



"SAINT HEAVEN"

A new musical

Book by Martin Casella

Music and Lyrics by Keith Gordon

Story by Steve Lyons

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Contact:

Van Dean

Van Hill Entertainment LLC

Phone: 203.545.7141

E-mail: Van@VanHillEntertainment.com

TIME: 1957

PLACE: Saint Heaven, Kentucky

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

Pastor Joe Bertram - A black man in his fifties/sixties. Joe is powerfully built and a dazzling preacher. He is also blind. Joe's been a minister in Saint Heaven for a long time. Professionally driven and filled with the spirit of the Lord, he always gets what he wants. [LEAD. Bass. Eb (2 below C) to F.]

Millie Walden- An older black housekeeper. Fifties or sixties. She is gentle and motherly, but with a sharp, wicked wit. Worked for Thom's father and helped raised Thom after his mother died. Millie knows everyone - and their business. [LEAD. Mezzo Sop. Gb (below C) to E.]

Eshie Willington - A young black woman preacher with the "gift" of speaking in tongues. Late teens to early twenties. Eshie is beautiful and innocent, yet has an innate sense of people and who they are inside. She works with Pastor Joe at the Tabernacle of Joy in Saint Heaven. [LEAD. Soprano. G (below mid-C) to Gb.]

Thomas Rivers - A young white doctor originally from Saint Heaven. Early to mid-thirties. Went to medical school in Detroit and stayed to work in a hospital. Always resented his father's workaholic tendencies. Thom tends to be a bit jaded and bitter, but inside is full of love. [LEAD. Tenor; more rock/pop than Broadway legit. B (2 below C) to A.]

Maggie Hartford - A pretty, friendly waitress. Tom's age. Lived her whole life in Saint Heaven and has never been out of it. She is funny, smart and an eternal optimist. Maggie can take care of herself. [SUPPORTING. Alto. G (below C) to D.]

Garrison Martin - A garrulous garage mechanic. Thom's age. Married early to a woman who had a kid that wasn't his, then left him for another guy, leaving the kid behind. "Greasy" is loyal, rambunctious and all heart. [SUPPORTING. Baritone. Bb (2 below C) to C.]

PRODUCTION REQUIREMENTS

SAINT HEAVEN may be performed on a bare unit set, with only a few set pieces and props to suggest where we are. (i.e. - a church pulpit, a doctor's desk, a kitchen table.) The orchestrations are scored for a piano, a bass, a guitar and drums. It has been suggested that a local church choir may be used onstage during the show to act as an observing Greek chorus and the actual singing chorus in the Tabernacle of Joy.

MUSICAL NUMBERS

ACT ONE:

Scene One: The Tabernacle of Joy. Morning.

"IF YOU BELIEVE"/"END OF THE ROAD"/"LIFT ME!" (Joe, Thom, Eshie, Choir)

Scene Two: Outside the Tabernacle. Immediately After.

Scene Three: Outside the Local Roadhouse. Late That Night

"NO TURNING BACK FOR ME" (Thom)

Scene Four: Dr. Rivers' Office. The Next Morning.

"THE GIFT" (Eshie)

Scene Five: A Hospital Room. That Afternoon

"BREATHE IN" (Thom)

Scene Six: Joe's Kitchen. That Evening.

"EAT YOUR OKRA" (Joe, Millie)

"FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL" - (Joe, Eshie, Choir)

Scene Seven: The Tabernacle of Joy. Later that Evening

Scene Eight: Dr. Rivers' Backyard. The Following Day

"NICE GIRL" (Garrison, Maggie, Millie, Thom)

Scene Nine: The Tabernacle of Joy. That Afternoon.

"LOVE ISN'T EASY" (Millie, Eshie)

Scene Ten: Dr. Rivers' Office. Immediately After.

"LEAVE THE RESCUE TO ME" (Maggie)

"WHY" (Eshie, Thom, Joe)

ACT TWO:

Scene One: A Revival Tent on the Road. Three Days Later.

"HE HAD NOT LOVE" (Eshie, Joe, Choir)

Scene Two: Eshie's Dressing Room. Immediately After.

"FULL MY MOUTH WITH YOUR WORDS" (Joe, Eshie)

Scene Three: Plummer's Garage. Same.

"HE DON'T MEAN TO BE SO MEAN" (Maggie)

"NOT ONE THING TYING ME DOWN" (Millie, Maggie, Garrison)

Scene Four: A River Bank. That Afternoon.

"LOVE ME LIKE YOU MEAN IT" (Thom, Eshie)

Scene Five: The Bigley Hospital Waiting Room. That Night.

Scene Six: Dr. Rivers' Office. Early the Next Morning.

"MY FATHER'S SON" (Thom)

"NOT ONE THING TYING ME DOWN" - reprise (Garrison, Maggie, Millie)

Scene Seven: The Tabernacle of Joy – Later that Morning

"FAITH IN THE FAITHFUL" – reprise (Eshie, Joe, Choir)

Scene Eight: The Tabernacle of Joy. Moments Later.

"BREATHE IN" - reprise (Eshie, Thom)

SCENE 1

(The Tabernacle of Joy, a small, poor colored church in Saint Heaven. There is a pulpit, a coffin and two pews. MUSIC IN. PASTOR JOE BERTRAM, a strong, black preacher in his 50's, is at the pulpit. With him is ESHIE WILLINGTON, a glorious young black woman of great wisdom and spirituality. She holds a worn white Bible. Joe wears dark glasses; he is blind. Millie, Garrison and Maggie are there; Millie joins in the singing.)

("IF YOU BELIEVE IN THE GLORY"/"THE END OF THE ROAD"/"LIFT ME")

JOE

COME, MY CHILDREN, GATHER 'ROUND NOW,
COME AND LISTEN TO HIS WORD.
LET IT FILL YOUR HEART WITH MUSIC,
THE SWEETEST SOUND YOU EVER HEARD.
PRAISE THE LORD FOR WHAT HE GIVES YOU
AND TRUST AND SERVE HIM EVERYDAY.
LET HIM FILL YOU WITH HIS POWER.
LET HIM FILL YOU ALL THE WAY!

CHOIR

IF YOU BELIEVE IN THE GLORY,
IF YOU BELIEVE IN THE GRACE
OH, BELIEVE IN THE GLORY
IF YOU BELIEVE IN THE GRACE
AND BELIEVE IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT
THEN HEAVEN HOLDS FOR YOU A SPECIAL PLACE
IF YOU BELIEVE!

JOE

I can't wait any longer. We're here today to celebrate the life of our beloved doctor Thomas Rivers Sr! Folks who live here in Saint Heaven have lost not only a great doctor, but a great friend! Doctor Rivers was the only white man in Saint Heaven to treat the Negro with respect! Dr. Rivers didn't see color. He saw your soul!

(As they SING, THOM RIVERS JR., a handsome, self-assured white man in his 30's ENTERS and stands "outside" the church, listening. Thom is wearing blue dress pants, dress shoes, a shirt and an untied tie. He is exhausted, angry and apprehensive.)

THOM

WELL, I'VE BEEN ON THE ROAD
WAY TOO LONG.
THROUGH THREE STATES
TWO STORMS
ONE TICKET
AND A BREAKDOWN
ALL OF THIS TO GET BACK HOME
TO THIS GOD-FORSAKEN,
NEVER-GONNA-CATCH-A-BREAK TOWN.

(MILLIE, a smart, hardy black woman in her 60's "exits" from the church and sees him.)

MILLIE

Oh, Tommy! We didn't think you'd make it --

THOM

Hospital was chaos. They didn't want me to leave.
One more patient, they said. There's always one more patient.

MILLIE

Service just started. Fix yourself up 'n come inside.
Good to see ya back home. Where you belong!

(Millie hurries into the church. Thom, more angry and frustrated, explodes.)

THOM

ALL OF THIS TO GET BACK HOME
TO THIS GOD-FORSAKEN,
NEVER-GONNA-CATCH-A-BREAK TOWN!

BUT THIS IS NOT
THE END OF THE ROAD.
I'VE PAID A HIGH-PRICED TOLL
KEPT MY DIGNITY STOWED.
I WILL STEER
GOOD AND CLEAR
OF THIS TROUBLE SPOT.
THIS IS NOT
THE END OF THE ROAD.
THIS IS NOT
THE END OF THE ROAD!

(As Thom heads "inside" the church, the FOCUS shifts back to Joe and Eshie.)

JOE

This morning, to guide Doctor Rivers into the loving arms of Jesus -- is Miss
Eshie!

(MUSIC SHIFTS. Eshie steps forward into the light. She is beatific.)

ESHIE

OH-HO WHEN
MY OWN DADDY DIED
I WAS MIGHTY PETRIFIED -
DEEP INSIDE MY SPIRIT WAS A HOLE!
MY FAITH WAS WRACKED WITH POVERTY,

BUT THE GOOD LORD SENT TO ME
THIS PREACHER WITH A GIFT TO SAVE MY GRIEVING SOUL!

HE CAME TO...
LIFT ME! LIFT ME UP!
LIFT ME! LIFT ME HIGH!
LIFT MY HEAD UNTIL MY EYES WERE DRY!
HE CAME TO...
LIFT ME... 'N HELP ME SEE
WHERE MY DADDY'D BE
LIFT MY FACE UP TOWARD THE GOOD LORD'S SKY!

THEN ON THAT...
SAD, SAD SATURDAY
DOC RIVERS PASSED AWAY
I SAT RIGHT DOWN AND I BEGAN TO CRY!
BUT I AM SURE HE'S HEADED STRAIGHT
FOR THE GOOD LORD'S PEARLY GATE -
HEAVEN JUST CAN'T WAIT TO HAVE HIM RIGHT NEAR BY!

ESHIE/CHOIR

WE'VE COME TO...
LIFT HIM! LIFT HIM UP!
LIFT HIM... WAY UP HIGH!
LIFT HIM WAY UP WHERE ANGELS FLY!
WE'VE COME TO...
LIFT HIM 'N CELEBRATE!
DON'T MAKE HEAVEN WAIT!
LIFT HIM WHERE THE SAINTS GO MARCHING BY!
FEEL YOUR BLESSINGS START TO MULTIPLY!
LORD, IT'S YOU WE'VE COME TO GLORIFY!

LIFT ME!
LIFT ME!
LIFT ME, LORD ON HIGH! LIFT ME UP!
LIFT ME! I'LL TESTIFY!
LIFT ME! LIFT ME HIGH!
IT'S YOU WE GLORIFY!
LIFT ME!
LIFT ME!
LIFT ME, LORD ON HIGH! LIFT ME UP!
LIFT ME! I'LL TESTIFY!
LIFT ME! LIFT ME HIGH!
IT'S YOU WE GLORIFY!
LIFT ME WAY UP HIGH!!!

(As the MUSIC CONTINUES UNDER, Eshie begins to swoon. She tries to control herself but she no longer can. She gasps for air, then slowly starts to shake. She falls to her knees. Writhing, she pounds on the floor. As she does, she "speaks in tongues.")

JOE

Miss Eshie says to you who are frightened of the great mystery that is death - do not be afraid! The good Lord's plans are never clear to us - what at first seems an affliction - often turns into a blessing - we gotta trust and believe in the Lord!

(As the MUSIC CRESCENDOS a last time, Eshie collapses to the floor.)

(LIGHTS OUT and RISE ON -)

SCENE 2

(Thom and Millie, outside the church.)

THOM
When did Joe start that?

MILLIE
What would "that" be?

THOM
Speaking in tongues.

MILLIE
A few years back.

THOM
It's - it's - it's -

MILLIE
Bringin' 'em in like bingo!

THOM
What's next? Snake handlin'?!

MILLIE
It's been tried.

THOM
This place ever gonna join the twentieth century?

MILLIE
What's that supposed to mean?

THOM
It's 1957, Millie. Nice Christians aren't supposed put on shows like that. The world's got Cinemascope, Thunderbirds and they're trying to put a man on the moon. And this sorry little town ain't even got a Goddamn stoplight!

MILLIE
Don't you take the Lord's name in vain!

THOM
I got a lot more reverence than a bunch of people who let some poor girl roll around on a floor, babbling! Did Daddy lose his mind?

MILLIE

These are his people. More than them snooty Baptists.

(Silence. Thom looks away from her. He just doesn't want to be there.)

THOM

Stopped at the house on the way in. Took a look around.

Was like I never lived there.

(after a beat)

Why Daddy leave you the house?

MILLIE

(quietly, trying to understand him)

You want it? It's yours.

THOM

Ain't you afraid what folks're gonna say? White man leavin' his house to a colored woman.

MILLIE

S'that all you're gonna do today - be nasty to me?

THOM

Oh I forgot. I'm supposed to be cryin' my eyes out -

MILLIE

Tommy Rivers! You show your daddy a little respect!

THOM

He ever show me any? He ever write? Come visit? Oh, no.

Too busy!

MILLIE

You ever write him? Or call? You got hands. Pick up a phone!

(pause; she watches Thom)

About the house. Folks're gonna say whatever's on their nasty minds.

That's why I don't want it.

THOM

'Course you want it. Only thing Daddy had. Had to leave you something - working all those years - barely paying you - 'sides - where else you gonna go?

MILLIE

Got me a niece in Louisville -

THOM

Well, whatever you want to do with the house - sell it, live there, burn it down - it's yours now. And as for Daddy, I'm gonna put his papers in order, shut down his practice – and back to Detroit –

MILLIE

You gonna close his practice?

THOM

Millie, I appreciate what you did for Daddy – takin' care of him all that time he was sick – I know this all has gotta be hard for you – but it's the only reason I'm here. To shut it all down.

(Joe appears on the arm of an exhausted-looking Eshie. Joe extends his hand to Thom.)

JOE

S' that you? S' that the Prodigal Son?!

THOM

Hello, Joe.

JOE

Sorry about your Daddy, Tommy. He was a good man. God should send us more like him!

MILLIE

Amen to that!

JOE

What'd you think, Millie? We do ol' Doc justice?

MILLIE

Justice?! Surprised the man didn't sit up in his box an' testify!

JOE

Now that woulda been something!!

(pause)

Thom, this is Eshie Willington. Eshie, this is Dr. Rivers's son Thom.

THOM

How do you do?

(Eshie just nods, barely able to stand or speak. Joe fills the silence by taking Thom's arm and speaking quietly to him.)

JOE

We're gathering in the hall after the burial. You be our guest of honor -

THOM

Thank you, but I have some things to attend to -

MILLIE

He's going back to Detroit!

JOE

What about your daddy's practice?

MILLIE

He's closing it down!

JOE

Be awful nice to have another Doc Rivers in town!

THOM

Bigley's not that far - there's a hospital there -

JOE

It's miles away, Tommy - sides, folks can't afford a hospital -

THOM

Maybe they can get an intern over here. Set up a clinic -

JOE

Already tried that - ain't got it in they funds -

THOM

Joe, listen, the hospital where I'm working - I signed a contract - they paid half of my school bills - I'm obliged to them -

JOE

What about your obligation to us? Saint Heaven needs you, son. We need a doctor. Bad. Especially poor folks. Millie tell you what it's like since the mine closed? Ain't no work. Stores all boarded up. Young folks leave soon as they can. Your daddy and me, Tommy, we's the only ones lookin' out for them folks. Yessir, him and me, we keepin' Saint Heaven alive.

