

THE SPITFIRE GRILL, a musical written by James Valcq (music and book) and Fred Alley (lyrics and book), based on the film by Lee David Zlotoff. **Copy of the script is available to be read at the Hi-Desert Cultural Center.*

A feisty parolee follows her dreams, based on a page from an old travel book, to a small town in Wisconsin and finds a place for herself working at Hannah's Spitfire Grill. It is for sale but there are no takers for the only eatery in the depressed town, so newcomer Percy suggests to Hannah that she raffle it off. Entry fees are one hundred dollars and the best essay on why you want the grill wins. Soon, mail is arriving by the wheelbarrow full and things are definitely cookin' at the Spitfire Grill.

"A soul satisfying...work of theatrical resourcefulness. A compelling story that flows with grace and carries the rush of anticipation. The story moves, the characters have many dimensions and their transformations are plausible and moving. The musical is freeing. It is penetrated by honesty and it glows." - **The New York Times**

"Soulful...The amiable country flavored tunes and lyrics are rendered with the kind of conviction and expertise that make them transcendent. What in normal times would be a joy is, in these troubled ones, sheer nourishment." - **New York Magazine**

"An abundance of warmth, spirit and goodwill!... Some of the most engaging and instantly infectious melodies I've heard in an original musical in some time." - **USA Today**

"Soaring melodies!... - **The Wall Street Journal**

Seeking:

PERCY TALBOTT - early to mid-20s. Strong-minded parolee determined to start over. Kind but feisty and perhaps a bit rough-edged, her past has given her wisdom and sadness beyond her years., (**strong folk/country belt to 'D', some head voice required.**)

HANNAH FERGUSON – late 50s to 70. The tough-skinned owner of the Spitfire Grill. A fiery old bird with a short, no-nonsense manner bordering on the bitter. (**Mezzo/alto chest range.**)

SHELBY THORPE – early to mid-30s. Caleb's meek, but soulful, wife. She begins to show confidence under Percy's influence. A plain, soft-faced creature with a shy, almost ethereal manner. (**Shimmering folk soprano with strong high belt to 'D'.**)

EFFY KRAYNECK – 40s to 50s. Gilead's Postmistress and resident busybody. A nosy and opinionated woman with narrow eyes and a sour tongue. (**Solid singer in mezzo/alto chest range. Must be able to carry close harmony.**)

CALEB THORPE – mid-30s to early 40s. Hannah's bitter nephew, an out-of-work foreman of the stone quarry. Fiercely protective of his aunt, he is frustrated as he loses control over most aspects of his life and tends to exert control over his wife. (**Solid folk/rock baritone with an edge (Top 'G').**)

JOE SUTTER – mid-20s to 30s. The local sheriff and Percy's parole officer. A likeable sort with an appealing intensity and a restless nature, eager to leave the town of Gilead for good. (**Strong folk tenor to a 'G' (touches an 'A').**)

THE VISITOR – mid-40 early 50's. An important, central, nonspeaking role requiring very strong acting ability. An actor with powerful eyes and a very strong sense of his body.

AUDITION SIDES

PERCY & JOE (& Percy- who does not speak in the scene):

Start pg. 10 **JOE:** "So – Perchance Talbot. Perchance. What kinda name is that?"

End pg. 11 **JOE:** "Damn ... my coffee's cold. Grab your suitcase."

HANNAH & JOE:

Start pg. 12 JOE: "Hannah? Hannah, I saw the light. You still up?"

End pg. 13 HANNAH: "Anything else you need to know will keep till then."
*(*cut the song lyric and prepare just the dialogue.)*

PERCY & HANNAH:

Start pg. 25 PERCY: "I was gonna turn in, Hannah."

End pg. 25 HANNAH: "No. Just go do what I told you."

SHELBY & PERCY:

Start pg. 26 SHELBY: "...Sorry I'm late."

End pg. 29 PERCY: "To win a whole grill I spose you could ask even more."
*(*cut the song lyric and prepare just the dialogue.)*

HANNAH & CALEB

Start pg. 37 CALEB: "Aunt Hannah? Aunt Hannah!"

End pg. 37 CALEB: "Aw the hell with it. Go ahead, raffle it off. I don't even know why I try."

PERCY & VISITOR

Start pg. 45 PERCY: "You gonna do something to me?"

End pg. 46 PERCY: "A feather."
(cut Hannah's line.)*

PERCY & JOE:

Start pg. 57 JOE: "Percy-"

End pg. 59 JOE: "Will you at least think about it?"
*(*cut the song lyric and prepare just the dialogue.)*

SHELBY & PERCY:

Start pg. 59 SHELBY: "Percy, are you ok out here?"

End pg. 60 SHELBY: "Percy... Oh, Percy girl..."

CALEB & SHELBY:

Start pg. 61 SHELBY: "Caleb. You should be in bed."

End pg. 61 SHELBY: "I think you should find someplace to stay for awhile."

JOE & EFFY:

Start pg. 64 EFFY: "You were forty-five minutes late picking up your mail."

End pg. 65 EFFY: "Anytime, Joe, Anytime."

***Prepare 32 bars of any song to audition with a cappella, from Spitfire Grill or other show.
Preferably country rock style.***

To hear samples of the songs go to: samuelfrench.com and look under "MEDIA".

The Spitfire Grill

A MUSICAL

Music & book by
James Valcq

Lyrics & Book by
Fred Alley

Based on the Film by
Lee David Zlotoff

Playwrights Horizons, New York City,
Produced the New York Premiere of *The Spitfire Grill*
Off-Broadway in 2001

The Spitfire Grill received its World Premiere production
by George Street Playhouse on November 5, 2000
David Saint, Artistic Director / Michael Stotts, Managing Director

A SAMUEL
A FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

New York Hollywood London Toronto

SAMUELFRENCH.COM

(The prison bars swing open and PERCY steps out.)

