

THE DARK TOME  
SEASON 1, EPISODE 8

"TRIAL DAY"

by TANANARIVE DUE

ADAPTED FOR AUDIO BY FRED GREENHALGH

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MUSIC - Theme of THE DARK TOME, eerie, sense of mystery, wonder...

INT. MONK'S APARTMENT, LATER

FX - Arrive Whoosh. Gussy staggers forward.

GUSSY

We're uh... uh... where am I? Not the ink parlor anymore. No it's uh... uh... Monk's place, I'm guessing. All the windows are painted black. There's um... There he is, laid out on his bed.

MONK

(murmuring a prayer under his breath) Give me the blessing of sleep, keep the voices out of my head, sweet sleep take me, keep the voices out of my head... (abruptly stops, speaks to Gussy, but also to US) They're always here. Always standing around my bed. Pale faces, gray faces. Most of them are silent. They stand here and stare at me, and sometimes at their own faces on my skin.

Denita King is here now, do you see her? She isn't silent. She's one of the screamers. She loved being alive. She loved her kids. And she fought so damn hard.

WOMAN

(SCREAM - that erupts and warbles and becomes part of a background chorus of regrets, sorrows, howls)

MONK

Denita will scream like that every night for as long as I live. That was the price for her revenge and we'd both been willing to pay it.

God damn it.

My name is Gerald Addison. Most people call me Monk.

(MORE)

MONK (CONT'D)

Tomorrow I'll get up, get washed,  
and maybe I'll spend the day  
chasing a bail skip. Or maybe a  
client will find me.

I lay here at night and listen to  
the screams. And the night closes  
around me like a fist.

Chorus of tortured voices reaches a fervor pitch, peaks,  
then...

FX - Whoosh! Gussy thrown back to his home world.

INT. GUSSY'S APARTMENT

FX - crash! Down below.

CASSIE

(drowsy) Unghhh, what was that? How  
long have I been asleep? (winces)  
Oh, my head...

Cassie rolls over, grabs her phone.

CASSIE (CONT'D)

What day is it... Sunday? Sunday!  
Wasn't it... Saturday... Or Friday?  
(beat) My phone's been blowing up.  
Missed Call. Mom, Mom, Mom, Mom...  
Nine times. Voicemail.

FX - beep, voicemail response

Mom's voice through sequence of voicemails is increasingly  
alarmed

MOM

(angry) Cassie, where are you? Did  
you know what you did to Mark?

FX - beep

VOICEMAIL

Message deleted

MOM

Cassie, I'm serious. You've been  
gone now for twelve hours. If you  
don't --

FX - beep

MOM (CONT'D)  
 (quieter) Cassie. Please Cassie,  
 tell me where you are. I'm serious.  
 Mark's gone. I'm scared. I don't  
 want to call the police...

FX - beep

VOICEMAIL  
 Message deleted

FX - Phone starts vibrating, silly ringtone.

CASSIE  
 Oh look who's calling. No thanks,  
 mom. I'm not in the mood to talk to  
 you. Not now. Maybe never.

Cassie silences the phone. Stands up, yawns, stretches.

CASSIE (CONT'D)  
 Let's see what's going on with...  
 Hey Mr. Gussy? Mr. Gussy?

Cassie exits the apartment, steps down, briefly outside, then  
 opens the door to bookshop.

INT. BOOKSHOP - DAY

FX - door jangles

Mr. Gussy is panting, winded.

CASSIE  
 Mr. Gussy? Oh - Mr. Gussy, are you  
 okay?

GUSSY  
 Just rosy, Cassie.

CASSIE  
 You look like you're gonna throw  
 up. You went into the Dark Tome on  
 your own again?

GUSSY  
 Yeah, that's right. I met a hell of  
 a fella too. Hero type. Anti hero.  
 No matter. I'm back now.

CASSIE  
 I've been thinking... I think we  
 need a break.

GUSSY

A break?

CASSIE

From the Dark Tome.

GUSSY

Whaddya mean?

CASSIE

It was fun before. Scary, maybe, but I was learning things. I was getting away from my life. But now I feel like I'm getting too deep. That we might go into a story and not be able to find our way back out.

GUSSY

Well, I'd be lying to you if I said that had never happened.

CASSIE

See. That's exactly my point!

GUSSY

Now hold on - Cassie! I learned my lesson, back then. We got too greedy. We were reckless. The Dark Tome is risky, I'll give you that, but you're also able to control it.

CASSIE

Control it? How exactly do you control it?

GUSSY

Remember we were asking it questions before, right? It can bring up stories that will speak to you. Help you figure out the answer to those questions.

FX - Bzzzt! Cassie's phone goes off again.

GUSSY (CONT'D)

You getting a call?

CASSIE

No one important.

GUSSY

Look Cassie, I know what happened to you was scary.

(MORE)

GUSSY (CONT'D)

I understand that, but, I'm asking - no - I'm pleading, Cassie. I need to find my wife and my kid... if there's any way to find them, it's gonna be with the Dark Tome.

CASSIE

I don't really see how that's happening. All we find are demons that try to kill us, angry ghosts or... creatures.

GUSSY

And you're learning something from all of them, aren't you? You're getting... powers. And once those powers are strong enough, you can call out to the book again, and maybe you'll hear my wife and my boy. You see what I'm saying?

CASSIE

Like I did with Nick and his Dad? I'll be able to bring us to... wherever they are now?

GUSSY

That's my thought. To be honest, I don't know for sure. I just know, that if we stop trying, then I'll lose hope. And without hope, I... I uh...

CASSIE

Fine. Fine, Mr. Gussy. We'll keep looking.

GUSSY

Thank you. Thank you, Cassie.

CASSIE

It's just... what's the next lesson we're gonna learn?

GUSSY

I don't know. It's your turn, now.