THOM

Joe, I understand what you've all been through -

JOE

Thought you'd be proud to take your daddy's place!

THOM
 (coldly, with irony)
 No one could ever take Daddy's place -

MILLIE
 Oh, Tommy, stay just a while!

THOM
 I'm sorry, y'all, I'd like to help but -

JOE
 Just think about it, Tommy - about what God wants you to do - !

THOM
 Anybody in this town ever think about what I want? No, siree! It's always what's best for the other fella! What's best for my family! What's best for Daddy! Well, I have a perfectly fine life in Detroit, thank you very much! And I ain't givin' it up to live here in this backwater stinkhole!

(Silence. Joe takes a moment. There is a look of great disappointment on his face.)

JOE
 Boy I knew weren't so full of pride.

THOM
 No, sir. I wasn't.

JOE
 (after a beat)
 I gotta go bury your daddy...

(Joe walks away from Thom. He takes Eshie's arm, wanting to be led out.)

THOM
 Joe, about this young woman. How long has she had these spells?

JOE
 They ain't spells, they's her miracle! One she ain't afraid to share.
 Comin' with us, Millie?

(Millie, Joe and Eshie WALK OUT. Thom watches them go.)

(LIGHTS FADE on him and RISE ON -)

SCENE 3

(Outside the local roadhouse. Later that night. Thom sits, downing a beer. He's drunk. A waitress, MAGGIE, ENTERS. Thom stares at the table. Maggie is brassy, sweet.)

MAGGIE

Last call.

THOM

'Nother beer.

MAGGIE

You drivin'?

THOM

Can't remember. No. I walked. Maybe.

MAGGIE

(patting him down)

No keys.

THOM

You're very friendly -

MAGGIE

You're very drunk. How long ya gonna keep pretendin' you don't know me? Or just too embarrassed to say hello?

(He looks up at her. He knows exactly who she is.)

THOM

Hello, Maggie Hartford.

MAGGIE

Hello, Tommy Rivers.

(Silence. Maggie just lets him stew. Thom turns on his only defense – charm.)

THOM

What?

MAGGIE

Just rememberin' the last time I saw you. It was a double-date. With Vestra Hummel and Cheeky Potter. Went to the pictures.

(Neither of them has fond memories of that night.)

THOM

Still got your heart on set on marrying Montgomery Cliff?

MAGGIE

Yes I do.

(pause)

Always wondered what it would take to get you back home.

THOM

Listen, the way I left --

MAGGIE

Water under the bridge --

THOM

I had planned to say goodbye --

MAGGIE

Yeah but ya didn't.

(fighting bitterness)

Made for a good story. Every girl oughta have "the one that got away."

(GARRISON MARTIN ENTERS. He's their age.)

GARRISON

I want my whiskey 'fore y'all lock up -

MAGGIE

Greasy - put a lid on it!

THOM

Greasy? Greasy Martin?

GARRISON

Now he says hi to his old pal! Tried to catch his eye at the funeral three times!

THOM

Greasy - is that you? You're old!

GARRISON

Why didn't you say hello to me today?

MAGGIE

He's just avoidin' everyone from his "old life." Can't say I blame him.

(Maggie GOES for the drinks. Thom covers his embarrassment with good cheer.)

THOM

How the hell are you, buddy?

GARRISON

"T," you don't even want to know -

THOM

Try me -

GARRISON

Well, I still work at Plummer's Garage - got married to Thelma Mae Bocher - we had a kid - Billy - he's six - Thelma left me - ran off with - don't wet yourself - an encyclopedia salesman from Wheeling - it's just me and Billy now, boy's an angel but raising him alone is crap and I ain't got laid in over a year - how's your life?

THOM

Not nearly as exciting as yours -

GARRISON

"Exciting!" Hell!

(Maggie returns. She hands out the drinks, keeping one.)

MAGGIE

(toasting)

To "the one that got away."

THOM

To Montgomery Clift.

GARRISON

To gettin' laid.

(They all clink and drink. There is an uncomfortable silence. Maggie breaks it.)

MAGGIE

Okay. So why didn't you say goodbye?

THOM

Hell. It was years ago. I don't remember.

MAGGIE

Oh, yeah...?

THOM

Maggie - c'mon - I'm drunk!

MAGGIE

Honey, I been around drunks my whole life. My father was one. My husband was one. And most of the guys I serve drinks to, well --- I think saying you're drunk is a mighty convenient way of not answerin' a question.

THOM

(catching something)

You were married?

MAGGIE

Did you think I was gonna sit around my whole life and wait for you to come back? Fat chance, city boy!

GARRISON

She married a miner. Guy with a little light on his head.

MAGGIE

Helluva lot a good it did him.

THOM

What happened?

MAGGIE

He died in a mine fire. Five years ago.

THOM

That when they closed the mine?

MAGGIE

Yeah.

THOM

I'm sorry, Maggie.

GARRISON

He was a good man, Tommy.

MAGGIE

He was a drunk. Then again, ain't a whole lot else to do in this town after dark.

(almost flirting, to Thom)

Sittin' up, anyways.

(Thom smiles at her flirting. The tension between the three of them relaxes a bit.)

GARRISON

So, "T," there's a rumor goin' 'round you're gonna close your daddy's practice.

THOM

Ain't a rumor -

GARRISON

Damn...!

THOM

C'mon. Don't you get all whiny on me! Swear, I musta had a hunnert people tell me what a tribute it'd be to my daddy if I'd stay - how much I'd love it here -

GARRISON

Maybe ya would? Just give it a try!

(MUSIC IN. Thom stands up to the two of them, trying to make them understand.)

("NO TURNING BACK FOR ME")

THOM

I'VE NEVER BEEN GOOD AT FOLLOWING IN SOMEBODY'S FOOTSTEPS
I'VE NEVER BEEN GOOD AT BEING SOMEBODY I'M NOT
IT'S WHY I HAD TO GET AWAY
WHY I COULD NEVER STAY!

I WANT TO BELIEVE
THAT THERE'S MORE TO LIFE
THAN THE LIFE I HAD HERE
I WANT TO BELIEVE
THAT THERE'S MORE THAN MY FAMILY!
I WANT TO BELIEVE THE DAY WILL COME
WHEN I COME INTO MY OWN!
SO, YOU SEE
THERE'S NO TURNING BACK FOR ME!

I'VE WORKED FOR SO MANY YEARS
BUILDING A LIFE - AND I'VE TRULY GROWN
WHY GO AND THROW IT AWAY
TO CARRY HIS TORCH
WHEN TIME AFTER TIME
HE LEFT ME ALONE?

(He drunkenly jumps up onto the picnic table.)

THOM

I GOT TO BELIEVE
THAT I'VE FOUND A PLACE
IN THIS WORLD WHERE I BELONG!

I GOT TO BELIEVE
THAT IT'S WHERE I AM MEANT TO BE!
I GOT TO BELIEVE THOSE DAYS HAVE PASSED
WHEN THE PAST WAS IN MY WAY
SO, YOU SEE
THERE'S NO TURNING BACK FOR ME!

(He drunkenly passes out into the waiting arms of Maggie and Garrison.)

(LIGHTS FADE on them and RISE ON -)

SCENE 4

(The late Dr. Rivers' Office. Early the next morning. A hung-over Thom is asleep at his father's desk. There are packing boxes nearby, some of which are filled. Millie comes in with a tray of breakfast and coffee. She takes a whiff of Tom - he smells bad.)

MILLIE

Gonna die of mold 'less you get some light in here.

(She puts down the tray and opens the blinds. SUNLIGHT FLOODS IN. Thom moans.)

MILLIE

You were the talk of the Piggly-Wiggly this mornin' -

THOM

What's that?

MILLIE

Cheesy eggs. Can you get 'em down?

THOM

I can try. Thank you.

(Thom raises an eyebrow and pushes the food away. He gingerly has a sip of coffee.)

MILLIE

(looking around)

What are we gonna do with it all?

THOM

Storage.

(She gives him a look. Thom sighs.)

THOM

I can't throw away the files, Millie. Whoever the new doctor is'll need them -

MILLIE

I don't want some stranger puttin' his hands all over me. Neither does anyone else in this town.

THOM

I can think of one or two might enjoy it -

MILLIE

Eat your eggs!

(As he does, he sees the sadness with which Millie takes in the room. It moves him.)

MILLIE

Somebody outside waitin' to see ya.

THOM

Who?

MILLIE

It's getting warm. I'll make some lemonade.

THOM

Millie, I told ya – I don't wanna see nobody!

MILLIE

I'll bring two glasses.

THOM

You'll do no such thing! I'm not at home! Millie!

(Millie is GONE. Thom hurries to put on his shirt and tie. Eshie ENTERS, tentatively, dressed in a suit and gloves. She holds her Bible. Thom forces himself to be polite.)

ESHIE

Millie said to come right in -

THOM

Would you like to sit?

ESHIE

That's all right. I can't stay -

THOM

Joe waiting - ?

ESHIE

He doesn't know I'm here.

THOM

(taking that in; intrigued)

What can I do for you today?

(Eshie waits. She has something important to say but doesn't know where to start.)

ESHIE

You and Joe know each other a long time?

THOM

Since I was a child.

(Thom doesn't want to answer but something makes him talk. Maybe he just wants to fill the silence. Maybe he wants to relax Eshie. But the words slowly come out of him.)

THOM

My father - didn't have much time for me. Or my mama. So Mama and I - we - we had adventures together. One Sunday we adventured into Joe's church. Joe was tickled this crazy white lady and her son had found their way to him. Mama and I liked it there. They paid attention to us. Joe and I, we got close. And then -

ESHIE

What happened?

THOM

When I was in high school, I took some preachin' instruction from Joe. Then my daddy decided, without even asking me, that I should study medicine. He got me into a fancy college up North. Wanted me outta Saint Heaven something fierce. Joe said I was doin' it for all the wrong reasons. Said I shouldn't quit my calling. We had a big ol' fight. Never spoke 'nother word 'til yesterday.

(Silence. Eshie has taken all of this in and gotten strength from his honesty.)

ESHIE

Do you still believe in God?

(off his shrug)

What about miracles?

THOM

I believe in the miracle of penicillin. Antibiotics -

ESHIE

The polio vaccine?

THOM

If there is a God, I believe He was generous enough to give us brains and logic so we could create our own miracles.

ESHIE

You don't think it's a sin that we - try and steal thunder from Him?

THOM

God wouldn't have given us such fine minds if he didn't want us to use them, Miss Eshie. Did you come here to convert me?

(Eshie doesn't look well. She suddenly falters.)

THOM

You all right?

ESHIE

There's something I need to - I -

THOM

Here. Sit down. Millie! Bring in that lemonade!

(Thom helps Eshie to a chair. Millie ENTERS with the lemonade. Thom gives Eshie a glass. Eshie wants to say something. She glances at Millie, but is afraid to speak.)

THOM

It's okay. Millie's real good at keepin' secrets.

ESHIE

(after a long moment)

Joe wants me to go on a preachin' circuit with him - West Virginia - Ohio - we're supposed to leave tomorrow - I'm not sure I can -

THOM

Why not?

ESHIE

He's done so much for me - given me so much - but sometimes - it's too painful -

THOM

What is?

ESHIE

What you saw - yesterday --

THOM

Do you have these spells often?

ESHIE

It's one thing at the Tabernacle. But on the road, travelin' -

THOM

Miss Eshie, I'm not allowed to practice medicine in Kentucky. No state license. Can't even really examine you, or God forbid, make a diagnosis -

ESHIE

I understand that - it's just - it's just -

(She stops, near tears. Thom is moved by her vulnerability. He wavers.)

THOM

Well - maybe I can help - a little – if we need to, we'll get a second opinion.
Okay? Now. I want you to describe what happens.

(Eshie nods. She is still. MUSIC IN. Then -)

("THE GIFT")

ESHIE

IT BEGINS IN A PLACE THAT'S DEEP INSIDE OF ME,
LIKE A WHISPER THAT IS FAR AWAY, BUT CLEAR.
THEN IT CLOSES IN AND IT FILLS MY HEAD ENTIRELY,
'TIL ITS THUNDERING SOUND IS THE ONLY THING I HEAR.
AND WHEN I DON'T HAVE THE CHOICE
TO RESIST IT ANYMORE,
I SURRENDER TO THIS VOICE
THAT I SIMPLY CAN'T IGNORE.
AND THEN I QUIETLY REJOICE
WHEN THE SOUNDS BEGIN TO SHIFT
AND I'M ABOVE THE NOISE.
AND I'M TOLD THIS IS THE GIFT.

SOON IT BLOWS LIKE A GENTLE BREEZE WITHIN MY BREATH,
FLOWING SOFTLY OVER EVERY WORD I SPEAK.
THEN IT FILLS MY LUNGS WITH A FORCE SO STRONG I'M SCARED TO
DEATH
AND MY MOUTH DELIVERS PROPHECIES UNTIL MY BODY'S WEAK
THEN THE INTENSITY COLLIDES
WITH THIS WEARY FLESH OF MINE
AND A GREATER POWER DECIDES
THAT I'LL SPEAK FOR THE DIVINE.
THAT'S WHEN THE ANGELS ACT AS GUIDES
AND MY SPIRIT STARTS TO LIFT,
AS IF MY BODY'S DIED.
AND I'M TOLD THIS IS THE GIFT.

BUT THIS BLESSING THAT HAS BEEN BESTOWED
TERRIFIES ME MORE EACH DAY,
AND THE PAIN THAT IT BRINGS HURTS MORE THAN WORDS CAN SAY.
EVERY MORNING, I BEGIN,
AFRAID THE GIFT MIGHT COME AGAIN.
AND EVERY NIGHT I KNEEL AND PRAY
THAT THE LORD MIGHT TAKE THIS PAIN AWAY

WHEN IT COMES, I'M AFRAID I WON'T SURVIVE ITS POWER,
 I'LL TRY ANYTHING THAT'LL HELP ME MAKE IT THROUGH.
 SO I'VE COME HERE TO SEE YOU IN MY DARKEST HOUR,
 AND I'M HOPING THAT THERE'S SOMETHING YOU CAN DO.

I TRY SO HARD TO UNDERSTAND
 HOW THIS GIFT'S A PART OF ME -
 IS THIS WHAT THE LORD HAS PLANNED,
 AND HOW MY LIFE SHOULD BE?
 SOMETIMES IT FEELS SO OUT OF HAND
 THAT MY FAITH BEGINS TO DRIFT...
 CAN YOU TAKE AWAY THE PAIN...
 BUT NOT THE GIFT?

(Silence. Thom turns to Millie.)

THOM
 Millie. Close the blinds.

(As Millie draws the curtains, Thom pulls a small flashlight from his bag.)

THOM
 The first thing I want to do is a simple test.

(Eshie nods. Thom looks at Millie.)

THOM
 Stand behind her.

(Millie goes to Eshie.)

THOM
 Relax. Breathe. Ready?

(Eshie nods. Thom switches on the flashlight. With trepidation, he points the light into Eshie's eyes. He then flicks the light ON and OFF.)

