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I Am: In the Making

Thesis submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Fine and Performing Arts Honors Program

By

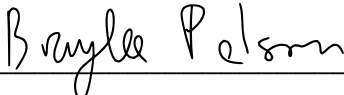
Braylee Polson

The Honors College

Fine and Performing Arts Honors Program

East Tennessee State University

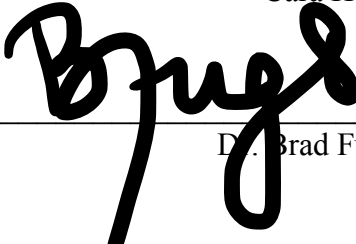
April 6, 2021



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Introduction

I Am: In the Making is an undergraduate honors thesis that features my exploration of Appalachian society, culture, and religion to create a brand-new play, titled *I Am*. My educational experiences as a Fine and Performing Arts Honors student and Theatre major minoring in Dance at East Tennessee State University, have given me the ability to create a theatrical play as my senior capstone project. In the following pages, I will cover the creative process involved in writing *I Am*. I will examine both the historical aspects of the storyline and the religious representations, as well as personal creative choices I have made. With this research and my own working knowledge of playwriting, I was able to develop a script centered around Appalachia unlike those before it.

The choice to write a play came naturally to me, although the play that came from this process is not the first play that I had in mind. When I started brainstorming the concept for the play, I was deeply influenced by pop music icon, Beyonce's work. My first inspiration came from her song "Freedom." I envisioned relating the Biblical story of Moses to Beyonce's powerful music and lyrics as the force behind the story. When I began talking over these ideas with my advisor, she very keenly pointed out that my voice and experiences could be the force behind the story, and that often, great stories come from within; they come from places inside the author that are built on past experiences and unique opinions. This is why I chose to write the play with an Appalachian setting and characters, as Appalachia is my home and represents my heritage.

I Am Play Synopsis

The play begins in Tennessee in the early 1900's, then jumps forward into time to 1920. In the opening scenes, we see a young mother place a basket into a river. An un-known man kills this young mother as the basket floats down the river. The next morning Ruth, a neighboring farmer's wife and mother to two small children, finds the basket and discovers that there is a baby inside. After talking it over with her husband, Clint, they decide that it must be God's will for them to keep the baby. They name the baby Sarah and introduce her to her (adoptive) siblings, John and Hannah. As Sarah grows, she attends a Christian Church led by a pastor named Simon. Sarah starts to see inconsistencies between Pastor Simon's teaching and her own understanding of the Bible. One day, while helping her brother pull weeds from the family garden, Sarah accidentally pulls a tomato plant from the ground. Frustrated from a long day's work, Clint lashes out at Sarah and reveals that she was adopted. A distraught Sarah flees into the forest to question her reality. While in the forest, she meets a beautiful stranger who carries a certain mysterious power about her. Sarah later comes to find this woman goes by, The Mother, as she is the mother to all living things. In her conversation with The Mother, Sarah realizes that she has a destiny and that she will soon discover her path. Upon Sarah's return home, she overhears a conversation involving Pastor Simon, who her family has invited over for dinner to give Sarah information about her birth mother, mention his brother Henry, a congressman, who Simon shares daily, advisory calls with. Later, Sarah finds a flyer advertising an amendment to the constitution that would allow women to vote, and she knows *this* is her destiny. She asks The Mother for advice on how to help secure the right to vote for women. The Mother gifts her shawl to Sarah and instructs her to go to Simon each day and ask him to have his brother vote in favor for women's right to vote. Each day Sarah asks Simon to let her people vote, and each day he

turns her away as The Mother brings punishment down in the form of dead crops, raining fire, and finally the death of all first-born males. Finally, Simon relents. He advises his brother to vote in favor of women's right to vote, single handedly ratifying the 19th amendment. The final scene shows Sarah walking through a sea of men dressed in red to a voting booth.

I Am Inspiration: Melungeon Heritage

I have always enjoyed stories about my Appalachian heritage. My mom used to tell me stories of her pulling tobacco in the fields with her dad, about her neighborhood where everyone was either family or close to it. She'd tell me about the kids from the mountains running barefoot in their county track meet because they couldn't afford running shoes. My favorite stories were always the ones about our heritage. While it is quite obvious that my father is a descendent of the Highlanders who settled our area, my mother's heritage is more of a mystery. My mother's family is believed to be Melungeon.

There is a lot of mystery surrounding the heritage of the Melungeon people. The Melungeon Heritage Association writes:

“Until recently, most scientists studying the Melungeons believed them to be – like most of the other tri-racial groups – the product of intermarriage between Anglo/Celtic Americans, Indians, and free African-Americans along the American frontier. Hancock County Melungeons, when first interviewed by outsiders about their heritage around 1890, defined themselves as Indian and Portuguese, but also acknowledged English and African ancestry. While most whites discounted the claim of Portuguese ancestry, believing it to be a means of denying African ancestry generations of feature writers tapped into folklore and their own imaginations to develop theories to explain the origins of the Melungeon people.”