CASSIE

(deep breath) I want to see the other side of magic. In all these stories, we've seen these monsters do things to people. I want to find someone who fights the monsters back.

Now, the Dark Tome is humming.

GUSSY

That's your question?

CASSIE

Yeah.

GUSSY

The book is ready, it's got, uh...  
A picture of the scales of justice  
I think, except there is something  
heavy on the scales, isn't there?  
Oh God... There is a white hood,  
and something hanging... hanging  
from them...

CASSIE

(horror) There's a boy, maybe  
fifteen? Sitting in the electric  
chair. He's about to, they're going  
to - no! - maybe he's walking free.  
I can't tell. The image keeps  
shifting...

GUSSY

There's the name of the story,  
right there.

CASSIE

"Trial Day," by Tananarive Due.  
Trial Day, what do you suppose that  
means?

GUSSY

I suppose we're about to find out.

FX - Whoosh! Dark Tome Portal opens

EXT. OUTSIDE FARMHOUSE - DAY

Story takes place in 1920s South. No one really affects an  
accent but sound design should be appropriate.

FX- Quiet, country ambience (1920s)

Gussy and Cassie arrive abruptly

CASSIE

Wh-where are we now?

GUSSY

I wager we're in the Deep South.  
Based on that big field of cotton  
over there.

FX - bicycle wheels up, rings bells

PAPER BOY

Newspaper!

FX - paper thrown, plops onto the dirt.

GUSSY

(raises voice) Thanks! (leans to  
pick up the paper) Huh. July 20,  
1927. And it looks like a boy named  
Wallace Lee is going to stand trial  
today.

Off in the distance, a young girl calls to them

LETITIA

(off) You folks talking about my  
brother?

GUSSY

Hi there! (approaches) Sorry, we're  
just, uh, passing through town.  
Newspaper says something about a  
trial.

Gussy presents the Paper to Letitia.

LETITIA

That's right, today is Brother's  
trial day.

CASSIE

For what?

LETITIA

I'll tell you in a minute. Will you  
sit with me? Daddy's gone and  
Bernadette, she doesn't want to  
hear my story.

CASSIE / GUSSY

Sure.

Cassie and Gussy take a seat.

CASSIE

Oh, and I'm Cassie.

GUSSY

Gussy.

LETITIA

I'm Lettie. At least, that's what Brother calls me. Doesn't that sound sassier than Letitia? Letitia is what Daddy and my stepmother call me.

CASSIE

Lettie, nice to meet you. This is a very nice house.

LETITIA

It's Daddy's house. I live here with Daddy and my stepmother, Bernadette. Bernadette, she calls me Letitia, not Lettie. She says nick-names are low class. Daddy, he usually goes by whatever stepmother says. So Brother calls me Lettie in secret.

GUSSY

Does your brother live here too?

LETITIA

No sir. Brother lives with his mama in Live Oak, that's a day's drive south of here in Daddy's shiny new 1927 Rickenbacker... that's farther than most people I know have traveled in their whole lives. I don't get to see Brother as often as I'd like. During the summers, and sometimes for Thanksgiving, Brother can take a train, stay with us for as long as two weeks. (chuckles) He can sleep on our couch if he can manage to turn his long limbs into knots. He's only fifteen now, but he's always been tall.

CASSIE

Brother lives with 'his' Mama? Isn't she your Mama too?

LETITIA

No. Brother and I, we have different mamas in different towns - Daddy never married either of our Mamas, and all stepmother says is that the whole thing is a disgrace and I ought to be ashamed, as if I could be responsible for any of the doings in the world before I was born.

CASSIE

Yeah. My mom acts sorta like that too.

LETITIA

If you got a good look at Brother, you'd know that his mama must be dark-skinned like my own, and judging by his long, thick eyelashes, she must've been pretty.

Last summer when he came and visited, he stood right here on this porch. He was nearly as tall as Daddy and his voice had dropped to a lower register, and they just sat here on the porch, joking and laughing and having a conversation I wasn't allowed to listen to, like two grown men having a gay old time, not a father and son.

I still remember the way they laughed, barking out into the night wind. I could hear them from my room, snuggled up into bed, and that sound seemed to surround the house, and I fell asleep with a smile, rocking in their happy noise.

FLASHBACK

BROTHER

...and then I said to her, that dress looks good, but I liked it even better on your sister!

DADDY

(bursts out laughing) You didn't...

BROTHER

(laughing) I did, swear I did, Pa.

Laughter continues, fades out with sound designed twinkle

BACK TO PRESENT, CONTINUED...

GUSSY

So how'd all this business about  
the trial come about?

LETITIA

One morning I came downstairs for  
breakfast, Bernadette was at the  
kitchen table, and she told me the  
news like she'd just read it in the  
paper.

BERNADETTE

Your Brother Wallace Lee got  
himself thrown in jail, Letitia,  
thrown in jail for armed robbery!  
That's what these young boys get  
for being so wild. They'll probably  
give that foolish boy the Chair,  
robbing a white man like that. Your  
daddy took up with every tramp and  
hoodoo woman who looked his way, so  
what else can he expect?

FX - Bernadette sets out a plate of food.

BERNADETTE (CONT'D)

What are you looking at me like  
that for? Go and eat your  
breakfast.

LETITIA

I was too scared for Brother to be  
angry about Bernadette's insults. I  
may be a few months shy of twelve  
years old, but I know what The  
Chair is. The Chair is the electric  
chair at Raiford State Prison,  
where colored men are sent to grow  
old - or to die, if they ever take  
a seat on The Chair. I'd never  
imagined I could know someone who  
got sent there. Those were the hard-  
luck stories from people with hard-  
luck lives.

But my Daddy? He's Richard Reaves.  
He has his own grocery store and a  
cotton farm.