THOM
 Have you always had the gift? Since you were a child?
 (Eshie nods; more LIGHT FLASHES)
 How's your head feel?

ESHIE
 (suddenly in pain)
 Oh God - !

THOM

That quick?

ESHIE

Yes. Oh, Lord. Not now! Not now!

(She begins to gasp for breath. Her body shakes and jerks.)

THOM

Hold her, Millie.

(Thom keeps FLASHING the LIGHT. Millie throws her arms around Eshie. Eshie SCREAMS and her body stiffens. She begins to SHOUT and BABBLE. LIGHTS FADE and RISE ON -)

SCENE 5

(Bigley Hospital. That afternoon. Thom is standing by a hospital bed. Eshie is asleep on the bed, covered by a blanket. She stirs, opens up her eyes and looks around.)

THOM

It's okay. You're in the hospital. How do you feel?

ESHIE

The way I always do. After.

THOM

We'll get you home in a few minutes. Just waiting on some test results -

ESHIE

They did tests - ?

THOM

(lightly)

Some blood work and - other things - I'm too squeamish to describe -

(Scared now, Eshie takes his hand. She is taking short, nervous breaths.)

THOM

Don't go getting all nervous Nellie on me. You're gonna be fine.
Doctor Thomas is here. He'll fix you up like brand new -

ESHIE

Doctor Thomas can't practice medicine in Kentucky -

THOM

Well nobody knows that but you - and Millie - she ain't gonna tell.

(MUSIC IN)

Now look at me. Listen.

("BREATHE IN")

THOM

BREATHE IN -
LIGHTEN UP AND TAKE MY HAND.
BREATHE OUT -
AND LET THE TENSION GO.
JUST TRY MY REMEDY
BREATHE IN WITH ME

ESHIE
But Doctor Rivers -

THOM
Shhhh...

BREATHE IN -
TRY TO TAKE IT EASY NOW.
BREATHE OUT -
AND SET YOUR WORRY FREE.
RELAX AND LET IT BE
BREATHE IN WITH ME.

NOW CLOSE THOSE PRETTY EYES
AND THINK OF SOMETHING THAT MAKES YOU SMILE.
I'LL CLOSE MINE, TOO,
AND IMAGINE WITH YOU...

BREATHE OUT -
ALL OF THAT ANXIETY.
BREATHE IN -
WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY.
I'LL TELL YOU WHAT I SEE -
YOU, BREATHING HERE WITH ME.

(MUSIC CONTINUES as Eshie breathes. Tom takes her Bible from his bag. When Eshie opens her eyes, Thom is holding the Bible out to her.)

THOM
Thought you might want this -

ESHIE
Thank you.

THOM
Looks like you've had it a long time -

ESHIE
Since I was baptized. I'm saving up to buy myself one.
In real leather. With my name engraved.

(Thom hands her the Bible. Eshie still looks agitated. Thom comforts her.)

THOM
NOW CLOSE THOSE PRETTY EYES
AND THINK OF SOMETHING THAT MAKES YOU SMILE.

JUST TRY MY REMEDY
BREATHE IN WITH ME

(MUSIC OUT. Eshie's smile lights up the room. Tom can't help himself; he finds he is attracted to her. His following exchange with Eshie has a slightly seductive edge to it.)

THOM

You always been so beautiful, Miss Eshie?

ESHIE

(embarrassed, looking away)

Doctor Rivers...

THOM

You saying you're not? Maybe there's something wrong with your eyes, too!
Bet you were one glorious baby –

ESHIE

I was scrawny. I had rickets -

THOM

Joe always did have had an eye for a beautiful lady. 'Fore he lost his sight.
Shoulda seen him on Sunday morning. After services. "Hi-dee ho, Miss Maude.
You look good enough to nibble. Miss Cassie, you scrumptious, girl." He'd get
that glint in his eye –

ESHIE

I've seen it - !

THOM

Like he's fixing to eat a butter biscuit - then he'd loop his arm through theirs and -
you tell me, what poor woman could resist? That how he found you? Trolling
the church pews?

ESHIE

Well - see - I was working in a motel -

THOM

Doin' what?

ESHIE

Supporting my mother and five brothers –

THOM

Five brothers? Glory, Miss Eshie - they shoulda been supporting you!

ESHIE

Joe heard me sing at my church – was there when I got "the gift" - said he'd never heard anything like it - said he was gonna hire me as a minister - all I could think was "here's my way out of scrubbing toilets" - and I could help my mama.

(The look on her face is so glorious that Thom cannot speak. Their eyes finally meet.)

THOM

Wasn't just your singing won Joe over. No, ma'am.

(Eshie smiles. Thom has charmed her. Thomas flicks the flashlight ON and OFF again.)

THOM

Miss Eshie, I have an idea of what's ailing you. It's called epilepsy. It causes seizures. Sometimes from flashing lights. Anxiety. Nerves.

(snapping off the light)

Nothing to be ashamed of. Matter of fact, there's a long history of people with epilepsy being thought of as holy. Like yourself -

(pause)

If it's what you have, we can keep it under control. There's this medication –

ESHIE

If I take it, will I lose "the gift?"

THOM

I don't know. Depending on what the tests show - we can start you on a dose of it this afternoon.

ESHIE

I can't give up "the gift" -

THOM

But if it's causing you this pain -

ESHIE

It's how God talks to me -

THOM

I know, Miss Eshie -

ESHIE

People need to hear what I have to say!

THOM

(after a beat, carefully)

When you get "the gift" - is Joe the only one who translates?

ESHIE

Not always. Every now and then someone in the congregation'll stand and interpret - that's what they tell me - Doctor Rivers, please - it's the only thing that makes me special -

THOM

Believe me, Miss Eshie - it ain't the only thing.

(Their eyes meet again. It takes Thom a moment to find his voice.)

THOM

Well. We'll just wait for the tests.

(STRONG BLUES BEAT is HEARD. LIGHTS FADE on the hospital and RISE on -)

SCENE 6

(Joe's Dining Room. That evening. Millie is serving Joe a plate of okra and black-eyed peas.)

("EAT YOUR OKRA")

JOE
NOW YOU KNOW THAT I AM GRATEFUL,
FOR THIS MEAL YOU'RE MAKING ME,

MILLIE
YOU CAN THANK THE LORD FOR THESE SWEET HANDS
AND MY MAMA'S RECIPE.

JOE
YES, YOU'RE BEING QUITE AN ANGEL..

MILLIE
GOT A HALO LIKE A CROWN -

JOE
BUT YOU NEVER COOKED FOR ME BEFORE,
I THINK SOMETHING IS GOING DOWN....

MILLIE
GET SET TO EAT SOME OKRA,
I'M READY TO DISH IT OUT.

JOE
WELL, YOU NEVER SERVED UP SOMETHING QUITE LIKE THIS -

MILLIE
THAT'S RIGHT, NOW EAT YOUR OKRA

JOE
...AND THAT'S WHAT I'M WORRIED ABOUT.

MILLIE
DON'T THINK OF ANYTHING BEYOND MY PLATE OF BLISS!

JOE
GOTTA FEELING SOMETHING'S BREWIN'

MILLIE
I MADE SARSAPARILLA TEA

JOE
SEE, FOR HER TO MISS OUR SUPPERTIME,
MUST BE QUITE AN EMERGENCY.

SOMETHING'S COOKING, I JUST KNOW IT.

MILLIE
I BEEN COOKING HERE ALL DAY.

JOE
YOU MIGHT AS WELL BE STRAIGHT WITH ME,
CUZ SHE'LL TELL ME ANYWAY.

MILLIE
HESH UP AND EAT YOUR OKRA.

JOE
NOW, LOOK HERE, I'M SERIOUS.

MILLIE
IT'S BEEN TOO LONG SINCE YOU HAD YOUR LAST MEAL

JOE
DON'T WANT TO HEAR 'BOUT OKRA.

MILLIE
YOU'RE GETTING DELIRIOUS!
MAKING SOMETHING OUTTA NOTHING
THAT'S NO BIG DEAL...

JOE
I'VE GOT A RIGHT TO KNOW!

MILLIE
YOU EVER GONNA TAKE A BITE?

JOE
I SAID, I'VE GOT A RIGHT TO KNOW!

MILLIE
IF NOT, YOU'VE GOT NO RIGHT
TO MY SMOTHERED CHOPS, MY PECAN HEAVENLY HASH,
OR MAMA'S PAN-FRIED DELIGHT!

(She takes away the plate of food.)

JOE

Now, wait a minute, don't take my plate away -

MILLIE

THEN EAT YOUR OKRA!

JOE

NOW, DON'T YOU GET IN A MOOD!

MILLIE

QUIT YOUR YAPPIN', SHUT YOUR TRAP 'N' SIT UP STRAIGHT

JOE

BUT I DON'T EAT OKRA

MILLIE

I TOOK TIME TO FIX THIS FOOD
SO EVERYTHING ELSE CAN WAIT!

(stopping him from speaking)

NOW EAT YOUR OKRA!

JOE

BUT I DON'T LIKE OKRA...

MILLIE

Y'AIN'T GETTIN' UP FROM THIS TABLE
'TIL YOU CLEAN THAT PLATE!

ESHIE

(ENTERING, in a hurry, breathless)

Millie - you fed him - you're an angel -

JOE

Okra! She fed me okra!

ESHIE

(kissing his forehead as she passes by)

It's good for you, Preacher Man -

MILLIE

Oughta be grateful he got anything - goodness, girl – set a minute –
have some supper - you keep flingin' yourself 'round like that, you
gonna have a stroke!

ESHIE

We gotta get to choir practice -

MILLIE

Two minutes late won't matter -

ESHIE

Might think I'm not coming -

MILLIE

Oh honey, they'll be fine – c'mon, I set you a plate -

JOE

Yeah - have some okra!

ESHIE

No thank you -

JOE

What was the big emergency?

ESHIE

I was at the hospital –

JOE

Somebody sick?

(Eshie takes a deep breath, then -)

ESHIE

I went to see Thom Rivers about the pain in my head - "the gift" came while I was there - he took me to the hospital - Joe, they did some tests - I might have something called epilepsy - it causes seizures -

JOE

I don't understand -

ESHIE

The doctors think that's why I - why I -

JOE

Get "the gift?"

ESHIE

Yes, sir.

JOE

Thought he wasn't gonna practice medicine here?

ESHIE

It was an emergency. Joe, they have a kind of medicine that can help me -

JOE

If there is something wrong, we're all gonna pray over it. We'll ask God for guidance -

ESHIE

I tried. I can't anymore, Joe -

JOE

Listen to me, child. If you need healin', God's gonna do it. Not Tommy Rivers.

MILLIE

Joe, Thom's just trying to help!

JOE

We don't need his kinda help! Look where his kinda help got us. This child sneaks around behind my back. She tells you to lie about where she's been -

MILLIE

She did nothing of the kind!

ESHIE

I never lied to you, Joe. I walked right in here and told you the truth!

JOE

Now, you listen to me, honey. I don't want you near that boy. He can't be trusted.

MILLIE

That was a long time ago!

JOE

'Fore he left, he had a steady girl. He asked that girl to marry him. Then he just up and left town. What kind of man does that?!

MILLIE

(as she EXITS, hissing at Joe)

Kinda man who minds his own business!

JOE

Did you take the medication, child?

ESHIE

It wasn't ready yet.

JOE

That was a sign. God don't want you to take it.

ESHIE

He wants me to suffer?

JOE

He knows all about sufferin'. He watched his only son suffer.

(taking her arm, walking with her)

Look at what you and your gift done for folks. Look at what you done for me!
Where'd I be without you? Some old blind preacher with a raggedy congregation
and no one to walk me home after services! You and me, Eshie, we's this church.

ESHIE

But it hurts so much, Joe!

JOE

(MUSIC IN)

I know, child. I know. I suffered, too – when I was young – I lost my wife – and
my sight – 'cause of my sins – but it made me stronger! Lord gave you the gift to
make you stronger. Don't throw it all away on some medicine supposed to make
your "headache" better!

("FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL")

JOE

OH THE DEVIL KNOWS THE FLESH CAN BE WEAK
AND THE HAVOC HE CAN WREAK
WITH HIS DARK WAYS
EVERYONE'S HAD DARK DAYS
TO GET THROUGH

EVEN I,
YES, I
HAVE STRAYED
A FEW TIMES
AND WHEN I'M AFRAID
HERE'S WHAT I DO

I KEEP MY FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL
I HAVE FAITH IN THE FLOCK
CUZ WHEN I WALK WITH THE FAITHFUL
I HEAR THE GOOD LORD TALK
THIS CONGREGATION
HAS A STRONG FOUNDATION

LIKE A ROCK
I KEEP MY FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL

JOE
I KEEP MY FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL
WHEN THE DEVIL IS NEAR
CUZ WHEN I'M HERE WITH THE FAITHFUL
MY SPIRIT'S IN THE CLEAR
THIS CONGREGATION
HELPS TO MAKE TEMPTATION
DISAPPEAR
I KEEP MY FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL

CHOIR
FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL!
KEEP THE FAITH!
HERE WITH THE FAITHFUL
WE'RE IN THE CLEAR!
OH...
MAKE IT
DISAPPEAR
KEEP THE – KEEP THE FAITH!

ANY TIME I BEGIN
TO FEEL THE LURE OF SIN
THAT'S WHEN I
TESTIFY
AND LET FAITHFUL IN
LET THE FAITHFUL IN

SIN, WATCH OUT!
I
TESTIFY
LET THE FAITHFUL HEAR ME SHOUT!
LET THE FAITHFUL IN

SO KEEP YOUR FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL
KEEP THE FAITH EVERY DAY
CUZ WHEN YOU STAY WITH THE FAITHFUL
SALVATION'S ON ITS WAY
THIS CONGREGATION'S SURE TO KEEP
DAMNATION WELL AT BAY
COME OUT OF THE COLD
NOW COME BACK INTO THE FOLD
KEEP YOUR
FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL EVERY DAY!

FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL!
KEEP THE FAITH!
PRAY WITH THE FAITHFUL
YOU'RE ON YOUR WAY!
OH...
KEEP IT WELL AT BAY!
NOW PRAY
HEY, COME AND STAY!
FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL!
KEEP YOUR

JOE/CHOIR

FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL
KEEP YOUR
FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL
KEEP THE FAITH EVERY DAY!
WE'RE WITH YOU WHEN YOU PRAY!
KEEP THE FAITH EVERY DAY!
WE'RE WITH YOU WHEN YOU PRAY!
KEEP THE FAITH EVERY DAY!
WE'RE WITH YOU WHEN YOU PRAY!
FAITHFUL EVERY DAY!

(During the previous musical number, we have TRANSITIONED into -)

SCENE 7

(The Tabernacle of Joy. Immediately after. LIGHTS RISE on Thom sitting in a church pew. He holds a small white paper bag. Eshie is saying goodbye to the choir members.)

THOM

So you got to choir practice on time?

(Their eyes meet. Eshie nods. She sees him in a different light now.)

THOM

Good. I drove back to Bigley. Got your prescription.

ESHIE

Oh.

THOM

Now I know you said you weren't sure.

ESHIE

Thank you.

(stacking up choir books in a neat pile)

I have to go. Tonight's my turn for the prayer chain.

