

PROLOGUE: The Ginkgo Tree

A large, ancient ginkgo tree, its leaves all golden with the autumn. A warm fall evening beside the Mississippi River. The sun is about to set.. Somewhere nearby, a hermit thrush is singing.

The CHORUS & AGA enter, take a moment to take in the space before...

CHORUS
It took place in a town
Not this town

AGA
It'll do.

CHORUS
A small town on a great river

CHORUS 1
Not this river

CHORUS 2
It isn't wide enough

CHORUS 3
It isn't great enough.

AGA
It will do.

AGA exits.

CHORUS
It took place in Thebes, Illinois.

AGA returns, pushing a wheelchair into the center of the space. MELLIE is sitting in the chair.

AGA helps MELLIE out of the chair, so that she can kneel in the center of the space. She looks at MELLIE. MELLIE looks back.

Then MELLIE turns her gaze out.

CHORUS 1
Not her

CHORUS 2

But she'll do as well, a worthy stand-in—

CHORUS 3

Stand-in, that's a cruel phrase. Look at that body

CHORUS 1

Battered, beaten, broken

AGA

Not broken.

CHORUS 3

But horribly deformed

CHORUS 1

The arms withered

AGA

They aren't—

CHORUS 2

Her body twisted

CHORUS 3

Knock-kneed and limping, barely better than a crawl

CHORUS 1

They say one of the gods came for her

AGA

It was Lo

CHORUS 3

Lo, First Son of the Father.

CHORUS 2

Lo came for her in the womb

CHORUS 3

She was never meant to enter the world

CHORUS 1

But she fought, resisted

CHORUS 2

Wrestled with one who didn't want her to live

CHORUS 3

And this battered, beaten—

AGA

Not broken—

CHORUS 3

Body is the scar she bears.

CHORUS 1

No one expected her to live, to be strong.

CHORUS 2

She was rejected, reviled, pushed to the fringe

CHORUS 1

Abandoned and forgotten, left to fend for herself

CHORUS 2

No one expected her to be strong,

CHORUS 3

No one expected her to be clever

CHORUS 2

No one expected her to live.

CHORUS 1

Most assumed she hadn't, her own mother even, her father.

CHORUS 2

They left her to die on the banks of the Great River.

CHORUS 3

And again she defied the Gods. She lived.

CHORUS 2

She lived to see the life run out of her father's eyes.

CHORUS 1

Speared by a wild boar in the woods,

AGA

That isn't true—

CHORUS 2

Who knew we even had wild boar in these parts

CHORUS 1

She was too late to save him, but she held his hand—

CHORUS 3

In her way—

CHORUS 2

Until the end.

CHORUS 1

And that's when she went home. Found her mother, sickly—

CHORUS 3

The reason her father had tried to hunt the beast that killed him

CHORUS 1

She cared for her mother, until the end, and that's how she came back

CHORUS 2

And couldn't no one send her away after that

CHORUS 1

Because when they tried they found that she...

CHORUS 2

Knew things...

CHORUS 1

Things no one knew, things no one could know.

AGA

Things that no one so forsaken by the gods should know.

CHORUS LEADER

And we were amazed and terrified at the... "miracle" of her.

AGA looks at the CHORUS LEADER, who looks back at AGA.

AGA takes one more look at MELLIE, then wheels the chair out and goes.

The CHORUS takes over the space.

CHORUS 1

So we left her alone,
left her to live her life in a one-room shack down by the river
away from the rest of us.

CHORUS 3

In a spot where we couldn't see her,
couldn't be reminded that the Gods that one could live thus
in brazen defiance of the Gods will

CHORUS 2

This is Thebes, Illinois,
Where they believe as we all believe
In the multitude of Gods
who teach us

ALL

The earth is mud. We are mud. Made by Godhands out of mud.
Exalted by their Love, transformed. Made from mud into Holy Waters.

CHORUS

They built this world from Their home on the Mountaintops

CHORUS 2

And They long to see us reside beside Them
So long as we stick to the True Path

CHORUS 3

And keep are eyes turned away from the Mud.