RING AROUND THE MOON,
BIGGER WORLD THAN ME,
READY OR NOT, HERE I GO,
OLLY OLY OXEN FREE...
OLLY OLY OXEN FREE.

*(PERCY changes her prisoner's jacket for a plain coat and scarf.
Clutching a small suitcase, she crosses downstage.)*

TWO STEPS FOLLOW ONE,
ONE STEP FOLLOWS TWO.
A TICKET IN MY HAND,
A BUS TO SOMEWHERE NEW.
A CIRCLE ON A MAP,
COUNT THE MILES TO GO
ON THE ROAD TO GILEAD
DOWN A HIGHWAY I DON'T KNOW.

IT'S ONE MILE TURNIN' TWO,
THREE MILES TURNS TO FOUR,
FIVE MILES TURNS TO FIFTY
THEN A HUNDRED MILES MORE.
BUS ROLLS TO A STOP,
DRIVER TURNS TO ME,
'THIS IS GILEAD...
WHAT THERE IS IS WHAT YOU SEE.'

A RING AROUND THE MOON,
BIGGER WORLD THAN ME,
READY OR NOT, HERE I COME,
OLLY OLY OXEN FREE...

*(Lights reveal SHERIFF JOE SUTTER. He flips through documents
in a file. PERCY crosses to him. Music continues under.)*

JOE. So — Perchance Talbot. Perchance. What kinda name is that?

PERCY. Percy'll do. Warden Halverson said he was gonna call.

JOE. Yeah, sure, I got a call from the prison. But to be honest, Miss Talbot, if the bus hadn't left, I'da put you back on it.

PERCY. Somethin' wrong with this place?

JOE. Chipes, look around you, Gilead's a ghost town. There's

nothing here.

PERCY. The warden said that —

JOE. I really don't care what the warden said, Miss Talbot. He's not the one freezing his ass off at this bus stop, now is he?

PERCY. No sir.

JOE. So why Gilead? *(PERCY is silent.)* Miss Talbot, it's my job to know why you're here ... okay?

(PERCY hesitantly reaches into an inside pocket and hands him a carefully folded piece of paper)

PERCY. Well, sir, I ... cut this picture from an old travel book someone donated at the prison.

JOE. *(Reads picture caption.)* "Autumn colors along Copper Creek near Gilead, Wisconsin." *(Hands picture back to her.)* You're a little late.

PERCY. Creek ain't dried up has it?

JOE. It's frozen. And the fall colors are long gone.

PERCY. *(Not very sure of herself.)* I hope to be here when they come back.

JOE. Yep, well, in the meantime I don't know what the hell I'm gonna do with you. *(Looks around as if for an answer. Tries to sip his coffee.)* Damn ... my coffee's cold. Grab your suitcase.

(HE leads PERCY along, describing the town to her although we don't hear his words. Instead, we hear PERCY's concerns.)

PERCY.
BEHIND THE WINDOW GLASS
THERE ARE FACES I CAN'T SEE.
I FEEL THEM AS WE PASS,
PEEKIN' OUT TO STARE AT ME
ALONG THE SILENT STREETS
THROUGH A CURTAIN OF NEW SNOW,
IN THE TOWN OF GILEAD...

JOE. Good. There's a light on over at the Spitfire.

PERCY. The Spitfire?

JOE. It's your best chance for a job, and apart from the local jail it's the only guest room in town. Looks like Hannah's burning the midnight oil.

(Music swells as the Spitfire is revealed. We see HANNAH FERGUSON, a gray-haired old woman of about seventy years

with a toughness that belies her age, carrying a lantern and a wrapped-up loaf of bread out back of the Grill. She sees the bread beside a large stump. HANNAH drives an ax into the stump, leaving it there with its long handle poised in the air. For a moment, she gazes out toward the deep wood, then turns to gather a few sticks of fire wood to carry back into the Grill. JOE and PERCY arrive at the front porch of the Spiffire.)

JOE. *(Entering the Grill and heading for the back porch.)* Hannah? Hannah. I saw the light. You still up?

HANNAH. No.

JOE. I didn't think so. Here, let me help you with that wood.

(Lights focus on PERCY sitting in the Grill trying to warm her frozen hands, looking at her bleak surroundings and realizing the bus driver may have been right.)

PERCY.

THIS IS GLEAD...

WHAT THERE IS IS WHAT YOU SEE.

A RING AROUND THE MOON,
BIGGER WORLD THAN ME...

(Crossfade back to HANNAH and JOE)

JOE. You know, Hannah, with your bad hip and that, you could use a waitress this winter.

HANNAH. Another body in here won't cure my hip, Joe.

JOE. You need some help, Hannah. I mean, this firewood's not gonna walk in by itself. And anyway, you'd be doing me a favor.

HANNAH. *(Going into the Grill.)* I don't owe you a favor.

JOE. *(Following HANNAH.)* Come on, Hannah. If you wind up in the hospital, who's gonna make my breakfast?

HANNAH. *(Looking over to where PERCY sits and shaking her head.)* I took in a stray dog once and I had to replace all my car-pets.

JOE. I betcha Miss Talbot here is housebroken.

HANNAH. Just so you know, I'm not making any promises.

JOE. *(Turning to PERCY.)* Miss Talbot... *(PERCY crosses in.)* Miss Talbot, this is Hannah Ferguson. *(PERCY and HANNAH take each other in but don't speak. JOE breaks the silence.)* Well, looks like you're all set. Thanks Hannah, now I owe you a favor.

HANNAH. It's always nice to have the law on your side.

JOE. Miss Talbot.

(JOE exits. HANNAH leads PERCY through the Grill.)

