

IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

(Pre-show music ends with Robert Johnson's Crossroad. Then rhythmic hand clapping starts as Haven enters.)

DOWN 'DAT DUSTY ROAD

HAVEN

There is a piece of spiritual prose called "Footprints," here is a summary in essence:

A man is walking with God in the sands of time as the man looks back over his life he notices and says to God, "In the hardest and saddest times in my life you left me all alone, because there is only one set of footprints in the sands of time." God smiled with love in his eyes and said, "Yes, those were the times I carried you."

I am Haven and I've become a weaver of tales. We are responsible for how we feel in our life, our purpose and our love. The importance of the love we give, yes, but more importantly the love we can't accept, or the love we refuse to see.

In the Presence of God is a phrase that deals with that inner spiritual journey called faith, the one that touches the heart and moves the soul.

There are moments in life that we're overwhelmed, a time of loss, despair and feel so utterly alone. We're not. There's a resonance that registers in our heart, and on our soul, a presence that tells us we're not alone.

The greatest gifts are most times there, but we simply don't recognize them: *The song we haven't heard in years comes on the radio and takes us to a happier time. The friend we happen to run into, who understands what you're going through. A smile from a stranger that just makes you feel better.*

The presence of God is with us.

Here's a tale that falls to heart. Come let's see what down 'dat dusty road.

(Enters the young woman called)

NANDI

(Enters the narrator, a young woman named Nandi. Vignette one "Down 'Dat Dusty Road.")

A few months after the American civil war. An old woman asleep near an old crossroads. A gasp for air yanked the old seer out of her slumber. She hated it because she was dreaming of a beautiful forest, shimmering water and melodic snatches of long forgotten words.

Dust was always in the air, even in the dark silence of a world yet to blossom into sunrise.

She rolled over on the soft hay laid down for her. Worry had kept her sleepless for many nights, and her great age kept her weary throughout the long hot days.

MAMA ISSA

It's so quiet, 'cept the sounds of my own rattlin' breath fightin' wit' near a hundred years of hard life.

I's older den dis 'ere country, landin 'ere in da year o' da lord 1773, when I's 'bout eight years ol'. "Now 'da year be's 1865.

So many years to find freedom.

NANDI

These ex-slaves could walk a hundred miles in the sweltering sun. Slavery had forged a people who were strong in body, but scarred in psyche.

MAMA ISSA

How can dey finds footin' in a life o' freedom?

"Where's my peoples be," were da question every newly freed soul is tryin' to answer? Does I 'ave 'nother day in me?

NANDI

They set up camp for her near a crossroads.

MAMA ISSA

Now dey calls it, "Mama Issa crossroads, or Mama Issa's divinin' roads."

NANDI

Running her old fingers across her arms, she sighed with the thought that there was once supple black skin on her body, but now wrinkly old leather lived in its place.

The old woman forced herself up and walked down to the little creek near the camp site.

MAMA ISSA

A bath e'en a cold one could help ease 'da maladies of 'dis ol' flesh.

NANDI

She stepped into the cold creek water and meticulously washed herself, chill bumps rose up all over her sagging skin, yet it was refreshing in the same instant. Slowly she dressed herself as the sun peeked over that part of Texas.

MAMA ISSA

I's 'membered bein' in 'dis 'ere country just a few years, when 'da white folks were fightin' to be free from 'da other white folks. We was still slaves, but white folks was free. Why weren't we worthy enough to be free? Worthy of kindness, love and value, "I gives portions of all 'dose thin's to e'erybody."

NANDI

Ol' Issa, da' seer woman, a daydream carried her back to an older name from before she was Issa, before coming to this land, her name was...

MAMA ISSA

Fo-uh-uh, som'mm? Memories of my homeland are just snatches of things, like a world of thick woods, or rainy seasons, or beautiful sunshine. Words my mama spoke still ring in my mind, but in a language I's can no longer speak.

NANDI

In dreams sometimes she could understand the language of her village and it is music to her soul.

It was so long ago when her village was attacked. What stood clearly in her mind was seeing her mother being hacked to death with long knives. Her mother who loved bright colors lying on the ground with blood spattered all over her beautiful garments.

MAMA ISSA

'Dat li'l girl I were saw much blood spill't on 'dat day.