CHORUS 1

So what we were to make—?

CHORUS 2

What could we ever hope to make—?

CHORUS 3

Of one like her?

CHORUS 3 exits.

CHORUS LEADER joins CHORUS 1 & 2.

They watch MELLIE.

*Mellie, is kneeling beneath the gingko tree. She looks out at the river,
her hands folded in her lap, speaking a silent prayer we can't make out.*

CHORUS 1

A warm, autumn night along the Great River.
Nearby a hermit thrush is singing.

CHORUS 2

In the distance, we hear the sounds of people gathering, an electric kind of hum—

CHORUS 1

A harvest celebration?

CHORUS 2

Whatever it is, the whole town of Thebes has come out.

CHORUS LEADER

She takes advantage of moments like this,
when she knows the rest of Thebes is occupied,
to visit the places she's not allowed,
Like this grove of trees which grows near the courthouse,
And she knows a little peace in the world.
Only, today—

CHORUS 2

The hermit thrush stops singing...

CHORUS 1

and there is a low rumble from the earth

CHORUS LEADER

A sound more felt than heard.

The Chorus moves silently among the trees. They each hold swaddled babies, and they walk right past Mellie, without acknowledging her, and exit.

CHORUS LEADER (cont'd)

The sun sets.
A wind rustles the leaves of the tree. A few of the leaves fall.
But the quivering among them continues after the wind has ceased.
Suddenly, all the leaves fall at once, covering her.

*With some difficulty and using the trunk of the tree
MELLIE works her way to standing.*

CHORUS 1

And then the screams begin. First one, from one part of the town.

CHORUS 2

And then another from another part. And another.
Until it sounds as if the whole town is crying out.

CHORUS LEADER

An uneasy feeling growing—

Blackout

ACT I: Beneath the Ginkgo Tree

I, i.

The grounds below the Courthouse. The CHORUS present (Chorus 3 as a PRIEST). They are standing, looking up at the empty balcony above them. KREE & CASTA, & AGA are there too.

ALL
Ode...

CHORUS 1
No one's seen you since we saw them jump,
helpless, unable to upend the laws of the natural world.

ALL
But we know you.

CHORUS 2
We were told to trust.

ALL
And we do.

CHORUS 1:
So we're settin' here,
Outside the place where you locked yourself away.

ALL
All of us.

CHORUS 1:
Not thinking you're God on Earth,
But not thinking ill of you neither. Just thinking that

PRIEST
You are the first of Men,
the only man to face the Monster and walk out alive.
The man who lifted us all up.
Who knows better how to find favor with the Gods?
We failed the Gods, allowed their holy line to be broken,
But you came to us and paid the debt we owed.
(We always thought your name so perfect:

ALL
Ode paid the debt that was owed.)

AGA

Ode, you see that all of Thebes has gathered, the faithful.
Young folks, and the oldest of us, bowed with years.
From the oldest families to the newest,
Rich and poor.

CHORUS 2

But we here, sisters, daughters, mothers-to-be
We're the ones with something to ask,
here to speak on behalf of those who can't.
This cradle of the Gods, this sacred town,
where They come among us on Earth is
Sore-buffed, can't even lift her head,
Foundered beneath a weltering surge of blood.

PRIEST

A blight is on us—

Just then, MELLIE enters and stops in her tracks—she wasn't expecting to see everyone out like this. She quickly casts her eyes to the ground, then moves on as quickly as she can manage. Everyone watches her, daggers behind their eyes—except for AGA, who tries not to look at anyone.

Once MELLIE is gone, eyes track to AGA briefly before returning to the Courthouse.

ALL

Ode

CHORUS 1

Twelve of us died last night, six stillborn and six suicides—

CHORUS 2

Six babies that never drew breath and their six mothers,
grief-stricken and full of terror—

PRIEST

Those poor women hurled themselves from the rail bridge,
Clutching the bodies of their children—

CHORUS 1

And now the steady earth quakes beneath us

CHORUS 2

And the river is poisoned, our crops are withering in the fields

CHORUS 1

Armed with his blazing torch, the God of Plague
Has swooped upon our town. The graves are quiet,
But we hear their whispers and moans;

PRIEST

And we fear that sin lies among us, a festering wound...