THOM

Don't run off so soon. Tell me about choir practice.

ESHIE

You don't want to know.

THOM

Why else would I ask?

ESHIE

Maybe you're just teasin' me. Havin' some fun.

THOM

No. I want to know what you taught 'em. What y'all sang.

"HE WALKS WITH ME

AND HE TALKS WITH ME

AND HE TELLS ME I AM HIS OWN..."

(Eshie can't help herself; she giggles at him)

What?

ESHIE

You're funny.

THOM
Am I? Funny how?

ESHIE
Standing there like that. Singing. Looking like a little child.

THOM
I do not!

ESHIE
Oh yes you do. You look just like this little boy I have in the children's choir. All elbows and knees. He sits right there, in the front row. Barton Blakeslee. Such a fine big name for such a little fella.

THOM
He's your favorite, isn't he? I can tell by how your eyes light up when you talk about him.

ESHIE
As a matter of fact, he is. That boy is so sweet - !

THOM
Sweet how?

ESHIE
He's polite. Always calls me "Miss Eshie." He loves to sing.

THOM
I remind you of this little boy?

ESHIE
In a way.

THOM
So you think I'm sweet?

ESHIE
You got a sweetness in you.

THOM
Nobody ever said that to me before.

ESHIE
Well there you are.

(Eshie has finished with the books. She tries to leave. He stops her.)

THOM
Miss Eshie –

ESHIE
Doctor Rivers?

THOM
Once I've gone - back to Detroit - I want you to promise me something -

ESHIE
If I can -

THOM
Promise me you'll take care of yourself. Promise you'll see another doctor.
(finding he actually means this)
I - I - hate to see anything happen to you.

(Eshie finally looks at him. It is as if she were seeing him for the first time. Everything about Thom - his posture, his face, the light in his eyes - says how much he is interested in her. She can't resist him. Something passes between them. Something electric.)

ESHIE
You gotta promise me something, too. For when you get back to Detroit.

THOM
What's that?

ESHIE
Promise you'll find someone who thinks you're sweet.

THOM
Won't be easy -

ESHIE
You come off so – smooth - but underneath - I see that little boy - sitting all by himself in a church pew - wanting someone to notice him. Tell him he's sweet.

(Thom hands her the bag with the medicine. Eshie takes it. Some seconds pass.)

THOM
Would you like to take a walk with me?

(Seconds pass. She nods. He takes her arm and they walk out of the church.)

(LIGHTS FADE AND RISE ON -)

SCENE 8

(Thom's backyard. The next afternoon. Garrison is going through a cardboard box filled with medical records with Maggie. They're drinking beers.)

GARRISON

All these medical records, just calling out to me, begging to be snooped through –

MAGGIE

Don't you dare!

GARRISON

(looking through them, reading)

Mrs. Stanley's gout - Mr. Zeylor's asthma - Randy Turkee and his zits - Charlene Remy and her - oh my Lord - !

(He looks up, then makes a pregnancy motion over his stomach with his hands.)

MAGGIE

I knew it! She was all puffed out at the Hasbro's Chop Fry! Lemme see that - !

THOM

(ENTERING)

Where's that box - hey! - put those away - they're confidential!

GARRISON

Oh, relax. I made it up. Charlene had a bad case of gas -

MAGGIE

We all knew that -

THOM

Greasy - you're such a kid - !

GARRISON

Ya spend most of your life around a six-year-old - ya start acting like one!!!

THOM

Didn't you date Charlene Remy in high school?

GARRISON

Yeah.

MAGGIE

Dated her again after his wife left him.

GARRISON

Don't remind me. She's got a laugh like a hyena.

THOM

I don't understand, Greasy. Why're you alone? Good-looking fellow like you.

(teasing him)

'Course you ain't much in the brains department –

GARRISON

How was I ever your best friend?!

THOM

Glutton for punishment.

MAGGIE

He's dated half the women in town. No one's ever good enough for him.

Or they're too good. Or Billy doesn't like 'em.

GARRISON

I'm just partic'lar, that's all. I don't wanna get burned again.

MAGGIE

All women are not your ex-wife.

GARRISON

You don't know that.

MAGGIE

Why can't you let go of Thelma Mae?! I know she did you dirt – that was a long time ago! You just keep hangin' on -- !

GARRISON

Okay, maybe I don't trust people! But why should I? They just let you down!

(pointing at Thom, triumphantly)

Exhibit A!

MILLIE

(ENTERING, dressed for shopping; to Thom)

I'm doin' the shoppin' for the whole week. You still leaving Sunday?

GARRISON

(still on his rant; motioning toward Millie)

Yeah, he's gonna go off, break this poor woman's heart! Oughta be ashamed, "T!"

THOM

Can we just finish this work, please?!

GARRISON

Do you really believe Maggie and I gave up our only day off to come over here and haul your daddy's - excuse my French, Millie - "crap" - into the garage outta the kindness of our hearts? Tell him, Maggie. Tell him why we come - !

MAGGIE

Coward -

GARRISON

Yellow streak. Right there! Down my back!

MAGGIE

Thom, people know you and Greasy were real close - they asked him if he would - well - you know how Greasy gets nervous - when he has to actually speak like an adult - he wanted me to come along - we're supposed to convince you to stay.

THOM

My apartment in Detroit. It's got a fireplace and a terrace -

MAGGIE

This beautiful house has ten big rooms.

THOM

And is a chore to heat in winter -

MAGGIE

Your office is right there on the first floor -

MILLIE

You'd have your own housekeeper. To look out for you and love you with all her heart -

THOM

Whom I'd have to pay -

MILLIE

Extravagantly -

THOM

Along with a nurse, and office help, and God only knows what else -

MAGGIE

It'd work out, Tommy -

THOM

That's what Daddy thought. That's why he never made a dime here in forty years!

GARRISON

Well, maybe we could find you someone to take your mind off all those things -

MAGGIE

Yeah - you could settle down - have some kids –

GARRISON

'Course, kids get sick and throw up and get chicken pox and diarrhea but hey - you're a doctor - !

MAGGIE

Greasy, shut up –

GARRISON

Got any prospects, Millie? Someone in Saint Heaven who'd keep Prince Charming here happy?

MILLIE

Is someone I seen him be awful sweet to – someone he's gone out of his way for -

THOM

Millie -

MILLIE

Someone pretty sweet herself -

THOM

I don't know what you're talking about!

MILLIE

Come on, Tommy - tell the truth and shame the devil!

MAGGIE

Thomas Rivers, you've been holding out on us!!!

THOM

All right, all right, let's not go makin' a big deal about this –

MAGGIE

Would you look at that, he's blushin' - !

(Thom grins. He can't help himself. MUSIC IN.)

("NICE GIRL")

THOM
 NOTHIN'S REALLY HAPPENED
 BUT FOR THE FIRST TIME IN FOREVER
 I'VE GOT A FEELING ABOUT SOMEONE
 AND SHE SEEMS LIKE A REAL NICE GIRL -

GARRISON
 (interrupting; still on his ex-wife)
 GOTTA STORY 'BOUT A NICE GIRL
 GOTTA STORY Y'ALL SHOULD HEAR
 LET ME TELL YOU 'BOUT THIS NICE GIRL
 WHILE I FINISH THIS HERE BEER.

SEE, SHE SAID SHE WAS A NICE GIRL,
 I REMEMBER IT REAL WELL
 "I'M JUST A SUGAR 'N' SPICE GIRL
 AND A NICE GIRL'D NEVER TELL"

THOM
 BUT THIS GIRL IS A REAL NICE GIRL,
 A REALLY REAL NICE GIRL

MILLIE/MAGGIE
 SURE YOUR GIRL IS A REAL NICE GIRL
 A REAL NICE GIRL!

GARRISON
 GOT A VISIT FROM MY NICE GIRL
 SAID THE STORK WAS ON ITS WAY
 "YOU WERE NICE TO ME JUST TWICE, GIRL."
 WAS THE FIRST THING I COULD SAY

AS I THOUGHT MORE 'BOUT THIS NICE GIRL
 HERE'S WHAT I SAID I'D DO
 "I'LL GLADLY BUY THE RICE, GIRL,
 IF YOU LET ME MARRY YOU."

MILLIE
 WHAT A REAL NICE BOY...

MAGGIE
 WHAT A REAL NICE BOY...

MILLIE/MAGGIE
 WHAT A REAL NICE THING TO DO!

MAGGIE
I DON'T KNOW MANY MEN WHO'D BE SO NICE IN SUCH A STEW

MILLIE
WHAT A REAL NICE BOY...

MAGGIE
WHAT A REAL NICE BOY...

MILLIE
WELL, I'M MIGHTY PROUD OF YOU!

MAGGIE
I'M GLAD YOUR STORY'S OVER...

MILLIE
AND I'M GLAD YOU SAW IT THROUGH!

GARRISON
SO I MARRIED ME THIS NICE GIRL,
SIX MONTHS WE HAD A KID.
SAID, "YOU'RE SKATIN' ON THIN ICE, GIRL"
HE LOOKED NOTHING LIKE I DID.

THEN AFTER ONE YEAR OF THAT NICE GIRL,
BEING "NICE" TO ALL SHE'D SEE
I SAID "ONE MAN SHOULD SUFFICE, GIRL."
SO SHE LEFT MY BOY AND ME.

MAGGIE
Greasy. Shut. Up.
(to Thom; with high spirits)
BET YOUR GIRL IS A REAL NICE GIRL,

MILLIE/MAGGIE
A REALLY REAL NICE GIRL!

THOM
I'M SURE THAT SHE IS A REAL NICE GIRL,
A REAL NICE GIRL!

GARRISON
NOW IF I RAN INTO THAT NICE GIRL
THERE'S A FEW THINGS I MIGHT SAY,
LIKE "TELL ME, WHAT'S THE PRICE, GIRL
FOR A "NICE GIRL" MATINEE?"

BUT I'D NEVER TELL THAT NICE GIRL
HOW SHE BROUGHT ME SO MUCH JOY
ON THE DAY SHE UP AND LEFT ME
WITH MY PRICELESS LITTLE BOY.

MILLIE
HE'S A REAL NICE BOY..

MAGGIE
WHAT A REAL NICE BOY...

MILLIE, MAGGIE, THOM
GOT A REAL NICE LITTLE BOY!

THOM
I'M GLAD IT ENDED HAPPY...

MILLIE
AND I'M GLAD YOU FOUND SUCH JOY!

MILLIE	THOM/MAGGIE
HE'S A REAL NICE BOY	I'M SURE THIS GIRL
WHAT A REAL NICE BOY	

MILLIE/GARRISON	THOM/MAGGIE
HE'S A REAL NICE LITTLE JOY	IS A REAL NICE GIRL
I'M GLAD IT ENDED HAPPY	A REAL NICE
AND I'M GLAD YOU'VE/I'VE	(REAL NICE)
GOT YOUR/MY BOY!	GIRL!

THOM
Now can we just get the boxes in the garage!
(AS JOE ENTERS; the kidding and horseplay stop)
Joe. Hi. Millie, before you go, maybe you could bring out some of that world
class lemonade for our guest.

JOE
This is not a social call –

THOM
Don't tell me y'all got together to ask me to stay?

JOE
I'm here to say one thing. You keep away from my Eshie.

THOM

She has an illness, Joe. A disease. That is causing her great pain -

JOE

Eshie is privileged to be -

THOM

Pain is not a privilege, Joe!

JOE

The miracle of prophecy is!

THOM

I don't believe in prophecy! And I don't believe that Eshie's fits are a miracle - !

JOE

Say that to the faithful who pack the church every Sunday. Who see the miracle with their own eyes - !

THOM

I don't know what you've been telling people 'bout Eshie's "prophecies," but my guess is that you've been using that girl's seizures to get people into your church -

JOE

How can you say that? Knowing how hard I work for these folks -

THOM

The thing is, Daddy must have known about this. I don't see how he let it go on -

MILLIE

Your father respected Eshie's miracle!

THOM

Eshie's illness is not a miracle!! You know it, too, Millie. You've heard Eshie's rantings - they're nothing - they're gibberish!

JOE

Maybe to a non-believer. But to someone who loves God, like Millie, like me, it's a message of His love for us, His kindness, His wisdom!

THOM

Don't ya see, Joe, people hear what they wanna hear! They believe in what they need to believe!

JOE

What do you need to believe in, Tommy? Hospitals? Drugs? What about things you can't see? That's the difference 'tween you and your daddy. That's why you'll never be half the man he was! I feel sorry for you, Thom Rivers - a man who believes in nothing has nothing!

THOM

I'll talk to Eshie myself -

JOE

We leave tonight for a month on the road -

THOM

I'll talk to her right now -

JOE

She said she don't wanna talk to you! Don't wanna see you. She don't want nothing to do with you!

THOM

She can tell me that herself!

JOE

You go near that girl, I'll make your life on this Earth a living hell - you hear me!

(He WALKS OUT. Thom, shaking with rage, picks up a file box, throws it after Joe, then STORMS into the house. The others look at each other. Garrison sings quietly.)

GARRISON

BET YOUR GIRL IS A REAL NICE GIRL -

MAGGIE

Greasy. Shut. Up.

GARRISON

(continuing, quietly)

A REALLY REAL NICE GIRL -

SURE YOUR GIRL IS A REAL NICE GIRL

A REAL NICE -

(LIGHTS CHANGE and we are now in -)

SCENE 9

(Tabernacle Sanctuary. That afternoon. Eshie is sitting with her suitcase, clutching her Bible. Joe ENTERS.)

JOE

Boys're getting' the car all packed up. Right after evening services, we'll go.

ESHIE

Yes, Joe.

MILLIE

(ENTERING, holding a bag)

Baked okra. Case y'all get hungry on the road.

ESHIE

Thank you, Millie.

MILLIE

How you feelin', Miss Eshie?

JOE

Lord's repaired her body and her mind, she's full of the Spirit, anxious to preach!

MILLIE

(handing him Eshie's suitcase)

Take this out to the car, Joseph.

JOE

Why, Sister - you're asking a blind man -

MILLIE

Get outta here, ya old fool. Take that okra with ya!

JOE

(as he EXITS)

Fine! Probably walk into a ditch!

MILLIE

Joe came over to the house this afternoon. Said you didn't want to have nothing to do with no medicine. And that you never wanted to see Thom Rivers again.

ESHIE

What?

MILLIE

You didn't know anything about this, did you?

(Eshie shakes her head.)

MILLIE

That man walked into Doctor Rivers's yard and lied. Cool as a cat -

ESHIE

What did Thom say?

MILLIE

Got all worked up. Threw things. Stomped a bit -

ESHIE

How could Joe do that?!

MILLIE

He thinks he's gonna lose you -

ESHIE

I would never leave the church - !

MILLIE

I don't mean the church.

(It takes Eshie a moment to understand what Millie means.)

ESHIE

Nothing happened between me and Thom, I swear -

MILLIE

Something musta happened, honey, or Tommy wouldn't be throwing boxes around the yard -

ESHIE

We went for a walk along the river. After he gave me the medicine. He held my hand. Told me I was beautiful. I would never say I didn't want to see him again. I want to see him every day, Millie - I -

(Eshie is so overcome by her feelings she cannot finish speaking. Millie takes all this in.)