(Frequently Asked Questions – Melungeon Heritage Association)

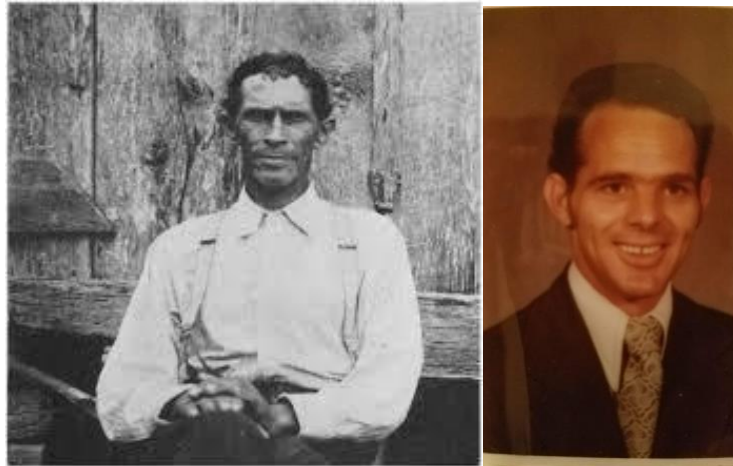
The Melungeon Heritage Association also briefly discusses folklore, and its part in trying to discover the genetic histories of the Melungeon people. They reference the common legend that Melungeon individuals are actually descendants of the Lost Colony of Roanoke. In this fable, the colonists seek safety inland while waiting for supplies. Once they reached Appalachia, they intermarried with the Native American Tribes who once lived here, and that is the proposed heritage of the Melungeon people. There are other tales that are similar to this one. They all end with white settlers moving inland and marrying Native Americans. The statement ends with:

“Genetic studies have shown that Melungeons share genetic traits with populations in the Mediterranean, South Asia, and Middle East, as well as with northern Europeans, Native Americans, and African-Americans. Not all Melungeons share all these genetic traits; every family has its own unique ethnic history. These studies do not answer all of the questions about the origins of the Melungeons, of course. We cannot tell when these various ethnic components entered a particular family line. However, these findings do open the door to further speculation and study; the Melungeons’ origins are almost certainly more complex than originally thought.”

(Frequently Asked Questions – Melungeon Heritage Association)

While there is some truth to the legends, there really is no way to tell exactly what specific genetics create the Melungeon appearance. Though there are many descriptions as to what a Melungeon individual could look like, all researchers agree that their skin tone is darker than white individuals with dark hair. Rachel Rubin writes one description of Melungeon appearance as having “... dark or oily skin, high cheekbones, curly or wavy hair, Asian eye folds” (Rubin 259). As if it wasn’t confusing enough, many of the prominent Melungeon features that once existed are becoming less common due to Melungeon individuals marrying white individuals.

Below are images of individuals believed to be Melungeon:



Resident of High Knob. Photo by Luther Addington. Paul Armstrong. My maternal grandfather.

Though varied in appearance, one can see the similarities in these individuals, from the dark, olive skin, to the shapes of their hairlines and eyebrows. My mother also has some similarities in her appearance, though her dark hair is not wiry as described. Instead, it is a closer texture to those individuals believed to be descended from Native Americans.

Though we may never know the exact genetic makeup of the Melungeon people, it would seem that not knowing is part of the fun. Being a descendant of a mysterious genealogy deeply inspired *I Am*. I knew I wanted a story that incorporated the complexity of Appalachian heritage by tying two very different religions from Melungeon ancestors into one, massive folklore legend. I felt this could be especially powerful because Appalachian culture is so tied to their location in the Bible Belt¹. I also wanted to create a tale that feels passed down from generation to generation, one that over the years may have been muddled by multiple cultures re-telling it and adding their own spin. Though there is no specific reference to Melungeon heritage

¹ An area chiefly in the southern U.S. whose inhabitants are believed to hold uncritical allegiance to the literal accuracy of the Bible. ("Bible Belt")

in *I Am*, it is an important aspect of my inspiration as it has informed my choice to mix cultural entities to create folklore that can span across diverse populations.

I Am Inspiration Part II: The Story of Moses

Growing up in the Christian Church, I always loved Biblical stories and the metaphors that seem to be packed in them. One story that I found particularly thrilling was always the story of Moses.



Moses & The Seventh Plague of Egypt by John Martin

In the story of Moses, the Israelites (Yahweh's chosen people) are enslaved by the Egyptians. When the pharaoh orders that all males under the age of two are to be executed, Moses's mother saves him by placing him in a basket and setting him adrift. The basket travels all the way to the palace where the pharaoh's daughter finds the baby and decides to raise him as her own. As Moses grows, he learns of his heritage and flees Egypt. He later receives a message from Yahweh commanding him to return to Egypt to convince the Pharaoh to free his people. Moses returns to Egypt, but the pharaoh will not listen. Yahweh sends down ten plagues on Egypt in order to force the pharaoh to release Yahweh's people. After the final plague, the Pharaoh finally releases Yahweh's people. (Mark)

The role that women play in the story of Moses is one of the reasons that I was drawn to it from a young age. While *I Am* follows very closely to the story of Moses, I made some creative changes. I have never believed that men are the only ones who can lead a church, and I have never believed that men are somehow closer to God than women because of their biological sex. Because of this, I knew the liberator of my story, Sarah, would be a woman. In addition to Sarah representing Moses, Yahweh is also written as a woman with the character, The Mother.