AGA

Ode, you've gone all quiet-like. Hide your face from
Those who love you—even your wife.

ALL

We are all mothers-to-be
We fear for the children we long to meet, ourselves
We fear for the future of Thebes.

CHORUS 1

All we ask is that you're in there, still praying.
Find some succor, whether by a voice from Heaven
Whispered. Or just known by human wit.

PRIEST

You are the savior of men, you upbraid that we may
Live. Don't let the records record:

ALL

"He raised us up only to cast us down."

PRIEST

Lift us up again. Rebuild this city on the Mountaintops,
In the image of gods and men,

ALL

For all the world to wonder at.

They kneel.

They wait.

And wait.

And wait.

But no answer comes.

CASTA stands. She is in her late 30s, and has the money to keep herself looking younger. She crosses to KREE, mid 40s. She has money too, but she's devoted to a more Spartan way of keeping herself.

CASTA

It's true, you know. He won't admit me. His wife.

KREE

I know.

CASTA

Didn't see him all day yesterday, and then suddenly he was out on the balcony. I walked out to see what he was looking at. Just in time to see all six of them jump off the bridge at the same time. And then he was gone.

KREE

Did he go straight down to the jail?
Was he in there all night?

CASTA

As far as I know. Locked himself inside, wouldn't let me in, wouldn't answer me.

(No response.)

Kree.

Do something about it.

KREE

He's your husband—

CASTA

I feel ill.

KREE (TO THE PRIEST)

Come over here!

PRIEST

What is it, Kree?

KREE

Look to Casta, please.

CASTA

I'm fine. Just...nauseous.

PRIEST

That's to be expected with a curse upon us—

KREE

We don't know this is a curse—

PRIEST

The signs point to a misalignment among Them on the Mountaintops.

(to CASTA:)

Perhaps a sacrifice to DAYM.

CASTA

But what if it's RE who needs blood? Or the River?

On the other hand, maybe TEM needs me to hunt down a stag for her—

KREE

Stop it, Casta—

PRIEST

It's a fair point. Perhaps your illness is best cured by making offerings to each of the Gods—

KREE

Go away.

PRIEST

Excuse me.

KREE

She's making fun of you.

PRIEST

"Making fun?"

KREE

Go.

The PRIEST crosses away.

KREE (cont'd)

You are insolent, sister.

CASTA

You enjoy torturing the priests as much as I do.

KREE

...Yes. But not at the risk of blasphemy.

Do you want me to ask the doctor to come?

CASTA

Thank you.

But first, go to Ode, please.

KREE

Casta—

CASTA

He doesn't talk to me anymore, sister.

It's not like when he first came here—the "Savior" we'd waited for,

The three of us working together, rebuilding the town...

He's grown distant, keeps to himself

Only ever wants to see me if I'm taking my clothes off.

Only ever wants to stick it in me.

And then he's off...to wherever he goes, sleeps anywhere but in our room.

KREE

Casta—

CASTA

It's true. The folly of marrying a younger man, I suppose.

KREE (Hushed)

Mind who can hear you!

CASTA

Kree, Ode still listens to you, still takes your advice—

KREE

Ode was chosen for us Gods, he speaks directly to Them,
what can I offer him that They can not?

CASTA

Kree. You're my sister. We held this town together through the dark days
when the Gods were silent and seemed not to hear us.

And now the days are dark again and Ode has locked himself away.

Go to him, make him listen to us again—

Lots of pregnant women in town. They're terrified.

I'm terrified too, in a way I never was before Ode came to us—

KREE

Gods will provide, Casta—

CASTA

I'm sure they will, Kree. But I will not stand idly by.

Go to Ode. He'll admit you. And if he's truly favored...

Make him make it all better.

*KREE nods, goes to the door. She knocks.. The door
opens. KREE goes in.*

CASTA watches as the townspeople begin to exit.