MILLIE

Honey, you got two choices. You can go tonight with Joe on that preachin' tour and never see Thom again. Or you can go tell Tommy what you just told me.

ESHIE

But he's leavin' town – nothin' can happen --

MILLIE

I wanted to be with someone once. He wanted to be with me. We made it happen.

ESHIE

But Thom's white!

MILLIE

How do you know the man I was with wasn't white?!

ESHIE

Millie!

MILLIE

I don't want you doin' what I had to do. Love someone in silence because people wouldn't understand. People would talk. Well, people always gonna talk!! Whether you give them cause or not!

ESHIE

Were you in love with that white man?

MILLIE

Word love ain't strong enough for what I felt for him. And what he felt for me. It ain't gonna be easy. No, ma'am. Gonna be scary. Gonna try your soul. But say the word and I'll be there for you - I'll be there for both of you!

("LOVE ISN'T EASY")

MILLIE

THAT BOY NEEDS YOU!
AND I THINK YOU MIGHT NEED HIM, TOO!
BUT BOTH OF YOU'S TOO DARN STUBBORN TO SEE IT THROUGH!
WELL LET ME TELL YOU NOW THAT
LOVE ISN'T EASY -

ESHIE

I'm not in love with Thom!

MILLIE

IT MAY BRING STORMS WITH SKIES OF GRAY.
THOUGH THE DARK CLOUDS OF DOUBT
MAY BE FILLING YOUR HEART,
KNOW THAT LOVE'LL SHINE THE LIGHT ONE DAY!

ESHIE
Ain't about no such thing!

MILLIE
LOVE ISN'T EASY,
BUT DON'T YOU TURN AND WALK AWAY
THOUGH THE ROAD MAY BE ROUGH
AND YOU'RE LOST AND CONFUSED,
WELL, LOVE'LL SHOW THE PATH ONE DAY!

ESHIE
Millie, stop it - stop!!!

MILLIE
NOW I DON'T WANT TO HEAR HOW YOU'RE GIVING UP
JUST BECAUSE YOU'VE HIT SOME RESISTANCE.
LOVE TAKES WORK,
LOVE TAKES TIME,
LOVE TAKES A LITTLE PERSISTENCE.

ESHIE
(looking around)
Joe's gonna hear you!

MILLIE
WELL, LET ME TELL YOU NOW THAT
LOVE ISN'T EASY
NOW LISTEN, GIRL, TO WHAT I SAY,
WHEN THE REAL THING COMES TO YA,
SING PRAISES, HALLELUJAH,
WHEN LOVE COMES IT'S A BLESSED DAY!

ESHIE
No -

MILLIE
WHEN LOVE COMES IT'S A BLESSED DAY!

ESHIE
No!

MILLIE
WHEN LOVE COMES IT'S A BLESSED DAY!

ESHIE
This is foolishness! You have to go!

MILLIE

Not yet, Preacher Girl! I got more things to say.

(grabbing her hand)

LOVE TAKES MORE THAN JUST ONE TRY,
IT AIN'T A SIMPLE DANCE
BUT LOVE WILL COME TO THOSE WHO WORK
TO GIVE SWEET LOVE A CHANCE.

(pulling her to her)

You say it, sugar, come on!!!

MILLIE AND ESHIE

(against Eshie's will)

LOVE TAKES MORE THAN JUST ONE TRY,
IT AIN'T A SIMPLE DANCE
BUT LOVE WILL COME TO THOSE WHO WORK
TO GIVE SWEET LOVE A CHANCE -

ESHIE

Oh, Millie -

MILLIE

NOW I DON'T WANT TO HEAR HOW YOU'RE BACKING DOWN
JUST BECAUSE SOME PROBLEMS HAVE FOUND YA
WORK IT OUT
AND WORK IT THROUGH
THEN LET THE FEELING SURROUND YA.
COME ON AND SAY IT WITH ME!
I WANT TO HEAR YOU SAY IT!
AND SAY IT LIKE YOU MEAN IT!

MILLIE

LOVE ISN'T EASY,
LISTEN, GIRL, TO WHAT I SAY,
WHEN THE REAL THING COMES TO YA,
SING PRAISES, HALLELUJAH,
WHEN LOVE COMES IT'S A BLESSED DAY

ESHIE

LOVE TAKES MORE THAN JUST ONE TRY
IT'S NOT A SIMPLE DANCE
BUT LOVE WILL COME
TO THOSE WHO WORK
TO GIVE SWEET LOVE A CHANCE

TOGETHER

WHEN LOVE COMES IT'S A BLESSED DAY!
WHEN LOVE COMES IT'S A BLESSED DAY!

(LIGHTS CHANGE PUTTING US in -)

SCENE 10

(Dr. Rivers' Office. Immediately after. Thom is at his father's desk, going over some files. On the desk are two liquor bottles and a half-filled glass. Tom has been drinking. Maggie ENTERS.)

MAGGIE

Do you have any idea how long it took to clean up all that paper?

THOM

Shoulda just let it blow away. Wanna drink?

MAGGIE

I'm praying that wasn't a rhetorical question -

THOM

Good doctor has bourbon - and rye -

MAGGIE

Oh hell, let's live on the edge - rye!

THOM

(filling a glass for her)

Where's Greasy?

MAGGIE

Home. His kid ate an azalea bush or something -

THOM

Sounds like a pistol.

MAGGIE

Billy? Oh. He's a big ol' Moon Pie. Bless his heart.

(taking a drink from him; toasting)

Small towns.

THOM

Small minds.

(They clink glasses and drink.)

MAGGIE

So - was it Eshie who caught your eye?

(Thom motions toward his father's desk.)

THOM

He couldn't afford a gold pen set, like every other doctor, no silver desk calendar -

MAGGIE

You did have the biggest house in town -

THOM

My mama's "dowry." Last nice thing she had.

MAGGIE

Never met your mama -

THOM

She spent her whole married life with a man who always had someplace else to be. So she went to school meetings by herself. She visited relatives by herself. She even had to remind Daddy the names of his own nieces and nephews. Mama used to say: "Sometimes I don't even think he knows my name." One day, when I was ten, she asked me for a glass of water. She drank it, sank to her knees, she was gone - bad heart. My daddy hadn't even noticed - he was too busy - that was Daddy -

MAGGIE

You still blame him for your mama's death?

THOM

What boy doesn't blame his father for everything that goes wrong in his life?

(finishes his drink)

It was Eshie.

MAGGIE

Boy, you're playing with fire -

THOM

Up in Detroit - I see lots of mixed couples -

MAGGIE

Kentucky ain't Detroit -

THOM

What's it matter? You like someone - you like 'em!

MAGGIE

Honey, this town, you go around telling people you like a colored girl you might not make it back to Detroit.

THOM

Maggie, I'm not in love with her! I just met her! I just meant people ought be allowed to - to like who they like! Anyway, nothin's gonna happen – colored or not - she's too nice a girl.

MAGGIE

You don't go for nice girls?

THOM

Nice girls don't go for me!

MAGGIE

That so?

THOM

Not after they get to know me. I have a reputation.

MAGGIE

Women love a rascal.

THOM

'Til they figure out he ain't gonna marry 'em.

MAGGIE

Still a heartbreaker, huh? What about “not-so-nice” girls?

THOM

You got someone in mind? You want another drink?

(He pours them both another drink. Maggie gets closer to him.)

MAGGIE

Why didn't you say goodbye when you left?

THOM

After I told Daddy you and I were getting married, he got me out this town so fast I didn't have time to say goodbye. He told me if I ever saw you again he'd...

(closing his eyes; trying to forget)

I was his son. I was a Rivers. He had bigger plans for me. I did what he said because I thought I had to. But I never kept any of the money he sent me. I put myself through school. And I vowed I would never come back to Saint Heaven.

MAGGIE

(after a long beat)

You ever think about me? Up North?

THOM

Sometimes. Wondered what you were doing. How you looked.

MAGGIE

How do I look?

THOM

Well. You ain't seventeen no more.

MAGGIE

That good or bad?

THOM

It's good. Mostly I hoped you didn't hate me too much.

MAGGIE

I didn't hate you. Too much.

THOM

So what have you been doing with yourself since your husband died?

MAGGIE

What do you think I been doing?

THOM

I don't know. Hoping for someone else to come along - maybe someone who's passing through - get you the hell outta this place -

MAGGIE

That's what you think I been doing? Waiting for my very own "Ivanhoe?"

("LEAVE THE RESCUE TO ME")

MAGGIE

IT'S SO PICTURESQUE YOU INCLUDE ME, HUN'
IN YOUR VISION OF CHIVALRY
IF THERE'S ANY SUCH RESCUIN' TO BE DONE,
HUN, YOU LEAVE IT ALL UP TO ME.

THOUGH I MAY BE A DAMSEL IN A YARD-SALE DRESS,
I'M NO DAMSEL IN DISTRESS
THOUGH NO ONE ENVIES THE LIFE THAT I'VE SPENT,
MY LIFE WASN'T MEANT TO IMPRESS.

NOW YOU LEAVE THE RESCUE TO ME
I'LL BE THE SHINING WHITE KNIGHT

I'LL SLAY EACH DRAGON I SEE
 MY LIFE'S GOING TO BE ALL RIGHT
 IF YOU LEAVE THE RESCUE TO ME.

I MAY LIVE IN A TRAILER AND I GOT NO PHONE
 IT'S STILL MY CASTLE AND MY THRONE
 THOUGH I'VE WORKED MINIMUM WAGE FOR IT ALL
 I'M PROUD I CAN CALL IT MY OWN.

NOW YOU LEAVE THE RESCUE TO ME
 I'LL BREAK THE SPELL WITH A KISS
 I'LL SET THE SLEEPING HEART FREE
 IT'S SOMETHING YOU WON'T WANT TO MISS
 SO YOU LEAVE THE RESCUE TO ME
 I'LL BREAK THE SPELL WITH A KISS
 YOU LEAVE THE RESCUE TO ME

(They look at each other, knowing what the other wants.)

MAGGIE

Well, since you're leavin' Sunday -

THOM

And since you been flirting with me all week -

MAGGIE

(teasing him)

Ain't gonna break your curfew, are you?

THOM

Neither of us is seventeen no more.

MAGGIE

Thank God!

I'LL SET THE SLEEPING HEART FREE
 YOU LEAVE THE RESCUE TO ME

(They kiss. Thom begins unbuttoning her blouse. DOOR KNOCK.)

THOM

Hold on!

(over the DOOR KNOCK, to Maggie)

I'll be right back.

(Thom opens the door. Eshie is there, her smiling beaming. MUSIC IN.)

THOM
Eshie?

ESHIE
Oh, Doctor Rivers --

("WHY")

ESHIE
WHY WOULD HE TELL YOU TO KEEP FAR AWAY?
I CAN'T BELIEVE WHAT HE'S GONE AND DONE!
HOW COULD HE EVER GO BEHIND MY BACK AND SAY
THAT YOU ARE SOMEONE I'D SHUN?

(She sees Maggie, half-undressed, then looks at Maggie's lipstick on Thom's face.)

ESHIE
No...

THOM
Eshie --

ESHIE
Joe was right about you -

THOM
Just listen to me --

ESHIE
WHY? I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY!
WHY DID I EVEN TRY TO START THIS WITH YOU?
WHY DIDN'T I THINK IT THROUGH, I'D HEARD HOW YOU LIE.
DEAR GOD, I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY.

THOM
Eshie - please -

ESHIE
Don't touch me, Thom Rivers!

THOM
(as Eshie RUNS OUT)
Eshie!!!!

(Thom is SPOTLIGHTED; Maggie and the office DISAPPEAR.)

THOM
 WHAT THE HELL HAS JUST HAPPENED HERE?
 HAVE I BLOWN MY ONLY SHOT?
 HAD I KNOWN I STOOD A CHANCE AT ALL
 THINGS WOULDN'T HAVE GONE AS FAR AS THEY GOT...

WON'T YOU
 PLEASE COME BACK TO ME, DARLIN'?
 WON'T YOU
 GIVE ME ONE MORE TRY?
 OH, I WON'T LET THIS BE THE WAY
 YOU AND I SAY
 GOOD-BYE!

(A LIGHT now also ILLUMINATES Joe, at the church pulpit, preaching.)

JOE
 WHY WOULD YOU STRAY FROM THE FAITHFUL?
 WHY'D YOU BETRAY ME THIS WAY?
 IF YOU GO PLAY WITH THE DEVIL
 AND LAY WITH HIS KIND,
 YOU HAD BETTER PLAN TO STAY!

WHY WOULD YOU STRAY FROM THE FAITHFUL?
 WHY'D YOU BETRAY ME THIS WAY?
 IF YOU GO PLAY WITH THE DEVIL
 AND LAY WITH HIS KIND,
 YOU HAD BETTER SAY GOOD-BYE!

THOM
 WON'T YOU PLEASE COME BACK TO ME DARLIN'?
 WON'T YOU GIVE ME ONE MORE TRY?
 OH, I WON'T LET THIS BE THE WAY
 YOU AND I SAY
 GOOD-BYE!

ESHIE
 (APPEARING in a pin spot, looking up)
 CAN'T YOU HEAR ME?
 I'M SO ALONE
 AND I'M BARELY
 MAKIN' IT DAY TO DAY!
 COULD IT BE
 YOU'VE FORSAKEN ME?
 DID YOU GIVE ME THIS GIFT
 AND THEN TURN AWAY?

THOM

I CAN TELL YOU'RE LIKE NO ONE ELSE
 YOU SEE WHO I TRULY AM
 I'M NOT THROUGH TRYING TO MAKE THIS WORK
 IF NO ONE APPROVES, HELL, I DON'T GIVE A DAMN!

ESHIE

WHY? I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY!
 WHY? AM I MEANT TO FEEL THIS WAY 'TIL I DIE?
 AND WHAT'S SO WRONG WITH WANTING TO HAVE SOMEONE HOLD ME
 AND KISS ME AND TELL ME
 HE NEEDS ME NEARBY!

JOE

WHY WOULD YOU STRAY FROM THE FAITHFUL?
 WHY'D YOU BETRAY ME THIS WAY?
 IF YOU GO PLAY WITH THE DEVIL
 AND LAY WITH HIS KIND,
 YOU HAD BETTER SAY GOOD-BYE!

THOM

WON'T YOU PLEASE COME BACK TO ME, DARLIN'?
 OH, WON'T YOU GIVE ME ONE MORE TRY?
 OH, I NEVER HAVE KNOWN
 SOMEONE LIKE YOU.
 I NEED YOU NEARBY!

THOM/JOE

I DON'T WANT TO LOSE YOU!

ESHIE

DEAR GOD, YOU CONFUSE ME

THOM/ESHIE/JOE

I/I/YOU CAN'T MAKE IT ALONE,
 SO LET'S TRY/THOUGH I TRY/PLEASE DON'T TRY

THOM

WHY NOT TRY?

ESHIE

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

JOE

WHY'D YOU BETRAY ME?

THOM

I WON'T GO BACK UNTIL I KNOW THAT YOU...

ESHIE/JOE
I DON'T...

THOM/ESHIE/JOE
...UNDERSTAND WHY!

(LIGHTS OUT. END OF ACT ONE.)