(MORE)

LETITIA (CONT'D)

He owns this house, a house with two stories and three bedrooms on a thirty-acre piece of land that had once been owned by slave-holders. Daddy and Cecil Johnson, who owns the colored mortuary, they're the two most envied men in the county - and Daddy's most envied because Bernadette is so much more light-skinned than Mr. Johnson's wife. When daddy installed the new upstairs bathroom, all our neighbors flocked to the house because they were still using outhouses and they wanted to see with their own eyes how a colored man right here on Percival Street had a working toilet and bathtub upstairs in his house, in addition to the one downstairs.

GUSSY

Good for your Daddy.

LETITIA

That's right. My Daddy, he didn't have hard luck, so Brother couldn't be sent to Raiford. At least, that's how I saw it. Daddy came to my bedroom that night. Tried to comfort me.

ANOTHER FLASHBACK

DADDY

Thing about your Brother's... that's just a misunderstanding, and it's being worked out. I'm sure Wallace Lee's home by now.

LETITIA

You promise?

DADDY

(hesitates) Promise.

PRESENT DAY

LETITIA

Daddy didn't look me in the eyes when he said it. And I got a great, heavy feeling in my belly when I realized my Daddy was lying to me.

(MORE)

LETITIA (CONT'D)

I'd never thought of Daddy as the kind of man who would lie to a stranger, much less to me.

That's when everything in my world began to feel all wrong. It started with hearing about Brother's arrest. Hearing the lie in Daddy's voice had been the next. But the hardest, the worst wrong thing, was yet to come. I knew it.

CASSIE

You knew it?

LETITIA

I know many things. Mostly things I wished I didn't. My teacher calls me 'unusually perceptive,' but Bernadette, she accuses me of mischief and lies. When she looks at me, all she's sees is wickedness.

GUSSY

No, that can't be.

LETITIA

Is so. Despite my efforts to behave as well as I can at all times, Stepmother, she considers me the very living image of everything wrong with her life. I've known this since I was five, the first time Daddy brought me to live with him because Mama was too poor. Bernadette hated me right away, at first glance. I didn't know why, not then, but the hatred had been as plain as the moon in the sky. It came to me later, Bernadette hated me because I was proof that Daddy had known other women before her, and because she hated mothering a strange woman's daughter when she could not have children herself.

But knowing why hadn't made me feel any more welcome in this house. I only ever felt welcome when Daddy came home at night, when Bernadette locked most of her hatred for me away and concentrated on finding things to dislike about Daddy.

(MORE)

## LETITIA (CONT'D)

I was afraid to enjoy anything about Daddy's beautiful house, because none of it was really mine. I could be sent away at any time, and I would hardly ever see Daddy if that happened, like it was before. When I came home with powders from Mama to slip into Bernadette's bath-water, I only did it because I wanted her to stop hating me so much.

CASSIE

She tells you she hates you?

LETITIA

Oh she never says these things aloud, not like an evil stepmother in a fairy-tale, but she doesn't have to. Words are only part of what people are. Usually the least important part. I can see right through people. As if they were standing before me naked. I can see right into people's hearts.

GUSSY

Whoa.

CASSIE

You ever see things you wished you hadn't?

LETITIA

All the time. When I go to church, people avoid me. People who steal from their bosses, people who are mean to their children, people who are courting someone other than their husband or wife. They fear. They're afraid I might tell on them.

One time, I'd said something that made the minister slap my face from the shock of hearing his business told. Now, I've learned to keep quiet.

CASSIE

Yeah. I could see why.

GUSSY

Uh-huh.

LETITIA

My aunties and neighbors near Mama's house have theories about why I have the gift: they say I was born with a caul covering my face, which gave me the seeing-eye, the third-eye. Others say it's because my Mama is a roots-woman, and she tied a piece of High John the Conqueror root around my neck the moment I was born. I know things, and usually knowing brings me only disappointment and trouble, so I don't like to think over the reasons why I have the gift... it brings me no joy. And with Brother in Jail, I realized there would be no joy for some time.

This problem with Brother was going to change everything. The problem with Brother was going to make every other problem seem small. And the problem with Brother would be up to me to fix, in the end.

GUSSY

You? Why's it your problem to fix? That's for the court...

LETITIA

The court... (snickers) One afternoon when Daddy was at his store and Bernadette was taking a nap I went to the corner of the parlor Daddy used as his office, with his oak roll-top desk and electric lamp and stacks of papers in different piles. I climbed up into Daddy's leather chair and surveyed the desk. Before I could decide exactly what I was looking for, or where to begin, the return address typed on a piece of mail caught my eye: LIVE OAK, it said.

I brought it out to read by the sunlight stealing in beneath the drawn shade. The whole letter was typed, which told me it must be important.

CASSIE

Is that the letter you have there now?

LETITIA

It is.

GUSSY

Can I read it?

LETITIA

Here you go.

GUSSY

(reading partway through, transitions from Gussy's voice to that of LAWYER)

Dear Mr. Reaves,

Regarding the matter of Wallace Lee Hutchins, I cannot impress upon you enough how urgent it is that you appear at the County Courthouse at 1 p.m. Friday, July 20.

LAWYER

Many cases like this one are disposed of in the blink of an eye, to the defendant's disadvantage. As an attorney for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), I am investigating the rising number of very troubling capital cases in this county. Your son's case is one of an alarming pattern. Please allow me to be frank: Two eyewitnesses, including the shopkeeper, have told police they saw the two boys with a .22-caliber pistol at the time of the robbery. The witnesses and the defendants have quarreled in the past, so one party's word goes against the other's - but since the witnesses are white, I don't have to tell you which version will have more credibility. Mrs. Kelly is fighting the charges against her son with all her soul - she was the one who contacted the NAACP - but I'm afraid she is in a similar position to your own son's mother.

