

FEEBLE-MINDED WHITE TRASH

A Drama

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Synopsis:

During the late 1920s in rural southern Virginia, Hattie Clawson, an illiterate laundress with three illegitimate children, one of them Black, hasn't heard of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes or his majority opinion in the landmark case *Buck vs. Bell*. But she will feel the impact of the court's decision when the Commonwealth of Virginia forces her to undergo an involuntary sterilization, severs her parental rights, and takes her children away. What will she and her children do to survive in a society preoccupied with race and class? Will the stigma ever go away?

All told, 33 states allowed forced sterilization as an outcome of the eugenics movement that swept our country during the 20th century. 65,000 Americans were affected, 85% of them were women. To date the Supreme Court has yet to overturn its decision in this case.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(for doubling see below)

Millie, as a child and an adult, African American, Hattie's daughter and Jed's sister
 Larrimer, white male, 20s and older, Miz Ethelyn's grandson
 Miss Gentry, 20s-early 30s, white
 Hattie Clawson, 30s, white
 Ezra, a large white man, any age
 Jed, as a boy, eight years old, white and as an adult, Hattie's son
 Justice of the Peace/Judge, white male, 50s
 Mrs. Lipscomb, white, 30s-40s
 Doc Paley, 30s-40s, white
 Orderly, male, any age
 Farmer Brown, white male, 50s
 Mr. Milhous, white, orphanage administrator, 40s
 Ethelyn Brown, Farmer Brown's wife, white, 40s and older
 Laundress, female, any race, 30s-40s
 Louisa, adolescent/teen, white female
 Mrs. Chester, white female, 30s-40s
 Sallie Mae, teen, white female
 Nurse, white female, any age
 Mr. Salmon, lawyer, white, 40s
 Mr. Toogood, funeral director, white, 40s-50s

With doubling, the cast would look like this:

Hattie Clawson
 Jed, as a boy, eight years old and as an adult
 Larrimer, 20s and older
 Millie, as a girl and an adult
 Ezra/Doc Paley/Mr. Milhous/Mr. Salmon
 Judge/Orderly/Farmer Brown/Mr. Toogood
 Miss Gentry/Louisa/Sallie Mae/Nurse
 Mrs. Lipscomb/Ethelyn Brown/Laundress/Mrs. Chester

Time: 1927-1980s

Place: southern Virginia.

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Time: a weekday in June 1927. Place: a yard in rural southern Virginia. The suggestion of a tumbledown shack.

Enter Hattie who carries a shotgun and a tin cup. Millie, age 11, carries a string of wild game and places it on a rough table. Then she chases Jed, age eight, who is pushing a wheelbarrow full of wood. Millie tries to tip over the wheelbarrow.

MILLIE

Tag. You're it, Jed.

[They chase one another.]

HATTIE

All right, children. Play time's over. You got chores.

[Hattie puts down the shotgun. She unloads the gun, puts the shells in her apron and takes a sip of tea from the cup.]

HATTIE (cont'd)

You have a good eye, daughter, and a steady hand. You won't starve if you learn your way around these woods. You know where this goes.

[She hands the gun to Millie.]

MILLIE

Aw, Mama, can't we play a game first?

JED

Tic, tac, toe. I'm way ahead of Millie.

MILLIE

Are not.

JED

Am too.

HATTIE

After supper IF you finish your chores and your homework. Now go fetch a bunch of asparagus for supper and fill up my tea cup while the kettle's still hot.

MILLIE

Mosquitoes and bees out back as big as quarters. Like to sting me good. Make Jed go instead, please, Mama.

HATTIE

You're no good if you can't do things, Millie.

MILLIE

Bugs don't bother Jed. Only me.

HATTIE

He got chores of his'n. Now be sure to snip those asparagus stalks. If they get too tall, they too tough to eat.

MILLIE

Who cares about silly old vegetables?

HATTIE

I do. Now do it right, sister, and do it right the first time.

MILLIE

I hate farming. When I grow up, I'm gonna live in a big city where they got no bugs or weeds or-

HATTIE

Meantime, get movin' or we won't eat till after dark.

[She hands Millie the cup. Millie exits.]

[Jed starts stacking wood.]

HATTIE (cont'd)

There's a right way and a wrong way to stack wood so's it don't roll away. Let me show you how, Jed. Then you'll always know it.

[She demonstrates. He tries to follow suit, she corrects him, then indicates for him to try again.]

HATTIE (cont'd)

Now you got the rhythm. Keep goin' while I skin these squirrels. We's havin' a feast for supper.

JED

Mama, are we poor white trash?

HATTIE

Who tell you that?

JED

Brady. His Mama say he can't play with me no more.

HATTIE

His Mama stuck up. You see any trash in our yard? Or in the house? On you or me?

JED

No. You burn it in the wood stove.

HATTIE

Brady's wrong. Ain't much of a friend. Good riddance to him.

JED

But he's my only pal. Who'm I gonna play with at recess?

HATTIE

Your sister.

JED

Millie can't throw for squat. The other boys'll laugh at me.

HATTIE

Not if I have anythin' to say about it. I'll talk to your teacher.

JED

Whoa. First, I need a nickel.

HATTIE

What you need a nickel for?

JED

Teacher's gettin' married and the whole class is chippin' in to buy her a present.

HATTIE

I don't have it, Jed. I'm sorry.

JED

But, Mama, everyone else is—

HATTIE

You can pick a boo-kay of wild flowers for her. She'll like that for sure.

JED

No, I can't. You said we wasn't poor.

HATTIE

You wasn't listenin'. I said we wasn't white trash.

JED

I can't go to school tomorrow without that money. I'll stick out like a sore thumb.

HATTIE

Then stay home. School's nearly over. You can help me plant tomatoes and peppers.

JED

That's girl's work.

HATTIE

Not if you like to eat regular.

JED

'D ruther plant corn.

HATTIE

We'll do all three.

JED

If I miss school, you need to send the teacher a excuse. They got rules.

HATTIE

That case, you'll have to go to school 'cause I ain't writin' no note.

JED

Then I ain't goin' to school. So there.

[He stamps his foot.]

HATTIE

Are you sassin' me, boy?

[She raises her hand. He starts running and Hattie runs after him. When she catches up with him, she turns him over her knee.]

JED

Ow!

HATTIE

Now then, I gotta start supper and you got wood to chop and a boo-kay to pick. Move along now, Jed.

[Exit Jed.]

[Enter Miss Gentry who carries a notebook. In the distance is a large man who wears a hat and a suit.]

MISS GENTRY

Well, Mrs. Clawson. Or is it Miss?

HATTIE

It's miss. Not that it's any o' your--

MISS GENTRY

Yes, it is. The county welfare board has received a complaint that you've been neglecting your children.

HATTIE

Who sez?

MISS GENTRY

I'm not at liberty to--. It's confidential.

HATTIE

Cowards.

MISS GENTRY

I saw you spank your son just now. Another strike against you.

HATTIE

Don't put up with no backtalk. You tellin' me your Mama never put you over her knee? Ever?

MISS GENTRY

My mother is not the subject of this—this inquiry. Now answer my questions, Miss Clawson, or it will not go well for you in this town.

HATTIE

Gossips got nuthin' better to do...than to meddle in my—

MISS GENTRY

You have three children?

HATTIE

Two living.

MISS GENTRY

And the third?

HATTIE

My baby. Hit by a car on the way to school last year.

MISS GENTRY

I'm sorry. That's a heavy blow. How do you manage?

[Miss Gentry peers into the shack.]

MISS GENTRY (cont'd)

I see. Well, the board will be very concerned that your, ah, home has one bedroom which you share with your two children. It's not good for a boy to be in the same bedroom as his mother and sister.

HATTIE

We goes to bed at different times.

MISS GENTRY

You're having a hard time going it alone. I'm here to help.

HATTIE

Clawsons don't complain. We keep goin' best we can.

MISS GENTRY

It takes money to raise a family. Could you go home to your people till you get on your feet?

HATTIE

No, they raise me up. Now, it's my turn.

MISS GENTRY

Miss Clawson, your children need to be in a place where they'd have a solid roof over their heads, food in the ice box and shoes on their feet. Where they'd get an education instead of having to work in the fields.

HATTIE

I'm teachin' 'em to fend for themselves. To hunt and fish. To live off the land.

MISS GENTRY

Don't you want something better for your children?

HATTIE

'Course. You got a magic wand?

MISS GENTRY

No. But the county has a place that would do right by your son and daughter.

HATTIE

You're talkin' foolishness. We stick together. That's what kin do.

MISS GENTRY

Sometimes children do better, thrive, in fact, with other—

HATTIE

Their Mama loves them.

MISS GENTRY

Plenty of married couples who can't have children want to have a family of their own. More and more are turning to adoption.

HATTIE

Have you taken a good look at my daughter? No chance white folks pick her. Better off with me.

MISS GENTRY

You don't know that for certain.

HATTIE

What planet you live on?

MISS GENTRY

Your daughter will marry one day. But your son will have to support himself. Do you want him to be a sharecropper and just get by? He could work on the railroad if he learns to read and write.

HATTIE

My Jed reads good now.

MISS GENTRY

How is that possible? There isn't enough light inside your ah, house, to do homework.

HATTIE

Jed and Millie do that right after school.

MISS GENTRY

And in the winter?

HATTIE

They goes to the lye-berry.

MISS GENTRY

You're far from town. Do they walk home in the dark by themselves?

HATTIE

We's country people. Dark don't scare us.

MISS GENTRY

Miss Clawson, you're hard pressed supporting two children as it is. If you have more, that could put you right over the edge. Then you and your family will suffer worse than you do now.

HATTIE

What's it to you? Those town women blabbin' in your ear?

MISS GENTRY

Even if you take uh, precautions, there are no guarantees you won't get pregnant. A simple operation could prevent you from having any more children. The best part is, the Commonwealth of Virginia will pay for all of your doctor and hospital bills. Wouldn't that be a weight off your shoulders?

HATTIE

Hospital? Can't do it. Who take care of Millie and Jed?

MISS GENTRY

The county and state will take care of them while you're in the hospital and later while you're recovering. They'll be with other children their age and receive good care. They'll go to school and have time to play games and read books. And you won't have to work so hard.

HATTIE

No such a thing as free, 'specially from the gov'ment. What's the catch?

MISS GENTRY

Millie and Jed will stay at the orphanage after you're well enough to come home.

HATTIE

Give up my children? What kind of Mama you think I am?

MISS GENTRY

One who can't support them, who lives in poor, unsanitary conditions, is unmarried--.

HATTIE

Get the hell off my porch, Missy, before I throw you off.

MISS GENTRY

You're passing up a chance to start over in another town, to lead a normal, productive life.

HATTIE

When your Mama teach manners, you must have been asleep. Or deaf. Answer's no.