HANNAH. Bathroom's at the end of the hall and there's plenty of hot water but not if you dawdle when you're washing. There's extra blankets in the cedar chest. I give you breakfast at six. Work starts at six-thirty sharp. Anything else you need to know will keep till then.

(Without so much as a 'goodnight,' HANNAH disappears, leaving PERCY alone, taking in her spartan surroundings.)

PERCY.

A DARK AND NARROW HALL,
AND THROUGH THE DOOR I FIND
THE SAME COLD EMPTY WALLS
I THOUGHT I LEFT BEHIND.

(The music shimmers as PERCY 'sees' the window.)

A WINDOW WITHOUT BARS,
LOOKIN' OUT ON SOMETHIN' FREE...
IN THE TOWN OF GLEAD
CLOSE MY EYES AND COUNT TO THREE

(PERCY reaches her hand out the window into the cold night air.)

AND THERE'S A RING AROUND THE MOON,
BIGGER WORLD THAN ME,
READY OR NOT, HERE I AM,
OLLY OLY OXEN
FREE...

(Fade out.)

Scene 2

SCENE: The Grill, next morning.

AT RISE: Lights up on HANNAH barking orders to PERCY.

HANNAH. Percy, there's onions in the cellar that need to come up! And boil some water for oatmeal!

WHAT THE HELL COULD BE THE MATTER?
SMELLS LIKE SOMETHIN' EVIL DIED.

I SWEAR THE CORN BEEF HASH
WOULD MAKE ME TURN INTO A VEGETARIAN.
ADD A TOUCH TOO MUCH TABASCO,
AND I'M OUTA THE FIRE, BACK IN THE FRYIN' PAN...

SHELBY. *(Entering.)* Percy, Effy sent her oatmeal back.

PERCY. *(Almost afraid to hear the answer.)* Why?

SHELBY. It's a little thick. She could get the spoon in but she can't get it back out.

(SHELBY exits.)

PERCY.
I FORGOT TO FLIP THE BACON,
AND THE SAUSAGE IS STILL RAW,
AND THE COFFEE CAKE I'M MAKIN'
MIGHT JUST BE AGAINST THE LAW.

I HEAR THE SIRENS WAIL.
IT PROBABLY WOULD BE BETTER IF I RAN,
BUT THERE'S ANOTHER DOZEN ORDERS,
GET ME OUTA THE FIRE, BACK IN THE FRYIN' PAN

PERCY. *(To SHELBY who enters.)* So... You think I'm losing Hannah's customers?

SHELBY. Oh, they'll come back.

PERCY. Pretty loyal, huh?

SHELBY. There's no where else to eat.

(SHELBY goes.)

PERCY.
YES, I CAN HEAR THE SIRENS WAIL.
I REALLY SHOULD'A OUT BEFORE I BEGAN.
BUT THERE'S A SINK O' DIRTY DISHES,
GET ME OUTA THE FIRE,
BACK IN THE FRYIN' PAN!
... MAN!

*(On applause PERCY takes off her apron and hangs it on a chair.
In a crossfade she goes to HANNAH, who is sitting up, her foot*

elevated.)

PERCY. I was gonna turn in, Hannah.

HANNAH. Percy, who exactly was it that taught you how to cook?

PERCY. The devil, judgin' by the looks.

HANNAH. Shelby knows her way around a kitchen. Get some help.

PERCY. I will. Night then.

(PERCY begins to exit. HANNAH calls to her, very cautiously.)

HANNAH. Percy...? There might be one last thing that — still needs doing.

PERCY. What's that?

HANNAH. I'd do it myself, but I can't with this leg.

PERCY. Yes ma'am...

HANNAH. Get a loaf of bread from the kitchen. Wrap it up in a towel, and set it out back by the stump.

PERCY. Loaf of bread...?

HANNAH. And make sure you leave the ax in the stump there ... so no one steps on it — and gets hurt.

(HANNAH can see the question in PERCY's face, but PERCY senses it's a question HANNAH does not want to answer.)

PERCY. *(Silently agreeing to leave the matter alone.)* I'll see to it. Not to worry. You want me to turn out your light?

HANNAH. No. Just go do what I told you.

(PERCY goes. Music starts as light fades on HANNAH. PERCY follows the instructions and places the loaf of bread near the stump. She picks up the ax and drives it into the stump, then gives a start as she senses some kind of sudden movement in the shadows.)

PERCY. Somebody there? ... Somebody there?

(JOE appears out of the darkness.)

JOE. It's me.

PERCY. *(Startled.)* What are you doin'?

JOE. I didn't mean to —

PERCY. What're you doin' here? Watchin' me? Lookin' at me in the dark?

JOE. I was only —

PERCY. If you're thinkin' I'm one of them sex-starved prison gals or somethin', you're damn wrong.

JOE. What??

PERCY. You just come around for our parole meetin' si! Otherwise you got no business around me, you hear?!

(PERCY goes into the Grill.)

JOE. (Calling after her.) I came by to see if Hannah needed more firewood! (Shakes his head.) Damn.

(Crossfade.)

Scene 4

SCENE: The Grill, morning. About a week later.

AT RISE: PERCY is doing AM prep. SHELBY and CALEB argue as they enter the Spitfire.

CALEB. But Shel, you knew I was showing the quarry today, and that I needed my blue shirt.

SHELBY. (Embarrassed to be arguing in front of PERCY.) I didn't have time for a colored load, Caleb. I told you, I'm sorry.

CALEB. I'm sorry doesn't get the damn shirt washed, does it?

SHELBY. (Dispirited.) I'll go home on my break. It'll be in the dryer.

(PERCY and SHELBY nod a wary 'hello'.)

CALEB. (To PERCY.) My Aunt said she was gonna write out a list of supplies.

PERCY. On the table.