(MORE)

## LAWYER (CONT'D)

Both ladies are ill-respected in this community.

Again, Mr. Reaves, it is vital that you contact me as soon as possible to help me prepare your son's defense. My resources in this matter are limited, but I believe if the jury heard the testimony of a respected colored business-owner in his son's defense, we may get a lesser sentence. You are his best chance. My great fear, sir, is that the prosecutor will seek execution. Two young men were executed earlier this year after being tried in very similar circumstances, where a robbery was committed, but there were no injuries or fatalities. Armed robbery, it seems, is a capital offense for colored boys.

Plainly put, I am asking you to help me save your son's life. I think we can both agree that if these two young men committed an armed robbery - and although they both maintain their innocence, it's very possible that they did - they deserve a severe punishment in the eyes of the law. They will go to jail for a long time, as is only proper.

But these are sixteen-year-old boys, and neither deserves to die for the ignorant work of one night, especially not under a legal system that is a sham, in a county where hunting colored men is virtually legal. (There was a lynching not a mile from where I'm lodging the night I arrived - my first exposure to the heinous phenomenon. But it is your son's case that has been sent to the top of the docket.)

## GUSSY

(still reading) Please help me in this matter. I am trying to prevent another lynching, this one in a courtroom.

GUSSY (CONT'D)

(to the group)  
My God...

CASSIE

Oh...

LETITIA

That letter was the most important thing I'd ever found. After I read it, I understood it all: Brother and a friend had been charged with robbing a store with a gun. The shopkeeper and another witness who didn't like Brother claimed Brother and his friend had a gun, and it was Brother's word against theirs. The court was rushing to take the case to trial, and they would probably ask for The Chair. A lot of colored people have been getting The Chair lately, and the problem is so bad that a national association for colored people came to see about it. And if Daddy didn't go, Brother might die. It was all so plain to me, it was as if I'd known the whole story the first time Bernadette told me that Brother was in jail.

The letter said the trial was going to start on July 20. I hadn't thought about what day of the month it was because there was no reason to track time in the summers, but then I'd checked the kitchen wall calendar and learned it was Tuesday, July 17.

GUSSY

And that's why the paper says...

LETITIA

Yes.

CASSIE

And you learned about all this... three days ago.

LETITIA

That's right.

CASSIE  
And so what did you do?

LETITIA  
I waited until dinner.

FLASHBACK - HOUSE, DINNERTIME

FX - eating dinner. There is an undertone of tension that quickly escalates.

LETITIA (CONT'D)  
You're going, aren't you, Daddy?

BERNADETTE  
Going where? (beat) What are you talking about?

DADDY  
She ain't talking about nothing.

LETITIA  
Aren't you going to Brother's trial?

DADDY  
Letitia...

BERNADETTE  
Richard...Washington...Reaves...

DADDY  
Now come on, Bernadette. Don't start up again. We're sitting to a pleasant meal.

BERNADETTE  
We settled that, Richard. You promised.

DADDY  
Yes, we settled it. Of course we did. Pay Letitia no mind.

LETITIA  
But you are going, aren't you, Daddy? If you don't, Brother could do.

DADDY  
(under breath) Lord Jesus Help Me.

Daddy stands up abruptly, shoving his plate aside. Then grabs Letitia.

DADDY (CONT'D)

That's enough, Letitia, you come on with me right now.

LETITIA

No, Daddy! Daddy! No, I just asked -

-

DADDY

NOW.

Daddy brings Letitia up to her room, slams the door behind them. Letitia is near tears at this point.

LETITIA

I'm sorry for what I said, Daddy. You're not going to hit me, are you?

DADDY

Have you been into my mail?

LETITIA

Yes, sir. But I only wanted to know about brother.

DADDY

Well, I'm very sorry you did that, Letitia, because that letter was meant not for your eyes. That letter was from a lawyer from New York who's just trying to scare us so we'll do what he says. He hasn't lived down here, and he doesn't understand my position. He's asking me to do something I can't do, and I want you to put it out of your head. Your brother got himself in some trouble, so he'll probably go to jail. But I sent some money, and he'll be just fine.

LETITIA

Daddy, he says you have to go, or Brother will get The Chair.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

(narrating) Daddy looked scared, now, the way he looked the night he brought his hunting rifle out of the closet because a strange car was driving slowly past our house after dark.

(MORE)

LETITIA (CONT'D)

Some people were jealous of him, he said - some white people - and jealousy was apparently something to fear. There was a bead of sweat on the bulb at the end of his nose, and he could barely make himself keep his brown eyes fixed on mine.

DADDY

You're too young to take all this in, Letitia. You can't believe everything somebody says just because it's typed on a piece of paper. That lawyer's job is to help your brother. But I'm not a lawyer, and I'm no help to him. And besides that, there's no chance they'll give Wallace Lee the chair. He didn't kill nobody.

LETITIA

The letter said --

DADDY

What did I just tell you about believing everything that's typed on a piece of paper? That's a spook story he wrote in that letter. That's so I'll do what he says.

LETITIA

But why won't you, Daddy? You have a car. You could drive there.

DADDY

(sighs, sits down on her bed next to her) Nothing's that simple, little princess. Wallace Lee's mother and me knew each other a long time ago. She's shamed herself in that town in ways that have nothing to do with me, and if I get all tangled in this mess, running off to a courtroom where there's newspaper reporters and such, then I'll be shamed too. A businessman can't afford to be shamed. All a colored man has in this world is his name, Letitia. And besides that, there's no use me going trying to stir up trouble. The Klan runs that county, and there's Klan in this county, too.

(MORE)

DADDY (CONT'D)

People in a place to make life very hard for all of us. Now, my heart aches for Wallace Lee - but I've seen how such things come out in the end, and it wouldn't do any good for any of us. I would just make this situation worse. Far worse.