MISS GENTRY

Out of misplaced pride and stubbornness you're robbing your children of a chance for a better future. A good mother wouldn't do that. She'd place the best interests of her children above her own.

HATTIE

You aint' never been a Mama or you wouldn't talk that a way. Now g—

MISS GENTRY

The county doesn't need your permission to do what we think is right. State law is on our side. So is the United States Supreme Court. You can be committed--

HATTIE

Don't know nuthin' about any laws 'cept for the Ten Commandments. Honor thy father and thy mother. Who top that?

MISS GENTRY

That commandment is based on the assumption the parents are worthy of respect.

HATTIE

You sayin' I'm not?

MISS GENTRY

Can you read and write?

HATTIE

I take in laundry and make sure Millie and Jed go to school.

MISS GENTRY

One of your customers told me you threw money at her.

HATTIE

Wrong. She--

MISS GENTRY

You haven't answered my question. Can you read and write?

HATTIE

When's the last time you bring home a string full of rabbits or fetch strawberries from your own garden?

MISS GENTRY

A simple yes or no will do.

HATTIE

The kids at school used to make fun of me for wearing my brother's shoes. Mama said I could stay home. She'd teach me all I needed to know about cookin', cleanin', sewin', and canning. Now I'm teachin' Millie.

MISS GENTRY

In other words, you can't read or write.

HATTIE

Jed and Millie read to **me** every night from the Good Book.

MISS GENTRY

And after they're in bed, you do your entertaining, is that right?

HATTIE

Too many busybodies in this town. Same ones who wouldn't lift a finger to—

MILLIE

[Enter Millie carrying a cup of tea for Hattie in her tin cup.]

Here, Ma—

MISS GENTRY

You're incapable of taking care of your children, giving them what they need to grow up and be productive members of society. Your lack of judgment puts them at risk.

HATTIE

What right you have to judge me?

MISS GENTRY

It's my job. Didn't you just say you lost a child?

HATTIE

I been cursed. The Lord took my baby before his time. Wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy.

MISS GENTRY

You're an unfit mother. As a government agent, I can't let this-this situation continue.

HATTIE

This here's America. You can't---

MISS GENTRY

Oh, yes, I can. You'll have a hearing before the justice of the peace.

HATTIE

Lordy, lordy, Halloween come early. See a car yonder but no broom.

MISS GENTRY

I've never been so insulted in all my—

HATTIE

You? What about me?

MISS GENTRY

You and your kind are morally delinquent, a parasite on society. Sheriff, please escort Miss Clawson to the car.

[Enter Jed and Ezra who picks up Hattie and tosses her over his shoulder.]

HATTIE

Put me down. Help. Help. Help me.

[Millie tries to protect her mother. Miss Gentry pushes Millie out of the way.]

You don't touch my child. Ever, not ever.

[Ezra removes Hattie kicking and screaming. Ezra and Hattie exit.]

MILLIE

What's wrong with Mama? Where's she going?

MISS GENTRY

Your Mama's not feeling well. She needs an operation.

MILLIE

I'll go with her.

MISS GENTRY

No. They don't allow children where your Mama's going.

MILLIE

Mama went with me when I had my tonsils out. Slept in a chair and sang to me so's I wouldn't be scared.

MISS GENTRY

No children in the hospital unless you're a patient. Your Mama asked me to look out for you. Jed, Millie, what's your favorite ice cream? The drug store in town's got a dozen flavors. Ice cream sodas, root beer floats, hot fudge sundaes. You name it.

JED

Mama's cryin'. She don't....

MISS GENTRY

Everybody cries sometimes. Your Mama's plumb wore out and needs a rest. Jed, I'll bet chocolate's your favorite.

JED

No, ma'am. Strawberry. Millie likes chocolate with sprinkles on top.

MISS GENTRY

How would you like to have a double scoop? My treat.

MILLIE

But what about Mama? She likes ice cream too. Can she meet us there?

MISS GENTRY

Not today. Your Mama has a doctor's appointment.

MILLIE

I'll wait.

MISS GENTRY

No, she'll be too long and she can't have dessert. But you can. Let's go before the soda fountain closes.

MILLIE

Mama's told us not to go with strangers.

JED

Yes'm, that's right.

MISS GENTRY

I'm not a stranger. I'm from the government. Come on now. Ice cream's calling.

[They exit.]

[Lights up on a court room; a justice of the peace is seated at a table when Miss Gentry enters, carrying a file folder.]

JUSTICE

Well, Miss Gentry, the county claims Miss Hattie Clawson is an unfit, feeble-minded mother. This is a serious charge.

MISS GENTRY

Yes, your honor. One we take seriously. May I proceed?

JUSTICE

On the condition that you substantiate your claim.

MISS GENTRY

Your honor, I personally visited Miss Clawson's one-bedroom shack. Her "house" lacks indoor plumbing and electricity and her children are poorly dressed.

JUSTICE

That description could fit a lot of people in this county. You've got to do better than that.

MISS GENTRY

Two medical doctors have examined Miss Clawson and found her to be feebleminded within the meaning of the law. Here is their signed statement. They recommend that she be committed to the State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded, that her parental rights be terminated and she be sterilized as a therapeutic measure to prevent more children from inheriting her feeble-mindedness. The county agrees with their assessment.

JUSTICE

Linwood Farley and W.T. McLemore. I know both of them docs. Mental deficiency. Morally delinquent. Unfit. Strong words. Still I don't much like taking children away from their Mama.

MISS GENTRY

It's the law, your honor. In a recent majority opinion written by esteemed Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, the United States Supreme Court has upheld a Virginia law authorizing the state to perform involuntary sterilizations on the unfit and feebleminded. The case is *Buck versus Bell*.

JUSTICE

Are you telling me how to do my job, Miss Gentry?

MISS GENTRY

No offense, your honor. But degenerates like Miss Clawson are procreating at an alarming rate. In the interest of public health we've got to prevent them from passing on their feeble-mindedness to more offspring. We need to stem the tide of moral delinquency that is polluting our population and cull out the unfit.

JUSTICE

Committing this woman to a state mental institution for the rest of her life is a burden on us taxpayers. I don't want to add to that burden.

MISS GENTRY

The county shares your concern. But rest your mind, Judge. Once Miss Clawson is committed, the superintendent will have the authority to sterilize her. A short time later she'll be released to work and be a productive member of society. She will no longer be a financial drain on the good people of Virginia.

JUSTICE

Does Miss Clawson have a job?

MISS GENTRY

She takes in laundry.

JUSTICE

Honest work, but a precarious way to make a living.

HATTIE

I pick tobacco when I--.

MISS GENTRY

Which is seasonal and unpredictable, your honor.

JUSTICE

But Miss Clawson is not in the almshouse, is she?

MISS GENTRY

No, but she cannot read or write. In this day and age, parents need to--

HATTIE

I can print my name.

MISS GENTRY

Your honor, I'd like to call a witness.

JUSTICE

Proceed.

MISS GENTRY

Mrs. Myrtle Lipscomb, one of the First Families of Virginia and a customer of Miss Clawson. Mrs. Lipscomb, tell the judge what you told me.

MRS. LIPSCOMB

Hattie Clawson's eight year old son, Jed, carries a shotgun in broad daylight. I've seen him and his sister go off into the woods together. That woman puts her children at risk.

HATTIE

We hunt squirrels and rabbits for food. My children know how to shoot and be safe just like my Papa teach me.

JUSTICE

Teaching children to use a shotgun is part of everyday life in these parts, Miss Gentry. If this allegation is your strongest argument, I'm inclined to dismiss—

MISS GENTRY

Mrs. Lipscomb, what do you know about the death of Larry, Miss Clawson's younger son?

MRS. LIPSCOMB

Most of us mothers walk our children to school -- but not Hattie Clawson. She lets her kids walk by themselves even though cars zip by every which way. One day Larry got hit by a car and died. He might still be alive if she—

HATTIE

The Lord take him to a better place to be with Jesus. It's in His plan, not mine. I cry for my son every day, Mildred Lipscomb, not that it's any of your business.

MRS. LIPSCOMB

Mrs. Lipscomb to you, Hattie, and don't you forget it.

HATTIE

You think you so highfalutin? I wash your dirty linen. Don't you forget that.

JUSTICE

Order, order.

MISS GENTRY

The court might be interested to hear about a recent argument you had with Miss Clawson.

MRS. LIPSCOMB

That white trash wanted to charge a dollar more than usual for doing my laundry. She—

JUSTICE

We deal in facts, not name calling, Mrs. Lipscomb.

HATTIE

Her son peed the bed and—

MRS. LIPSCOMB

Of all the nerve. My son would never do such a thing. How dare you accuse—

HATTIE

Boys be boys. Some of your white sheets was yellow here and there and they smelt like—

MRS. LIPSCOMB

Ridiculous.

HATTIE

You pays me to wash them so's I did. Fresh and clean. Told you to smell 'em.

MRS. LIPSCOMB

I don't go around smelling bed clothes. You just wanted to cheat me—

HATTIE

No, ma'am. Just wanted to get paid fair and square.

MRS. LIPSCOMB

I refused. First I heard tell of extra charges.

HATTIE

Mister Lipscomb charge more for cream than milk.

MRS. LIPSCOMB

His sign says so. Big as life when you walk in the front door. Where's yours?

HATTIE

Don't have one. But I know how much time it take to wash sheets. Yours needed lots of extra soap and scrubbin'. Lots more.

MRS. LIPSCOMB

This—this woman refused to give me back my property.

HATTIE

You bet. Until you pay me what you owe.

MRS. LIPSCOMB

Hattie stomped her feet and blocked my path with her wagon while calling me names a lady should never hear. She has a temper.

HATTIE

And you call yourself a Christian? You're a cheat and a liar. You the one who throw money at me. Those coins hit me in the face and arm. What you do? Just walk away without checking if I'm ok. You the one with the temper, Missus.

MRS. LIPSCOMB

You and your kin will never win the Fittest Family contest. I have.

JUSTICE

You're trying my patience, Miss Gentry, by fostering what amounts to a cat fight. Miss Clawson has already lost one child. Why add to her pain?

MRS. LIPSCOMB

That hussy entertains men at night in her shack, drinking moonshine. Hattie Clawson is a scandal to her children and a menace to law-abiding folks who come from good stock. I felt it my duty to report her to the county welfare board.

HATTIE

Busybody. Ain't you got better things—

JUSTICE

Have you seen these men with your own eyes, Mrs. Lipscomb?

MRS. LIPSCOMB

No, but my neighbors have.

JUSTICE

Hearsay. Miss Gentry, you haven't done your homework.

MISS GENTRY

Your honor, Miss Clawson is sexually promiscuous, a prostitute in the making.

HATTIE

Judge, my children are clean, they go to school, have food on the table and a roof over their heads. They're healthy and go to church. Who you think takes care of all that? Me, that's who. Your job's bein a judge. Mine's been a mama these past twelve years. A job I take serious. They are my life, the reason I get up in the morning.

