

FADE IN:

EXT/INT. MODEST RIVERSIDE WOODPLANK HOME - 1920 - SUNSET

In the woods by the Tar River, crickets chirp and cicadas screech. A hundred yards from the sandy bank, oil lamps flicker in the windows of a crude wood plank house.

LARGE FAMILY (O.S.)
(happy laughter)

The screen door slams. LIL EDDIE(6) a skinny, awkward, snaggle-tooth, barefooted black boy jumps off the crooked porch and quickly picks up pecans from below a huge pecan tree. He stops to chase a firefly and drops all the nuts.

THROUGH THE SCREEN DOOR WE SEE:

A happy multi-generational black family of 10 sit at a crude, handmade, picnic-style table full of delicious southern food. At the head is TURNER PRINCE(70) a distinguished looking, gray haired, gently wrinkled, balding black man with a glimmer in his eye and a familiar smile on his face.

TURNER PRINCE
That smells some kinda good.

His beautiful wife SARAH(65) serves cornbread to the family. Except for her hands, she looks forty and strong as an ox.

SARAH PRINCE
It's sweet. Just like you like it.

He tugs on her cute handmade apron. She can't help but melt.

TURNER PRINCE
You have the eyes of an angel.

Turner caresses Sarah's flawless skin. She tries not to grin.

SARAH PRINCE
And you havin' the thoughts of the devil. Lawd. Need I 'mind you? We got five grand young'ns sittin' at the table here! You be-have now.

Sarah blushes and puts a big piece of cornbread in his obviously worn hand. He smells it, smiles, and takes a bite.

TURNER PRINCE
Mmmmm...mmmmmm. I do love your grand mama's cornbread. What else we got?

Each child shares their favorite dish in their own way.

Adorable, nappy-headed LIL RICHARD (5), also missing a tooth, holds up a dumpling on a fork. He smiles even when he eats.

LIL RICHARD
Chicken dumplin's!

Pimple-faced LIL EPHRAIM (13), holds up a chicken leg. His voice squeaks like Scooby Doo and he's embarrassed by it.

LIL EPHRAIM
Fried Chicken!

In her handmade high-chair, quirky LIL CORA(4) tries to stab a butter bean with her fork but it escapes her over and over.

LIL CORA
Butter beans!

Sassy, skinny ELLA (11) is obsessed with her cornrows. She can't stop touching them. She's sarcastic to say the least.

ELLA
Collard Greens!

LIL CORA
Collard Greens? Ooooh.

SARAH PRINCE
Collard Greens yum! Finish yo'
collards chile. They's good fo'
you. Make you strong and smart.

Sarah serves cornbread to Ella and notices an empty seat.

SARAH PRINCE (CONT'D)
Who's gone to fetch my pecans?

Everyone looks around the table for a few seconds. Lil Ephraim runs outside. The screen door swings wide open.

BACK OUTSIDE:

Rambunctious, snaggle-toothed LIL EDDIE(6) frees a firefly.

LIL EDDIE
Now you're free!

The loud slam of the screen door startles him. Pow! He jumps.

LIL EPHRAIM
What you doin'? Me Maa's waitin'.

Lil Eddie scrambles to pick up all the pecans he dropped and scurries back inside. The screen door slams. Lil Ephraim stops to watch the firefly buzz across the river towards the lights of Tarboro. Cricket and cicada songs fill the air.

BACK INSIDE:

Lil Ephraim rejoins the table now full of nuts. Turner cracks two together in his fist. All the kids try to do the same.

SARAH PRINCE
I pressed your good shirt.

TURNER PRINCE
I'm not going.

Turner pulls a perfect pecan half from the shell and sets it down. Sarah picks it up and eats it. Turner's eyebrow rises.

SARAH PRINCE
Yes you are. I put your shaving kit
out too. Blade's sharp. Be careful.

Sarah continues to clear the table. The kids help her.

LIL EPHRAIM
Why don't you wanna shave Pa Paw?

Turner cracks another pecan without looking up.

TURNER PRINCE
You'll understand one day son.

Sarah tries to hold her tongue but can't resist.

SARAH PRINCE
He's stubborn as the mule out back.
He's a hero, he just won't admit
it. Take some credit Turner. You
should be proud o' what you done.

Turner cracks another pecan and takes a deep breath.

TURNER PRINCE
I'm not looking for an award Sarah,
or credit or honor. I just did what
I was supposed to do. I did what I
had to do. I did it so we would all
have a place to live.

SARAH PRINCE
And a fine place it is. A fine
place indeed.

(MORE)

SARAH PRINCE (CONT'D)

And look at our beautiful babies
and now they's got babies. Look at
our beautiful family. Thank you
Jesus.

LIL CORA

What did you do Pa paw? Why is Pa
Paw a hero Me Maw?

Sarah sits back down at the table and cracks another pecan.
Turner rolls a cigarette and leans back in his chair.

SARAH PRINCE

Tell 'em Turner. Tell 'em bout when
we was young'ns. They need to know.
Your grand chillins gon' be the
ones tell this story to the world
one day. Don't leave nothing out.