LETITIA

(narrating) As I stared up at Daddy in that instant, he shrank in my eyes, although he was still three feet taller than me still, with thick arms and thighs as solid as the trunk of an oak. He began to look very small, the way he looked to me when Bernadette chased him from one corner of the house to the other with her sharp tongue, his shoulders wincing with every blow.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

(in scene) It's cause of Bernadette, isn't it? She don't want you to go.

DADDY

Mind your tongue, child!

FX - Smack! Daddy slaps her.

LETITIA

(winces)

DADDY

Letitia. Don't you dare put that magic-eye on me, gal. You best learn to stay out of grown people's business. I've made my decision, and that's the last I have to say about it. Now you get yourself to bed.

Daddy storms out, slams the door.

LETITIA

(whispered) You're so weak, Daddy. You look big and strong, but you're weak through and through. (breaks into tears)

FX - Purring, cat comes up onto her.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

Hi... Hi Midnight... Thank you...  
Thank you...

Back to scene...

CASSIE

He hit you? For pointing out what  
was obvious?

LETITIA

I learned long ago that the truth  
makes people angry, and to speak  
it was considered evil.

GUSSY

Ain't that the truth.

LETITIA

I should've known better, but I was  
upset about brother. My room is  
directly across the hall from  
Daddy's, and even when their door  
was closed, I knew what went on in  
there even when I wasn't trying. I  
knew how Bernadette expected Daddy  
to account for his whereabouts  
every minute of every day. I knew  
how Bernadette told him 'No' when  
he said he was thinking about  
buying more land or expanding his  
store... she preferred him to buy  
pretty things for the house  
instead. And worst of all, I knew  
how Daddy had to beg - how he had  
to make his voice sound silly and  
ask a dozen times or more, each  
time sounding sillier than before -  
to convince Bernadette to lie in  
his bed with him like a man lies  
with his wife. Most times, begging  
or no begging, her answer was 'No.'

I don't know about the private  
things men and women do together,  
but I do know that the sound of  
Daddy's begging makes me feel sick  
to my stomach.

If Daddy understood how much I  
really knew, he would have done  
more than just slap me.

MUSIC - TRANSITION

// BREAK //

LETITIA (CONT'D)

The next day, as I always did when I had nowhere else to turn, I walked the half-mile's distance on an unpaved road to see Mama. Whenever I went to Mama and cried about how mean Bernadette was to me, Mama knew how to fix it. She knew which powders, which doll, and which combinations of roots, bone and blood would make Bernadette more humble, more tolerable, more kind. Bernadette never got completely quiet - something I'd wished for often - but after a good ritual or two, I noticed I had two or three weeks in a row when Bernadette did not say a single unkind thing to me. That was all the proof I needed that Mama's magic worked.

FX - Door opens.

MAMA

Lettie, what troubles you?

LETITIA

Brother, mama.

MAMA

He get himself into some trouble?

LETITIA

Yes. And Daddy won't help.

MAMA

Tell me the story, dear.

LETITIA

(to Gussy/Cassie) I told her everything that had happened, starting with the morning Bernadette told me the news, all about the letter, about what happened at the dinner. When I finished, Mama clucked her tongue and sighed:

MAMA

That man, that man... Well, don't nothin' change. Always too skeered of what people think.

LETITIA

I think it's cause of Bernadette.

MAMA

Well, shoot, we know that. What ain't the fault of that devil-woman?

LETITIA

Do a spell, Mama. Make it so Bernadette will say Daddy can go save Brother. Make her go out her head, or get her real sick. Or...

MAMA

(Clucks tongue again) Naw, we ain't gonna kill her. I see you thinking it. I remember that time we made her little doll, you twisted the leg and Bernadette fell off a horse next day? We cain't do no more, Letitia. We hexed that woman five, six times. I told you that kinda' magic comes back on you. She got protection, and she's comin' back strong now. Naw, chile, we mess with any bad juju now, and yo' brother's gon' die.

LETITIA

(narrating) "Brother's gon' die. " Those three words turned my blood cold.

MAMA

The spirits is playin' tricks. Somebody got a curse on that house, and we got to do a higher ceremony. I think it's got to be you, 'cause you're blood kin to your brother.

You need a sacrifice ritual, Lettie. You seen me bleed chickens, and that's what you got to do. But if you want the message to get across, don't use a chicken. That might not get what you want quick enough. Use your black cat.

LETITIA  
My cat? Midnight?

MAMA  
Lettie, I know you love that cat.  
But you'll make the spirits listen  
if you bleed something you love.  
You see how I keep my bleeding  
chickens apart from my stewing  
chickens? I treat 'em special. And  
I had to do this, too, when I was  
your age.

LETITIA  
I won't.

MAMA  
Then you don't wanna' save your  
brother, do you?

LETITIA  
(narrating)  
My stomach hurt as I thought of  
Brother's row of smiling teeth.  
Brother was in a cage somewhere,  
and soon he would go to The Chair.

LETITIA (CONT'D)  
(dialogue) Daddy will go see about  
him.

MAMA  
Chile, yo' daddy ain't goin'  
nowhere. I know yo' daddy. I know  
him. If he was gonna' go, he'd'a  
gone from the start. He would'a  
been there an' back. Nothin' can't  
keep that man from somethin' he  
wanna' do, and nothin' can't change  
his mind, neither. Bernadette's got  
him stuck bein' wrongheaded, to let  
his own boy die. There's ways for  
women to get a'hold of men until  
they can't fight, an' that's how  
Bernadette's got him. An' she was  
too strong for me, chile. Else, you  
an' me both would be livin' in yo'  
Daddy's fine house, wouldn't we?

LETITIA  
(near tears) No. Bernadette... She  
can't be more powerful than you,  
Mama.