ACT TWO

SCENE 1

(A Lexington church. Three days later. We HEAR CHURCH MUSIC. Joe is preaching to a crowd. Eshie is at his side.)

JOE

I want to thank you for welcoming us to Lexington. We've come so far to rejoice with you! We're here today to talk about one thing - repentance! Welcome now Miss Eshie, a woman who's stood at the Door of the Beast, who felt its Heat, clasped its hand, yet when it was time to give the Evil One her Heart, she refused! And she was saved! She's gonna share the proof that even the Lord's greatest Apostle himself was in need of Salvation -

(“HE HAD NOT LOVE”)

ESHIE

First, let us look at who Paul was, and what he was - WAS MANY THINGS.

(MUSIC AND A NEW CHORD)

Paul had all those things that man uses to define his LIFE ON THIS EARTH.

(MUSIC AND A NEW CHORD)

He had the trappings that were supposed to make him a WHOLE HUMAN BEING.

(ANOTHER CHORD)

But when it got right down to it, he didn't have the SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN THIS WORLD...

HE WAS BORN WITH GOLD, HE HAD QUITE A STASH

HIS SOFTEST PART WAS HIS COLD HARD CASH

A SELF-RIGHTEOUS MAN RIGHT FROM THE START

A WEALTHY MAN WITH A BANKRUPT HEART,

HE HAD NOT LOVE!

HE HAD NOT LOVE!

HE STUDIED HARD BUT HE HARDLY KNEW

WHAT THIS LIFE AMOUNTED TO

A LEARNED MAN FROM THE HONOR ROLL

A JAM-PACKED MIND WITH AN EMPTY SOUL

HE HAD NOT LOVE!

THEN HE HEADED TO DAMASCUS TOWN

TO SMITE SOME CHRISTIANS DOWN

ON HIS WAY HE WAS BLINDED BY

A BRILLIANT LIGHT IN THE SKY

Now Paul was used to having any old thing he wanted.

AND HE WANTED THAT LIGHT!

(MUSIC AND A CHORD)

But that light was something special. That light was gonna cost Paul, cost him his wealth, his status, his power, and brother and sisters –
COST HIM HIS SIGHT.

(MUSIC AND A CHORD)

Not that this mattered, by then, you see, for the light can be SEEN BY ALL, even the blind man if he's willing to look for it.

JOE

Amen

ESHIE

WELL HE HAD HIMSELF A JOYFUL WITNESS THEN AND THERE!
FROM THAT DAY ON WELL HE CHANGED HIS WAYS
HIS HEART WAS FULL OF JOY AND PRAISE
HE WAS WISER THEN BY TEN-FOLD
HE WAS RICH WITH MORE THAN GOLD
HE HAD GOT LOVE
YES! HE GOT LOVE!

JOE AND THE CHOIR

HE HAD GOT LOVE
YES! HE GOT LOVE

ESHIE

SO TAKE A LOOK
AT THE LIFE YOU LEAD
AND LET YOUR HEART AND
SOUL BE FREED
SHOUT HALLELUJAH, RAISE YOUR VOICE
OPEN YOUR HEART AND MAKE A CHOICE
THEN YOU'VE GOT LOVE!
YES, YOU'VE GOT LOVE!

JOE AND THE CHOIR
LOOK!

INDEED!
SHOUT AND REJOICE!
OH, REJOICE!
THEN YOU'VE GOT LOVE!
YES, YOU'VE GOT LOVE!

JOE

Amen!!!

ESHIE

OH!

JOE AND THE CHOIR

THEN YOU'VE GOT LOVE
YES YOU'VE GOT LOVE

ESHIE

OHHH!

JOE

Amen!

ESHIE, JOE, CHOIR

SHOUT HALLELUJAH
RAISE YOUR VOICE!
OPEN YOUR HEART
AND MAKE A CHOICE!
THEN YOU'VE GOT LOVE!
YES YOU'VE GOT LOVE!
THEN YOU'VE GOT LOVE!!!
YES YOU'VE GOT LOVE!!

(Eshie ends on a note of triumph, her arms raised high toward Heaven.)

(LIGHTS FADE on her and RISE on -)

SCENE 2

(A Dressing Room at the Church. After services. An exhilarated Eshie leads Joe into the room. She helps Joe out of his choir robe, then slips on his coat and puts on his tie.)

JOE

That was quite a witness! You got the makings of one mighty fine preacher!

ESHIE

I had the best teacher in Kentucky!

JOE

Pastor Duvall said two woman fainted!

ESHIE

I saw three!

JOE

And that was without you getting the gift. Think what it'll be like when you do. Roof'll probably blow off!

ESHIE

I'm sorry I haven't gotten it, Joe. I know it's been days.

JOE

Only three days! You gone a week or more without getting it! It'll come, it'll come. I ain't worried.

ESHIE

People must be disappointed.

JOE

"Always leave 'em wanting more." Who said that?

ESHIE

I tried to let the Spirit in --

JOE

Long as you feeling well, Eshie. That's all that matters.

(teasing her)

For a while there, I thought you had taken that medicine --

ESHIE

Why would you think that?

JOE

'Cause I'm a suspicious old man who don't trust the sun to rise.

(pause)

I'm just so grateful you came home.

ESHIE

Thank you for taking me back.

JOE

Maybe – if you put the last few days behind you – then maybe the gift will come back.

ESHIE

Maybe. Maybe it will.

JOE

Let's pray on it.

(Eshie kneels. Joe puts his hands on her forehead.)

("FILL MY MOUTH WITH YOUR WORDS")

JOE

LORD, HEAR MY PRAYER –
 FILL HER MOUTH WITH YOUR WORDS,
 FILL HER HEART WITH YOUR LOVE,
 FILL HER DAYS WITH YOUR GLORY
 SHINING DOWN FROM ABOVE.

FILL HER DARKEST NIGHT
 WITH THE HEAVENLY HOST.
 GLORY BE TO YOU, FATHER,
 YOUR SON AND THE HOLY GHOST.

JOE/ESHIE

FILL HER/MY MOUTH WITH YOUR WORDS!
 AND I'LL FILL THE WORLD WITH YOUR PRAISE,
 TELL THE WORLD OF YOUR GRACE AND YOUR POWER.
 GLORY BE TO YOU, FATHER.
 STAY WITH HER/ME THE REST OF MY DAYS -

JOE

GLORY BE TO YOU, FATHER.
 WATCH OVER MY ESHIE ALWAYS...

(He helps Eshie to her feet and clasps her hands.)

JOE

I'm gonna go speak to Pastor Duvall, tell him everything's gonna be just fine.
You join us when you're changed.

ESHIE

(helping him to the door)

You be alright down this hallway?

JOE

Been gone down this hallway since you was born.

(Joe makes his way out. Eshie takes off her choir robe, then checks herself in the mirror. Thom has ENTERED and is standing behind her. He is holding a package. Eshie turns.)

THOM

Just hear me out. I'm on my way to Detroit. But I had to make sure you understood something –

(she turns away from him)

I thought what Joe said was true! I thought I was never going to see you again!

ESHIE

That supposed to make me feel better?!

THOM

Just once, for once in my life, I want to do the right thing.

I was drunk. I know that's no excuse, but I'm sorry, Eshie.

I am so sorry. And nothing happened between me and Maggie.

Just a kiss, that's all, just a.....

ESHIE

You'd better go before he comes back -

THOM

What else were you going to say to me, when you - ?

ESHIE

Doesn't matter anymore -

THOM

I think it might. Just tell me, please, Eshie, please -

ESHIE

Do you know how lucky I am he took me back? In spite of what I did, he forgave me -

THOM

He doesn't want to give up the money you're bringing in!

ESHIE

Why should he want to give it up? That money keeps our church doors open - it buys food for families who ain't got none - clothes for folks with nothing. That money makes our Saviour present at every house in Saint Heaven - when it ain't comin' in, everybody suffers - God Himself suffers!

THOM

Joe's using you -

ESHIE

Don't you dare say a bad word about Joe Bertram in front of me! He may have lied but he did it for a good reason -

THOM

I just meant -

ESHIE

He was trying to keep me away from someone like you. He knows you, Thom Rivers. He knows your heart. And don't you think Joe benefits one cent from that money he collects. I do the books. I know where every dime goes - !

(A long silence. She stares at him.)

ESHIE

You're lost, Thom Rivers. You don't know what you want. Or where you're going. I just pray there's a soul out there somewhere to help you -

THOM

How about the one I'm looking at?

(no answer)

I heard you say it this afternoon. At the service. God gave Saint Paul a second chance. Give me one.

ESHIE

Coming back home was your second chance. You belong in Saint Heaven. With people you can help. With people who love you -

THOM

That include you?

ESHIE

I don't even know you! I got to see Pastor Duvall.

THOM

Get to know me –
 (a huge decision for him)
 I won't leave for Detroit.

ESHIE

What?

THOM

I'll stick around. For a few days.

ESHIE

Don't make me the reason you're staying --

THOM

You're the reason I'm standing here now - Miss Eshie -

(Thom steps toward her, almost shyly. Eshie doesn't move. And then slowly, almost painfully, they find their way to each other. Their hands touch first and their fingers entwine. Carefully, with great tenderness, Thom pulls her toward him. As gently as he can, he kisses her. Eshie kisses him back. When the kiss ends, Eshie laughs.)

ESHIE

That's what all the fuss is about?

THOM

What?

ESHIE

You're the first boy I ever kissed -

THOM

Wasn't what you expected?

ESHIE

Maybe I could try again –
 (another kiss; she touches his face)
 I see their point –

THOM

I know you have another service - I don't want to do anything that'll upset Joe -

ESHIE

Everything we're doin' is gonna upset Joe. He'll be the least of it.
 (touching his face)
 Meet me outside - five minutes.

THOM

What're you gonna tell him?

ESHIE

That I'm ministering to the needy. It ain't a lie.

(She kisses him, then collect her things and runs out. Thom is overjoyed.)

(LIGHTS FADE and RISE ON -)

SCENE 3

(Plummer's Garage. Same time. Garrison is lying on a wheeled roller. Maggie is holding a covered plate of food.)

MAGGIE

Droppin' off that lunch order you called in. Chicken hash. Fries.
Threw in some piccalilli.

GARRISON

I hate piccalilli.

MAGGIE

Wish I'd known. Woulda brought succotash.

GARRISON

It's the corn, Maggie. I hate anything with corn.

MAGGIE

Well, then, give it to Billy.

GARRISON

Billy hates corn, too. In any form or fashion. On the cob, cut up, fresh -

MAGGIE

I got it, Grease.

GARRISON

He hates anything yellow. School buses, egg yolks. Squeals if he sees spoon
bread. "Get that away from me, Daddy! I hate it!"

MAGGIE

You must have the patience of Job.

GARRISON

Not this mornin'.

MAGGIE

What happened?

GARRISON

I sorta had a conniption fit. Called Millie 'cause I couldn't stand to look at the boy

MAGGIE

You didn't tell him that?!

GARRISON

Jesus, no. Said I had to go to the dentist.

MAGGIE

What'd he do this time?

GARRISON

'Bout everything he could. Found him down in the grease pit. With an oil gun. He knows he's not supposed to be in the garage. Told him next time I found him here, I'd slap him into next Christmas.

MAGGIE

He's at that age.

GARRISON

What he is - is a big old pain in the butt. But he ain't the one I'm mad at.

MAGGIE

Lemme guess. Could this person be a doctor?

GARRISON

How can he show up here, pretendin' he ain't one of us?

MAGGIE

'Cause he ain't, Greasy.

GARRISON

Good ol' boy's a good ol' boy. College degree or not.

MAGGIE

Thom Rivers was never a good ol' boy. That's why y'all were such good friends. Everybody wants to be somethin' they're not.

GARRISON

Well, I'm still pissed at him! Said he'd be this town's doctor. He promised!

MAGGIE

When did he say that?

GARRISON

Night 'fore he went away, he and I sat there, drinking our beers - he said he'd come back - said he'd be here for all of us - said he'd deliver my first kid - did he?

(pause)

Course my first kid wasn't even mine. But that don't make no difference!

MAGGIE

Greasy, he was eighteen years old when he said that.

GARRISON

Well you wanted to know why I don't trust no one!

TRACK 13 ("HE DON'T MEAN TO BE SO MEAN")

MAGGIE

A MAN MAKES A PROMISE
 LIKE A GAMBLER MAKES A WAGER
 LAYIN' IT ALL ON THE LINE EACH TIME
 LOVIN' WHEN STAKES ARE MAJOR.
 LIVIN' LARGE IS WHAT HE DOES
 LIVIN' LARGE, IT'S JUST HIS WAY
 NEVER THINKS ABOUT WHAT FOLKS AROUND HIM HAVE TO PAY
 HE DON'T MEAN TO BE SO MEAN.

A MAN KEEPS HIS PROMISE
 LIKE A DRUNK'LL KEEP HIS LIQUOR
 NOTHING IS MORE IMPORTANT TO HIM
 NOTHIN'LL DISAPPEAR QUICKER.
 NEVER THINKS HE'LL BLOW IT ALL
 HE NEVER THINKS HE'LL LOSE CONTROL
 WHEN IT'S GONE HE TRULY FEELS A SADNESS IN HIS SOUL
 HE DON'T MEAN TO BE SO MEAN.

I LIVE IN THE HERE AND NOW
 I DON'T NEED TO HEAR SOME VOW
 AN OATH IS LIKE A SHOT OF RYE
 BOTH CAN MAKE A GOOD MAN START TO LIE.

A MAN BREAKS A PROMISE
 LIKE A CHEATER BREAKS THE RULES
 THINKIN' HE'S ALWAYS ABOVE IT ALL
 THINKIN' THAT RULES ARE FOR FOOLS
 THAT'S THE WAY HE'S BORN AND BRED
 THAT'S HIS WAY OF STAYING FREE
 IF HE LETS YOU DOWN, DON'T GET UPSET,
 HON, LET IT BE.

I DON'T MEAN TO SAY HE'S RIGHT
 HE'S USUALLY WRONG FROM WHAT I'VE SEEN
 HE'LL COME AROUND, IF YOU SIT TIGHT
 HE DON'T MEAN TO BE SO MEAN.

GARRISON

Yeah, well, I don't wanna talk about this no more. It's girly stuff.

MAGGIE

You are in a mood -

GARRISON

Go back to work!!! And take your piccalilli with ya!

MAGGIE

(as MILLIE ENTERS)

Hey Miss Millie.

MILLIE

Hey, baby.

(to Garrison)

Billy's inside. Sleeping. Gave him some Jello 'fore I brought him home.

GARRISON

Hope it wasn't yellow.

MILLIE

Cherry-lime.

MAGGIE

I'd best get back to the diner.

MILLIE

Tommy's gone.

GARRISON

What?!!

MILLIE

Walked out the door. Five a.m. this morning. Took his suitcase with him. And his doctor bag.

GARRISON

Why didn't you say something earlier?

MILLIE

Kept thinkin' he'd come back.

GARRISON

Didn't leave a note or nothin'?

MAGGIE

This is all my fault –

GARRISON

You're both getting worked up over nuthin'! Tommy wouldn't go again without tellin' us good-bye! Millie, thank you for watching my boy. I'll return the favor soon as I can.