CASTA (cont'd)
Girl.

AGA stops walking, demurely turns to face CASTA.

AGA
Yes, Ma'am?

CASTA
Walk with me.

They exit.

I, ii.

Mellie's house by the river. One room with a basic kitchen in one corner. A bed, a simple table, two standard chairs, a large bookcase filled with books. MELLIE sits in a chair that doesn't look like the others—it's a homemade wheelchair, made with whatever scraps she could find.

She's fixing a simple meal.

Then a knocking that comes from the floor. MELLIE ignores it.

AGA (off)
Mellie?
Mellie!

MELLIE
Go away.

AGA (off)
No.

MELLIE, wheels herself to a spot near the bookcase, pulls away a rug and opens a trapdoor beneath it: AGA is there. She climbs into the room.

AGA (cont'd)
Mellie!

MELLIE
Aga!

They stare at each other for a moment. Then MELLIE wheels away.

AGA
Are you... Uh... What's going on?

MELLIE
What do you mean?

AGA
What is that?

MELLIE
It's a chair. With wheels. It makes getting around my home much easier.

AGA

Show me how it works.

MELLIE does.

MELLIE

I can disguise it too, to make it seem like a regular chair.

AGA

You're some kind of genius.

Why are you looking at me like that?

MELLIE

...You're not supposed to come here when it's still light out—

AGA

Nobody saw—

MELLIE

That you know—

AGA

I was careful.

MELLIE

Maybe the rest of them can break the rules, but you can't—

AGA

What about the ban against anything that can help you walk?

MELLIE

This is just for my house and no one comes here but you. So don't say anything and no one will know.

AGA

I won't.

MELLIE

Why are you here, Aga?

AGA

I have news.

MELLIE

Okay.

AGA

Casta gave me a new job—

MELLIE

Chief hair-braider?

AGA

Mellie!

She's asked me to be her secretary.

MELLIE

Sounds like a chief hair-braider to me—

AGA

“You have a head on your shoulders—not like these other girls who prattle and prate.”

MELLIE

She never said that.

AGA

She did. It's why she asked me to be her secretary. I'll be advising her too.

MELLIE

...Well, that's—

AGA

Do you know what this means?

MELLIE

No idea.

AGA

They're finally accepting me. I'm not an outcast anymore—

MELLIE

Because your sister is a monster—

AGA

You're not a monster—

MELLIE

I am to the rest of them, Aga.

AGA

But people respect me now—

MELLIE

Good for you.

AGA

No, I know you're not a monster—

MELLIE

“Thanks.”

AGA

—and I can change their minds.

I can!

Aren't you happy for me? for us?

MELLIE

I'm grateful for you and how you've always stood by me. I'm happy that people are appreciating you at last, but I'm not going to hold my breath waiting for the rest of Thebes.

AGA

Mellie—

MELLIE

Did you come in the front door, or did you sneak in through the rathskeller—?

AGA

That's just until I've secured my position. And changed everyone's minds about you

(MELLIE laughs.)

I'm serious!

MELLIE

I'm sure you are.

AGA

You're gloomier than usual.

MELLIE

Those women?

AGA

You heard?

MELLIE

I saw them.

AGA

Lords...

It's awful. Everyone is terrified it's some new curse—

MELLIE

That's why I'm terrified I'm going to wake up in the middle of the night because this little house is burning down with me still in it.

AGA

No one would do that!

MELLIE

It's never been safe for me. It's less safe now.

Did you see how they looked at me, when I interrupted your...meeting last week?

AGA

You shouldn't've been there—

MELLIE

I didn't know it was happening!

Thebes has always been suspicious of me, and now...

AGA

It was just an awkward time for you to—

MELLIE

They're wondering if maybe I'm dangerous—

AGA

No!

MELLIE

Ode made up all those new rules, to keep me away from the rest of town,
and I bet they're all thinking I've broken them and that's why this Curse is on us.

A moment.

AGA

He doesn't make them up.

MELLIE

Excuse me?