MAMA

This is one o' them times you got a choice, Lettie. You can do what you want and hope things don't turn out wrong, or you can do what you know will make things right.

Letitia bursts into tears, she gulps, tries to hold it in.

MAMA (CONT'D)

If you gon' do it, do it clean and quick, like you seen me. When the blood's spilt, say this prayer: "Spirit, release my daddy an' give him strength to fight the curse." An' do it at midnight. See how you named that cat? Like you known it from the start. Mama'll come bring you a new cat someday.

LETITIA

By myself?

MAMA

Just take the cat out back, to yo' Daddy's barn. Do it quick. Take this knife.

Mama pulls a sharp knife from a cutting block

MAMA (CONT'D)

Just the size for Midnight. (beat)  
Lettie?

LETITIA

(trembling) Thank you Mama.

FX - Lettie takes the knife.

MAMA

You goin to thank your Mama?

LETITIA

I wish I'd never been born!

FX - Letitia runs out of Mama's house, slams door, hits dirt road and starts running.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

(narrating) I don't remember my walk home. I don't remember what happened the rest of the day.

CASSIE

You took the knife?

LETITIA

Mama had rolled it up in a handkerchief and I held it against me, it seemed to burn. I told Bernadette I didn't feel well - that was true - and I sat on my bed stroking Midnight's velvet-soft fur, rubbing my chin against the top of his head while his purr's filled my ears.

Cat purring, under.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

As much as I hated to believe Mama's words, I knew their truth. Daddy had made up his mind, and he would not go see about Brother on his own. And Brother, most certainly, would die without Daddy's help. If there was a curse on my house, like Mama had said, then the curse on the town where Brother was in jail was a hundred times bigger. A hundred times stronger. It was a curse that had touched many families already.  
(chokes back a sob)

Cassie tries to comfort Lettie, though even as the words come out she realizes how hollow they are.

CASSIE

Hey, Lettie... It's, um, it's okay...

LETITIA

The trial day would ruin everything. I could see it, clear as day. If Brother went to The Chair, Daddy would be a changed man. The bourbon bottle he kept hidden in the pantry for special occasions would become his constant companion. Bernadette, full of her own guilt, would be more hateful than ever. And I would grow to despise them both. For all my life, I would judge men as weak and act accordingly, learning from the lesson of Daddy and Bernadette.

(MORE)

LETITIA (CONT'D)

But though I might hate them, I would imitate them all the same. I knew these things as sure as I knew my name. I felt my future unfolding like a clear-minded dream. It was so imminent, poised with terrible ease, that I marveled that Daddy and Bernadette couldn't see it, too.

But they couldn't. If they could, Daddy would have left for the trial by now.

Cat is purring loudly, meows at Lettie.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

(dialogue) Oh, midnight...

LETITIA (CONT'D)

(narrating) In Sunday school, I studied Judas Iscariot, the Betrayer, and the thought made me cry harder. Midnight wasn't the same as Jesus, of course, but he trusted me. For the past year, since Daddy said I could keep the cat who planted himself on our doorstep, I had taken care of Midnight, and he had taken care of me. How could I kill a creature that loved me?

But then I remembered Abraham and Isaac from the Old Testament. God told Abraham to sacrifice his son, but in the end it was only a test. Just like Abraham, I only had to show my willingness to do what Mama said, and God would provide another way to save Brother. Or maybe this was the only way, and Midnight was going to make a sacrifice like Jesus had, to save another's soul.

By sunset, I'd made up my mind.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

(dialogue) I have to do it, Midnight. Maybe God will save you. But even if He doesn't, you can save Brother. I know you can.

Cat meows

LETITIA (CONT'D)

What's that, you're saying yes? You are, aren't you? You understand it all, and it's perfectly fine with you. (kisses him) Thank you, Midnight.

MUSIC - Transition

LETITIA (CONT'D)

I went into Daddy's room and got his gold pocket-watch, so I could make sure I could do what I needed to, just as soon as the tall hand and the short hand pointed to twelve. Then I got a dish of milk, and laid it out in the barn for Midnight, and brought him out. He was happy to be in the barn, at first.

Cat meows, walks over to milk, starts lapping it up.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

I enjoyed watching him drink, almost laughing at the slurping sound he made and the sloppy droplets of milk dotting his whiskers. "Midnight was two parts cat and one part hog," Daddy always said. The thought made me smile through my tears.

And with that thought, I felt my resolve melting. I wanted nothing more than to scoop Midnight into my arms and run back to bed before I got caught outside the house. Then, I remembered that wonderful sound of Daddy and Brother laughing on the porch, how that sound had lulled me to sleep.

FLASHBACK - Laughter of Brother/Daddy from earlier in the episode.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

I remembered how Brother called me Lettie. How he hugged me and said he loved me every time he came to stay, never tugging on my hair or teasing me the way my friends' older brothers did. I looked at the watch.

(MORE)

LETITIA (CONT'D)

Only two minutes until midnight.  
How had the time gone so fast?

LETITIA (CONT'D)

(dialogue, praying) God, please let  
Midnight forgive me for what I'm  
about to do... and please let this  
just be a test, so you will stop my  
hand at the last moment... and  
please don't let Midnight die...  
but if Midnight has to die, please  
let his sacrifice stop the curse so  
Daddy will go look after Brother  
and keep him safe.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

(narrating) My prayer gobbled a  
full minute. With as heavy a heart  
as I had ever known, choking me so  
much my head felt light, I  
realized... It was time. I unrolled  
the handkerchief and took out the  
tiny shiny knife Mama had given me.  
I tried it on my finger. It was  
razor sharp.

It was time to hold Midnight tight  
and feed his blood to the spirits.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

(dialogue) Midnight. You're not  
going to like this. I need to pick  
you up, and hold you still.