NANDI

She shivered at the thought of the long death march to the sea, all the pain, the suffering and the death. By the time the little girl was on the big boat she was all alone, and all the people she knew were dead.

Issa was a child when she arrived in this country, and couldn't understand how one human could own another. Now she was ancient, she still couldn't.

There was an older part of the collective soul, that dwelled in her spirit. She called it...

MAMA ISSA

“‘da knowin’.”

NANDI

Holding the hands and looking deep into someone’s eyes she could divine the whereabouts of people...

MAMA ISSA

‘Da knowin’ of where folks be.

NANDI

Ol’ Issa’s whole life has come down to—

MAMA ISSA

‘Dese last few mont’s. If’n I can just gits a little shade, I’d be alright.

NANDI

Helping hands led the way to a comfortable chair.

MAMA ISSA

Under ‘dat ol’ oak, under ‘dat ol’ whippin’ tree. *(A jar of water is at the foot of the chair.)*

NANDI

They come from everywhere.

MAMA ISSA

All thinkin’ dey wants ‘da knowin’. But sometimes ‘da knowin’ is bright like da sun, sometimes it ain’t. Sometimes it’s cold as a grave. All ‘da newly freed folks, tryin’ to find ‘dere place in the world. ‘Da bits of ‘da pas’ ‘dey wants to keep hold of or ‘dat piece of ‘da pas’ ‘dey is tryin’ to find, brings ‘dem to me.”

NANDI

Every time ol’ Issa shared her gift, a little piece of her soul was pulled away and—

MAMA ISSA

'Da pain of 'da person I's divinin'—

NANDI

Was left in its stead. Even if the news was bad, they felt lighter and their burdens were passed on to Mama Issa.

'Da knowin' fell to her when she was...

MAMA ISSA

'Dat little girl, on 'dat ship of death 'dat crossed 'da endless waters. 'Da woman wit' 'da eyes was dyin' lyin' in all 'dat sickness. She was chained in a spot where e'erythin' from above was drippin' down on her. Dat mess drippin' down on her and 'den her lyin' in 'dat mess, she weren't gonna last long. I sees 'da sickness growin' on her skin, and 'den it gits into her breathin' makin' her cough and 'den choke. 'Da smell of 'dat place was awful, 'Den 'da woman stared at me when I's was still 'dat little girl wit' 'dat other name and wit' 'da woman's dyin' eyes, she could see inside my soul. I's stopped lookin' in 'dat dyin' woman's direction, but I's could feel her eyes still on me.

'Dat night, 'da woman wit' 'da eyes was in my dream.

We was back home, but e'eythin' was more.

NANDI

The colors of the world were richer.

MAMA ISSA

I turns and sees 'da woman bathin' in a waterfall 'dat fed a sparklin' stream. She ain't said a word, but wit' her eyes she tells me to come bathe in 'dat 'dere waterfall, too. As I gits closer I can see 'dat all 'da sickness 'dat was in 'da woman was gone, she was beautiful, and she was flawless.

'Da woman washed me like I was her child, wit' so much love, and so much care. Wit' 'da real world bein' what it be, mayhaps any child

MAMA ISSA & NANDI

Without a mother is your child.

MAMA ISSA

She held my hands and looked deep into my soul wit' a spirit of pure love, 'den she slowly melted away in 'da sparklin' waterfall.

When I woke to 'da real world, 'dem white mens was takin' 'da woman's body and drops her in 'da sea, 'dat what 'dey do.

‘Dat ‘dere dream changed me, after ‘dat, I could divine ‘da locations of folks.

I’s made a mistake when I were a young woman, Se’banteen years age, I were. I gits sold to a new plantation and ‘dere were a slave, ol’ and dyin’, outta his mind. ‘Dat ol’ man’s mind done carried him off, to ‘n ol’ place, ’cause he were talkin’ in ‘dat African talk.” I lays hands on him and could see his concerns, “I’s tells him ‘dat his family in Africa ‘scaped ‘da slavers and is livin’ free in ‘dey home land. I tells him his chil’ren is strong African mens, now. ‘Dat ol’ man smiled as he drift into ‘da nex’ world.