I also chose to include only three plagues because of the biblical significance to the number three. The number three is used many times through The Bible. It represents the Trinity² and eternal life, as Jesus Christ is to have risen on the third day. Yahweh goes by many names through the Christian Bible. He is part of the Holy Trinity and represents the Father of man and of Christ. In the Old Testament of the Bible, Yahweh is depicted as vengeful and fearsome, while in the New Testament he is seem more as a loving Father. I chose my Yahweh (The Mother) to be a mixture of the Yahweh of The New Testament and the Yahweh of The Old Testament. The Mother cares for Sarah as Yahweh cares for his followers in The New Testament, while simultaneously unleashing plagues on her town as Old Testament Yahweh does to Egypt.

I Am Inspiration Part III: Mami Wata

When searching for other mythology, I found an African Deity who perfectly encapsulates both the fearsome and caring nature of Yahweh, as displayed in the Biblical Story of Moses. Recent studies of Melungeon heritage suggest that some Melungeon individuals have

² the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three persons in one Godhead according to Christian dogma (“Trinity”)

African Ancestors. When researching African deities, I stumbled upon Mami Wata. Mami Wata is described as,

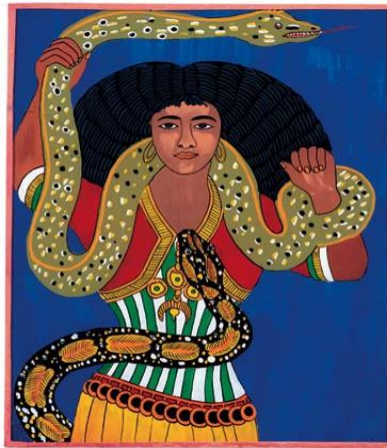
“Mami Wata is a complex symbol with so many resonances that she feeds the imagination, generating, rather than limiting, meanings and significances. She is at once a nurturing mother; sexy mama; provider of riches; healer of physical and spiritual ills; and embodiment of dangers and desires, risks and challenges, dreams and aspirations, fears and forebodings. People are attracted to the seemingly endless possibilities she represents and, at the same time, frightened by her destructive potential. She inspires a vast array of emotions, attitudes, and actions among those who worship her, fear her, study her, and create works of art about her.”

(“Introduction || Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas”)

These attributes were important because they are so similar to how Yahweh can be viewed between the New Testament and the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. Yahweh is both fearsome and Fatherly; he is vengeful and forgiving. Having these juxtaposing characteristics truly creates a very human character. No one is one thing, and I wanted the audience to relate to The Mother as well as Sarah. It is also written that Mami Wata, “... is widely believed to have "overseas" origins, and her depictions have been profoundly influenced by representations of ancient, indigenous African water spirits, European mermaids, Hindu gods and goddesses, and Christian and Muslim saints.” (“Introduction || Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas”). The conglomeration of religions that make up Mami Wata drew me even more to her. She was the perfect selection for my collage of a story. Mami Wata informed my creation of The Mother; specifically, I used Mami Wata’s mythology to further tie The Mother to water.

The Christian Bible is full of symbolism that centers around water, so using Mami Wata’s mythology allowed me to create symbolism for both. An example of this occurs in Act I Scene 10. Sarah dives into the water to reach The Mother. At first, she is worried about starting

to run out of air, but The Mother beckons her further in and gives her the ability to breathe underneath the water. This scene relates to the myth saying Mami Wata would pull her followers down into the water and they would be released with deeper spiritual understanding. Similarly, in the Christian Bible, followers of Jesus Christ were baptized. In this ritual, followers were lowered under water to have their sins and their past life washed away. Just like Mami Wata's followers and the followers of Jesus Christ, Sarah leaves the water with a deeper spiritual understanding of her circumstances and new found life with purpose.



Zoumana Sane (dates unknown, Senegal) Mami Wata, circa 1987 Pigment, glass

Collection of Herbert M. and Shelley Cole Photo by Don Cole

I Am Inspiration Part IV: Tennessee's Role in the 19th Amendment

With the exploration of deities Yahweh and Mami Wata in mind, it was time to find a worthy conflict for my tale. At first, I struggled to find a historical event that I felt could hold such a monumental story. Then I stumbled across the fact that Tennessee was the state that ratified the 19th Amendment. Tennessee Congressman Henry T. Burns ratified the 19th Amendment in 1920 after voting no twice. He chose to change his vote after receiving a note

from his mother saying, “Don’t forget to be a good boy” (History.com Editors). With this piece of history, I had found the perfect host for my freedom story, women’s suffrage.

Another historical element in *I Am* is the symbolic use of color. While Congress was in session to ratify or dismiss the 19th Amendment, they wore colored “rose-shaped pins” (“Symbols of the Women’s Suffrage Movement (U.S. National Park Service)”) to announce their support (or lack of support) for this amendment. If a Congressman was a suffragist³ he wore a yellow pin. If he was an anti-suffragist⁴, he wore a red pin. In the ending scene of this play, Sarah, dressed in yellow, can be seen walking through a room of men dressed in red to a voting booth. In this scene, the red symbolizes both the men’s disapproval of a woman voting, and it is a reference to the Biblical character Moses splitting the Red Sea to lead his people to freedom.