MISS GENTRY

And where's your husband, Miss Clawson?

HATTIE

I know widows whose husbands died. Are you gonna take their children away from them too? Don't have enough room in the orphanage for all them kids. Taking my children away be like cuttin' out my heart and stompin' on it.

MISS GENTRY

Judge, Miss Clawson has had three illegitimate children. If that's not a sign of feeble-mindedness, I don't know what is. Women like Miss Clawson must be kept separate in institutions to protect society. Otherwise, honorable men can be seduced by loose, incorrigible women like her.

HATTIE

Yes, I been with men who didn't ask me to say I do. I don't come into your bedroom, Missy, so stay out of mine.

MISS GENTRY

Judge, one of Miss Clawson's children is colored.

HATTIE

Not asking you or nobody else to raise 'em.

JUSTICE

Do you deny it, Miss Clawson?

HATTIE

My Jed's Daddy is white.

JUSTICE

You're unfit, a disgrace to the people of Virginia and your own sex, Miss Clawson. Nobody in her right mind would take up with a colored man. At the county's request, I'm admitting you to the Lynchburg State Colony for Epileptics and the Feebleminded.

HATTIE

Judge, I'm willin' to have this operation if my children stay with me. You're a God fearin' man. You have a Mama. In her name I beg you not to do this thing.

JUSTICE

Denied. Bailiff, next case.

HATTIE

Please, please, Mister Judge, don't takes my children away. I'll get me a real job, I'll give that evil woman her money back. You're breakin' my heart. What will happen to Jed and Millie? Why are ya doin' this to me?

JUSTICE

Bailiff, what did I say?

HATTIE

How you feel if this happen to you and your Mama? Judge, judge... Who will speak for me?

[Enter Millie and Jed.]

JED

Who will speak for us?

MILLIE

Who will speak for us?

[All exit.]

I-2

A few days later. A hospital room with a window at the Lynchburg State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded. The window is shut. A stretcher is nearby. Hattie is pacing; she wears a hospital gown.

[Nurse enters. She wears a white uniform, white stockings and a nurse's cap.]

HATTIE

You've got to help me, Nurse.

NURSE

I'll be glad to make you as comfortable as I can, Miss Clawson. Can I bring you some tea?

HATTIE

Never mind that. You've got to get me out of here. My children need me.

NURSE

I can't—

HATTIE

Are you a mama?

NURSE

Yes, but--

HATTIE

Then you understand. Children belong with their Mama.

NURSE

Usually. But there are always exceptions. My neighbor's children live with their grandmother. Their Mama ran away with the milkman.

HATTIE

Not me. Never want to leave 'em. But busybodies in town are taking them away and putting 'em in an orphanage. Can you believe it? My own flesh and blood.

NURSE

Miss Clawson, your chart says you're under a court order. You can't leave.

HATTIE

How many children you have, Nurse?

NURSE

Excuse me. But my personal life has nothing to do with your hospital stay.

HATTIE

Right. But that don't stop those busybodies from messin' with mine.

NURSE

I don't know why you're here and I don't need to—

HATTIE

How many children, Nurse?

NURSE

What is your full name and date of birth?

HATTIE

Hattie Clawson. January 16th, eighteen ninety five. How many children, Miss?

NURSE

Two girls. And that's all I'm gonna say except to ask what you want for breakfast and if you need help getting to the toilet.

HATTIE

How you feel if somebody in town decided you're not a good Mama?

NURSE

That won't happen. I'm a churchgoer.

HATTIE

Me too. Didn't mean squat.

NURSE

Scrambled eggs, buttered toast and jam with a pot of tea? Or oatmeal and coffee with cream?

HATTIE

Tonight when everyone else is asleep, knock on my door just once. I'll count to ten, then I'll slip out the back door. You'll never see or hear from me again.

NURSE

I can't. You're my patient. That means I'm responsible for you at all times.

HATTIE

Then I'll wait till you go off duty.

NURSE

The hospital will blame me.

HATTIE

Nobody will know.

NURSE

Yes, they will. This is a locked ward. My supervisor and I are the only ones with a key.

HATTIE

Please, Miss Nurse, I'll be forever grateful.

NURSE

My instructions are to prepare you for surgery.

HATTIE

You know what they're plannin' to do to me? Treat me like a worthless stray cat and stop me from having any more kittens. Bet you'd have no truck with that no how.

NURSE

Miss Clawson, I have other patients.

[Hattie goes to the window.]

HATTIE

Window just needs a shove. Then I'd be out of here faster than you can say the Lynchburg State Colony for Epileptics and the Feebleminded.

NURSE

No. I'll lose my job. My girls depend on me to keep them fed.

HATTIE

Times is tough. I'm sorry if your man's out of work.

NURSE

Just the three of us. (Pause) Now then...

HATTIE

The same thing could happen to you, Nurse.

NURSE

You're not the first woman who's had this—this—procedure. All it takes is a snip here and a snip there.

HATTIE

If it's so simple, why do they lock us in?

NURSE

I don't make the rules.

HATTIE

I'm scared.

NURSE

You'll be out of here in a few days. Your children will be so glad to see you when it's all over.

HATTIE

Didn't you hear me? The county took 'em away from me. They're not coming home.

NURSE

[Nurse touches Hattie's forehead.]

You're getting all worked up, Miss Clawson. Let me get you a cold compress and some ice chips, then I'll help you on the stretcher.

HATTIE

[She recoils.]

Don't come back with no wash cloth when what I need is a way out of this mousetrap.

NURSE

I would if I could. My hands are tied.

HATTIE

Huh! Talking to you is like watching a dog chase its tail. I want to speak to the doctor.

NURSE

He's on a tight schedule. There's another patient ahead of you.

HATTIE

If'n you don't call him right now, I'll scream.

NURSE

You can't. This is a hospital, not a barnyard.

HATTIE

You better believe I will. I won a hog calling contest. Git going!

[Nurse exits.]

[Enter Doc Paley who is in surgical scrubs and a surgical mask.]

HATTIE

Doc, I don't belong here. Please. Please. Let me go. Promise I won't be a bit o' trouble ever again.

DOC PALEY

It'll all be over soon. Then you won't have to worry about having any more children.

HATTIE

Doc Paley, is that you?

[She pulls off his mask.]

DOC PALEY

This is the right decision, Hattie. You'll see.

HATTIE

You have it all wrong. This here's not my idea. Stranger come into my house and act like she in charge of Judgment Day.

DOC PALEY

These are hard times. So many people out of work. You're doing yourself a favor.

HATTIE

Favor? My children's all I got in this world. Plus, they need me.

DOC PALEY

A few small pleasures still exist that cost nothing if a woman is willing. Some aren't. But you... Well, after today, you can enjoy yourself without fretting over having another mouth to feed.

HATTIE

Don't you unnerstand? That witch took my children away--

DOC PALEY

Rest easy now. You'll be in the hospital just for a few days—

HATTIE

A few days? Too long for me to be away from Jed and Millie. They'll think their Mama don't—

DOC PALEY

I'll come out and visit you after you're discharged to make sure you're all right.

HATTIE

It ain't fair. White women in this town have children and no husband. Other whites sleep around behind their husbands' back. Church goes too. Nobody puttin' them in the hospital. Plus, lots of colored women have children by white men. You want me to name 'em?

DOC PALEY

Whoever said life is fair, Hattie?

HATTIE

You my boy's father. How could you--?

DOC PALEY

Keep your voice down, Hattie.

HATTIE

Jed need a Daddy. He needs you.

DOC PALEY

You're healthy and strong. You'll be fine after this operation.

HATTIE

You got no children or you wouldn't talk that a way.

DOC PALEY

Dammit, Hattie, I said, hush.

HATTIE

They's startin' to call Jed white trash. That tears at my heart.

DOC PALEY

The staff will hear you. I can't have it.

HATTIE

Don't you understand? That government woman's taken away my children. She says I'm feebleminded. Unfit.

DOC PALEY

Your daughter is colored.

HATTIE

I'm a good enough Mama. Love those kids. What am I gonna do? What am I gonna—

DOC PALEY

Calm down, Hattie. Have you lost your mind? I work here. Orderly! Orderly!

HATTIE

You tryin' to get rid of me, Doc?

[Orderly enters. Doc Paley indicates the stretcher.]

DOC PALEY

My patient isn't cooperating.

[The Orderly tries to lift Hattie on the stretcher. She resists. They struggle.]

HATTIE

I thought you was my friend.

[The Orderly lifts her on the stretcher and restrains her with a belt.]

DOC PALEY

The surgery will be over shortly. A simple incision in your abdomen. It won't hurt.

HATTIE

Nobody's asking me what I want.

DOC PALEY

Enough talk. I have a job to do.

[He gives her an injection.]

Start counting back from a hundred. Say it with me. Ninety nine. Ninety eight.

HATTIE

You used to gettin' your way with me. In the bed you say yes and I say yes. But today I say no. No. No.

DOC PALEY

I could never marry you, Hattie.

[Orderly wheels Hattie offstage. Doc Paley exits with them.]

[Light shift indicates the passage of time. Adult Millie enters.]

MILLIE

I didn't know it then. But sixty five thousand Americans from 33 states were subject to involuntary sterilization as a result of the United States Supreme Court's decision in *Buck vs. Bell*. Like my Mama, eighty-five percent of them were women. Some were as young as 10. It was all part of the eugenics movement that swept our country during the twentieth century. The top states were California, Virginia and North Carolina. Among the champions of forced sterilization: Stanford University Chancellor David Starr Jordan, Luther Burbank, Margaret Sanger and Theodore Roosevelt.

I-3

A few weeks later. Young Millie is alone onstage . She is crying. A rec room at a local orphanage may be suggested with a table and chairs. Jed, slightly better dressed than before, is playing checkers by himself.

MILLIE

Mama, where are you? I'll fetch the asparagus without fussin' and swat those mosquitoes without blinkin' an eye. Mama, Mama, come back. Come back. Please.

[Enter Miss Gentry. Without a word, she goes up to Millie and starts pulling her off stage.]

MILLIE (cont'd)

Stop! Where you takin' me? Help!

[She resists but to no avail. Millie and Miss Gentry exit.]

JED

It's your turn, Millie. Don't take so long. I want another game before supper.

[He moves to the other side of the board.]

King me!

[Enter Farmer Brown who's dressed for market day. He approaches Jed.]

BROWN

Gotta son your age. He plays checkers by hisself when his Ma or I can't. Beats the pants off me most of the time. Ruther play checkers than get in hay or pick tomatoes. What's your name, boy?

JED

Jed. Jed Clawson. What kind of farm you have, mister?

BROWN

Tobacco mostly. Animals o' course.

JED

You have a horse?

BROWN

An old plow horse whose ridin' days are long gone. Got a tractor though.