‘Da folks ‘round in dat shack say I were talkin’ ‘dat African talk wit’ him. I thinks I’m talkin’ ‘merican, but I do ‘member ‘da music in ‘da words spoken.”

One of ‘da girls in ‘dat shack were a girl called Rista, we was ‘bout ‘da same years age, se’banteen. ‘Dere were such pain in her eyes, ‘dat I’s stop ‘dat gal and held her. I thought it were ‘da man ‘dat just passed on, but it weren’t, I’s sees its somethin’ about ‘nother man, “Your man be Jesse— no his name be Zachariah.”

RISTA

(Stares) You knows my Zachariah?

MAMA ISSA

Zachariah gonna run off and ‘dem White mens ain’t ne’er gonna catch ‘em. He gonna disappear up nort’ and change who he be, he gonna be’s Jesse Freeman.

RISTA

What of me? Should I run, too?

MAMA ISSA

Ain’t no runnin’ for you. If’n you run ‘dey gonna catch you and beat you to deat’. If’n you stay and ‘dey think you help ‘dat boy ‘dey gonna whip you so bad you be wishin’ you was dead.

‘Dis is what you gotta’ do. Tell Zachariah to wait ‘til ‘da nex’ dark moon, near ‘da end of ‘da mont. ‘Den today, you and Zachariah gotta’ ‘ave a big fight in front of ‘dat o’erseer Mister Razzah. ‘Den ‘dere’s ‘da hard part, you gotta’ say goodbye to Zachariah tonight and not say nothin’ to him for ‘da the rest of ‘da mont’— for ‘da rest o’ your life.

RISTA

I understands.

MAMA ISSA

‘Da mont’ rolls by, t’were ‘da day after the dark moon. ‘Dere seemed to be

some kinda goin' on's, White folks and slaves bot', runnin' e'ery which way. I's looks fo' Rista, but she weren't nowheres to be found. She runs off with Zachariah. Three days later 'dey catches Rista and brings her back to 'da plantation. Dat 'dere o'erseer Mister Razzah ties her to 'da whippin' post and beats Rista to deat'. Mister Razzah say he ain't mean to kill her, but he does. I ne'er forgits 'da look in her eyes. You could see all 'da love dat she had for Zachariah, well, 'til deat' closed her eyes. 'Dat ol' o'erseer couldn't beat 'dat love out of her.

NANDI

These ex-slaves came in all tones from so bright almost white to faces so black they seemed blue.

MAMA ISSA

(Sees a gal) Come o'er c'her' girl. Ionya be's your name.

IONYA

(Surprised) Yes'm, ma'am.

MAMA ISSA

(Taking her hands) Find some land near 'da water, down in Texas and plant 'dat peach pit in your pocket 'dere. *(Ionya had the peach pit.)*

'Dat 'dere were 'da first peach you ette' as a freed woman, and when it starts to bear fruit your family gonna start findin' you, all 'cept'um your mama and papa 'cause 'dey done already crossed o'er.

A'ter 'dat tree starts bearin' fruit 'da first of your brothers gonna show up." Ion "O'er 'da next twelve years all 'n' your nine brothers and three sisters gonna find you. Go on chil', find 'da land near 'da water and plant 'dat' pit. You'll knows 'da place 'cause 'da sun gonna love 'dat land, and you gonna think ain't nothin' more beautiful 'den 'da sunrise and 'da sunset on 'da coast. It gonna be 'da most special place in 'da world to your family and 'dey gonna connect it to you for generations to come. *(Ionya set down a pipe and exits.)*

'Ere come a yellow girl who look more white 'den Negress, but she were born and reared as a pure blooded slave.

NEZZY

Ol' mama Issa, I needs to finds my daddy.

MAMA ISSA

Your massa' sired you, chil'."

NEZZY

I knows 'dat, but he weren't my daddy.

MAMA ISSA

'Dat's right, chil', he weren't. Nezy, 'dat be you name?

NEZZY

Yes'm, ma'am. You knows my name wit' a touch?"

MAMA ISSA

Mmmhuh. You take a breath, chil' 'cause 'da man who loved you, and you called daddy, he gone. He done crossed outta' 'dis world. Three years ago he done got beat bad and he ain't live long a'ter 'dat."

