back with everything you ask for, I gotta do what he say. No more hugging and kissing like Junior show me. Only hugging and kissing like you do for family. Mr. Murphy say he family.

(RIVER stops playing her solitary game of patty-cake and goes to CORA LEE.)

RIVER (cont'd)

I don't think he family, Mama Cora. I say no. He take the stick of butter. I can't forget nothing you ask for. I do what he say.

(CORA LEE wraps RIVER up in her arms.)

JESSE

Mr. Murphy won't be making it to the morning.

MISS SARAH

If Mr. Murphy comes down with as much as a cold, I'll bring the sheriff directly to your door.

JESSE

You keep helping the wrong folks, and the help you offering to the right folks don't be nowhere close to what they need.

(CORA LEE releases RIVER and gently pushes her towards the entrance to the back rooms.)

CORA LEE

Go on back to your room.

MISS SARAH

We haven't finished with my questions.

CORA LEE

This is still my house and River is still my grand-baby. *(to RIVER)* Go on back to your room.

(RIVER exists to the back rooms.)

MISS SARAH

I would like to take her with me today.

CORA LEE

I ain't changed my mind.

MISS SARAH

What more do you need to hear? Does River need to have another baby before you take action? You're lucky you don't have a house full of children running around here as it is. I know you don't care for the word, but your granddaughter is feeble-minded. And I find her to be promiscuous. There's no telling what other men there are.

(ARTHUR opens his dictionary to find the word PROMISCUOUS.)

JESSE

Then you need to go find them men. River ain't leaving out this house.

(ARTHUR arrives at the word and announces it like he's at the start of a spelling bee.)

ARTHUR

Promiscuous--

CORA LEE

Close up that book.

(JESSE walks to the front door and opens it.)

JESSE

Good day, Miss Sarah.

MISS SARAH

(to JESSE)

I can see to it that your war pension check is stopped. How would you survive then? You're too old to pull tobacco anymore, if a white man would even hire you. You got a reputation around this town. I can stop your sister's welfare. I can make it so not a dime of government money ever comes into this house again. If you want to have a fight we can have one, but you won't win.

(JESSE closes the door in defeat.)

CORA LEE

Ain't no need to threaten us. Did you see fit to threaten Mr. Murphy? What you gonna do about his urges? Cutting something out of River ain't gonna stop him.

MISS SARAH

This operation will stop her from bringing another child like herself into the world. Those defective genes are in your family.

CORA LEE

Arthur ain't slow.

MISS SARAH

Most likely on account of Junior.

JESSE

You giving that boy credit for something? He stuck his thing in a girl that didn't know no better.

MISS SARAH

And she won't ever know any better. I can't do anything about Junior, but I can do what's best for River. *(to CORA LEE)* I need you to sign those papers. *(pause)* Childbirth is a dangerous thing for any woman. My husband nearly lost me to it. You lost your Esther to it. Sure, part of it can be blamed on the acts of an unknown man, but your daughter was the one left to pay. Esther is dead not him. Are you willing to take another chance of losing River to it?

(CORA LEE picks up the papers and pen. She prints her name on the first page and flips through pages finding the various Xs, printing her name three more times.)

JESSE

Cora Lee.

CORA LEE

We ain't always gonna be here, Jesse. What's River gonna do with another baby, if she even make it that far. This operation ain't gonna take nothing from her that she need. It ain't gonna change all of her. She still gonna be River.

(CORA LEE drops the signed papers and pen back into the seat of the Queen Anne chair.)

MISS SARAH

It's the proper thing.

(MISS SARAH picks up the signed papers and pen. She places the items inside her leather satchel.)

CORA LEE

She ain't ever been away from home. Are you sure you need to take her today? She won't understand.

MISS SARAH

The sooner she leaves the sooner I can get her back to you.

CORA LEE

How long she gonna be gone for?

JESSE

Three or four days.

MISS SARAH

(as if JESSE has said nothing)

Three or four days.

JESSE

(to CORA LEE)

You can't let her do this.

(CORA LEE takes ARTHUR by the hand.)