MILLIE

He kept saying he didn't belong here. Everybody pushing and pulling on him -

GARRISON

He ain't gone - I know that peckerhead!

MILLIE

I'll have to sell the house now.

GARRISON

Millie, you'll do no such thing!

MILLIE

Get to see that niece of mine in Louisville –

GARRISON

Ya ain't goin' nowhere -

MAGGIE

Garrison - maybe it's all for the best -

GARRISON

You hush now! Miss Millie, come on -

MILLIE

Only reason I had to stay in Saint Heaven was Tommy.

GARRISON

You got plenty of reasons to stick around. Your friends, the church. Hell, who's gonna take care of Billy every time I get sick of him?

MILLIE

If there's no one named Rivers here, ain't no reason for me to stay.

GARRISON

That's just foolishness, Millie!

MILLIE

Don't be telling me what's what, Garrison Martin. I know 'xactly what I gotta do.

("NOT ONE THING TYING ME DOWN")

MILLIE

LOOKS LIKE IT'S TIME FOR ME
TO GO AND SEE
THE REST OF KENTUCKY.
NOT ONE THING TYING ME DOWN

I'M GONNA PACK MY THINGS
AND SPREAD MY WINGS,
YES, THE LORD'S MADE ME LUCKY.
NOT ONE THING TYING ME DOWN.

MAGGIE

YOU'RE DAMN RIGHT.
JUST LOOK AT YOU
FREE AS A SONGBIRD IN THE SKY

MILLIE

TAKING FLIGHT
THROUGH THE BLUE

MAGGIE

IT'S SOMETHING I MIGHT LIKE TO TRY

MILLIE

WELL WHY DON'T YOU GIVE IT A TRY?

MAGGIE

HELL, I DON'T KNOW
WHY I DON'T GO
AND SEE MORE OF OUR COUNTRY

MILLIE/MAGGIE

NOT ONE THING TYING ME DOWN

MILLIE

SONGBIRDS FLY ALONG
AND SPREAD THEIR SONG
THEY DON'T SING FROM JUST ONE TREE.

MILLIE/MAGGIE

NOT ONE THING TYING THEM DOWN.

MAGGIE

Garrison?

GARRISON

I HAVE SEEN ENOUGH TO KNOW
I WANT MY BOY TO GROW UP HERE.
AIN'T NO REASON Y'ALL SHOULDN'T GO,
JUST DROP ME A LINE A FEW TIMES A YEAR.

MILLIE/MAGGIE

LOOKS LIKE IT'S TIME THAT WE
GO AND SEE
THE REST OF KENTUCKY
NOT ONE THING TYING US DOWN.

GARRISON

IT'S TIME THAT YOU
TRAVEL THROUGH
ALL OF KENTUCKY
NOT ONE THING TYING YOU DOWN

MILLIE/MAGGIE

LOOKS LIKE IT'S YOU AND ME
WE'RE GONNA SEE
THE REST OF KENTUCKY
NOT ONE THING TYING US DOWN

MILLIE/GARRISON

I'M GONNA/I'LL HELP YOU PACK MY/YOUR THINGS
AND SPREAD MY/YOUR WINGS
YES THE LORD'S MADE US LUCKY

MAGGIE

PACK OUR THINGS
SPREAD OUR WINGS
CUZ LORD, WE ARE LUCKY

MILLIE

NOT ONE THING

MAGGIE

NOT ONE THING

TRIO

NOT ONE THING TYING US DOWN!

(LIGHTS FADE to -)

SCENE 4

(A river bank. That afternoon. Thom and Eshie are on a blanket. There are picnic things spread about them. They are pointing up at the sky.)

THOM

What about that one?

ESHIE

A giraffe!

THOM

You ever seen a giraffe?

ESHIE

In a picture book I have. Always thought God must have a pretty wicked sense of humor to make an animal like that -

THOM

If that's your criteria for a sense of humor, honey, God must be a laugh riot -

ESHIE

I don't understand -

THOM

This would be the same God who'll give some poor child cancer of the brain while he makes the Grand Wizard of the Klan millionaire -

ESHIE

God doesn't have anything to do with that. Those things - they just happen.

THOM

Bad things are just part of life?

ESHIE

Good things are His gifts!

THOM

S'that mean you're his "gift" to me?

ESHIE

(playfully)

Yeah. And He takes gifts back sometimes, Mister, so you'd better watch yourself!

THOM

Speakin' of gifts -

(Thom holds out the package to her.)

ESHIE
What's that?

THOM
Something I picked up this morning. On the way in to Lexington. Open it -

(She does. Inside is a white leather Bible, embossed with Eshie's name in gold.)

THOM
Spell your name right?

ESHIE
(nods, glowing)
It's beautiful!

(She kisses him again. They lay back on the blanket, looking at the clouds.)

THOM
What about that one?

ESHIE
(looking up; squinting)
President Eisenhower and Miss Mamie having coffee -

THOM
You're making fun of me!

ESHIE
I'm reveling in you, Thom Rivers.
(realizing how late it is)
I have to get back -

THOM
Ohhhhh -

ESHIE
We gotta pack up. Come on. Thom -

THOM
"I remember when she used to call me Doctor Rivers."

ESHIE
Sit up -

(They start to clean up. Thom puts his arms around her. She loves how it feels.)

ESHIE

Promise me something -

THOM

What?

ESHIE

We can do this forever!

THOM

Is that what you want?

ESHIE

I know it won't be easy. People will say rude things. Do rude things -

THOM

People been doing rude things since Genesis –

ESHIE

Might not even let us get married –

THOM

(avoiding that subject; with bravado)

That's what I hate about this place! One of the reasons I stayed in Detroit! All these God-fearing folks go on and on about "love thy neighbor." They're the same "nice Christians" who'll be shooting holes in our windows and burnin' crosses on our lawns. Don't you just love that old-time religion?

ESHIE

Thom –

THOM

What? Oh shoot – I lost her -

ESHIE

I just want to know why when I brought up gettin' married, you changed the subject? Is this all just a game to you?

THOM

Aren't we havin' fun, honey?

(MUSIC IN)

("LOVE ME LIKE YOU MEAN IT")

THOM

YOU KNOW HOW TO COMFORT ME,
SO SHOW ME NOW JUST HOW MUCH YOU CARE.
ALL I NEED IS SOME SWEET AFFECTION,
GIMME JUST A LITTLE RIGHT THERE.

LET ME FEEL YOUR TENDER KISS,
WARM ON MY LIPS, LIKE THE SUMMER SUN.
I DON'T THINK THAT I CAN LIVE WITHOUT IT
I'M FEELING LIKE I'M COMING UNDONE.

ESHIE

BUT WILL YOU LOVE ME,
AND LOVE ME LIKE YOU MEAN IT?
OR TOY WITH ME LIKE I'M A RAG DOLL?
YOU'VE GOT A ONE TRACK-MIND
I THINK YOU'D BETTER CLEAN IT,
LOVE ME LIKE YOU MEAN IT OR DON'T LOVE ME AT ALL.

THOM

Girl's got a little bite - just how I like it!
(loosing up and having some fun)
WE BOTH KNOW THIS IS, OH, SO RIGHT,
THERE'S SOMETHING BETWEEN US YOU CAN'T DENY.
A FORCE OF NATURE'S BRINGING US TOGETHER
YOU SHOULDN'T FIGHT IT, DON'T EVEN TRY.

ESHIE

BUT WILL YOU LOVE ME,
AND LOVE ME LIKE YOU MEAN IT?
OR LEAD ME ON AND THEN JUST LET ME FALL?
YOU'VE GOT A WANDERING EYE,
DON'T THINK I HAVEN'T SEEN IT.
LOVE ME LIKE YOU MEAN IT OR DON'T LOVE ME AT ALL.

THOM

COMFORT ME....

ESHIE

FIRST, SAY YOU LOVE ME,
I NEED TO HEAR YOU SAY IT...

THOM

WE WERE MEANT TO BE!

ESHIE

SO SAY YOU LOVE ME,
 AND SAY IT LIKE YOU MEANT IT
 DON'T LEAD ME ON
 AND THEN JUST LET ME FALL.
 YOU'VE GOT A WANDERING EYE,
 DON'T THINK I HAVEN'T SEEN IT.
 LOVE ME LIKE YOU MEAN IT
 OR DON'T LOVE ME AT ALL!

LOVE ME LIKE YOU MEAN IT
 AND LOVE ME FOR THE LONG HAUL,
 LOVE ME LIKE YOU MEAN IT
 OR DON'T LOVE ME AT ALL!

THOM

YOU KNOW
 HOW TO COMFORT ME
 SO SHOW ME NOW
 JUST HOW MUCH YOU CARE.
 ALL I NEED
 IS SOME SWEET AFFECTION
 GIMME JUST A LITTLE
 RIGHT THERE!

COME ON AND COMFORT ME,
 OH, COMFORT ME.
 OR WON'T YOU
 COMFORT ME AT ALL?

(Thom picks her up and throws her over his shoulder. As she happily squeals, the
 LIGHTS FADE and RISE on -)

SCENE 5

(The Hospital. A while later. Joe is sitting in a chair. Maggie is in another chair with her head in her hands. They both are still for a very, very long time. An eternity seems to pass before - Thom and Eshie hurry into the room. Joe glances in their direction. Thom takes that in, then goes to Maggie, who looks up at him.)

THOM

We got a message from Pastor Duvall --

MAGGIE

Garrison was changing a tire on a car. The jack slipped --

THOM

Is he all right?

MAGGIE

He's fine. But Billy was playing under the car. He got hurt real bad. Garrison took him to your house. Hoping you were back.

THOM

How's Billy?

(Silence.)

MAGGIE

He didn't make it.

(Eshie stifles a cry. Thom looks stunned.)

THOM

He -- what -- ?

(trying to take this in)

Where's Garrison?

MAGGIE

Inside with the doctors.

(Silence. Thom starts for the door.)

MAGGIE

No!

(Thom stares at her, not understanding.)

MAGGIE
It's just -

THOM
What?

MAGGIE
Oh, Tommy -

THOM
What??!!

MAGGIE
He doesn't want to see you -

(Garrison WALKS in. His eyes are red from crying. Millie is at his side.)

GARRISON
Thank you for all your help, Reverend Bertram. Miss Millie -

MILLIE
Garrison, your boy's with Jesus now -

GARRISON
Yeah, well - he should be here with me.

(Silence.)

THOM
Greasy. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I wasn't there -

GARRISON
Why should today've been any different from the rest of your life, Tommy?
Never thinkin' of anyone but yourself. I know where you were! You were off
with that colored girl! Jesus God - you make me sick!

MAGGIE
Greasy, c'mon -

GARRISON
Why'd you come back here, Thom?! It wasn't to keep any of the promises you
made to me - or Maggie - or anybody! You just wanted to spoil all our memories
of your daddy!

MAGGIE
This isn't the time!

GARRISON

Well, you accomplished what you set out to do. You disgraced your daddy's memory all right!!

MAGGIE

Garrison, we got a lot to take care of -

GARRISON

Your daddy woulda been there, Tommy. Your daddy woulda been home. He woulda saved my Billy. Oh my Billy, my baby. My baby -

(He covers his face, sobbing. Maggie LEADS him away. Eshie goes to Joe.)

ESHIE

Joe?

JOE

Where were you this afternoon?

ESHIE

I was going to tell you -

JOE

When? After Pastor Duvall cancelled tonight's services 'cause you weren't there? After his wife had to drive me here?

ESHIE

Joe, let me explain -

JOE

Were you with Thom Rivers this afternoon?

ESHIE

Yes I was!

JOE

Millie, take me home! Now!

THOM

I'll drive you home, Joe. We'll talk about this -

JOE

I got nothing to say to you! Neither of you!

MILLIE

Hear them out, Joe.

ESHIE

Joe, please, a little boy died today.

JOE

While you were out doin' God knows what!

THOM

Leave her alone, Joe!!

JOE

I been askin' myself, what kind of wickedness could cause the death of a child?

THOM

That's enough!

JOE

Garrison Martin was right. You are a disgrace! I'd rather have no doctor than have you!

MILLIE

Joe Bertram, you hesh up!

(Long silence. Joe can hear Eshie crying.)

JOE

Eshie. Eshie. Take my hand.

(privately, to her)

I can give you one more chance. I forgive what you done. Let me take care of you. Way you took care of me all these years. Please, honey. Please. Come home.

(A long silence. Then Eshie answers.)

ESHIE

Call Pastor Duvall. See if he'll have us back.

THOM

Eshie - no!

JOE

This ain't your business!

THOM

Billy's death had nothing to do with us. God doesn't punish people. "Things just happen." You said so yourself -

ESHIE

I'm not so sure anymore -

THOM

D'you think it would have been different, if I had been there, instead of with you?

ESHIE

Maybe -

THOM

What do you want me to say, Eshie? I'm sorry I was with you? Well I won't! What I feel for you does not make me a bad person !

ESHIE

What do you feel for me, Thom? Do you love me?

THOM

Eshie, I - I -

ESHIE

Say it, Thom. Say it. Out loud.

(Thom tries to say the words but can't. Eshie begins to lead Joe away.)

ESHIE

Come on, Joe. Let's go home.

THOM

What're you gonna do about the pain?!

JOE

We're gonna pray on it -

THOM

Like you prayed about goin' blind?

MILLIE

Tommy, don't!

THOM

I read my father's files -

JOE

We gotta go, honey -

THOM

(to Eshie)

He had syphilis. My father tried to treat him.

MILLIE

Tommy!!!!

THOM

He refused to take the medication. He thought God would heal him!

JOE

Eshie, honey - don't listen!

THOM

It's just a disease, Joe. There's no shame in it. You didn't have to lose your sight!

JOE

I was a sinner!! It's how God punished me!!!

THOM

You punished yourself, Joe! Don't punish Eshie the same way!

(Joe takes Eshie's arm and starts out. Eshie stops, goes to Thom and hands him the Bible he gave her that afternoon. She returns back to Joe and escorts him OUT. As Millie watches, LIGHTS DIM on her, leaving Thom and Millie in a SPOT.)

MILLIE

Come on, Tommy. Let's go home.

(Millie EXITS. LIGHTS FOLLOW Thom to -)

SCENE 6

(Dr. Rivers' Office. The next morning. Thom looks around. MUSIC IN.)

("MY FATHER'S SON")

THOM

HERE I AM IN THE ROOM THAT YOU CARED FOR,
THE PLACE WHERE SPENT EVERY WAKING HOUR.
WHERE I WOULD LOOK IN TO LOOK UP TO YOU,
YOU WITH YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND INFINITE POWER.

YOUR INTELLECT ALWAYS INSPECTING THINGS
THEN ALWAYS SELECTING THE RIGHT MEDICATION
AS I WATCHED THE TREATMENT AND HEALING TAKE PLACE
I'D BE BEAMING WITH PRIDE AND WITH SUCH ADMIRATION.

HERE I AM IN THE ROOM THAT YOU CARED FOR,
THE PLACE WHERE YOU SPENT YOUR ENTIRE LIFE.
SO CLOSE TO YOUR PATIENTS, YET SO FAR AWAY
FROM YOUR PATIENT SON AND WIFE.