AGA

He speaks direct to the Gods.

MELLIE stares.

MELLIE

So why do you keep breaking "Their" rules?

AGA can't look her sister in the eye, can't find a response.

AGA

Is that...? You have so much food.

MELLIE

...I've been saving up. I can read the "signs" better than any of the priests.
Are you hungry?

(AGA nods.)

Doesn't Casta let you eat? share her wealth?

AGA

She would—she will—but I don't want her to know I've been living on hardtack and whatever Eck can get from the river.

MELLIE

You're eating fish from the poison river?

AGA

We clean it up best as we can, and we cook it until it's practically leather.

MELLIE

Here.

MELLIE sets the plate she was preparing on the table. AGA sits. MELLIE gets another plate for herself.

MELLIE (cont'd)

Eck, huh? You're spending a lot of time with him.

AGA

What are you doing?

MELLIE

Inquiring about your life.
...What?

AGA

Forgive me for not recognizing a moment of sisterly care from you...
I'm kidding.
Anyways, I am spending a lot of time with Eck—

MELLIE

Hm.

AGA

He's a good man—

MELLIE

He's a boy—

AGA

He loves me. Has promised to do so forever.

MELLIE

Is he being good to you?

AGA

Yes.

MELLIE

Is he a fighter? Can he protect you—?

AGA

Oh please—

MELLIE

I'm serious. You walk around with your head in the clouds, sit in Casta's mansion and braid her hair—

AGA

I do not braid her hair—

MELLIE

Aga, you have to me hear when I say this:

You know that I pray to the Gods every morning and every night,
ask Them to take me into Their arms and guide me on the True Path.

But they've never answered back, and every day of my life has been a fight,
and everything that's mine is a thing I've had to build all on my own—

You've helped when you could, I know—

But bad times are coming—they're here already. Bad times with bad men plotting—

AGA

You're so dramatic—

MELLIE

When times turn, like they are now, people go looking for those they can blame.

I'm a target, Aga. I'm easy prey. You are too.

But if we made a move now, you and me could get out—

AGA

Just go, and leave Thebes?

MELLIE

Yes.

AGA

...And what if the outside world isn't any more accepting of you than Thebes?

What if they're worse?

MELLIE

If the outside is as full of sinners as we've been told,
maybe I'd get along great with them—

AGA

You're awful—

MELLIE

I can do a lot more than people expect I can,
but I can't get out on my own. It'd take me days to walk to the nearest town,
and I don't barely have two nickels to rub together.

AGA

...Mellie, I can't.

MELLIE

Please, Aga—

AGA

This is our home, and my position with Casta
and Eck?

MELLIE

Nevermind then. I'll find a way to go on my own.

AGA

Mellie, how?

MELLIE

Don't bother with yourself with it—

AGA

Mellie—

MELLIE

And don't you dare say a thing,
not to no one. Not even Eck.

AGA

You know I won't.

MELLIE

Promise.

AGA

I promise—

MELLIE

And promise you'll consider leaving with me—

AGA

I won't!

MELLIE

Only consider it.

Promise?

AGA

...I promise.

MELLIE

Thank you.

Outside a church bell chimes five o'clock.

AGA

I have to go. Casta will want her dinner soon and she gets angry if it's not prepared on time.

MELLIE

Hungrier than usual?

AGA

One minute she's sick, next she's ravenous. She's keeping me on my toes.

MELLIE

Wait. Take this.

*MELLIE wraps up the leftover food in a napkin for
AGA to take with her.*

AGA

I can't—

MELLIE

I have stores and stores of food.

AGA

...How? How would you leave?

MELLIE

I ain't tellin'.

*A moment. And then AGA walks towards the front
door.*

MELLIE (cont'd)

Aga.

AGA

I could just—

MELLIE

Don't.

AGA turns and goes to the trapdoor, opens it, and descends.

AGA

Sleep tight, little sister—

MELLIE

Make sure Eck is one who will fight for you.

And maybe you should learn how to fight too.

MELLIE closes the trap after AGA.