JED

Is it fun to drive?

BROWN

Prob'ly looks like fun to a boy your age. My son's already pesterin' me 'bout learnin' to drive.

JED

Someday wanna go duck huntin'. Once Mama let me borrow her shotgun. Killed two rabbits.

BROWN

Good for you. You dress 'em?

JED

Yes, sir. Mama wouldn't let me waste shells by trying to kill a duck. She says that'll come by and by. But those rabbits sure taste good with sweet potatoes and poke beans.

BROWN

My missus has a big garden. Butter beans, tomatoes, cucumbers, peaches, peppers, you name it, she puts 'em up. We eats good all winter long.

JED

I like diggin' in the dirt. My Mama taught me how to plant corn and tomatoes. She says a garden's like raisin' children. You need patience.

BROWN

Your Mama's right. Otherwise I gets to hollerin' at my son.

JED

The orphanage doesn't have a garden. They have store bought.

BROWN

Nothin' like steppin off the back porch and pickin' a handful of strawberries and eatin' em plain and simple. Um. Um. Good.

JED

Mama makes strawberry jam if the ground hogs don't eat 'em all and we're right quick with a pail.

BROWN

And if you come across a worm or two, you set 'em aside to go fishin', right?

JED

Yes, sir. Used to catch plenty of carp. Ugly face but good to eat. Not here though. Against the rules.

BROWN

Schoolwork comes first, is that it?

JED

Yes, sir.

BROWN

You doin' ok with your lessons?

JED

Yes, sir. A's and B's mostly except for a D in Sacred Scripture. All those begats have me confused.

BROWN

New Testament don't get any easier. I leave the church going to the Missus. You raise up Baptist?

JED

Yes, sir. Me and my sister go to Sunday school pretty regular and we read the Bible.

BROWN

My son could use some company now that his brothers and sisters are grown. Would you like to live on a farm, Jed? There's a creek out back that he goes swimmin' in and a rope that gives him a head start. Lots of good trees for climbin' too.

JED

What's his name?

BROWN

Radnor.

JED

Is he stuck up?

BROWN

No. Got no reason to be. Just stubborn. Bet you could teach him some manners.

JED

You poor white trash?

BROWN

No. But don't ask the Missus that or she'll bite your head off.

JED

Well, I'd like to live on a farm. But I'll need to leave an address for my Mama so she'll know where to fetch me once she's done recoverin'.

BROWN

Well. That's not up to me--.

JED

Could I bring my sister Millie? She knows how to hunt and fish.

BROWN

Sorry, son, I only have room for one child.

JED

Will you be my Papa till my Mama comes?

BROWN

Can't do that 'cause we have different names.

JED

What'll I call you, mister?

BROWN

Let me think on that after I speak to the folks in charge. Meantime, finish your game. I'll be back right quick to help you with your things.

[Brown exits.]

JED

I don't know, Mama. He seems nice. But so was that lady with the ice cream.

[Enter Mr. Milhous.]

MILHOUS

Sit down, my boy.

JED

Yes, sir.

MILHOUS

You have received an extraordinary opportunity just now. A chance to leave the orphanage and live with an upright Christian family. In all my days here, never seen the like. Best get down on your knees and thank the good Lord--.

JED

Just till Mama comes by to take me home.

MILHOUS

That's wishful thinkin', young 'un. Your Mama's not coming today, tomorrow or ever. So get that idea right out of your head.

JED

Yes, she—

MILHOUS

No, she ain't. You might want her to, but she can't.

JED

Mama loves the stories in the Bible. Millie and me's not finished reading about Noah... Most every day we—How come she can't?

MILHOUS

Now. Now. I don't have all the details.

JED

Is she still sick?

MILHOUS

Some Ma's try their very best, but they get plumb exhausted raising kids and putting food on the table too. After a while they have to throw up their hands and let somebody else take over. Lucky for you Farmer Brown has offered you a place in his household. He plans to raise you right alongside his own son. You'll be the envy of every boy in this orphanage.

JED

Mama wouldn't up and leave without saying goodbye.

MILHOUS

Well, she has.

JED

I don't believe you, Mister. Mama says we don't have much, but kin stick together like cotton.

MILHOUS

You better not be calling me a liar, young 'un, or I'll have to—

JED

You just said you don't have all the details. Sir.

MILHOUS

Maybe not. But instead of living in a shack, you'll have your own room at Farmer Brown's and you'll be able to play outside.

JED

I do that now. Mama's teaching me the names of trees--

MILHOUS

I don't like all this backtalk, Jed. Didn't your Mama teach you to respect your elders?

JED

Yes, sir, she did. Meant no disrespect. What about my sister Millie?

MILHOUS

This orphanage is for boys. She's out of my hands.

JED

I want to write Mama a note so's she'll know where to find me. You have pencil and paper, Mister?

MILHOUS

Your Mama's far from here and I don't have her address. The answer's no.

JED

Please. Preacher's wife could read it to her. I write real fast. It would only take--.

MILHOUS

Your ears plugged up, boy? I said NO. I don't have time for this nonsense.

JED

Will that man be my Daddy?

MILHOUS

Not exactly. You'll be his foster son. That means you keep your own name.

JED

Foster --what?

MILHOUS

Most of our boys don't get a chance like this. They stay on till they have to leave. Then they scramble to find jobs. Some don't make it.

JED

But what about Mama?

MILHOUS

You can learn a lot from Farmer Brown. What it means to work and raise a family, till the soil, have money in the bank.

JED

[He starts to cry.]

Don't have a Pa.

MILHOUS

Seeing as how this is new, ok to cry this once. Now then... take a deep breath and hold your head up high like a man.

JED
That's hard. I ain't.

MILHOUS
You can do it.

JED
I miss my sister awful bad.

MILHOUS
Understandable. You haven't made friends here. At Farmer Brown's you'll have a boy your age to pal around with. Bet you can teach him a thing or two about checkers, climbing trees, having fun.

JED
Somethin' wrong with him?

MILHOUS
No. But he could be a tad lonesome living way out in the country.

JED
I like livin' in the country.

MILHOUS
That's the spirit. Tell yourself you're having an adventure like Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn.

JED
Don't know 'em.

MILHOUS
You will.

JED
Are they with the government too?

MILHOUS
You ask too many questions, boy.

[He gives Jed his handkerchief.]

Promise me you'll never, ever mention the fact your sister is colored.

JED
How come?

MILHOUS

Hush now. Folks will hold it against you.

JED

Why? Millie's kin.

MILHOUS

Makes no never mind. White folks won't take you in.

JED

I don't understand.

MILHOUS

You don't need to, boy. That's just the way it is. The way it will always be if you want to fit in.

JED

Yes, but—

MILHOUS

You're tryin' my patience, boy. You wanna be white trash the rest of your life? Then you best promise and remember what I'm tellin' you or you'll end up like, like—

JED

What, mister?

MILHOUS

Your Ma.

JED

We're not white trash. Mama burns all our trash in the wood stove.

MILHOUS

Stop sassin' me, boy, or I'll change my mind. Now quick pack your bag while I fill out this paperwork so I can tell Farmer Brown you're honored to say yes.

[Aside]

JED

Millie, some day when I'm big, I'll find you and Mama. We'll be together again. That's a promise.

[A beat. Enter Farmer Brown.]

FARMER BROWN

Almost ready, Jed?

JED

Almost, sir.

[Jed exits.]

MILHOUS

Please take a seat, Mr. Brown. I'll be with you in a minute.

FARMER BROWN

Uh, there's just one thing, Mr. Milhous.

MILHOUS

What's that?

FARMER BROWN

Well, uh, I wouldn't want the boy's family to change their minds two weeks or a month from now about these-these arrangements. 'Specially after he's settled in and all. Gonna be a big adjustment for the wife and me and of course my son. Jed too.

MILHOUS

You can rest your mind about that, Mr. Brown. The boy's illegitimate. The mother's not in any position to—

FARMER BROWN

Oh? Well...

MILHOUS

The boy needs a good home.

[Lights up on Hattie who approaches her yard and a suggestion of her shack.]

HATTIE

Jed! Millie! Mama's back. Where are you?

[She wails and falls to the ground, then rocks back and forth. Lights down on Hattie.]

[Lights shift to the suggestion of a porch on Brown's farm. Miz Ethelyn is waiting when Brown and Jed enter.]

BROWN

Got a surprise for you, Ethelyn.

ETHELYN

That makes two of us. Couple no account niggers got drunk and hit your prize hog with their truck. Made me so mad almost went after 'em with a shotgun until I remember I'm a Christian. Sheriff put 'em in jail. (Pause) Who's the boy?

BROWN

Jed Clawson from the orphanage. I'll fill you in after supper. Jed, go wash your hands. Sink's around the corner.

[Yelling]

Radnor, get down here. You and me. We got to see the Sheriff.

[Jed exits.]

ETHELYN

Porter Brown, most folks go to market and bring back foldin' money. You bring back a boy. Long ago I told you I've stopped raising children.

BROWN

Yes. But I'm going to raise this one.

ETHELYN

Mark my words. Someday he'll want to be with his own kin. Then what thanks will you get?

[Light shift indicates the passage of time. Lights up on Miss Gentry who is working at a desk. Hattie enters. She carries a large shopping bag and is dressed for winter.]

HATTIE

I come to see about my children. Where are they, Miss?

MISS GENTRY

I can't tell you, Miss Clawson.

HATTIE

I'm their Mama. That gives me every—

MISS GENTRY

No.

HATTIE

What you say?

MISS GENTRY

You're not their mother any more in the eyes of the state.

HATTIE

You bet I'm their mama. Me and the midwife brought them into this world. I give 'em suck.

MISS GENTRY

Your children are in foster care.

HATTIE

Nonsense. They're my flesh and blood. You ripped 'em from me like I was a hog.

MISS GENTRY

You brought this on yourself, Miss Clawson. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a report to write.

HATTIE

I brung Christmas presents for 'em. Otherwise, they'll think their Mama don't care.

MISS GENTRY

I can't help you. But if you leave them here, I'll—

HATTIE

You'll give them to other children. And you won't even blink an eye, will you, Miss Gentry?

MISS GENTRY

How dare you? We have rules. No favorites.

HATTIE

You don't have children, do you, Missy?

MISS GENTRY

That's none o' your ---

HATTIE

But you don't mind meddlin' in mine, do you? Tell me are Millie and Jed together?

MISS GENTRY

They're in separate homes. Christian homes.

HATTIE

Whites?

MISS GENTRY

[Riffling through her files]

You should have received a copy of this letter.

HATTIE

What letter?

MISS GENTRY

I'd forgotten you can't—Oh, never mind. I'll--

[Reading]

Dear Madam, your children will be well provided for at Christmas. It will not be necessary for you to send them anything. Furthermore, correspondence and visits from relatives are not allowed once they are in their new homes.