CALEB. (Picks up the list.) I'll drop these off when I come back for the bank deposit tonight. (Kisses SHELBY's cheek.) You girls try not to burn the place down. Who knows, one of these days this old greasy spoon might actually sell.

(CALEB exits.)

SHELBY. ... Sorry I'm late.

PERCY. It's not my business.

SHELBY. (Finding empty container.) Scalloped potatoes fin-

ished?

PERCY. Nobody said I couldn't eat leftovers.

SHELBY. That's not what I —

PERCY. I was hungry.

SHELBY. You probably haven't had a decent meal since you went to pr — ... I'm sorry.

PERCY. I haven't exactly made a secret of where I've been, have I?

SHELBY. No, not exactly ...

PERCY. (Very carefully, lowering her defenses a little for the first time with a woman who is still virtually a stranger.) I shouldn't oughta snap at you. I know you been savin' my bacon in here.

SHELBY. I have? (PERCY nods cautiously.) Now that things have gotten... sorted out, it's going pretty good, huh?

PERCY. You could say that twice and mean it.

SHELBY. Just don't tell Caleb I've been helping out in the kitchen, okay?

PERCY. ... Okay. So, is Hannah really tryin' to sell this place?

SHELBY. Oh, I don't know, she might just give it away.

PERCY. Not really.

SHELBY. (Hesitates.) I think the Spitfire reminds her of better times.

PERCY. I don't mean to pry ...

SHELBY. Oh, no ... It's not that. It's just ... she never talks about it.

PERCY. What?

SHELBY. Hannah had a son.

ELI WAS HIS NAME,
TALL AND SWEET AND STRONG,
LOVED BY EVERYONE.

He was like a brother to Caleb. We all looked up to him.

AS LONG AS HE WAS HERE
NOTHING COULD GO WRONG.
GILFAD'S FAVORITE SON...

And then the Vietnam war came.

PERCY. He got drafted?

SHELBY. No, he enlisted. His dad Jack had been kind of a hero in World War II ... so when it came Eli's turn to serve, he was raring to go. The day of his send-off we all put on our Sunday best.

EIGHT YEARS OLD
WITH A FLAG IN MY HAND,
STEP FOR STEP
WITH THE BIG MARCHING BAND.
THROUGH THE STREETS,
PICKET FENCE, WHITE WASH WHITE,
EVERY HOUSE
PERFECT TRIM, PAINTED BRIGHT.

LIKE ELI, WE WERE BRAVE.
THERE WAS A WORLD TO SAVE.
THE BAND STRUCK UP A SONG,
GILEAD MARCHED ALONG.

I CAN SEE IT STILL,
EVERYONE IN TOWN
WALKING UP THAT HILL,

WAITING FOR THE BUS,
WAVING HIM GOODBYE,
PART OF ALL OF US...

BOWED MY HEAD,
SAID MY PRAYERS EVERY NIGHT.
"ELI PLEASE
SAVE THE WORLD, SET IT RIGHT"

FOLDED HANDS
HOLDING HOPE, LIKE A PRAYER,
FOUR YEARS PASS,
FINGERS PART, NOTHING THERE...

Missing in action. Hannah's never told anyone what the official story was, but after a few years, it was clear Eli wasn't coming back

WHEN HOPE GOES, SIDEWALKS CRACK,
WHITEWASH FADES.
MUSIC STOPS, EMPTY STREETS,
NO PARADES.

WHEN HOPE GOES, FENCES SAG,
FLAGPOLES RUST.
PAINT PEELS, BROKEN WHEELS
GATHER DUST.
WHEN HOPE GOES,

HEARTS CLOSE.
EIGHT YEARS OLD,
WITH A FLAG IN MY HAND.
STEP FOR STEP
WITH THE BIG MARCHING BAND.

EVERYONE IN TOWN
WALKING UP THAT HILL,
WAITING FOR THE BUS,
WE ARE WAITING STILL.

(The song ends.)

That was years ago ... Eli's dad took it real hard. I guess his heart just gave out from it. The day after he died, Hannah put the Grill up for sale.

PERCY. My... she must have wanted to get rid of this place real bad.

SHELBY. She still does. She's always pestering Caleb to find a buyer. She says she "couldn't unload this grill if it was the booty prize in the Lion's Club raffle!"

PERCY. *(With a dry laugh.)* Raffle?!... Well, why doesn't she?

SHELBY. Why doesn't she what?

PERCY. Raffle it off... People do it all the time --- ten dollars for a chance at a TV set or somethin'. To win a whole grill I spose you could ask even more.

HANNAH. *(Offstage.)* Percy! Shelby! I don't smell coffee brewin'!

PERCY. Well, the fall didn't hurt her nose.

HANNAH. I heard that.

(PERCY and SHELBY look at each other and share their first smile. Crossfade.)

Scene 5

SCENE: Town of Gilead / The Grill. Montage --- passage of time.
AT RISE: Crossfade reveals CALEB, JOE and EPHY in various limbo areas. THEY are engaged in mid-winter activities. Early March.

PERCY.
THEN YOU LOOK OUT FROM YOUR FRONT PORCH
TO SEE THE SUN GO DOWN,
ANOTHER NIGHT HAS FALLEN
ON THE STREET OF YOUR HOMETOWN.

AND ALL AT ONCE YOU UNDERSTAND
THAT YOU ARE HERE TO STAY,
WITH ROOTS SO DEEP INTO THE EARTH
THEY'LL NEVER PULL AWAY.

SHELBY.
NEVER PULL AWAY!

(THEIR voices blend in harmony. The two women feed off one another's energy, each seeming to find for the first time a way to express a deep longing for a better life.)

BOTH.
AND WHEN SUMMER TURNS TO AUTUMN
IN THE TOWN WHERE YOU ARE FROM,
THEN THE COLORS OF PARADISE COME...