Final Thoughts

When writing a play, I have always found it best to think of writing a story like creating a life. I started using the story of Moses as my skeleton, and this held the shape that I wanted. From there, I added the characters, acting as the muscle and skin, who I would use to move the story to its conclusion. Though this creation may sound simple, I spent weeks pondering who The Mother would be and how she would appear. I combed through Biblical Plagues as I didn’t feel that this story needed ten plagues. At a certain point, the audience is likely to be tired of the spectacle, and many small theatres cannot afford to finance a show with ten full scenes of costly special effects. I also included a personal anecdote into the storyline as well. For most of my

³ A supporter of women’s right to vote (“Symbols of the Women’s Suffrage Movement (U.S. National Park Service)”)

⁴ An opposer of women’s right to vote (“Symbols of the Women’s Suffrage Movement (U.S. National Park Service)”)

childhood I believed that to be truly baptized, one must breathe while underwater. Luckily, this was corrected before my own baptism, but this incredible display of faith has stayed with me. I chose to incorporate this into my story, and later found out that Mami Wata has a similar mythology surrounding her. Unfortunately, the final step of creating a story has not happened for this play. In order for a tale to come alive, it must have blood. It must be told.

As to what comes next for this story, I would love to see it produced. As a writer, nothing is more beneficial to me than seeing the work played out before me, so I can gauge what the audience is comprehending and what they're not. Eventually, I will be adding additional optional scenes of narrations to help accommodate theatres with smaller budgets. With these scenes, a theatre company could produce this play as more of an oral tradition with minimal effects rather than a massive and costly production that fully accommodates exactly what is written. All in all, I am very satisfied with this first draft, and I am excited to see what this story develops into as it continues to grow.

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I AM

Thesis Play

Polson, Braylee

East Tennessee State University

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Story Setting

The play begins in Tennessee in the early 1900's, jumps forward into time to 1920, and then jumps again to 1921 in the ending. Most of the action in this play occurs in a farmhouse, inside and outside a church, and in the forests on the Appalachian Mountains.

Character List

Sarah- A headstrong feminist with a connection to the spiritual world.

The Mother- A mystical being with God-like powers. She assists Sarah in her journey towards equality by bring Biblical plagues down on the town.

Ruth- Sarah's adoptive mother. A kind woman with strong faith. A hard worker who may be of Melungeon descent.

Clint- Sarah's adoptive father. Good'ol farmer who loves his kids and his wife. Hard work sometimes causes him to have a short temper, but behind his tough exterior, he is soft.

Hannah- Sarah's adoptive sister. Takes after her mother.

John- Sarah's adoptive brother. Takes his chores seriously, but really likes to have fun. Goof ball with a good heart.

Simon- Pastor of the local Church. Charming in a snake-like way. Has a particular distain towards strong women. Manipulative with a real mean streak.

Ann- Sarah's birth mother.

Church Goers/ Towns People

ACT 1

SCENE 1

(Lights come up on a tiny house near a creek. We see a girl emerge from the forest behind the house. She's carrying a basket and running towards the water as if someone is chasing her.)

ANN

You can't take her away from me! I won't let you!

(A man emerges from the forest with his gun drawn. We can't see his face.)

SIMON

Annie, I won't let you ruin my life with that baby. Give it here. I'll make it quick.

(Ann places the basket in the water. We hear a gun shot. Ann falls.)

SCENE [2]

(The same basket is traveling in the river by a different home. A woman sees the basket and goes to investigate.)

RUTH

Clint! Clint, come quick! There's a baby!

CLINT

A baby? Was it one of the cows? They're not due until the spring. Which one-

RUTH

It's not the cows, Clint. Look.

CLINT

I- Well, I'll be. That's a baby, Ruthie.

RUTH

I can see that, honey. She was just floating in the lake in her little basket. You don't think-

CLINT

The Bishop's? I don't know, Ruthie.

RUTH

The gunshots last night. I told you it was too late to be huntin'.

CLINT

Now don't get so upset. We don't know nothin' like that yet, and you're just gonna get yourself all stirred up.

RUTH

What're we gonna do, Clint? We can't just take her. This is somebody's little baby.

CLINT

I ain't takin' her up the mountain to them until I know she belongs there. I reckon the safest place for her right now is here, least until we can find her parents or find her a new family.

(John enters with Hannah in tow.)

JOHN

Is everything alright, daddy? I heard momma yellin'.

CLINT

Everything's just fine, little John.

RUTH

God just brought us another baby to look after for a little while.

JOHN

Well, what's its name?

RUTH

Hm. I think we oughta call' er Sarah.

CLINT

Why Sarah?

RUTH

Any baby strong enough to survive what she's been through was made with a special purpose. Ya know, John, in the Bible Sarah is the wife of Abraham. God promised her she'd be the momma to thousands of babies. Something tells me that this baby, (realizing she is leaving her children out) that all my babies, are going to be great leaders.

CLINT

Alright, little John. Leave Hannah with yer momma. She can help her care for the new baby. We gotta go pull more 'backer before the sun goes behind the trees.

(Clint and John exit as Ruth and Hannah take Sarah into their home.)

SCENE [3]

(It is the next morning. Ruth is standing over Sarah as she sleeps with Hannah and John, humming a tune. Clint enters and throws his hat down.)

RUTH

(Shushing) Clint! The babies are sleepin'! What is the matter with you?

CLINT

You were right.

RUTH

What do you mean?

CLINT

I couldn't sleep last night, so as soon as dawn came, I made my way up the mountain to the Bishop family house. Ty was sweet as punch, but I could tell somethin' was off. I asked'em about his daughter. You know, the real pretty one that used to come to church with them awful bruises. Ruthie, he said he sent her to some private school in the north, and I was so happy for her, but as I was leavin' I saw this fresh pile a dirt near their cow field. I didn't think nothin' of it, Ruthie. Cows die, but what stuck with me was that Ty's wife and son was both down there cryin' 'n holdin' flowers. Now you tell me, Ruthie, I know I'm a hard man, so it don't bother me none when a cow dies, it's natural. It's life, but you're a farmer's wife, Ruthie, and I ain't never seen you cry like that over a cow. Never. It was like it weren't a cow. Ruthie, it was like-

(Ruth moves to hold Clint so that he can cry into her.)