HATTIE

No. No. That can't be. Whites won't know how to take care of Millie's hair. It'll get all tangled up. Give her this hair goop. She'll know---

MISS GENTRY

That's against the rules.

HATTIE

For the love of God, Miss. I'm beggin' you please. It's Christmas.

[Hattie puts the bottle of hair straightener on her desk.]

[Enter young Millie wearing a large straw hat. Millie picks up the bottle of hair straightener and removes her hat. Her hair is untamed. She rubs the lotion into her scalp, smooths and shapes her hair in a more conventional style.]

MILLIE

Just like you taught me, Mama.

[Millie puts the hair straightener back on Miss Gentry's desk and exits.]

HATTIE

My children. Will they get adopted?

MISS GENTRY

Probably not. Most married couples want to adopt babies.

HATTIE

Who will love them like I--? I demand--

MISS GENTRY

I can't tell you anymore. I must ask you to—

HATTIE

You call yourself a Christian, but you're doin' the devil's work, Miss. May all your babies be stillborn.

[Hattie exits.]

[Miss Gentry knocks the hair straightener off her desk.]

[Hattie crosses to her yard. She screams and falls to the ground, keening. A beat. She stops rocking and dries her face with her mittens.]

The great state of Virginia. Pure and genteel, my ass. Can't leave here fast enough.

[Enter Jed.]

JED

Mama, I'm doin' everything I can to make you right proud. Getting' good grades. Raising my own pig. Call him Adam like in the Bible. Reading the Good Book with Miz Ethelyn, but it's not the same. She's, uh--I miss you real bad, Mama. Do you miss me?

[Jed exits.]

[Hattie gathers up a washboard, a bar of laundry soap and a brush and puts them in a carpetbag. Then she starts walking. Finally Hattie approaches a woman who's in a yard folding laundry.]

HATTIE

I can help you with that, missus.

LAUNDRESS

Mebbe so. But you'd be takin' food outta my mouth and I can't put up with that no how.

HATTIE

Pardon, missus. Didn't know.

LAUNDRESS

New in town?

HATTIE

Yes'm. Feelin' a little weak. Could you spare a cup of water?

LAUNDRESS

In a womanly way, are ya?

HATTIE

No, ma'am. Them days are over.

LAUNDRESS

On your own then?

[She hands Hattie a cup of water.]

HATTIE

Yes'm. Much obliged. Been walkin' all day. Purdy town this. What name does it go by?

LAUNDRESS

Reidsville. Fixin' to stay?

HATTIE

Depends. Hafta find work. Washin' clothes is all I know.

LAUNDRESS

Then you best go to the school over yonder.

HATTIE

Can't afford no school, missus.

LAUNDRESS

Boardin' school's lookin' for somebody to do laundry. They asked me, but I don't have no truck with no private school. If you ask me, the kids are all brats with their noses in the air.

HATTIE

I like children.

LAUNDRESS

Hear tell them girls throw their bed clothes on the floor and expect you to pick 'em up. If my youngun's ever try such a thing, I'd--

HATTIE

I'd do anything for a steady job.

LAUNDRESS

Your hands looks like they're used to hard work. Don't let them girls sass you none.

HATTIE

Where'd you say it was?

LAUNDRESS

Straight ahead. Looks like a castle with brick all around. Good luck! You'll need it.

[Lighting indicates the passage of time. With an armful of linen, Hattie crosses to the suggestion of a bedroom. A girl enters. She is crying.]

HATTIE

What's wrong, child?

[The girl keeps crying.]

HATTIE (cont'd)

You're all upset...enough tears to water a patch of tomatoes. You wanna tell me what's makin' your pretty nose turn red?

LOUISA

It's my birthday. Daddy promised to visit, but he hasn't and it's almost dinner time.

HATTIE

I'm sure he'd be here if he could. Maybe his train is late.

LOUISA

He always drives.

HATTIE

Maybe he or your Ma got sick and they couldn't call.

LOUISA

Mother's dead. He's probably with his girlfriend. How could he forget his only child's birthday?

HATTIE

I-I don't know. Some folks wanna be with their children, but they-they can't. I'm very sorry about your Mama.

LOUISA

Thank you. What's your name?

HATTIE

Miss Hattie. And yours?

LOUISA

Louisa. Do you have children?

HATTIE

Here's a handkerchief. Blow your nose and you'll feel better. My children's on their own now.

LOUISA

Grown up?

HATTIE

Sorta. Enough about me. You're the birthday girl. Cook will have a cake for you and your friends.

LOUISA

The girls in my class haven't been very friendly.

HATTIE

They's a few who fight like cats. But most of 'em are nice once you get to know 'em, 'specially the ones on this here floor. Have you poked your head in the door and said hey?

LOUISA

No.

HATTIE

Hmm. You'll wind up being very sad and lonesome if'n you don't. Been down that road myself till a lady at church asked me to join the gospel choir. Go down the hall and knock on one of them doors. You might find a friend.

LOUISA

I'm shy.

HATTIE

Start small.

LOUISA

Well, I guess I could offer the girls next door a piece of my cake.

HATTIE

Best wash your face first so they don't see you been cryin'. You'll feel a whole lot better.

[Hattie crosses to a nearby nightstand and pours water onto a wash cloth, then hands it to Louisa.]

HATTIE (cont'd)

Would you like me to sing you the birthday song?

[A bell sounds in the distance.]

LOUISA

That's the dinner bell. I better run. You know how they are when we don't follow the rules.

HATTIE

Yes, I know.

[Louisa exits.]

[Hattie takes a deep breath, stands tall and raises her head high, then sings in a soulful alto.]

Amazing grace. How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

[A beat. Hattie gathers the dirty linen, then she crosses to a wash tub and starts scrubbing.]

HATTIE (cont'd)

Millie daughter, I pray some kind soul's lookin' out for you.

[Lights fade to black.]

II-1

Southern Virginia, summer, 1932. Enter Millie who is in her late teens. She stands next to a clothesline draped with laundry. Next to it is a table, a chair and a laundry basket. From time to time she checks the laundry to make sure it's dry, unclips it from the line and folds each piece carefully before adding it to the basket.

Enter Mrs. Chester who sits in the chair next to Millie and fans herself.

MRS. CHESTER

Millie, we need to have a talk. A grown-up talk.

MILLIE

Somethin' wrong, Miz Clara?

MRS. CHESTER

Have you been happy here, Millie?

MILLIE

Yes, ma'am.

MRS. CHESTER

Well, I'm glad. But it's time for you to be with your own people.

MILLIE

Mama?

MRS. CHESTER

No. Your Mama brung shame on this family with all her carryings on in that shack of your'n. Can't believe she had the gall to set foot in church all those years. Preacher must a been deaf, dumb and blind.

MILLIE

Do you know where she is?

MRS. CHESTER

No, I don't. Washed my hands of her a long time ago and so did the rest of her kinfolk.

MILLIE

If you're so mad at Mama, why'd you take me in?

MRS. CHESTER

Don't have no truck with no orphanage and that stuck-up busybody from the welfare. 'Sides you're a big strong girl and I needed help 'round here.

MILLIE

Still do as far as I can tell. You or Mister Chester got any complaints about my helpin' in the kitchen?

MRS. CHESTER

No. You're a good cook.

MILLIE

What about my work on the farm?

MRS. CHESTER

You're learnin'.

MILLIE

And the children. They like me.

MRS. CHESTER

Yes, they do.

MILLIE

Then why are you sendin' me away?

MRS. CHESTER

You're a young woman now. Soon you'll want to have a family of your own. I can't have townfolk gettin' the wrong idea.

MILLIE

But I'm not steppin' out with anybody.

MRS. CHESTER

Not yet, but you will if you're anything like your Mama.

MILLIE

It's because of Mama that I know how to take care of a house and farm animals.

MRS. CHESTER

I'm not talkin' about that.

MILLIE

What then?

MRS. CHESTER

I won't put up with you sneakin' around behind my back and carryin' on in my house with menfolk from town or t'other side of the tracks. Havin' babies without a Daddy and no wedding ring on your finger. Nope.

MILLIE

I'm not—

MRS. CHESTER

You're a pretty gal. The men are sure to come 'round and turn your head just like Mister Chester done mine. I got to live in this town. Can't have no gossip. These women will shun me and my children like the plague.

MILLIE

But you're Mama's cousin. Mama says kin stick together.

MRS. CHESTER

Distant cousin. Two, three times removed. Look at my arm and yours. See the difference?

MILLIE

You have freckles.

MRS. CHESTER

I done my part. Now it's your turn.

MILLIE

But where will I go? What will I do?

MRS. CHESTER

There's a colored family in town. You need to be with them.

MILLIE

Who? I don't know 'em.

MRS. CHESTER

Names Williams. The Mama's sick and they have a young'un who needs lookin' after.

MILLIE

But I'm still in school.

MRS. CHESTER

You learned enough.

MILLIE

But they're strangers.

MRS. CHESTER

Not for long. Friday we'll go meet 'em.

MILLIE

Just like that? Where do they--?

MRS. CHESTER

They live in a holler on the other side of the tracks.

MILLIE

But—

MRS. CHESTER

It's time to move on, Millie. Trust me. It's better this way.

MILLIE

For who?

MRS. CHESTER

They'll offer you room and board and pay you ... a little.

MILLIE

But this is my home. Been my home since Mama--.

MRS. CHESTER

You told me once you want to live in a city.

MILLIE

Yes, but—

MRS. CHESTER

If you save up, maybe you can...by and by.

MILLIE

Fat chance.

MILLIE

Now. Now. After you finish the laundry, start packin' up your things.

MILLIE

If I go, will we still visit? You and me?

MRS. CHESTER

No. You'll be on your own.

MILLIE

Then I'm not going.

[Millie stomps her foot.]

MRS. CHESTER

You're as stubborn as your Mama. See where it got her.

MILLIE

Time to find Jed. He's out there...somewhere. I'll work and he can go to school. Then we can--

MRS. CHESTER

No one knows where your brother is. So give it up.

MILLIE

My only kin? Would you do that to one of yourn? No.

MRS. CHESTER

Don't blame me. Blame your—

MILLIE

Only got one Mama. She loves us.

MRS. CHESTER

Maybe. Time to love yourself.

MILLIE

I'm scared.

MRS. CHESTER

You've done it before...here with us.

MILLIE

Had no say so.

MRS. CHESTER

Then put that at the top of your list -- before you say I do to some man who fancies you and you don't fancy the way he combs his hair or the way he eats his peas with a knife.

MILLIE

If the Mama is sick and the child needs lookin' after, who will I talk to?

MRS. CHESTER

You can't expect me to know about people in colored town.

MILLIE

You must know somethin'. You been there to talk with them about me.

MRS. CHESTER

I don't put up with no fresh talk from a gal who has a roof over her head and food on her plate on account of me.