Cat meows, Letitia grabs her, Cat gets agitated

LETITIA (CONT'D)

I thought about the task, not  
Midnight himself, or else with all  
his thrashing and complaining, I  
might feel sorry and forget what  
was at stake. Daddy was weak, so I  
needed to be strong, and that was  
that.

Midnight fought me, wriggling like  
mad to get loose. He freed his  
front paw and slashed me, and that  
made me mad - and the anger helped.  
I clamped my knees around him and  
hooked one arm around his middle,  
tight.

(MORE)

LETITIA (CONT'D)

My palm was slick with sweat, but I kept a firm grip on the knife, and raised it to Midnight's throat. Mama always wanted to use the throat.

More agitated angry cat sounds.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

I wanted to close my eyes, but couldn't. I poked and then slashed with the knife, quickly, and even though the cut wasn't nearly deep enough, I was amazed to see a ribbon of blood seep through Midnight's fur, right above his tiny collarbone.

Cat howls out.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

I watched, fascinated, as two fat, crimson drops of blood fell to the dusty barn floor at my feet. I kept my grip around the cat, and was about to let go when I realized I had almost forgotten the prayer.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

(dialogue) Spirit, please help lift the curse and make my Daddy strong so he will go see about Brother--

DADDY

(booming) What in great red hell are you doing?

LETITIA

(Gasping)

Letitia releases grip on the cat, drops the knife. Cat mewls and then rushes off.

LETITIA

(narrating) I thought it might be God's voice at first, before I realized it was only Daddy. He was standing in the doorway of the barn, wearing only his trousers. His chest was heaving up and down. His face was a combination of rage and shock, a kind of shock I'd never seen on my Daddy's face before.

DADDY

Letitia, what are you doing?

LETITIA

Mama said... she said to...  
sacrifice...

LETITIA (CONT'D)

(narrating) It was Abraham and  
Isaac. God had stepped in and sent  
Daddy.

DADDY

Mama said to... what...

(Daddy fumbles for his belt)

LETITIA

(narrating) Daddy fumbled for his  
belt, before he realized he wasn't  
wearing it. He was angry. He wanted  
to beat me. Beat me in a way he'd  
never beaten me before.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

(dialogue) Mama said if I  
sacrificed Midnight, I'd break the  
curse and you would go see about  
Brother. See the blood, Daddy? I  
had to bleed Midnight, but I did it  
for Brother, Daddy. I did it so  
you'd go to the trial.

DADDY

You did... what?

LETITIA

(narrating) Daddy stared at my  
pointing finger, then back at my  
face, than back at my finger, and  
then his own face seemed to  
transform. The only light was the  
dim lantern I'd brought with the  
bowl of milk, but Daddy's face  
wasn't the same anymore. The only  
word for it, really, was haunted.  
He cradled his abdomen, as if a  
grown man had kicked him in the  
stomach hard.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

We have to save Brother, Daddy.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

(narrating) Daddy rocked in place, like he did when he'd had too much to drink. Then, he took a lurching step and turned so he was no longer facing me. One step at a time, he walked away. He did not look at me or speak to me. I saw him climb the steps of the back porch, and he was back inside the house. He left the back door wide open. Bernadette wouldn't like that, I thought. All the mosquitoes could come in.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

(dialogue, calling out) Midnight!  
Midnight!

With following dialogue, cat hisses.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

(narrating) I called for Midnight for a long time. I finally heard him growling somewhere out in the bushes near the cotton patch, but he would not come to me. Maybe he would never come back, I realized. But this time, I did not cry.

FX - squeak of a sink faucet turned on, water running, hands washed.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

I washed my bloody scratches clean in the kitchen sink, blew out the lamp and climbed the stairs to go into my room. Daddy's door was closed, but I could hear Bernadette's voice through the door, wide awake.

BERNADETTE

Richard, what's got into you? Talk to me. I said talk to me, goddammit. You put that suitcase down, you hear me? Do you know what time it is?

LETITIA

I stole into my own room and shut the door.

FX - door latched, quietly.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

I tore off every piece of clothing I was wearing, even though my body was shaking. I climbed into my bed, under the covers, seeking sanctuary while my breathing came hard and deep from my lungs. I had a headache. The memory of Midnight's blood on the knife made my stomach twist, and I was afraid I would be sick. As I lay there, I remembered I left Daddy's pocket-watch lying on the barn floor, next to Bernadette's bowl from the kitchen. They would be mad about that. I wanted to go and fetch them, but I couldn't move from where I lay.

FX - Door (outside in hallway) bursts open, then heavy footsteps. Daddy is leaving his bedroom.

LETITIA (CONT'D)

My eyes were closed tight, but in my third eye - what Daddy calls my magic eye - I could see Daddy leaving his room wearing his best brown suit and white shirt, with his brown Sunday derby. He was wearing the clothes that told everyone that he was Richard Reaves, a business-owner, and he was not a hard-luck sort of man.

BERNADETTE

Richard... you aren't thinking clearly. Do you know what they'll do to an uppity yellow negro who thinks he can just walk in there and have a say? Think of it, Richard! Don't be a fool. Don't get your name mixed up in this mess. That boy's gonna' be all right. You aren't thinking. What about your family? What about me and Letitia? I swear to Jesus, if you don't stop this foolishness, I won't be here when you come back. Richard...  
RICHARD!

FX - Daddy's footsteps trail down stairs, a more distant door opens, car (1920s roadster) chokes, sputters, then roars to life

BERNADETTE (CONT'D)

Richard, don't do this - I love you!

LETITIA

Bernadette's professed love just sounded like the same old hate to me. No matter, I'd bled Midnight and the curse was broken. Daddy's ears belonged to himself again and he had his strength back. I closed my eyes, smiling. The sound of that purring engine as it drove away was as sweet as the memory of Daddy's laughter with Brother on the porch that night.