RUTH

I know, honey. I was afraid of as much. It takes a special kind of awful man to hurt his babies. I know.

CLINT

I don't know what we can do, Ruthie. I mean we're barely feeding' the babies we have now. I don't know if we can-

RUTH

You listen here. God brought us this baby for a reason. We'll be alright. Hannah's only a little older. I can take some of her clothes down a size or two to fit the baby. We can plant more tobacco next year. God trusted us, honey. We just gotta trust Him a little too.

(The couple holds each other as they watch their children sleep)

SCENE [4]

(Scene opens on a tiny church filled to the brim.)

SIMON

Let us begin with prayer. Heavenly Father, we ask that you keep us in your ever loving' grasp, God. Keep us humble, Lord. We pray that you would lead us in our every step, our every breath, God. That we may honor you above all, Father. Amen.

(The congregation mumbles their amens)

SIMON

Today I gonna tell you a story. Because before our Lord'n Savior was born there was another savior of his people. This man was a leader, but he was born to the Hebrews while they were still enslaved to the Egyptians. Let me tell you somethin' these Egyptians were nasty to this Hebrews. They forced God's people to build their pagan temples, they *enslaved* God's chosen. (addressing a single congregant) Now, God's not going to let his people suffer for long is he, brother? No sir, he's not. So what did he do? (to the church) He sent a deliverer, amen?

(The congregation fills with amens and praises)

Amen, our God sends a deliverer. He sent his people a man named Moses who called down the plagues, who broke the souls of the pagans, and who freed his Hebrew brothers. And he started this, brethren, when Moses was just a baby. We've gotta be watching our babies. God is gonna use them for such big things. You don't even know, but God can't use them if he can't find them. If they're out followin' Satan. God uses the children that are dedicated to him, the babies that are gifted unto him. Get babies in church and in the word. We can change our world and pull it back out of the hands of Satan, amen?

(The church erupts in amens and praises)

Father, we thank you. We thank you for your deliverance, and we thank you for the charges you send unto us to give our babies back to you God. Ain't nothin' in this world more heartbreaking than a child following' the devil, God, but we know your punishment is swift and just, Lord. Thank you for all you do for us. Amen. (to congregation) Now, you be blessed, and go bless others this week.

(The choir sings as the congregation begins to leave)

SCENE [5]

(Scene opens on the front porch of Ruth and Clint's home. Ruth and Hannah are sewing, while John and Sarah are pulling weeds from the garden and laughing together.)

JOHN

(Laughing) You keep slingin' them weeds over here, Imma burry you up to your neck in dirt.

SARAH

No way, you be able to catch me. I seen how much you been eatin' at dinner. There ain't no way you ain't at least twice as big as you were last week.

(John throws a glob of dirt at Sarah. Sarah reaches behind her without looking and up roots a tomato plant and throws it at John as Clint arrives home)

JOHN

(With a devious look in his eye) Where do you think pop's been gettin' all the manure you're slingin'?

CLINT

(Angry and taken aback) What are you two doin'? Sarah why ain't you up there helpin' your mamma and sister mend clothes instead of rippin' our food out the ground?

RUTH

Clint, she was just trying to help John. Hannah and I are fine.

CLINT

Little girls ain't s'posed to be digging in the dirt like a man, and this here is why. You mess up sewin' and you cut and do it again. This could mean we go without food, Ruthie. Ain't enough we took her in, now she's takin' the food right out our months like we don't mean nothin'. John, you shoulda known better, son.

HANNAH

What do you mean, took her in, pop?

JOHN

What are you sayin'?

CLINT

Now, I didn't mean nothin' by it. It ain't nothin. I had a long day out-

SARAH

Are you sayin' I ain't actually your family?

(Ruth crosses towards Sarah)

RUTH

Sarah, baby, of course your own family.

SARAH

Then what did you mean, pa? What did you mean you took me in?

CLINT

Honey, it don't matter where you come from. We are always- Sarah!

(Sarah doesn't let Clint finish before she bolts into the woods. Clint moves to follow.)

RUTH

Give her space. She needs to let this sink in a little before she sees us again.
She'll come home when she's ready. 'Till then, God and the forest'll care for her.

(The family goes back into their normal routine while each casting nervous glances into the woods periodically.)

SCENE [6]

(Scene opens with Sarah in the forest alone.)

SARAH

I just don't understand, God. Pastor Simon said that those babies blessed by you all have a purpose. They are all loved. I have been in that church every Sunday, God. Why didn't my family want me? Why don't they want me now?

(Sarah hears rustling in the leaves around her as the wind picks up. She sees a woman walking through the trees)

SARAH

Hello? Ma'am? Are you lost?

THE MOTHER

No, my child. I've seen these trees grow from seeds. I know them, and they know me. What is your name?

SARAH

Sarah.

THE MOTHER

Sarah, the mother of thousands. Do you know that story?

SARAH

Yes ma'am. My mamma told me that she knew I was strong. She said that strong girls grow up to lead strong babies. I always thought she was right, ya know? I always felt a little different. Special. I guess that's just because I was different.