MILLIE

You been tellin' me just now to love myself, Missus.

MRS. CHESTER

Practice speakin' up to somebody else, Millie.

MILLIE

Been practicing for years, calling your cows and pigs, your children for supper. Now I ask you nicely. Anybody at their house my age?

MRS. CHESTER

You're awful uppity all of a sudden for a –

MILLIE

For a what?

MRS. CHESTER

Never mind.

MILLIE

You've got to tell me something or I'll-I'll—

MRS. CHESTER

The talk is, an older son works on the railroad. But don't count on him for company because he spends most of his time up north.

MILLIE

New York?

MRS. CHESTER

How do I know? Never been on a train in my life.

MILLIE

What's his name?

MRS. CHESTER

Stop pesterin' me, girl. I told you all I know.

MILLIE

But—

MRS. CHESTER

You can do this, Millie.

[She tries to give Millie a hug, but Millie resists.]

MRS. CHESTER (cont'd)

All right. Suit yourself. But on Friday be sure to wear your church clothes and that pink hat with the flowers. You want to make a good impression.

MILLIE

Do **they**?

[Mrs. Chester exits.]

MILLIE (cont'd)

This is your fault, Mama. Kin stick together? Huh. That's a lie.

[Millie punches the laundry and throws the clothes pins on the ground in a fit of temper.]

If Mamas disappear, why can't I?

[Enter Hattie.]

HATTIE

I wanted to find you and Jed. But I didn't know how or who I could turn to after the county shut the door in my face. No money for a lawyer. Ashamed to ask the members of my church.]

[After a beat, Millie takes a deep breath and blows her nose.]

MILLIE

Jed, I hope you're happy and with folks that love you. Someday we'll be together. But right now I've got to ----

[She puts on her pink hat.]

A railroad man's used to travelin'. Take me with you, Mister Williams.

[A train can be heard in the distance. Millie exits. Hattie watches her go, then exits as the lights fade to dark.]

II-2

[Light shift indicates the passage of time. Enter adult Millie who speaks in a German accent.]

MILLIE

On this day in 1936, the University of Heidelberg is proud to convey an honorary degree on the American scientist Harry Hamilton Laughlin for his work on the “science of racial cleansing.” Doctor Laughlin, director of the Eugenics Record Office of the Department of Genetics of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, DC has been a tireless advocate for eugenics and a developer of compulsory sterilization polices for thirty-three American states.

[Exit Millie.]

[Enter Jed, 18, who carries school books. He paces.]

JED

I can’t waltz or square dance and I don’t like crowds. Why would I go to a school dance? Just cause everybody else is? I’d have to have a date. I’d ruther kill snakes in the barn. At least they don’t talk back.

[Enter Sallie Mae, 18.]

JED (cont’d)

Uh, hi, Sallie Mae. Pretty day. Uh, what’s new?

SALLIE MAE

Hi, Jed. Miss Smith says you’ll be head of the class at graduation. You’ll have to give a speech.

JED

With all those people staring at me? Sooner fight lions with a pitch fork.

SALLIE MAE

It’s an honor. Means you’re going places.

JED

Nope. Staying right here.

SALLIE MAE

Folks in the audience expect you to say something important, something they’ll always--

JED

Farmers don’t talk much.

SALLIE MAE

You could say a few words and be done.

JED

Nah, they'd want more. Guess I'll have to slack off so the principal picks somebody else.

SALLIE MAE

Why? George Johnson wants to be valedictorian, but he hasn't earned it. You have.

JED

You're awful nice, Sallie Mae. But--

SALLIE MAE

No but's about it. George Johnson's a bully with a big mouth. Why let him get all the applause?

JED

[Aside]

Sallie Mae's from a genteel family. A prized Jersey and I'm a poor Holstein. Why would she go out with me?

[Enter Hattie. She is dressed like a housekeeper and carries a feather duster in one hand and a bucket in the other.]

HATTIE

You're smart. You wear decent clothes. You don't smell bad. You're just as good as she is, son.

[She gives him a push toward Sallie Mae.]

JED

Um, uh, Sallie Mae, do you like ice cream? They have great milk shakes at the drug store in town. My treat.

SALLIE MAE

Jed, are you askin' me out on a date?

JED

Uh, yes, yes, I am.

SALLIE MAE

Well then, I'm confused. Saw you laughin' and talkin' with that colored girl the other day.

JED

Alicia? Nah. Doin' an errand for Miz Ethelyn.

SALLIE MAE

I know flirtin' when I see it.

JED

Just business.

SALLIE MAE

Can't remember the last time I saw you having so much fun.

JED

Alicia's the cook's granddaughter. Known her since grade school. She's like family.

SALLIE MAE

Not my family.

JED

'Course not. I didn't mean—

SALLIE MAE

You got hopes of earnin' a livin' here, puttin' down roots, you best memorize the code and follow it to the letter.

JED

Like I said, no offense, Sallie Mae.

SALLIE MAE

Plus which fact, I don't play second fiddle to no colored girl any time. Ever. Get your priorities in order.

JED

Yes, ma'am. They are and you're at the very top. I'd be pleased if you could meet me for a soda after school.

SALLIE MAE

I have my piano lesson then.

JED

I see. Another time then.

SALLIE MAE

Only if you wash your hands first and scrub your finger nails real good till they're white and shiny. I only go out with gentlemen.

[She exits.]

JED

Ain't no two ways about it. Farmers get their hands dirty. Guess I could wear gloves. Nah. I still wouldn't fit in. So why bother pursuing a filly when they buck and leave like Mama?

HATTIE

Like to stab me in the heart. Couldn't find you, son – 'til now.

[Offstage]

GIRL'S VOICE

Miss Hattie, come quick. My zipper's stuck and class starts in five minutes. Help!

HATTIE

Hold on, Annie Mae.

JED

I give up on girls. Farming and the four-legged variety will keep me out of trouble. That way I can save up to buy a car and look for Millie and Mama.

[Jed exits.]

HATTIE

Praise be!

[Hattie exits.]

II-3

Early 1940s. The Brown's porch.

Jed steps off the porch brandishing the keys to his new car.

JED

Gotta find my kin if it's the last thing I do. Then clear out and start my own farm.

[Jed gets in the "car," which may be suggested.]

This field, that barn, Jones's mailbox. Know these woods like I know my own name. Won't Mama be proud to go for a drive?

[He exits the "car" and starts walking.]

Garden should be up ahead. Soil's so rich. One of Mama's tomatoes taste so sweet in this heat.

[Hattie's shack is in ruins. He looks through the rubble, picks up a tin cup and raises it as if in a toast. He starts to cry.]

JED (cont'd)

Mama's gone.

[Enter Millie dressed like a domestic but with a widow's arm band. She is polishing silver.]

JED (cont'd)

Millie, where are you? The orphanage won't tell me anything. What's the matter with those people? You're my sister.

MILLIE

New York City ain't so great. Mister Williams used to drink like a fish until one day he fell off a subway platform and got killed. Just like that.

JED

What the hell they thinking? You're my sister.

MILLIE

Brother man, I know I should look for you. But it's been so long, I'm embarrassed. Don't wanna make trouble for you with those crackers.

JED

You've disappeared into the ether, Millie, just like Mama.

MILLIE

Worse yet. You might turn your back on me. Couldn't take that.

JED

If you were walkin' down the street, would I even recognize you?

MILLIE

I know one thing. I'm done cryin'.

JED

Mama used to say, hogs move forward, cows stand still and chickens back up.

MILLIE

Put your faith in Jesus, brother.

[Singing to herself]

Bless the Lord, O my soul
 O my soul
 Worship His holy name
 Sing like never before
 O my soul
 I worship Your holy name

The sun comes up; it's a new day dawning
 It's time to sing Your song again
 Whatever may pass and whatever lies before me
 Let me be singing when the evening comes

[She keeps humming.]

JED

Searching for Mama and Millie worse than lookin' for a needle in a haystack.

[He examines the cup, then puts it in his pocket.]

MILLIE

Will you forgive me, brother man?

[Millie exits. Jed returns to the farm. Miz Ethelyn is on the porch; she's crying.]

ETHELYN

Jed, Jed, been waitin on you all day. Mister Brown's had a heart attack. Radnor's nowhere to be found. Probably spoonin' with some girl. You've got to take me to the hospital right quick.

II-4

Early 1960s. The porch of the Browns' farm.

Offstage is the sound of chickens in an uproar. Miss Ethelyn is sitting on the porch reading a newspaper. A table is nearby with two glasses, a pitcher of tea and Jed's tin cup. Jed enters in a huff.

JED

Dadratit. Those God damned SO—uh, so and so's.

ETHELYN

What's got you so riled?

JED

Spent the whole ding dong day fixing the ruts in the road, spreading gravel and sweating bullets. Just as I'm about finished, a truckload of gypsies come through and ruined it.

ETHELYN

Is that any reason to take the Lord's name in vain, Jed Clawson?

JED

You'd think those lazy so and so's would apologize? When hell freezes over.

ETHELYN

God might forgive you for such language. But have you forgotten I'm a lady?

JED

No, ma'am. But now I've got to do the whole ding dong job all over again tomorrow when I'm supposed to be at the market.

ETHELYN

Sit down and try to cool off. I've made your favorite lemon meringue pie for supper. In the meantime, have some sweet tea.

[She starts to pour him a glass when he hands her the tin cup.]

ETHELYN (con'td)

I don't know why you insist on usin' that beat up tin cup when we have these fancy new glasses.

JED

I'm not fancy.

ETHELYN

You're peculiar.

JED

Old fashioned. Suits me just fine.

[He drinks the tea and gets up to leave.]

JED (cont'd)

Larrimer will be here in a minute. I need some time to--

ETHELYN

Not like we're entertainin' the preacher. Don't have to do nothin' special like put on a suit. My grandson may be in college, but he's still wet behind the ears as far as I'm concerned.

JED

First time in my life I'm being interviewed. Need to be sharp so's he gets a good grade.

ETHELYN

He can hardly get his hat on now.

JED

If I ever had a son, I'd want him to be just like Larrimer.

ETHELYN

Don't go makin' a fuss over that boy or he may get big ideas that I don't like. We don't need no rabble rousers in this family. And when you're finished talking, tell him I'll be in the parlor. A college boy can still help his Grandma shell peas.

[She exits.]

[Jed puts the tin cup in his pocket.]

[Enter Larrimer with a tape recorder and a camera. He is in his 20s.]

LARRIMER

How 'ya doin, Jed? Am I taking you away from your chores?

JED

They can wait.

LARRIMER

Give me a minute to set up the tape recorder.

JED

Thought this conversation's just between you and me.

LARRIMER

It is. The recording's my backup in case I forget something you've said. That way I can concentrate on listening.

JED

You gotta turn the tape into your teacher?

LARRIMER

No. Just for my benefit. You can have it after I've finished my newspaper article.