YOUR INTELLECT SOMETIMES NEGLECTING THINGS,
LIKE NEVER SUSPECTING YOUR FAMILY MIGHT NEED YOU.
THAT MAYBE WE'D NEED YOUR ATTENTION AND CARE
IN BETWEEN ALL THE CASES AND JOURNALS YOU'D READ THROUGH

I ONLY WANTED TO BE
JUST LIKE YOU
TO KNOW ALL THE FACTS AND THE ANSWERS,
EVERYTHING YOU KNEW.
NOW I HAVE SO MANY QUESTIONS,
THERE'S SO MUCH UNSAID AND UNDONE
THE ONE THING I SEE THAT IS CLEAR TO ME
I AM MY FATHER'S SON!

HERE I AM IN THE ROOM THAT YOU CARED FOR,
THE PLACE WHERE I CAME WHEN YOU LEFT FOR GOOD.
SURROUNDED BY MEMORIES OF YOU I TRIED SO HARD TO CRY
'CAUSE I THOUGHT THAT I SHOULD

BUT MY INTELLECT PROUDLY PROTECTED ME
BY SIMPLY DEFLECTING THE PAIN AND EMOTION
YOU'D LEFT WITHOUT TALKING TO ME ALL ABOUT
HOW TO DEAL WITH LOVE AND DEVOTION
NOW HERE I AM, MY FATHER'S SON.

(Millie ENTERS. Thom glances at her.)

MILLIE

I made you cheese grits. Coffee. Toast. Eggs. And some of that world class lemonade you're always going on about -

THOM

Were all those things Garrison said true?

MILLIE

His heart was broke, Tommy. He would have said just about anything -

THOM

No. I did want people to hate Daddy. I wanted them to hate him for all the terrible things he did to me and Mama. Nobody knew what he was really like except me!

MILLIE

I knew what you and your mama went through. I saw it all. But after you left, your Daddy did wonderful things for Saint Heaven -

THOM

Out of guilt!

MILLIE

He knew he was the reason you never came back. It ate at him, honey. He never let it go. But you can. You gotta forgive your Daddy. And you gotta forgive yourself.

(Their eyes meet.)

THOM

I shouldn't have come back. Make of mess of everything I touch -

MILLIE

That's not true - !

THOM

Yes it is! Always has been. My whole life, I was so angry at Daddy - it made me bitter and selfish --

MILLIE

You ain't gonna be that man no more.

THOM

I'll always be that man.

MILLIE

You gotta cleanse that thought from your heart! Right now!

THOM

Eshie was the only one who could do that. Millie, I gotta get outta here. 'Fore I harm someone else!

MILLIE

You didn't harm Eshie, honey. You showed her who she can be. That's what love does -

THOM

She'll never love me. Joe's convinced her I'm the devil!

MILLIE

You aren't the devil. You're competition.

(pause)

Little wonder he fought like a tiger to keep her. You better fight just as hard -

THOM

I gotta go.

MILLIE

High time you stopped walking away from things. 'Specially people you love.

THOM

Like you?

(Silence.)

MILLIE

Something you need to ask me?

(no answer)

I think there is.

(Finally, Thom cannot stand it.)

THOM

How long were you and Daddy...?

MILLIE

So you did know?

THOM

It was one of the reasons I was so angry at him. At both of you.

MILLIE

Nothin' happened while your mama was alive. Didn't even think of your Daddy that way. Not 'til later.

(she lets Thom take that in)

He became a good man, Tommy. You gotta believe that.

(pause)

He wanted you to know about us. I said I wanted to tell you.

(pause)

He missed you. We both did.

(Silence. There is a KNOCK at the door. Millie dries her hands and answers it. Garrison COMES IN. A few steps behind him IS Maggie.)

GARRISON

Morning, Millie -

(Millie nods at him and Maggie, then retreats to the corner of the room. There is an awful heavy silence. Thom cannot look at his friend.)

GARRISON

Tommy - look at me - please -

(It takes everything Thom has inside him to look at Garrison.)

GARRISON

What I said to you at the hospital was awful. Every word of it. I heard you were leaving today. And I didn't want you to go thinking that I... that I wasn't sorry about what I said -

(pause)

I believe in you, Tommy. I love you. We all do. It's important to tell people ya love 'em before - shit -

(He stops, crying, unable to continue. There is a silence until Thom walks over and embraces Garrison. Garrison clings to his friend.)

THOM

It's okay, Greasy. It's okay. Go ahead and cry -

GARRISON

I just want my boy back -

THOM

I know, buddy. I know -

(When the two men finally break their embrace, Garrison wipes his eyes.)

GARRISON

Well - Detroit's callin', I guess -

THOM

Yeah -

GARRISON

You get a chance, you phone. Write a postcard or something --

MAGGIE

You know, me and Greasy, we were thinking -

GARRISON

She's been helping me, Tommy --

THOM

Maggie to the rescue -

MAGGIE

We were thinking we might visit you -

GARRISON

Check out Detroit -

(MUSIC IN. The following is sung with quiet reverence and great sadness. Garrison's loss, and Billy himself, are on all of their minds.)

("NOT ONE THING TYING ME DOWN" - reprise)

MAGGIE

MAYBE IT'S TIME FOR US
TO CATCH A BUS
AND TAKE TO THE HIGHWAY
NOT ONE THING TYING US DOWN.

GARRISON

FEELS LIKE IT'S TIME TO DO
SOMETHING NEW
AND EXPLORE EVERY BYWAY.

BOTH

NOT ONE THING TYING US DOWN.

MILLIE
 AS WE HEAD SEPARATE WAYS
 WE WON'T FORGET
 THESE PEOPLE WHO MADE US WHO WE ARE
 THESE PRECIOUS DAYS
 ARE FIRMLY SET
 IN OUR HEARTS AND MINDS NO MATTER HOW FAR WE GO!
 THIS I KNOW!

(taking Thom's hand)
 I DRAW MY STRENGTH FROM THESE
 MEMORIES
 AND I'M READY TO FLY.
 NOT ONE THING TYING ME DOWN.

(MUSIC UNDER as Thom grabs Millie and hugs her.)

THOM
 Something I gotta do. I'll be back. Promise!

(Taking his doctor bag with him, Thom EXITS from the room. The trio continues.)

MAGGIE AND GARRISON	MILLIE
WE'RE GONNA PACK OUR THINGS	I'LL PACK MY THINGS
AND SPREAD OUR WINGS	SPREAD MY WINGS

MAGGIE, GARRISON, MILLIE
 THERE'S A NEW LIFE TO TRY
 NOT ONE THING
 THERE'S NOT ONE THING
 NOT ONE THING TYING US DOWN!

(As they stand there, thinking about their lives, LIGHTS FADE and RISE ON -)

SCENE 7

(The Tabernacle. That morning, during a service. As an exhausted-looking Eshie is helped to her seat, Joe leads the Choir. The words of their song seem directed at her.)

(FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL – reprise)

ESHIE, JOE CHOIR

SO KEEP YOUR FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL	FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL!
KEEP THE FAITH EVERY DAY	KEEP THE FAITH!
CUZ WHEN YOU STAY WITH THE FAITHFUL	PRAY WITH THE FAITHFUL
SALVATION'S ON ITS WAY	YOU'RE ON YOUR WAY!
THIS CONGREGATION'S SURE TO KEEP	OH...
DAMNATION WELL AT BAY	KEEP IT WELL AT BAY!
COME OUT OF THE COLD	NOW PRAY
NOW COME BACK INTO THE FOLD	HEY, COME AND STAY!
KEEP YOUR	FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL!
FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL EVERY DAY!	KEEP YOUR

FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL
 KEEP YOUR
 FAITH WITH THE FAITHFUL
 KEEP THE FAITH EVERY DAY!
 WE'RE WITH YOU WHEN YOU PRAY!
 KEEP THE FAITH EVERY DAY!
 WE'RE WITH YOU WHEN YOU PRAY!
 KEEP THE FAITH EVERY DAY!
 WE'RE WITH YOU WHEN YOU PRAY!
 FAITHFUL EVERY DAY!

(The Choir EXITS, leaving Joe and Eshie alone. LIGHTS FADE and RISE ON -)

SCENE 8

(The Tabernacle. Later. Joe has just counted the collection as Eshie sits watching.)

JOE
Sixty dollars! Listen at it jingle!

ESHIE
We never collected sixty dollars before. Not even on Easter Sunday!

JOE
No, ma'am. Now. After I get this money locked up good, we oughta think about dinner. I'd love me some catfish. Might even be in the mood for okra!

(He gives her a grand smile. She gently takes his hand.)

ESHIE
I got something to tell you, Joe. Something so important -

JOE
What could be more important than sixty dollars in the collection plate and catfish on the fire?

ESHIE
I'm going home -

JOE
How long?

ESHIE
I'm not sure -

JOE
Well honey, if you need a few weeks -

ESHIE
Wouldn't be a few weeks, Joe. I'm gonna start a church there. Of my own.

JOE
You're gonna what?!

ESHIE
Start a church. I been prayin' on it for a while now. Durin' the service today God answered me. Said it was time to go back home. Said people there needed me. They needed to hear what I had to say -

JOE

Honey, you know how hard it is to run a church? How much work you gotta do? Sugar, it would knock the wind outta Jesus Christ himself!!

ESHIE

I've learned so much from you, Joe. I know I could do it -

JOE

Takes money to gather up a flock. You gotta have a building -

ESHIE

I'm gonna ask folks back home to raise me up one. And they will!
Now I'm gonna go fix you a mess of catfish.

(Eshie walks back to where the collection baskets are.)

JOE

Honey, God's got other plans for you. For us!

(Eshie looks away from Joe. She knows what she must say to him but it's the hardest thing she's ever said to anyone. She finally gets the words out.)

ESHIE

I don't believe in your kinda God no more. What kind of Savior is that? Who wants you to go blind when there was medicine to cure you?

JOE

But Eshie -

ESHIE

I need to raise me up a new kinda church! And that's what I intend to do.
I am so grateful to you, Joe! For everything!

JOE

(after a moment)

Honey, if you stay here, with me, when I'm gone, this church'll be yours.
You can do whatever you like. Worship any way you want.

(Eshie is very touched. She puts her arms around him and hugs him.)

ESHIE

Thank you, preacher man. But I have made up my mind.

JOE

(getting through to him; slowly)

What am I gonna do without you?

ESHIE

You got a whole congregation. Put your faith in the faithful.

(Eshie sees Thom standing in the doorway of the church, watching her. Their eyes meet. She takes a step away from Joe.)

JOE

Eshie? ESHIE?!

THOM

Joe, it's Tommy. Did I interrupt something?

JOE

Someone was saying goodbye, that's all.

(Silence. Thom goes to Joe.)

THOM

I won't take up much of your time. I just need to say something to you, sir.
I need you to know how much you meant to me. When I was younger --
(kneeling beside him)
I should have said that to you a long time ago, sir.

JOE

Well, you said it now.

THOM

I'm sorry I let you down, Joe. I'm sorry about so many things.
(pause)
A wise old preacher once told me, "A man who believes in nothing has nothing."
I can see there's something to that.

JOE

(gently)
What is it you believe in, Tommy?

THOM

I believe something brought me back to Saint Heaven, sir – and whatever it was,
whatever you wanna call it - I'm gonna honor it by staying here - serving these
good people - if you'll have me.

(Joe understands how much this has cost Thom to make this choice.)

JOE

Thank you, son. Thank you.

THOM

I'm not gonna steal Eshie from you, Joe. But I want you to know that –
 (going to Eshie, simply)
 I love you, Eshie. And I'm not gonna let you go. Not without a fight.

JOE

You're too late, Tommy.

THOM

Why?

JOE

Tell him.

ESHIE

I'm gonna start my own church. Back home.

THOM

What?

ESHIE

I gotta be on my own for a while. It's what God wants for me.

THOM

But I love you –

ESHIE

I see things clearly now. It wouldn't have worked between us.

THOM

Sure it will. It won't be easy, like you said –

ESHIE

I have other things I gotta do -

THOM

But you can't just leave! You can't! Help me, Joe. Help me get her to stay!

JOE

I tried, son. She knows what she wants. We gotta let her go.
 (painful for him, too)
 Let her go, son.

(Thom stands, broken-hearted, not wanting to give her up. He looks at Eshie for a long time. He watches her face. Something very deep inside of him knows he must let her go. It is the only way. He takes a breath, addressing her. His heart is breaking.)

THOM

About your "gift." Whatever it is, it is part of what makes you special. I don't want to be the one responsible for taking that away. Maybe you shouldn't use the medicine -

ESHIE

I already did -

JOE

What?

ESHIE

The night you brought it to me. I been taking it every day.

JOE

But, during services, you got the gift.

ESHIE

That's why the collection was so good!

JOE

(understanding what this means)

My God, son, you shoulda heard the prophecies she made - put Revelations to shame!

THOM

What about the pain - ?

ESHIE

There was none -

THOM

Eshie - ?

ESHIE

It worked, Thom. The medicine worked.

(Thom is stunned. Eshie puts her arms around him and whispers.)

ESHIE

Thank you... thank you... see what you did for me?

(Thom is suddenly just overwhelmed. A SHAFT OF BRIGHT WHITE LIGHT SEEMS TO ENVELOPE HIM, much like St Paul on the road to Damascus. He falls down to his knees, sobbing – from joy, from relief. Eshie kneels, holding him. MUSIC IN.)

(“BREATHE IN” – reprise)

ESHIE

BREATHE IN -
 TRY TO TAKE IT EASY NOW.
 BREATHE OUT -
 AND SET YOUR WORRY FREE.
 RELAX AND LET IT BE
 BREATHE IN WITH ME.

NOW CLOSE THOSE SOFT BROWN EYES
 AND THINK OF SOMETHING THAT MAKES YOU SMILE.
 I'LL CLOSE MINE, TOO,
 AND IMAGINE WITH YOU...

BREATHE OUT -
 ALL OF THAT ANXIETY.
 BREATHE IN -
 WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY.
 I'LL TELL YOU WHAT I SEE -
 YOU, BREATHING HERE WITH ME.

(Thom slowly recovers. Eshie, still holding him, gently touches his heart.)

ESHIE

The God I believe in. He's the One who gave us this medicine. He gave me a free will to use it. That's the God I want to preach about!

JOE

(a revelation for him, too)
 And you will...

ESHIE

(loving them both so much)
 And now... I gotta go fix this preacher his supper.

(She leaves Thom and goes to Joe, taking him by the arm. They start out. Thom stands, remembers something. He pulls out the white Bible he bought for her and calls out.)

THOM

Eshie... this belongs to you.

(Eshie waits, then takes and holds it. She touches Thom's face.)

ESHIE

I'll only be a few hours away -

THOM

You'll be so alone -

ESHIE

No I won't. And neither will you.

(She kisses Thom on the cheek, then takes Joe and they EXIT. Thom watches her go.)

THOM

I'LL HOLD YOU IN MY HEART
UNTIL THE NEXT TIME I SEE YOU SMILE.
I'LL KEEP THIS MEMORY -
YOU BREATHING HERE
WITH ME.

(He suddenly looks hopeful. LIGHTS SLOWLY FADE.)

(CURTAIN)