THE MOTHER

Look at these trees around us. They were once smaller than the palm of your hand. Each of them different. Every one of them created with a purpose and a need to grow. Life can be painful child, but didn't they grow through the rocks? Through the thorns? Imagine the forest around us if they had refused to grow. Life is created to seek light, and that is what trees do. That is what you will do too. Go home, child. Rest your mind and your body. Your answers will come as you grow towards the light.

(The Mother stands up and walks into the forest. Sarah sits and ponders until the sun starts to set. She stands up and returns home.)

SCENE 7

(Sarah walks into her home where Simon and her family are all sitting together. Ruth is serving coffee. She sets down the pot when she sees Sarah entering.)

RUTH

Oh baby, I'm so glad to see you. We started to get worried when the sun started settin'. We had Pastor Simon come over so we could pray for ya.

(Ruth embraces Sarah, and they both turn to face Clint expectedly.)

CLINT

Sarah, honey, I didn't mean what I said. I was just tired and frustrated when I came home. One of them new calves kicked me when-

(Simon clears his throat to interrupt him.)

SIMON

I think what your father is trying to say, is that there are hardships that fall on a man's shoulders that his family can't even know.

CLINT

What it all boils down to, Sarah, is I shouldn't have said them things. You are our family, and you always have been. Ain't nothin' is gonna change that.

RUTH

We love you, Sarah. No matter where you came from, you're our precious little girl.

SARAH

Where am I from mamma? Do you know?

SIMON

That's actually why I came here, sweetheart. You see, I'm afraid your beginnings weren't somethin' that a proper lady comes outta, and your Mom and Pop here thought it'd be best if you heard it from someone with first-hand experience.

SARAH

You knew my parents?

SIMON

Well, honey, I knew your momma. (Clears throat) That is, I mean I knew the girl that birthed you. Before she went out, and uh-, well, honey, before she was pregnant with you, her Daddy asked me to have weekly prayer meetin' with your Momma. Seems she was strugglin' with some real serious disobedience towards her pa. And as we both know, the Bible says we are to honor our father and

mother. This little girl and I would spend every Tues-dee morning' her Daddy's barn, where I would try my best to reach her delicate little soul and untangle it from the grasps of the devil. I promise you, honey. I did my very best, but this devil of arrogance had a hold of your Momma. She wouldn't accept that her place as a woman was to obey and serve those around her. I tried everything in my power to teach her this lesson, but then she fell pregnant. Her Daddy was livid with her. I had to stop him from sendin' her away, or hurtin' her or- you. We kept her hidden together. We were gonna take you to a nice family far away. When it came time for her to have you, she hid it. I didn't know she'd given birth to you until I was chasing her through the woods, tryin' to keep her form tossin' you in the river. I had to save you, so I pulled out my gun. My bullet hit'er and she dropped you. It was night, and I couldn't see you in the water. I thought you died. It wasn't until the next Sun-dee when I saw your real Ma and Pa holdin' a new baby, that I realized you'd lived. At that point, you were with a family and safe. I thought it best not to say nothin'. That is, until your Daddy here called me to get some advice on talking to you about this. I thought it was time to come clean. Sarah, honey, this is just what happens when women make their own decisions. That's why God tasked men with caring for you.

SARAH

What was her name, my mother?

SIMON

Ann. Her name was Ann.

RUTH

Well. I think that's quite enough excitement for tonight, and I believe supper is ready. Pastor, won't you stay?

SIMON

I'd be delighted to, Ruth. With Henry and his family havin' left for DC, for his new, fancy Congress job, it has been just too quiet at my house. I think the company'll do me some good.

CLINT

I bet you never even hear from him now. He's got to be so busy.

SIMON

Oh you know Samuel, he calls me everyday at lunch time to hear some scripture and to get his big brother's advice and prayers. He's a good one.

(Ruth puts stew in John's bowl. He looks disinterested.)

JOHN

I bet he eats steak every night.

(Clint gently pops him on the back of the head.)

CLINT

Have some manners, boy. Your momma works hard to feed us.

SCENE 8

(The scene opens on Ruth and Sarah walking into the grocery store. A bulletin board outside the store has a bright flyer addressing women's right to vote.)

SARAH

Momma, did you see this? Are we gonna be able to vote?

RUTH

Sarah, quit reading' the walls and help your sister and me.

SARAH

This could change everything. We could have our own voice.

RUTH

Your pa votes for us, baby. He knows what we need.

HANNAH

I didn't see what the big deal is. Who cares who wins or loses? They don't never help us out here anyways.

SARAH

That's the point! Maybe we could all vote for someone who cared about us.

RUTH

You two are lucky your daddy let me teach you how to read.

HANNAH

I doubt your husband is going to like havin' a wife who thinks she can vote.

SARAH

I don't see why not. I'mma be just as smart as him.

RUTH

Girls, that's enough of this voting' talk. God made the man so that he could protect us and care for us. We outta trust your pa to make the right decision for us. We got no business messing' in things meant for men.

(Sarah turns in defeat to grab a grocery item. She briefly sees The Mother, but she soon vanishes.)

SCENE [9]

SIMON

And we thank you, Heavenly Father, for all that you do for us sinners. Amen.

(The congregation mumbles their amens)

SIMON

The Lord has led me somewhere special today. Now, if I know one thing, it is that the Bible promises persecution to any who follow our Savior. Jesus said, "They're gonna hate you. You gotta remember," and he's real clear about this, brother, "you gotta remember, that this world hated me first." Can I get an amen?