CORA LEE

Come say good-bye to your mama. She gonna be at the hospital for a few days. *(to MISS SARAH)* Should I put some clothes in a bag for her?

MISS SARAH

Just something for her to come back home in. She'll be in a hospital gown most of her stay.

CORA LEE

You ain't even say where she was going.

MISS SARAH

The Colored ward over in Durham. You should pack a change of clothes for Arthur as well.

CORA LEE

What he need a change of clothes for?

MISS SARAH

He needs to come with us.

JESSE

Why?

MISS SARAH

The boy is carrying his mother's genes.

JESSE

And the genes of the boy who raped her. You forget you give him credit a minute ago?

CORA LEE

Ain't nothing wrong with Arthur. You can see that for yourself. He can read, write, and speak up for himself. Read out another word in that dictionary for this woman.

MISS SARAH

He'll be a man before you know it. He'll want to get married and have children of his own. His children stand a strong chance of inheriting his mother's mental retardation.

CORA LEE

Arthur ain't going nowhere.

MISS SARAH

The Eugenics Board has already made their decision. I have papers to take him.

CORA LEE

I ain't sign no papers for him. Unless you tricked me. Were some of those papers for Arthur? I told you I don't do no reading. I just follow what you say about them Xs. Did you fool me into changing this boy life?

MISS SARAH

Arthur's grandmother had the papers signed giving consent to his castration.

(ARTHUR remembers learning the definition of castration. He announces the word on his way to trying to give the definition.)

ARTHUR

Castration--

CORA LEE

Go back there with your mama.

(ARTHUR is completely caught up in grown folks business. He walks backwards towards the entrance to the back rooms as the adults continue. He does not leave the room.)

CORA LEE (cont'd)

My daughter Mildred ain't been back to North Carolina since River was four. She ain't never even met Arthur. What give her the right to make that choice? What give you the right to go find her?

MISS SARAH

Miss Linda gave us the right. She had Junior sign the papers. They are his kin.

CORA LEE

Miss Linda done found a reason to claim Arthur? She had no ear for it when I brought it to her. She said I ain't see what I saw. Told me she don't need me to clean her house no more. River standing there bleeding all over her kitchen, and she think I still wanna clean her house.

JESSE

Call River whatever it is you fix it in your mind to call her, but ain't nothing wrong with her boy. None of River passed down to him, other than some of her color. Is that what you trying to get rid of?

MISS SARAH

I won't keep defending that accusation.

JESSE

Arthur is the smartest boy in his school. He be even smarter if they let him use the library. Now that he's descended from Jefferson Davis they just might. Miss Linda done put it in writing. Arthur, come meet your cousin.

(JESSE pulls ARTHUR away from the entrance to the back rooms and presents him to MISS SARAH.)

JESSE (cont'd)

Tell your cousin what you fixing to do to him.

CORA LEE

Is that what Miss Linda is worried about? She scared her family genes gonna be passed around to Colored folks. Afraid Junior gonna make another Colored baby. Worried about her direct line to Jefferson Davis being darkened up. How long you and Miss Linda been planning this? They sent you for Sister Washington and Ida Springfield's children, so you would have got to River on your own. But Miss Linda didn't want you to miss taking Arthur. Ain't nobody running around saying who he kin to. Ain't no cause for y'all to mutilate my boy.

(ARTHUR announces the word as he opens the dictionary to search for it.)

ARTHUR

Mutilate--

(CORA LEE snatches the dictionary from ARTHUR and throws it across the room.)

ARTHUR (cont'd)

Mama Cora!

CORA LEE

I told you to take yourself on out of here.

ARTHUR

You said it ain't no sin to skip pages. What did I do wrong?

MISS SARAH

Come into the world.

(CORA LEE swiftly pushes ARTHUR out through the entrance to the back rooms. He exits.)

(CORA LEE turns back to the main room and charges towards MISS SARAH. JESSE grabs ahold of CORA LEE, preventing any further advance.)

JESSE

My sister might be too polite to tell you to get out of her house--

CORA LEE

Get out of my house.

MISS SARAH

I'm not leaving alone. We've spent all morning going over this. The papers are signed and everything is in order.