AND THE COLORS OF PARADISE COME
AND THE COLORS OF PARADISE COME TO YOU
AND THE COLORS OF PARADISE COME

PERCY.
AND THE COLORS OF PARADISE COME...

SHELBY.
AND THE COLORS OF PARADISE COME
PERCY.

AND THE COLORS OF PARADISE COME...

SHELBY.
AND THE COLORS OF PARADISE ...
PERCY.

AND THE...
BOTH.
COLORS OF PARADISE COME!

(Crossfade.)

Scene Six

SCENE: The Grill, three weeks later.
AT RISE: HANNAH sweeps the floor. From offstage we hear
CALEB call.

CALEB. Aunt Hannah? Aunt Hannah!

(CALEB enters with several out-of-town newspapers in hand.)

HANNAH. No need to shout.

CALEB. *(Holding papers.)* What the hell is this about?

HANNAH. I don't have my glasses. What does it say?

CALEB. *(Reading papers.)* "Win a hometown grill." "Enter the Spitfire raffle." Tell me this is just some kind of joke.

HANNAH. Sounds kinda funny, doesn't it?

CALEB. Yeah, it's funny alright. I can hear the whole county laugh right now. What the hell were you thinking?

HANNAH. To tell you the truth, Shelby and Percy did the thinking.

CALEB. Shelby and Percy...? Well... that's just great.

HANNAH. Spitfire's been on the market ten years, Caleb. I thought it was time to try something new. Or maybe you were hoping I'd leave it to you, when I kick over.

CALEB. Why would I want this old grill?

HANNAH. Oh, it might just be worth a little something. Lord knows, it would have been worth a hell of a lot more if you'd sold it ten years ago, before they ran the highway through Mineral Point instead of here.

CALEB. And I suppose that was my fault? Cripes, it must be my fault the quarry closed, too. Of course, none of that would have happened if Eli was alive.

HANNAH. You leave him out of this.

CALEB. Why? It's what you're always thinking, you and Shelby, and everybody, if only Eli—

HANNAH. Caleb. Maybe that's what you're always thinking. Don't even pretend to know what I'm thinking.

(HANNAH goes past him dismissively. CALEB follows her.)

CALEB. Aw, the hell with it. Go ahead, raffle it off. I don't even know why I try.

HANNAH. I'm sure I have no idea. *(She snatches the letter from EFFY and puts it in her pocket. EFFY stares at HANNAH. After a beat.)* I don't think I'll open it just yet. *(Slyly, EFFY huffs out.)* Here Shelby, you open it!

(Excited, SHELBY opens the envelope and presents HANNAH with the enclosed cash.)

SHELBY. One hundred dollars!... *(Music under.)* "Dear Mrs. Ferguson, I saw the article about your contest last night when I couldn't sleep. The reason I couldn't sleep is because my family is falling apart. My husband walked out last year and left me with our high school boy. If I don't do something soon, I'm afraid I may lose my son, too. Maybe if I could take us off to someplace like yours in Glend, that won't happen..."

HANNAH. *(Dismissively, as she walks away.)* If they're all gonna sound like that, to hell with it. Shelby, you can go home now. We're done here.

SHELBY. *(To PERCY.)* Caleb'll be waiting anyway. Night then.

PERCY. Night, Shel.

(SHELBY exits.)

HANNAH. *(Handing PERCY a towel.)* Make sure you wrap that leaf up good. I gotta get off this leg.

PERCY. Still pretty tender?

HANNAH. Sore enough considering the doctor keeps telling me how good it's healing.

PERCY. You think if a wound goes real deep, that the healing can feel just as bad as what caused it?

HANNAH. ... Might be. *(Starts toward her room. Music begins.)* Might be.

PERCY. *(Reaches out to touch HANNAH's shoulder.)* Hannah...

HANNAH. *(Pulls away sharply; then says, not unkindly.)* Good-night.

(PERCY takes the bread out to the porch. Light fades on her. HANNAH makes her way up to the bedroom as she sings.)

OLD FAMILIAR ACHES AND PAINS,
CUTS AND SCRAPES AND SOUVENIRS.
EVERYBODY HAS A FEW
COLLECTED OVER DAYS AND YEARS.

ALL AT ONCE, A PAIN WILL COME
LIKE SOME FORGOTTEN LULLABY,
THE WHISPER FROM A CHILDHOOD WOUND
WHEN I FIRST LEARNED HOW NOT TO CRY.

TEARS WON'T MAKE IT GO AWAY.
YEARS WILL PASS AND I'LL REMEMBER.

MY LIFE HAS BEEN WHAT IT HAS BEEN,
NO ONE NEEDS TO PITY ME.
AND IF I FALL AND FALL AGAIN
I DON'T WANT ANY SYMPATHY.

FOR GOOD, FOR BAD, FOREVERMORE,
SOMEDAY I'LL LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP,
AND I WILL HAVE JUST ONE REGRET,
A SECRET I WILL ALWAYS KEEP.

AND ON THAT NIGHT THE PAIN WILL COME,
LIKE SOME FORGOTTEN LULLABY
THAT MOTHERS SING TO MISSING SONS
WHEN THEY'VE FORGOTTEN HOW TO CRY.

(HANNAH lies down and light fades on her. Lights rise on porch area. PERCY sets the bread down and drives the ax into the stump. In the shadows behind PERCY we can just make out the silhouette of a male figure watching her. As PERCY makes her way back toward the door, she catches sight of the figure and stops short with a gasp. In the lantern light, his shadow looms above PERCY. It is the VISITOR. Although frightened, PERCY quickly composes herself and stands her ground.)