NEZZY

I's runs off three years ago, he done got kill't over me!

MAMA ISSA

Your daddy, 'da one e'erybody called ol' Robert, he were glad you run off. He woulda took a hundred beatin's fo' you to be free.

His love is all 'round you gal, he wit' you now, and if'n you find 'da glad in your life, he be glad. You go travel to 'da west, you gonna find your place, you'll knows it when you gits 'dere.

NEZZY

I needs one more truth...

MAMA ISSA

It be love 'dat make a daddy not all 'dis other nonsense. Ol' Robert were your daddy, 'cause he loved you and your mama more 'den anythin' in his life. 'Dis warmth you feels when you think 'bout him is all 'dat love he had for you, 'dat 'dere you gonna keep wit' you, your whole life, chil'. *(Nezy sets down a sweet 'tata' and exits)*

NANDI

As all gifts most times it's not for you, but for the folks that walk through your life. Old Issa could divine the locations for others, but she couldn't see where her own children were, or remember her original name.

MAMA ISSA

Mayhaps all ‘dem out on ‘dat dusty road is my chil’ren.

NANDI

A woman with rich brown skin and chiseled features stood before her.

SARAH LYN

Help me Mama Issa, I had me nineteen children, all got sold off.

MAMA ISSA

(Ol’ Issa takes hold of her hands.) Sarah Lyn, I needs you to be strong. *(Pause)* I needs you to be strong ‘cause all your chil’ren’s has died.”

SARAH LYN

No, no noooooooooo!

MAMA ISSA

(Ol’ Issa held her tight) You gots you a grandchil’ Sarah Lyn, from your oldest girl. He be a man now, a worker of wood. His name be Marcus and he ‘bout to settle in ‘dem sticks outside of Laurel Mississippi. As soon as he sees your face he gonna know you. He gonna see his mama’s face in your face and know who you is, *(Let loose her hands.)*

NANDI

Sarah Lyn took out a perfect needle and lays it at ol’ Issa’s feet, and then she turned and melted into the sea of black folks.

A man with a rusty mouth pushed some folks out of the way and grabbed hold of her. Ol’ Issa felt a jolt in her stomach...

MAMA ISSA

‘Cause, ‘dis man had been a black overseer, a trusty, ‘da White folks called ‘dem. We calls ‘dem shit! ‘Dis man ‘ere was loyal to his White massa, he loves massa more ‘den his own chil’ren.

Wit’ a li’l mo’ food or a blanket in ‘da winter, a slave, man or woman could be enticed into ‘dis wicked behavior. ‘Dis ‘ere evil man had a mad passion for ‘dis young gal, who run off to gits away of him.

NANDI

She sees how ‘dis man would take hold of ‘dat poor girl and use her any way he wants. Now he misses ‘da joy he gits beatin’ ‘dat gal and rapin, ‘dat gal.

MAMA ISSA

(Screams) ‘Dat girl hate you wit’ e’erythin’ in her soul, she scared to deat’ of you findin’ her.

RUSTY MOUTH MAN

(Begging) You ain’t seein’ right, I loves ‘dat gal!’”

MAMA ISSA

What you done did to ‘dat gal ain’t got nothin’ to do wit’ love! No, you gits on away from me!”

RUSTY MOUTH MAN

(Evil leer) You gonna tell me somethin’ ol’ woman!

NANDI

And he went to grab hold of her throat, but a big black hand grabbed his arm first. That man with the rusty mouth found himself flying through the air landing hard on that dusty road.

MAMA ISSA

(Touches his hand.) Your name be Bronson.

BRONSON

Yes’m, it is ma’am.

RUSTY MOUTH MAN

You ain’t real ol’ woman.

MAMA ISSA

You go on down ‘da road. ‘Dere is somethin’ waitin’ for you, but you ain’t wanna’ hear it.”

RUSTY MOUTH MAN

What you see ol’ woman? Ain’t nothin’ gonna happen to me. I gots me some good friends, white friends.

MAMA ISSA

It’s by ‘dem good White friends you gonna hang. And your good White friends ain’t gonna be mad, ‘specially ‘dat one little Dougy Adams he ‘da one ‘dats gonna talk all ‘dem other White boys into hangin you fo’ fun.”