JESSE

These children ain't going nowhere with you.

MISS SARAH

I have paperwork to take two people out of this house, but if you see fit I can call the sheriff and have him take four.

(CORA LEE exits to the inside of the back room. She returns holding the broom and sets her entire frame in front of the entrance, holding the broom in a threatening manner.)

CORA LEE

I done changed my mind about the whole thing. River ain't going nowhere either. Rip up them papers. I'm gonna look after her. We all gonna do better around here. Protect her from this world that don't care nothing about her. You leaving out here with yourself, Miss Sarah.

MISS SARAH

Do you want to lose everything?

CORA LEE

You done made that threat. My children mean more to me than some eighteen dollars and seventy-four cents. Go on and take it. I got dirt and something to put in it. We gonna eat rutabagas.

MISS SARAH

Call for River and Arthur. I won't tell you again. I'll go through you if I need to.

(JESSE moves to CORA LEE and takes the broom from her grasp. He adds his size to protecting the entrance to the back rooms.)

JESSE

You gonna need the sheriff.

MISS SARAH

When was the last time you saw the sheriff favor Colored over white? Maybe I'll tell him you touched me. You made me stay in your house longer than I wanted. Maybe I'll rip my dress a little. You'll find yourself sitting in jail if they don't lynch you first.

(JESSE relaxes his stance due to the threat from MISS SARAH. He silently contemplates his next action as the women go back and forth.)

CORA LEE

One word against two. You forget I'm standing here?

MISS SARAH

My word will see to it that the sheriff takes you both away. River and Arthur will have no one to come home to. The Eugenics Board will be forced to turn them over as wards of the state. You'll lose them forever. Take your pick.

CORA LEE

You can't just steal children from out they homes.

MISS SARAH

Arthur is the only child in this house and based on your family's history he won't remain one for very long. Without this operation he'll be a father by the time he turns twelve or thirteen. And it's only by God's hand that River isn't carrying some anonymous man's child as we speak.

(JESSE puts on the mask that is required of Colored folks when dealing with white folks in the South. The mask that makes white people feel at ease, respected and in charge.)

JESSE

Can you give us till tomorrow?

CORA LEE

Tomorrow for what, Jesse?

JESSE

Can you do that, Miss Sarah? That will give us a chance to talk to River and Arthur.

MISS SARAH

The hospital is waiting for their arrival today. It's all been planned.

JESSE

What difference a day gonna make, Ma'am? See your way around to understanding. You gonna get your way, be it today or tomorrow.

CORA LEE

We don't have to do what she say. We can fight.

(CORA LEE snatches the broom from JESSE.)

CORA LEE (cont'd)

Stand with me, Jesse.

JESSE

A cripple and an old woman? You know what these folks capable of. They like to burn me up inside my own house. Miss Sarah, can you do that? Please make your way around to understanding. These children ain't never been nowhere before. Just give us a day. Give us till the morning, Ma'am.

(MISS SARAH contemplates her decision.)

MISS SARAH

Just one more day? Until tomorrow?

JESSE

That's all I'm asking.

MISS SARAH

I can make that work. I'll explain it to my superiors and send notice to the hospital. But I'll be back this time tomorrow. I'll have my two men with me, so--

JESSE

We'll be looking for both you and your men. Don't you worry, Miss Sarah. Those children gonna be ready for--

(CORA LEE rushes towards MISS SARAH. She holds the broom like a baseball bat and readies it to strike MISS SARAH.)

CORA LEE

You ain't coming back here tomorrow because you ain't leaving here today! I'm gonna kill--

(JESSE grabs up CORA LEE as she attempts to attack MISS SARAH. He covers CORA LEE'S mouth to stop her from finishing the threat.)

JESSE

Stop it! Stop it, Cora Lee! You done lost your mind or something?

(CORA LEE struggles to break free of JESSE'S hold. JESSE releases CORA LEE. He quickly spins her towards him and slaps her across the face. The broom drops to the floor. CORA LEE instantly calms. She stands staring at JESSE and his betrayal.)