PERCY. You gonna do something to me, why don't you just come ahead and do it? I'm right here, ain't I? *(The VISITOR stands still for a moment, then holds up a small feather and sets it down on the stump. He steps back.)* Okay then. *(She picks up the feather.)* A feather? That's real nice. Thank you. *(The VISITOR stands motionless.)* You scared me, that's all. I didn't see you there. Didja get them loaves of bread I left? I could bring you somethin' different if you want. I know how it is eating the same thing till you can't stand the sight of it no more. Would you like that? *(The VISITOR doesn't answer.)* My name's Percy. You got a name? *(The VISITOR doesn't answer.)* I think I'll call you 'Johnny B,' okay? Johnny B. How would that do?

HANNAH. (Off) Percy...

(The VISITOR tenses, then grabs the bread and leaves. PERCY follows a few steps and calls after him.)

PERCY. Maybe next time we won't be so rushed and we'll have more chance to chat. (PERCY looks again at the VISITOR's tiny gift.) A feather.

(Fade out.)

Scene 9

SCENE: The Grill. Late May through late June.
AT RISE: EFFY, clutching a handful of envelopes, marches toward the Grill like a woman on a mission. In the Grill, HANNAH is pouring JOE a cup of coffee. EFFY approaches HANNAH and slaps the envelopes down one at a time.

EFFY.

HARTFORD, HOUSTON, HARRISBURG,
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA,
PORTLAND, PITTSBURGH, PROVIDENCE,
RAPID CITY, SOUTH DAKOTA.
SAY WHAT YA WANT, SAY WHAT YA WILL.
ALL OF 'EM "CARE OF THE SPITFIRE GRILL".

(Speaks as music continues under.)

Now as postmistress, I've got a legal right to know if the mail service is being used for some irregular purpose. So are you going to tell me what goes on here, Hannah Ferguson? Or do I have to open these letters myself?

HANNAH. Not that it's any of your business, Effy. But if you must know, I'm running a contest to give away the Grill.

EFFY. What kinda contest?!

HANNAH.
FOLKS OUT THERE WILL PAY A PRICE
TO WIN A CHANCE AT PARADISE,
THEY PRAY FOR LUCK AND GIVE THE DICE A GO.

I'D NEED A COLD DAY DEEP IN HELL.

BEFORE THIS GRILL WOULD EVER SELL,
SO WHY NOT TRY A HUNDRED BUCKS A THROW?

JOE.

IT'S LEGAL, ON THE UP AND UP.
FOLKS DROP THEIR MONEY IN THE CUP
AND WRITE A LITTLE ESSAY ON THE GRILL.

EFFY. (To JOE, for HANNAH's benefit.)
I BETCHA WHEN THE DEAL GOES DOWN
SHE'LL BE THE LAUGHINGSTOCK OF TOWN,
AND GREED IS SUCH A BITTER LITTLE PILL.

HANNAH.

COMES A TIME TO SHOOT THE MOON,
TAKE A CHANCE, SAY "WHAT THE HELL."
PAY TO POP THE PRIZE BALLOON,
SPIT INTO THE WISHING WELL.

SHOOT THE MOON, SHOOT THE MOON,
LIFE IS HARD AND GONE TOO SOON.
SHOOT THE MOON, SHOOT THE MOON,

(Taps her cane on the floor three times.)

SHOOT THE MOON.

(Lights shift to CALEB on the phone in limbo light. A week later.)

CALEB. Yeah, hello, is this the Genesee Depot Gazette? I'm trying to track down some news articles about a trial. About five years ago. Yeah, I'll hold.

(Lights shift to kitchen, the following week. EFFY is now doing out envelopes to HANNAH. PERCY and JOE sort envelopes into small piles as HANNAH passes them along.)

EFFY.

CINCINNATI

PERCY and JOE.
SHOOT THE MOON.

EFFY.

BIRMINGHAM AND BUFFALO.
AMARILLO

SHELLEY.

"I WANT MY HUSBAND AND ME TO HAVE TIME FOR OUR LIVES."

HANNAH.

"I WANT MY CHILDREN TO LEARN HOW TO SMILE."

PERCY, HANNAH and SHELLEY.

"I WANT PART OF ME TO COME ALIVE AGAIN."

(EFFY and JOE enter the Grill. The Spittle not only looks different, it feels different. A magical shift has occurred and the sense of budding joy and camaraderie is palpable. EFFY even leaves a tip for PERCY.)

JOE, EFFY, PERCY, HANNAH and SHELLEY.
ALL SUMMER, MORE ESSAYS ARRIVE EVERY DAY,
FIND THEIR WAY TO EACH CORNER OF TOWN.
PEOPLE SIT ON THEIR PORCH SWINGS
'N' READ THEM OUT LOUD
TILL LONG AFTER THE SUN HAS GONE DOWN.

OLD STORE FRONTS ARE PAINTED,
EACH FLOWER BOX FILLS,
THE SIDEWALKS ARE PATCHED AND REPAIRED.
THERE ARE CARS ALONG MAIN STREET
WITH OUT-OF-STATE PLATES.
IT'S BEEN SO LONG SINCE ANYONE CARED.

AND THE LIGHT FROM THESE WINDOWS
AIN'T SPARKLED THIS BRIGHT
NOT SINCE WE CAN REMEMBER BACK WHEN
THERE'S A SPIRIT OF HOPE ALONG MAIN STREET TONIGHT.

HANNAH, SHELLEY and PERCY.

AND THIS OLD GRILL HAS COME ALIVE

EFFY and JOE.

AND THIS OLD TOWN HAS COME ALIVE

ALL FIVE.

AND GILEAD HAS COME ALIVE

EFFY and JOE.

ALIVE...

ALL.

AGAIN!

(Blackout.)

Scene 2

SCENE: Behind the Grill, night, October.