JED

Newspaper article? I thought you were writing a college paper.

LARRIMER

I'm writing for the college newspaper. Five hundred words on a local hero. You've accomplished so much. Tripled the size of this farm. Let's start with a picture.

[Larrimer holds up the camera.]

Say cheese.

JED

Whoa.

[He puts his hand over the lens.]

I thought you wanted to learn about tobacco farming.

LARRIMER

Yes, but first I need a timeline. To put your achievements in context. You lost a brother. Right?

JED

You know the story of how I came here from your Grandpa.

LARRIMER

But you did lose a brother.

JED

Yes.

LARRIMER

Sister?

JED

Uh, let's skip the ancient history and talk about innovations in farming.

LARRIMER

You have lots to crow about. But you don't.

JED

Fellas down at the feed store would say I'm lucky. Just put one foot in front of the other like so many before me.

LARRIMER

You're a respected leader in this community. A county commissioner.

[Enter Hattie who leans on a cane.]

HATTIE

Always knew you'd be somebody, Jed.

JED

Part time.

LARRIMER

Folks here voted you into office.

JED

Well, I've lived here a long time. Now, about that picture. College students don't want to see my ugly mug.

LARRIMER

Sure, they do. Plus, my editor expects it.

JED

Nah. Tell your editor I'm a vain, ornery SOB who doesn't like having his picture taken.

LARRIMER

It's part of my job. He won't like it if I show up emptyhanded.

JED

You can take as many pictures of the barn and livestock as you want.

LARRIMER

You ever catch up with your family after you left the orphanage?

JED

No. Your family's my family now.

LARRIMER

Don't know how I'd manage if I lost my mother and father, plus a brother and a sister like you did.

JED

My Mama used to say, keep your kin close to your heart. Don't ever take 'em for granted.

HATTIE

You remembered. Proud of you, son. I can die happy.

[Hattie exits.]

LARRIMER

You ever wish you had a wife and children of your own, Jed?

JED

Lost your mind, Larrimer? Who'd take care of your grandma? You?

LARRIMER

No, I couldn't—

JED

Your Dad and Mama live too far away. Miz Ethelyn can't take care of herself. Who does that leave?

LARRIMER

Well...I don't—

JED

Guess not. World War Three break out if I married and brought another woman in here. Miz Ethelyn too set in her ways and this house is too small.

LARRIMER

Guess I never thought about it that—

JED

Now then...I forgot that I have a meeting in town. In the short time we have, let's focus on tobacco, animals, and crop yields, shall we?

LARRIMER

Ok for now. My editor may want a follow up story.

JED

You go on ahead to the barn. Take your pictures. I'll be there soon's I take a pee.

[Larrimer exits.]

JED (cont'd)

Future articles? Over my dead body.

[He takes the tin cup out of his pocket, flings it to the ground, stomps on it and kicks it to the side.]

JED

Ever had a wife, I'd have to tell her about my sister. Couldn't risk her telling Miz Ethelyn. Then the whole town would know. My name'd be mud.

[Jed exits.]

[Enter adult Millie. She is reading a newspaper.]

MILLIE

Says here the Commonwealth of Virginia repealed its involuntary sterilization law in 1974, fifty years after the law went on the books. North Carolina is the only state that has offered compensation to victims of its state-sponsored forced sterilization programs. As for the United States Supreme Court, it has yet to overturn its decision in *Buck versus Bell*.

[She exits.]

II-5

A hospital room. 1980s. Jed is in bed. He has suffered a stroke. A walker is nearby. He appears to be asleep. Enter Larrimer who wears a suit and tie. He takes a seat next to Jed and quietly removes his coat and loosens his tie.

JED

[His speech is slurred.]

Larrimer, huh, what are you doing here?

LARRIMER

In the neighborhood. Thought I'd stop by for a visit.

JED

Your neighborhood's a far cry from here. Never were a very good liar.

LARRIMER

Well...

JED

You got a cigarette?

LARRIMER

Against the rules.

JED

Who cares? I got one foot in the grave now. Come on.

[A beat. Larrimer gives Jed a cigarette.]

JED (cont'd)

How about a match?

[Larrimer lights Jed's cigarette.]

LARRIMER

Fortunately you're not on oxygen or I wouldn't be able to—

JED

God, I miss this.

LARRIMER

Better make it quick. The nurse said she'd be here in a few minutes to check on you.

JED

Except when I need the bed pan. Then they're slow, slow, slow.

LARRIMER

Do you want me to complain? I'd be glad to.

JED

Nah, they're short staffed. Just leave me another cigarette before you leave and a pack of matches.

LARRIMER

How are you doing, Jed?

JED

I hate this place. The noise. Beeps so loud and so often you can't sleep. Interruptions all hours of the day or night to take my temperature, check my pulse, take my blood. I can't sleep.

LARRIMER

I'm sorry. Betty and the kids send their love.

JED

When you have a family of your own, you're a millionaire in my book.

LARRIMER

Not quite. But I'm working on it.

JED

Keep 'em close.

[He coughs and wheezes.]

LARRIMER

They are.

JED

A long time ago you asked me about my family. But I wasn't ready to-to talk about them then.

LARRIMER

You need to rest. You're short of breath.

JED

It's been on my mind. Better tell you while you're here. Dunno when I'll get another—

[Enter nurse.]

NURSE

Mr. Clawson, smoking in your condition? What were you thinking? You know the rules. I'll take that.

[She grabs the cigarette and stubs it under her shoe.]

JED

Nurse, you're interrupting.

[The coughing and wheezing continue.]

NURSE

Visiting hours are over, sir.

[To Larrimer.]

JED

But—

NURSE

Please leave.

[She puts an oxygen mask over Jed's nose.]

LARRIMER

Love you, Jed.

[Larrimer tries to give Jed a hug. But the nurse is busy tending to him and blocks his way.]

[He exits while the lights fade to dark.]

II-6

A few months later. A grave, then the suggestion of a law office and later a funeral parlor, a porch.

Larrimer, dressed in black, stands at a grave. He is silent. He removes a can of chewing tobacco from his pocket and raises it in the direction of the headstone as in a toast.

LARRIMER

To Jed who taught me how to be a man.

[After a beat, he crosses to a law office where Mr. Salmon, who is sitting at a desk, rises to greet him.]

LARRIMER

You asked to see me.

SALMON

Yes. Jed Clawson left you his farm. The bad news -- he died intestate.

LARRIMER

What?

SALMON

He didn't leave a valid will. As a result, all of his money and property will go to the Commonwealth of Virginia.

LARRIMER

Damn. There must be some mistake. Jed told me he had a will drawn up years ago.

SALMON

It's nowhere to be found. I have a copy without his signature. The court won't recognize that.

LARRIMER

And you call yourself a lawyer?

SALMON

Now, now. No need to be sarcastic.

LARRIMER

You're not losing out on a four hundred acre farm.

SALMON

Mr. Clawson was a frugal man used to handling his own affairs. He drew up the will himself and mailed me this copy.

[Salmon hands him the will.]

LARRIMER

And you let it go at that? You didn't follow up?

SALMON

Yes, several times. He didn't respond.

LARRIMER

Uh huh. Since you're not in the will and there was no likelihood of billable time. What do you care?

SALMON

Jed could be very stubborn.

LARRIMER

Now you're blaming him for your own negligence. The local bar association will be hearing from me, counselor.

SALMON

Go right ahead. My file contains several letters to Mr. Clawson requesting—

LARRIMER

For a country lawyer, you're very good at covering your ass.

[He spits out a wad of chewing tobacco into a wastepaper basket before exiting the office.]

[Light shift. Larrimer crosses to the steps of a porch. He carries several paper files. Impatient, he riffles through the documents and starts reading.]

LARRIMER

I'll be damned if the government cheats me out of what's mine. Jed, you stepped in it this time. Where'd you stash the original?

[Beat.]

For a man who could plant row upon row of tobacco in a straight line, how could you be so disorganized?

[One by one, the files land on the floor at his feet.]

Fortunately, courts keep records. Public records. Guess I'll have to pay them a visit.

[Light shift. The office of a funeral home which may be suggested with a desk or table and chairs. A somber looking man greets Larrimer.]

MR. TOOGOOD

Can I help you, sir?

LARRIMER

I'm trying to settle an estate on a man whose mother was buried from your funeral home five years ago. I need to locate her daughter. But so far I've been unable to do so. Hoping you might know where she is.

MR. TOOGOOD

That far back? My assistant's on vacation. I don't have time right now to go through the records. Can you come back next week?

LARRIMER

Here from out of town. Sure appreciate it if you could help me today. There's money on the table for this woman and the clock is ticking.

MR. TOOGOOD

All our old records are in the basement. Can't leave my post.

LARRIMER

Make me your deputy. I'm presentable. Just fill me in on who's here and in what room. If anyone shows up, I'll point them in the right direction.

MR. TOOGOOD

Against company policy.

LARRIMER

I'm a lawyer. If anyone calls, I'll take a message.

MR. TOOGOOD

Your voice has the wrong timbre, sir. Flinch & Toogood requires a serious bass.

LARRIMER

Hmm. Here's something for your trouble.

[He hands Toogood a bill.]

LARRIMER (cont'd)

The death certificate lists Hattie Clawson's name and date of death. That should make it easy for you.

MR. TOOGOOD

Well...

[Larrimer hands him another bill.]

MR. TOOGOOD (cont'd)

Perpetual care is our motto, one we take seriously and apply to the bereaved as well as the deceased.

[Larrimer hands him another bill.]

MR. TOOGOOD (cont'd)

Fortunately for you, our census is down for the moment. I'm not expecting any new, ah, clients.

LARRIMER

So you can take the time to nip down stairs. Her daughter's first name is Millie. Here's a copy of the death certificate.

[Hands Toogood the certificate.]

MR. TOOGOOD

If anyone calls, take a detailed message.

[Toogood exits. Larrimer paces and reads a magazine.]

LARRIMER

[Points to the phone.]

Don't ring. I'm a tenor.

[Re-enter Toogood.]

MR. TOOGOOD

You're in luck, sir, I found the file. Indeed, Miss Clawson was one of our guests.

LARRIMER

Who paid for her funeral?

MR TOOGOOD

A private school nearby. Apparently she was a long time employee.

LARRIMER

No next of kin?

MR. TOOGOOD

Not in our records. But there's a handwritten note. A woman claiming to be the deceased's daughter saw Miss Clawson's obituary in the local paper after the funeral. She wanted to see our guestbook to find out who had attended the viewing. Left her name, address, and phone number.

[He puts out his hand. Larrimer resists.]

MR. TOOGOOD

Are you sure the daughter will be glad to see you? Don't want to tick off future customers.

LARRIMER

It's a good sized piece of property.

MR. TOOGOOD

Maybe I ought to call her and ask her to call you.