(The congregation responds with amens and praises)

Now, when we're talking about persecution y'all, it ain't always easy to see. Now, I'm sure y'all been down by the market and seen that sign put up about this blasphemous new bill comin' up to Congress. Let me tell you now, folks. This is the work of Satan. Now here's why, we all know that story of Adam and Eve. We know how God created humans to worship and obey Him in this beautiful paradise, but then what happened? What happened, is Satan found a weakness, amen? He found he could trick Eve into eatin' this forbidden fruit. He knew Eve was the weak link. He knew he could get her. What happened, church? They was cast out of the kingdom of God, amen? They were rejected from God's presence. Now hear me, congregation, what do those that want our women to vote, actually want? This ain't about them. No sir, this is about opening a way for our country's leaders to be elected by Satan. Women cannot be trusted not to be swayed by the devil. Now I-

SARAH

But what about, Esther, pastor?

(Ruth and Clint try to shush and subdue Sarah. The rest of the congregation is taken aback.)

What about God choosing Esther to save her people? Was he not afraid she would be tempted?

SIMON

We are not to question the ways of our Lord, Sarah. Now if you would so kindly-

SARAH

Why did the angel tell Joseph to trust, Mary?

SIMON

What?

SARAH

Why did the angel tell Joseph to trust Mary when she said she was pregnant with the messiah? If women cannot be trusted to-

SIMON

I said sit down, Sarah, before you anger our God. First Corinthians thirty-four through thirty-five says, "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law." Sarah, I am deeply disappointed in you. Though, I should not expect much more from a girl born of such a wicked mother.

(Sarah storms out of the church.)

SCENE 10

(Sarah returns home and goes to the river. To relieve stress, she throws rocks into the water.)

SARAH

I don't understand what makes us so different. I learned to read before John. I can remember history better than, pa. Why are we so bad to you, God? Didn't you make us? Don't you love us?

(Sarah looks down to find a light in the water in front of her. She's entranced and begins to wade into the where to find the source of the light. As she begins to run out of air, she sees The Mother draped across the branches of a great underwater tree.)

THE MOTHER

Sarah! Let go of your burden. Believe and you may stay.

(Sarah struggles to decide between surfacing and staying. She decides to stay. She takes a deep breath of water and finds she can breathe.)

I have seen the misery of my people. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to deliver unto them the freedom of choice. The cry of the mothers and daughters has reached me, and I have seen the way their oppression. So now, go. I am sending you to deliver your sisters. Take this message unto Simon, "Let them vote."

SARAH

Who are you?

THE MOTHER

I am that I am. I am a mother whose children are crying to be freed.

SARAH

I- I don't know how to help. I'm no one.

THE MOTHER

Perhaps, you were born for such a time as this. Go, child. Fulfill your destiny.

(The Mother backs away from Sarah and she finds herself needing air again. She swims to shore and looks back to find that the mother and the tree are gone.)

ACT II

SCENE 1

(Scene opens outside the grocery store. Sarah is handing out flyers.)

SARAH

Write your Congressman. Let him know that you support women's right to vote.

(Very few people are taking flyers from Sarah. Ruth and Hannah arrive.)

RUTH

Sarah! Sarah, what are you doing? We sent you to get groceries hours ago.

SARAH

I know, mamma. I just saw all these people here and I thought this would be the perfect place to raise awareness.

RUTH

You can't be out here waiving your business around like this. It ain't lady-like.

HANNAH

Sarah, folks 'round here won't take nice to you supportin' this. They'll see it as blasphemy. Men and women aren't supposed to-

(Simon enters the scene with a group of Deacons)

SIMON

Well hello sister Ruth, Hannah, and Sarah; whatcha got there?

SARAH

I thought it would be helpful if people had the Congressman's address, so they could write to him about the women's suffrage movement.

SIMON

What a kind heart you have, Sarah. Now believe me, you've got nothin' to worry about. My brother knows that God intended men to protect women, especially from themselves.

(The deacons laugh at Simon poking fun of the women)

SARAH

I think you misunderstand me, Pastor. I'm garnerin' support for the right to vote. I don't see nothin' wrong with it. I reckon my thinking' works the same as yours.

RUTH

Sarah-

SIMON

No, that's alright sister. I always have time to teach a lost soul back onto the glorious path. Sarah, sweetheart women don't have the intelligence or the physical ability to handle such an important task. The stress of it all would prove too difficult to manage. Well, I'd be worried about a woman who voted. Heaven knows what would happen to her, all that weight on her shoulders. Lord forbid her favorite candidate lose her husband would go hungry for weeks while his wife mourned. (Deacons laughing with Simon) Sarah, honey, women just can't handle that kinda responsibility.

SARAH

If women can't be trusted to vote, then how can you trust them to raise the children, or tend the home? If their emotions are so weighty then why is it that God chose us to carry children? Come to think, that would make women closer to God than men. Who but God and women can create life, reverend? I'd say that makes them chosen by God.

SIMON

You better watch that smart mouth, girl. That's a wicked path you're walkin', and we both know where it leads.

(Simon and the Deacons continue into the grocery store. Ruth grabs Sarah's arm and pulls her away.)

RUTH

You get home. Right now. We'll talk about this once I've had time to calm down.

(Sarah leaves the storefront to walk home.)