AT RISE: The sky is star-filled. HANNAH emerges from the back of the Grill. She looks behind to make sure she is alone. Lantern in hand, she brings a loaf of bread out to the stump. She drives the ax into the stump and gazes out at the woods. She turns back to the Grill. PERCY emerges from inside.

PERCY. There you are, Hannah. *(PERCY looks disappointed when she sees Hannah has already completed the bread ritual.)* Oh... you already took care of things.

HANNAH. *(Nods and crosses back to the Grill.)* Yeah.

PERCY. Hannah ... them loaves of bread we set out ... are we leavin' 'em for —

HANNAH. These October nights get nippy. Keep yourself warm.

(PERCY watches HANNAH enter the Grill. Then PERCY crosses out to the stump. She stops, reaches in her pocket, and removes a well-worn photo. She reads.)

PERCY. "Autumn colors along Copper Creek, near Gilead, Wisconsin."

(PERCY tucks the photo alongside the bread. As she turns back to the Grill, JOE emerges from inside, startling her.)

JOE. Percy —

PERCY. Joe Sutter, you need to wear a bell around your neck.

JOE. Then you'd know I was coming and you might run away.

PERCY. I might.

JOE. And that'd be a shame, cuz you'd never find out about this.

(HE holds out a piece of rolled-up paper tied with a piece of ribbon.)

PERCY. What is it?

JOE. Ten acres.

PERCY. Looks like a piece o' paper to me.

JOE. My old man sat me down last night. He's so afraid I'll hop that train outta town that he cut me in on a little of the family land.

PERCY. Just what you always wanted.

JOE. He let me choose whatever parcel I liked. So I picked ten acres right along Copper Creek, close enough from here you could

throw a stone and hit it.

PERCY. Your worthless woods...

JOE. A corner of it, anyway.

PERCY. So you gonna sell it and move on like you said?

JOE.

I'D LIKE TO THINK THE OLD MAN DIDN'T RAISE A FOOL, BUT SITTING IN THE WOODS OUT THERE TODAY, I COULDN'T THINK WHY ANYONE WITH HALF A BRAIN WOULD EVER PACK HIS BAGS AND MOVE AWAY.

I'M JUST A FOOL WHO COULDN'T SEE THE FOREST FOR THE TREES.

THAT IS, UNTIL THE DAY YOU CAME ALONG.

AND NOW THAT OUTBOUND TRAIN HAS ONE LESS

PASSENGER.

IT'S HERE IN THIS WIDE WOODS THAT I BELONG.

You know, there's a clearing where a fella could put up a little house, with trees all around it. Maybe tomorrow I could give you the nickel tour.

PERCY. Maybe.

JOE. I was hoping you could help me decide where to put the front porch.

PERCY. Front of the house might be good.

JOE. That's why I need your help.

THERE'S THINGS THEY NEVER TEACH YOU IN A COUNTRY SCHOOL.

THERE'S THINGS YOU GOTTA FIND OUT FOR YOUR OWN.

I MAY BE SLOW, BUT EVEN SO I FINALLY KNOW

THAT I DON'T WANT TO LIVE MY LIFE ALONE.

I'M JUST A FOOL WHO COULDN'T SEE THE FOREST FOR THE TREES.

THAT IS, UNTIL THE DAY YOU CAME ALONG.

AND NOW THAT OUTBOUND TRAIN HAS ONE LESS

PASSENGER.

IT'S HERE IN THIS WIDE WOODS THAT WE BELONG.

OH, I'M JUST A FOOL WHO COULDN'T SEE THE FOREST FOR THE TREES.

THAT IS, UNTIL THE DAY YOU CAME ALONG.

AND NOW THAT OUTBOUND TRAIN HAS ONE LESS

PASSENGER.

IT'S HERE IN THIS WIDE WOODS THAT WE BELONG.

IT'S HERE IN THIS WIDE WOODS

THAT WE —

PERCY. *(Cutting him off.)* Joe! Joe, you don't wanna be marryin' me.

JOE. Why not? I'm already used to your cooking.

PERCY. You gonna want children?

JOE. Hell, yeah. As many as you're up for.

PERCY. I can't have children no more...

JOE. Well, then we won't, or...

(His words trail off.)

PERCY. Joe, don't. Please...

JOE. Will you at least think about it?

SHELBY. *(As she comes out onto the porch.)* Percy, do you know where Hannah put the — Oh, I'm sorry...

JOE. That's okay. I guess we were just about finished here anyway. Ain't that right? *(No response from PERCY.)* Night, then.

(JOE exits through the Grill)

SHELBY. Percy, are you okay out here?

PERCY. He wants me to marry him.

SHELBY. Percy...

PERCY. I said no. That man deserves better than me.

SHELBY. I'm not so sure there is better than you.

PERCY. Shelby. You don't know me.

SHELBY. I know that you're my friend.

PERCY. Yeah, well do you know why I got locked up for five

years? *(Looks right at SHELBY.)* I killed somebody.

SHELBY. Who?

PERCY. My stepfather. Mason Talbot. I was sixteen when he got me pregnant.

SHELBY. Percy....

PERCY. My momma just slapped me and told me to shut up about it. But you know what? I found myself lovin' that little life inside me. Feelin' it grow. I got to callin' it Johnny B. After that song, Johnny B. Goode. And I swore to God that I was gonna protect that baby no matter what. But Mason, he got drunk and took to me with his fists so bad that ... my baby — And all I could think was how I hadn't kept my promise. Mason musta been afraid of the police or

something' 'cuz he pulled me outta the hospital and dumped me in the back of his car. We ended up in this motel somewhere. Mason had a bottle and he was into it real good. He was sayin' how it was right that my baby died. I didn't say nothin'. But later on, when he was layin' there on the bed all passed out, I took out his straight razor.

(Spent, PERCY sits in the porch rocking chair, motionless and almost numb.)