[Larrimer hands him another bill. Mr. Toogood gives him the note. Larrimer exits. Beat. He crosses the stage, looking for an address, then approaches the porch. Adult Millie is relaxing there.]

LARRIMER

Millie Clawson?

MILLIE

Used to be. What you want, mister?

LARRIMER

You have a brother named Jed?

MILLIE

You in the Klan? Don't want no trouble.

LARRIMER

My name's Larrimer Brown. Jed was my grandfather's foster son. I have good news and sad news. Which do you want first?

MILLIE

Haven't seen Jed in more'n fifty years. County took him away from me and Mama. Never saw either of them again.

LARRIMER

I'm sorry to tell you your brother has passed away. My condolences.

MILLIE

Overdue, mister. Long overdue.

[Enter Hattie who leans on a cane.]

You lose your Mama when you were a child?

LARRIMER

No, no, I--

MILLIE

My Mama wasn't feeble-minded any more than you are.

HATTIE

Thank you, daughter. You're the only one to admit it -- 'cept me.

MILLIE

Folks in town hated Mama for stepping over the line and taking up with a black man. And this is the land of the free? They neutered her like she was an alley cat or a stray dog. Folks couldn't abide us living together, lookin' different from them and one another. They wanted us to disappear just 'cause I'm two shades darker.

HATTIE

You go, girl.

MILLIE

Her crime? Bein' lonely. I been down that road. Maybe you have too. Except we didn't get caught. That's the difference. Mama wouldn't hide us. She loved me. Let me say that again. She loved us. No, my Mama wasn't perfect. Neither am I. Married a drunk the first time around. Desperate to go up north. You ever been desperate?

LARRIMER

Um, uh, I—

MILLIE

Ever lose a brother or a sister?

LARRIMER

No, I—

MILLIE

Lost two brothers. Larry, now Jed. Leaves a hole in your heart. A big black hole the size of this porch that lasts for years. No family gatherings at Thanksgiving and Christmas. No birthday celebrations. Not even a card.

LARRIMER

I'm sorry.

HATTIE

Me too.

MILLIE

Thank you. Now...give me a moment.

[Millie pauses as she tries to collect herself.]

MILLIE (cont'd)

Good news you said. I need that right about now.

LARRIMER

Yes, ma'am, as Jed's only living relative, you're in line to inherit his estate.

MILLIE

Huh. Forty acres and a mule.

LARRIMER

On the contrary. Four hundred acres with a house and several out buildings.

MILLIE

What do you know? Humph. I hear a "but" coming.

LARRIMER

In exchange for help in filing your claim, I want a third.

MILLIE

You're all warm and fuzzy, ain't you, Mister Brown? You been here less than five minutes. In that time, I lost a brother and gained a piece of property. Havin' trouble wrapping my head around this ...this--

LARRIMER

I'm sorry if I was abrupt. I've been so intent in finding you and, well, it was quite an effort. Take all the time you need, Miss Clawson.

MILLIE

It's Mrs. Harold Forrester.

LARRIMER

Would you like me to talk with your husband instead?

MILLIE

I'm a widow. Twice now. Jed was my brother. You talk to me.

LARRIMER

Yes, ma'am.

MILLIE

So it's all about the money, is it?

LARRIMER

From a legal perspective, yes. Jed died without a will and left no heirs. If I hadn't located you, all of his assets would go to the Commonwealth of Virginia. He wouldn't want that.

MILLIE

And neither do you. Isn't that so, Mr. Brown? Otherwise, you get nothing.

LARRIMER

True. Jed was a hard working farmer all his life. For the government to profit from his death makes my blood boil. Don't you agree?

MILLIE

Government didn't do right by him or me. Why should you get anything?

LARRIMER

I know where his property is located and you don't.

MILLIE

But I could find out easily enough.

LARRIMER

Jed and my father grew up together. They were as close to kin as you can get.

MILLIE

Your family adopt him?

LARRIMER

No.

MILLIE

Then I'm his only relative or you wouldn't be here.

LARRIMER

Jed always told me the farm would be mine when he died.

MILLIE

Humph. He tell you about Mama and me?

LARRIMER

Not a word.

MILLIE

Not surprised. When you knocked on my door just now, you didn't know I was black, did you, Mr. Brown?

LARRIMER

No, ma'am.

MILLIE

He marry?

LARRIMER

Lifelong bachelor.

MILLIE

And now you know why.

LARRIMER

Jed was a fine man, a brother you'd be proud of. I hope that's some comfort to you.

MILLIE

I know. Read about him in the Richmond paper when he worked for the county.

LARRIMER

And you didn't contact him?

MILLIE

You're not from around here, are you, Mister?

LARRIMER

Virginia born and raised. Now I live in another state.

MILLIE

Used to live in New York until my second husband got sick. The VA hospital in these parts was better for him so we moved back here eight years ago. That's when I first heard about Jed.

LARRIMER

He would have wanted to see you.

MILLIE

Can you imagine what Jed's coworkers would have said if I went up to him on the street, gave him a big hug and introduced myself as his sister? Probably would have lost his job straight away. Couldn't do that to my brother.

LARRIMER

Some things have changed around here since you were children.

MILLIE

May be for the young ones coming up. But not for folks my age.

LARRIMER

I disagree. There's the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act—

MILLIE

Government. I'm talking about people, people who live in the same town, the same county getting together as equals.

LARRIMER

I'm sure that happens...

MILLIE

You are? When's the last time you had a black woman to your house for dinner?

[He is silent.]

MILLIE (contd)

Your Mama and Daddy raise you up under one roof?

LARRIMER

Yes, ma'am.

MILLIE

You have a wife and children of your own?

LARRIMER

Right again. A boy and a girl. You?

MILLIE

Miscarried. My church is my family now. Gospel music lift me up. And I say hallelujah. You a believer?

LARRIMER

In family? Yes.

MILLIE

Then I want all of his property.

LARRIMER

My grandfather raised Jed from the age of eight. If that doesn't qualify as family...

MILLIE

I'm his flesh and blood. That puts me at the head of the line.

LARRIMER

Be reasonable, Mrs. Forrester. Instead of the whole estate, I feel right in claiming a third.

MILLIE

Law's on my side.

LARRIMER

As an attorney, I can handle the necessary paperwork on your behalf.

MILLIE

And charge me a fee equal to a third?

LARRIMER

Not quite. My hourly rate is—

MILLIE

A lawyer I know be glad to do it for me at a discount seeing as how we go to the same church.

LARRIMER

You're a pretty good negotiator.

MILLIE

For a woman, you mean?

LARRIMER

Jed was too. He got the best rate for his tobacco of any farmer in the county.

MILLIE

Mama used to say, when you know you're right, fight like a bulldog till you win. Except our Mama lost. Big time.

LARRIMER

Jed made up for that.

MILLIE

Not talking about money.

LARRIMER

But you want all of his estate.

MILLIE

Yes, I want to walk the land my brother walked and sit in his kitchen for a time or two or three or four. Be in the place he called home and feel his presence instead of only imagining him from a distance.

LARRIMER

Would you sell it?

MILLIE

After a time. Do I look like a farmer?

LARRIMER

No, but—

MILLIE

My church needs a new roof. I can help with that now.

LARRIMER

Jed's property has been in my family for decades. Please excuse me. My turn to--

[Larrimer steps off the porch. Jed is upstage. He is sitting in a chair and reading the newspaper. Hattie stomps her cane. Jed looks up.]

HATTIE

You're up, son. They're callin' me upstairs.

[Hattie exits.]

JED

Yes, Mama.

LARRIMER

I don't know you, Jed. Thought I did. All these secrets. I'm stumped.

JED

About what?

LARRIMER

Your sister. Your mother.

JED

I couldn't.... Your grandma would have turned me away. Town folks the same.

LARRIMER

Grandma's dead now. My father and grandfather too.

JED

[Chuckles]

So am I. You're talking to yourself, Larrimer, just like when you were a boy. You'd follow me around and ask a million questions. Why this and why that?

LARRIMER

So why didn't you tell me?

JED

Tried to once. But the nurse—

LARRIMER

That's just an excuse. You waited too long.

JED

Guess so. The stigma hung on like bad breath and wouldn't go away.

LARRIMER

You promised you'd leave me—

JED

You don't like farming. Never did. What you really liked was my attention when you were growing up. You talked and I listened.

LARRIMER

But I liked growing up on the farm.

JED

You liked being outside, being around all the dogs and farm animals. But you didn't like the work or the isolation. And now you're trying to hang onto something from the past that will keep you from your family, from your law practice. When there's a problem, you'll wind up driving up and down the highway for hours to manage a piece of property for what? Auld lang syne?

LARRIMER

It would be an investment.

JED

One you and your wife and children will pay a high price for. Can't you see that, Larrimer? Do you have any imagination?

LARRIMER

I'm a lawyer. I deal in facts.

JED

Not asking you to write a novel. Put yourself in my shoes for once. You like telling stories – just not made-up ones.

LARRIMER

If you wanted your sister to benefit from your estate, why not sign your will and have that shyster file it for you?

JED

I didn't know where Millie was or if she was still alive. But if she was, I knew you'd find her.

LARRIMER

How'd you know that? .

JED

You like puzzles. The will would be a challenge for you. As a young boy, you used to repair my wrist watch. Took it apart and put it back together again more than once.

LARRIMER

It was easy. You bought cheap watches.

JED

Now. Now. Give yourself credit. When you were in high school, you fixed your grandmother's washing machine. I couldn't have done it.

LARRIMER

Baloney.

JED

I have great confidence in you, Larrimer. You're a fixer. I'm depending on you to put this right. Don't keep my sister waiting.

[Jed exits.]

LARRIMER

[A couple of beats. Larrimer returns to the porch.]

Mrs. Forrester?

MILLIE

Yes?

LARRIMER

The farm's yours.

MILLIE

Whoa. Hundred percent?

LARRIMER

Yes, ma'am.

MILLIE

Why you change your mind?

LARRIMER

The Commonwealth of Virginia has done a terrible wrong to you and your family.

MILLIE

You got that right, but it's nothing to do with you.

LARRIMER

Jed would want you to have it. You're his kin and he was good to mine, especially my Grandma. I'd be glad to give you a tour whenever you want.

MILLIE

You are a gentleman after all, Mister Brown.

LARRIMER

You remind me of Jed. You have the same frame and many of the same mannerisms.

MILLIE

Feels so good to say Jed's name out loud after all these years. Love to hear more about my brother. You knew him a long time?

LARRIMER

Yes, ma'am, all my life. I'd like to get to know you too.

MILLIE

You had lunch? Got corn bread in the oven and collards on the stove.

LARRIMER

Collard greens and ham hocks are my favorite. Brings me back to my childhood.

MILLIE

Hold on. Mine's vegetarian. This here's the New South. Now it's your turn to tell a whopper.

[They start laughing as the lights
fade to black.]

END OF PLAY