ACT II

SCENE 2

(Sarah is walking home through a path in the woods. She sees The Mother through the trees.)

THE MOTHER

What grieves you, my child?

SARAH

Simon. I don't think we'll ever see eye to eye. He doesn't see women as people like he sees men. He sees us as somethin' less.

THE MOTHER

Take this. *(She removes her shawl and places it on Sarah)* Go to the church early every morning and place it over the door way. Knock three times and demand your people's right to vote. Do this for the next four days, and you shall see a diamond crack. Go home now. There is much to do.

(The Mother disappears into the woods. Sarah continues home.)

SCENE 3

(Sarah stands in front of the Church with The Mother's Shawl. She places it over the door and knocks three times. Simon answers after the third.)

SIMON

Ah Sarah, I see you've come to apologize for your behavior yesterday. I imagine Ruth must have spoken some wisdom to you.

SARAH

Let us vote.

(Simon seems irate as he shuts the door in Sarah's face. Sarah removes the shawl and walks away from the door. Once she reaches three paces away from the door, the sky turns black and meteors rain. Sarah feels safe in The Mother's shawl and returns home amid the chaos.)

SCENE 4

(Sarah returns to the church the next morning. She places the shawl over the door and knocks three times. Simon opens the door.)

SARAH

Let my people vote.

SIMON

You, my child, have been taken hold of by a demon sent by Satan. Do not ever cross the threshold of this door again, lest you see the wrath of God firsthand.

(Simon slams the door. Sarah waits for the next plague, but nothing comes. She leaves disappointed. As she walks home, she sees The Mother in the fields. The Mother beckons her into the fields. As Sarah walks through the fields, the crops around her begin to die. Once she reaches her, The Mother touches her face, and walks away as the plants die around her.)

THE MOTHER

Stone cannot withstand the course of water. Go once more come morning.

SCENE 5

(Sarah returns home.)

CLINT

Sarah, I'm glad you're home. We need to have a talk, honey.

RUTH

Clint-

CLINT

No, Ruthie. This has gone too far. Sarah, you need to sit down. *(Sarah sits.)* Listen honey, you have to stop with this nonsense. The other men of the town are callin' you awful things. You can't be doin' this kind of stuff anymore. Do you understand me?

SARAH

Pa, this is bigger than this town. I met this woman-

CLINT

Sarah! I do not want to hear anythin' more. You're done with this. You're not gonna see this woman ever again. Sarah, you have to get married eventually, and no man is going to want you after this. They think you're a witch!

RUTH

That's enough, Clint. You know that the men in this town talk more gossip than the women. You just calm down. Sarah, your Daddy is just worried 'bout you. You gotta be careful as a woman in this world. We love you.

SCENE 6

(Scene opens in the church. Simon is on the phone with his brother the congressman.)

SIMON

And we just want to thank you God for our reminders, God, that show us the inabilities around us, God, in those of that oh-so weaker sex, God. Thank you, Lord for your discernment in these matters. Lord, I just ask that your cover us in that discernment this week and all our weeks to follow. God, I- (Simon hears three knocks at the door) Albert, give me just a minute.

(Simon opens the door to see Sarah there.)

SARAH

Let my people vote.

SIMON

No. I will never use my voice to go against God's will. I will not coach my brother in the way of the Devil.

SARAH

Please, Pastor. *(Sarah touches his hand)* You don't understand what consequences are comin'.

(Simon removes her hand from his shoulder)

SIMON

Do not ever touch me again, or I will have you arrested and ruined.

(Simon slams the door. Sarah walks away.)

SCENE 7

(We see Sarah walking home from the church. Sarah sees The Mother wading through the river.)

THE MOTHER

Come to me.

(Sarah walks towards the water and then wades in.)

THE MOTHER

Place your shawl in the water.

(Sarah lowers her shawl into the water. As she does this, the water around her turns to blood.)

THE MOTHER

Take this blood and mark your doors with it. Every household who supports you will bear its mark. Those without, will meet the mother of lost children, keeper of the stillborn. She will enter their homes and take their first-born son as her own.

SARAH

You mean she'll kill them?

(The Mother walks away from Sarah)

THE MOTHER

Go. Your time is now. Simon will listen.

(Sarah runs back towards town.)

SCENE 8

(Sarah arrives at the church and desperately knocks)

SARAH

Please! Pastor Simon, you have to call your brother. Call him now before it's too late.

(Simon opens the door. Sarah almost falls onto him.)

SIMON

What are you- Is this blood, child? What have you done?

SARAH

Please. You have to listen to me. We must mark the doors of this town with the blood from the river. The Mother is coming. She'll take your first born.

SIMON

Are you threatening my children, with your heresy? You think to threaten a man of God with a false plague. Remove yourself from this holy place, demon. Lest you find yourself dragged to hell as your mother once was.

SARAH

Please. You don't understand. We must-

(Simon pushes Sarah away from the door)

SIMON

May God damn your soul for this wickedness.

(Simon close the church doors. Sarah walks away.)

SCENE 9

(We see Sarah entering the town. Some families are weeping. All families are holding their children close. Simon flings open the church doors, holding his son's body in his arms. He walks to Sarah and places it at her feet.)

SIMON

It is done. You will have your freedom. Leave my family alone.

SCENE 10

(We see an older Sarah, dressed in yellow, entering a building filled with men dressed in red. Her family stands behind her. She has The Mother's shawl around her shoulders. When she enters the room, the sea of red before her parts to show a voting station.)