Flashback - again, the laughter of the brother and Daddy

LETITIA (CONT'D)

As sweet as Christmas morning and as gentle as the stinging of Mama's loving hands when she pulled my hair into tight plaits between her knees, the way only Mama really knew how. And then, my magic eye, it stopped working. Brother's future was blurry and far away, not for me to know. All I knew for sure was that Richard Reaves was on his way to the trial in his good suit to try to save Brother. And that knowledge would last me as long as I would live.

MUSIC - Crescendo.

Back to scene on porch, old farmhouse, wind blowing.

CASSIE

That was last night?

LETITIA

That's right. Daddy's off to defend Brother. It's Trial Day.

BERNADETTE

(off) Letitia! Who you talking to?

GUSSY

That must be your stepmother, Bernadette?

LETITIA

She's still here. But her words  
don't work on me anymore.

CASSIE

Thanks, Lettie, for telling us your  
story.

GUSSY

Yes, and uh, good luck at the  
Trial. I hope Brother goes free.

LETITIA

Me too. (beat) You best be going  
now. I still got some prayers to  
say. My magic eye's not working,  
but God still listens to prayers,  
don't he?

CASSIE

Yes, Lettie. I'm sure he does.

FX - Sound starts to warble around them. thennnn PORTAL!  
Whoos

INT. BOOKSHOP - LATER

Cassie and Gussy are thrust onto the bookshop floor, gasping.

CASSIE

We're hear... back in the  
booshop... Safe...

FX - door opens, off. Someone enters the bookshop.

CASSIE (CONT'D)

Who's that - -- oh, crap, that's my  
guidance counselor, Mr. Gussy---

GUSSY

Ssh. I'll take care of it.

CASSIE

How...?

GUSSY

I got it, okay?

There is a presence in the far end of the room, Gussy  
addresses, stepping out from behind a stack of books.

GUSSY (CONT'D)

Hi there, can I help you? --

Guidance counselor is idly flipping through some titles.

COUNSELOR

Mr. Gussy. (raises eyebrow) You had a fire in here?

GUSSY

Some moron came in here with a cigarette, I was out back, next thing I hear was the guy yelling, he'd set a stack of John Grisham paperbacks on fire. Lucky I keep a fire extinguisher handy. Obey all the fire codes.

COUNSELOR

Hm. Too bad he didn't burn up the Stephen Kings.

GUSSY

Something I can help you with, George?

COUNSELOR

You still looking for unseen worlds? Finding unsuspecting young people and sending them off with your... tome?

GUSSY

Are you looking for a particular title? This is a bookshop, you know. For paying customers.

COUNSELOR

I am very interested in a particular book. One which is rightfully my father's. A book which should have been burned. My dad didn't have the guts to do it, so I'd like to.

GUSSY

I don't follow you.

Counselor pulls out a piece of paper, reads.

COUNSELOR

"The first time I traveled, I traveled alone. I was guided to hell by a man who murdered his cousin and I came back with a bird that sang when people told it lies." You know what this is?

(MORE)

COUNSELOR (CONT'D)

It's a personal essay from Cassie Pinkham about what she learned in community service. At the hospital bedside of Mr. Gussy.

GUSSY

Girl has a colorful imagination.  
Reads a lot of books.

COUNSELOR

Girl has not appeared at school for over a week.

GUSSY

'Scuse me?

COUNSELOR

She was last seen at the senior prom, ten days ago, she left with Kim Norridge, also a senior. Cassie came home in the middle of the night, and apparently there was an - ah - domestic altercation.

GUSSY

Is that right?

COUNSELOR

There were raised words between her and her mother's boyfriend, and windows were broken in their apartment. Cassie stormed out. She hasn't been seen since.

GUSSY

You're coming to me looking for a missing girl? Who do I look like, Sam Spade?

COUNSELOR

I thought that maybe you would have seen her. She was spending a lot of time here before she went missing.

GUSSY

Can't help you. Isn't this something the police should be looking into?

COUNSELOR

COUNSELOR (CONT'D)

The police have been looking, believe me.

(MORE)

COUNSELOR (CONT'D)

They've been digging through Cassie's social media accounts and they've been questioning her friend Kim. But you know as well as I do, Mr. Gussy, that they're not going to find her. Not out there. I thought you might appreciate me coming to you first, before the police got involved. They might not appreciate literature as much as I do.

GUSSY

I'm afraid I can't help you, George. Last I saw Cassie, it was the night of the prom, same as you. Sent her off and wished her well, haven't seen her since.

COUNSELOR

(beat) So that's how it's gonna be?

GUSSY

That's the Lord's honest truth.

COUNSELOR

I thought that might be your answer. Okay. Well, when it all goes down, Mr. Gussy, you'll only have yourself to blame.

GUSSY

Sorry I couldn't help you, George. I'll keep an eye out for the girl. She's a smart kid. I'm sure she knows better than to get herself into trouble.

COUNSELOR

Yes, she's smart. That's exactly what I'm worried about.

Counselor reluctantly exits the bookshop

FX - door shut.

CASSIE

Thank you, thank you Mr. Gussy.

GUSSY

Quiet now. We're getting you downstairs. Up here ain't safe anymore.

FX - Gussy opens trap door, they head down.

CASSIE

Did he say... ten days? I've been missing for ten days?

GUSSY

You heard him right.

CASSIE

Last time, when I came back from the prom, it was Saturday, instead of Friday, but now... Mr. Gussy, what's going on?

GUSSY

Remember our conversation about going sideways? Well, looks like we veered real sideways this time.

CASSIE

Ten *days*?

GUSSY

Cassie, you just heard, we're in a red hot pile of trouble right now, but before we go any further, I think I better fill you in... I think it's time to tell you how I came across the Dark Tome.

MUSIC - Ominous, over, out.