SHELBY. Percy... Oh, Percy-girl...

(SHELBY kneels. Gently and peacefully, she comforts her silent friend with calm, quiet confidence.)

SING A LONELY CHILD SONG,
POCKET FULL OF RYE,
TO THE ONLY WILD BIRD
'NEATH THE NORTHERN SKY.
FOLD YOUR TRED WINGS AWHILE,
YOU WILL WAKE TO FLY...
WILD BIRD.

DREAM A DREAM OF LIFTING UP
FROM THIS HOLLOW TREE.
FLY A CIRCLE 'ROUND THE SUN,
HIGH ABOVE THE SEA.
WHEN YOU REACH THE FARTHER SHORE,
THEN YOU WILL BE FREE...
WILD BIRD.

LOOKING BELOW YOU,
WHAT DO YOU SEE?
LONE WILD BIRD,
IS IT ME?

(SHELBY puts her arm around PERCY's shoulder.)

WILD BIRD, OH WILD BIRD
TELL ME WHAT TO DO.
IF I WERE A WILD BIRD
COULD I FLY WITH YOU?
AND TURN A RING AROUND THE MOON,
REST HERE WHEN WE'RE THROUGH...
WILD BIRD...

(PERCY has fallen asleep. SHELBY kisses the top of her head as the lights...
Fade out.)

Scene 3

SCENE: The Grill, a while later that night.
AT RISE: CALEB sits in darkness at a table, clutching a handful of papers. He drinks from a bottle. SHELBY comes in from the back porch, unaware that CALEB is in the Grill. CALEB sets his bottle down on the table.

SHELBY. Caleb. You should be in bed.

CALEB. You're right. It's two-thirty in the morning. I should be in bed. But somehow I just couldn't sleep. Must've been something I read.

SHELBY. What are you talking about?

CALEB. I had the paper over in Genesee Depot send me some clippings about Percy Talbot's trial. You might want to read them.

SHELBY. I don't care what they say.

CALEB. You should. Did you know that sweet little friend of yours slashed her stepfather? Take a guess how many times.

SHELBY. Don't do this.

CALEB. Two or three maybe?

SHELBY. I'm going home.

CALEB. How about twenty or thirty? Read 'em. (CALEB thrusts the papers at SHELBY.) That girl's a cold-blooded killer.

SHELBY. That girl is the first hope we've had since Eli was here.

CALEB. You watch your words, Shelby!

SHELBY. I'm tired of watching my words! You're jealous, Caleb, because Percy is doing something for me and for this town that you could never do!

(CALEB pulls back his hand to strike SHELBY, but something in her face stops him. He lowers his hand.)

CALEB. Shel...

SHELBY. I think you should find someplace else to stay for awhile.

(SHELBY exits.
Crossfade.)

SHINE ON ME.
SHINE ON ME.
SHINE!

SHINE!
SHINE!!
SHINE!!!

(Radiant and triumphant, PERCY glows. Overflowing with a deeply satisfying joy she's never allowed herself to feel before, she realizes she is good! She is worthy! PERCY basks in the glory of her discovery as the sunrise peaks and subsides. The music grows softer but conveys an edge of tension. ELL slowly comes forward, next to PERCY, and kneels. PERCY smiles, takes a deep breath, and sings with quiet self-assurance and deep contentment.)

THERE'S A FLICKER OF LIGHT,
THERE'S AN EMBER OF HEAT,
THERE'S A DIAMOND OF HOPE
IN THIS GOOD HEART OF MINE.

(PERCY places her hand on ELL's shoulder. PERCY and ELL both gaze forward, joined in a moment of blissful communion. Fade out.)

Scene 5

SCENE. Outside the Grill, later that morning.
AT RISE: EFFY holds JOE and hands him mail.

EFFY. You were forty-five minutes late picking up your mail. I was going to have the Sheriff send out a search party. But since you're the Sheriff, I didn't know who to call.

JOE. Thanks Effy, I appreciate your worry.

EFFY. You look like you've been spit at and hit.

JOE. Long night.

EFFY. She turned you down?

JOE. Effy, it's not really your damn business.

EFFY. Well, you bought a piece of ribbon yesterday, I figured it was for a package. Fifteen cents of ribbon won't wrap around much. Small package. Figured it was a ring.

JOE. It wasn't.

EFFY. Really, huh. Now you got me curious.

JOE. Effy, you were born curious.

EFFY. Better than being born with six toes and a cowlick.

JOE. I suppose.

EFFY. Well, just remember what my mother always said, JOE. What's that?

EFFY. "If you've got the thread, you'll find the needle."

JOE. What's that supposed to mean?

EFFY. I'm not really sure but she always said it.

JOE. Thanks, Effy, you've been a real help.

EFFY. Anytime, Joe, anytime.

(Crossfade.)

Scene 6

SCENE. The Grill, later that day.
AT RISE: HANNAH and SHELBY are setting tables. CALEB enters. He and SHELBY meet eyes for a moment but SHELBY continues to work. HANNAH breaks the silence.

HANNAH. Afternoon, Caleb.

CALEB. Aunt Hannah.

HANNAH. Missed you this morning.

CALEB. I wasn't hungry. Where's the rest of your staff?

HANNAH. Good question. Haven't seen Percy all day. Want some coffee?

CALEB. Yeah. Maybe a sandwich, too.

HANNAH. Comin' up.

(Still glowing, PERCY appears outside the front of the Grill, leading ELL.)

(SHELBY looks up to see ELL just outside the doorway. She drops the plate she is holding. It shatters.)

PERCY. Come along, now. (She enters the Grill.) Not to worry, come on in.

HANNAH. That's one less to wash, Shelby. (Turning from Caleb, she sees ELL.) Oh, my Lord.