JESSE (cont'd)

I'm sorry, Miss Sarah. River and Arthur gonna be ready in the morning. Them papers are all signed. Cora Lee ain't gonna give you no more trouble. I'm gonna calm her down. It's gonna be alright. We all gonna be waiting for you first thing.

(MISS SARAH works to compose herself from the near attack from CORA LEE and witnessing JESSE'S violent act.)

MISS SARAH

(to CORA LEE)

I was hoping things would go a bit more smoothly. Give it some time. You'll come to understand it's all for the best. Thank you, Jesse.

(MISS SARAH gathers up her leather satchel, purse, and summer squash. She walks towards the front door.)

MISS SARAH (cont'd)

I'll be sure to use as much molasses as I dare.

(MISS SARAH exits.)

(CORA LEE is frozen in place. Her stare of betrayal still burning through JESSE.)

CORA LEE

Jesse--

(JESSE places his finger up to his lips as a sign for CORA LEE to hush. He walks to the front door and puts his ear against it. Hearing nothing. He returns to CORA LEE.)

JESSE

Sound like she gone.

CORA LEE

What it matter if she gone? Woman gonna be back in the morning. You gave my children away to her. You the one always talking about fighting back. Don't waste your sugar on 'em, Cora Lee you say. Don't step from that sidewalk, Cora Lee you say. Don't let 'em get to thinking they better than you, Cora Lee you say. The one time I find it in me to push back. You find it in you to go along.

JESSE

You talking about fighting back. Don't you think Sister Washington fought for her boy? How about Ida Springfield? I know damn well that girl by the railroad tracks went kicking and screaming. She kept a dirty house and ran the street, but she knew what made her a woman. She ain't gonna want them to cut that out of her. Fighting back and them people still took what they wanted. Us fighting back gonna have me dragging around two lame legs and you laid up under some dirt. I've been trying it that way. It ain't work when I was at war in Europe and it ain't been working for this war we in back here. You can't fight with brooms when they got guns. You can't fight with your heart when they ain't got one. Godless people be all around us. You watched that woman walk out of here with your summer squash, just as easy as she please. That's what we been doing for over three-hundred years. Bringing seeds to life for white folks. Whatever they told us to plant, we planted. Whatever they told us to grow, we grew it. That included our children. They turned around and sold both of them from us. But they don't need what we growing no more. They're trying to kill our gardens. I found a different way, Cora Lee.

CORA LEE

What different way you talking 'bout?

JESSE

The same way colored folks who came before us found. When they couldn't take it no more. When they got tired of waking up before the sun and going to sleep long after it went down. When they realized the dirt they turned over every day was going to be the same dirt that swallowed up their broken bodies. Freedom was never gonna come as long as they stayed put. They had to free themselves, Cora Lee.

(CORA LEE searches JESSE'S eyes for the answer.)

CORA LEE

I don't understand what you trying to say. That white woman coming back here first thing in the--

JESSE

Disappearing. Disappearing, Cora Lee. We just gonna disappear.

(CORA LEE'S face lights up with understanding and renewed hope.)

JESSE (cont'd)

Grab up whatever it is you want in this house. We getting out of North Carolina.

(JESSE exits out the side door.)

(CORA LEE begins to run around the room gathering up her most valued items into her arms: the family Bible, framed photos. She notices Miss Sarah's handkerchief still covering the cushion on the Queen Anne chair. She drops the items from her arms onto the sofa and yanks the handkerchief off of the cushion. CORA LEE rushes to the back room. She returns with a large knife. She stabs the cushion of the Queen Ann chair and slices it open. She places the knife down and begins to pull out roughly \$300 in small bills from inside the cushion. Once she gathers all the money and secures it in a bundle she runs to the entrance leading to the back rooms.)

CORA LEE

River, Arthur, come on!

(RIVER runs into the room with ARTHUR up in her arms.)

CORA LEE (cont'd)

We leaving.

(CORA LEE grabs ahold of RIVER'S hand and the three run out the side door.)

(Several seconds pass. ARTHUR rushes back in through the side door. He scans the room for his dictionary.)

The Fertile River

*He spots the book and picks it up from the floor. He
rushes back out the side door into his future.)*

FADE TO BLACK.

END OF PLAY