TURNER PRINCE

Well.. What I 'member most.. Your
me maw was one fine lookin' girl.
Mmmmm..mmmm. The day we was taken
down to 'Lizabeth City and sold was
the first day I laid eyes on her.
Right then, I knew we were s'posed
to be together. My mama and daddy
was bought by the Norfleets.

SARAH PRINCE

And the Dancys bought my mama. We
was separated by 'bout 3 miles and
Hendrick's Creek. Lordy have mercy
and when it rose.. I'd be crossin'
with my dress hiked up tryin' to
get away from the snappin' turtles.
Remember that Turner?

They share a laugh. The family settles, all eyes on Turner.

TURNER PRINCE

Lord we had fun didn't we? But way
'for then.. back when I was, oh..
'round seven I s'pose. Workin' with
my daddy and learnin' how to make
crown moldin' at the Norfleet
Plantation, I 'came friends with
this strange white boy, E'ward...

TRANSITION - TO BLACK AND WHITE

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SOUTHERN PLANTATION HOUSE - 10 YRS PRE-CIVIL WAR - DAY

In pressed knickers and shiny shoes, EDWARD ZOELLER, (7) the white son of a Bavarian fresco painter, jumps off the wrap-around porch of the Norfleet Plantation House into a puddle.

SOUTHERN WOMAN (O.S.)
(calling) Edward! I told you about
playing with the niggers. Edward!

Just behind him, curious young TURNER PRINCE (6), catches up and passes him. They take off and race each other.

YOUNG TURNER PRINCE
White boys cain't run!

Turner and Edward race across a beautiful lawn into a endless sea of cotton. They take separate rows, running side by side.

YOUNG EDWARD ZOELLER
I can beat you! My daddy says so.

They sprint across the cotton field, neck in neck for what seems like a mile, laughing all the while. They get to a small creek at the end of the field and leap...

YOUNG TURNER PRINCE
You ain't ne'er gon beat me E'ward!

SLOW MOTION DURING MID-AIR LEAP

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SOUTHERN PLANTATION HOUSE- LAST DAY CIVIL WAR 1865 - DAY

EDWARD now(17)and TURNER now(16) are in confederate uniforms. They land on the other side of the small creek and run like hell. It's the tail end of the last Civil War battle and it's gruesome. Death is all around. Canons fire. Men scream.

Caption: 10 YEARS LATER - LAST DAY OF THE CIVIL WAR

They dodge bullets and run for cover behind the cotton gin. Blood gushes from Edwards wounded leg. He's fading fast.

EDWARD ZOELLER
Turner you can run faster than me
cause you're younger than me.

TURNER PRINCE
Only one year. E'ward, you been
shot! You's bleed'n bad E'ward.

Edward passes out. Turner ties a tourniquet around Edward's leg and carries him back to the Norfleet plantation house.

INT. SOUTHERN PLANTATION HOUSE - KITCHEN - 1865 - DAY

Turner carries Edward inside and collapses on the wood floor. A black cast iron pot on the huge wood stove boils furiously.

TURNER PRINCE

E'ward wake up. E'ward. Don't die
on me E'ward. You can't die E'ward.

He holds Edward in his arms and rocks him gently in and out of consciousness. Angry voices approach outside.

TURNER PRINCE (CONT'D)

E'ward. Please don't die. Please.

The kitchen door flies open. Edward strains to see through the bright light from outside and loses consciousness again.

LOUD VOICES (O.S.)

Get him!

Several WHITE MEN bolt in and snatch Turner to his feet. NETTIE HOWELL (42) a wide hipped Julia Childs-looking southern belle comes in with a fresh chicken still twitching.

NETTIE HOWELL

Edward! Turner what have you done?

TURNER PRINCE

I didn't do nuthin' Miss Howell. We was jumpin' the creek when a shot rang out. I looked an' E'ward done got hit. We's hid 'hind the cotton gin long 'nuf fo' I could tie his leg up good. Then I brung E'ward all the way here and thas all Miss Howell. I swear. E'ward. E'ward.

Nettie drops the twitching chicken and cradles Edward.

NETTIE HOWELL

Edward. What really happened?

EDWARD ZOELLER

Turner. He..

Edward loses consciousness again. The white men yank Turner up and force him out the door. The chicken stops twitching.

FADE TO:

INT. MODEST RIVERSIDE WOODPLANK HOME - 1920 - NIGHT

Turner blows a smoke ring and tamps out his filterless cigarette. Lil Cora sticks her finger in the ring. Sarah waves away the smoke and drags the story out of Turner.

SARAH PRINCE

And where did they take you?

Sarah caresses his back. Edward "hears" whipping sounds.

LIL CORA

Where did they take you pa paw?

TURNER PRINCE

That's not important now. It's where we was goin' the next day.

LIL CORA

To meet Me-maw?

Turner takes a pecan half and gives it to Lil Cora.

TURNER PRINCE

We met at the T..

THE WHOLE FAMILY

(together) Tar River Bridge.

SARAH PRINCE

And why did we meet at the bridge?

Sarah sits down at the table. Turner closes his eyes. All the kids, focused on Turner, forget to crack their nuts.

TURNER PRINCE

We were set free.

Turner "hears" slave songs in his head like it was yesterday.

FADE TO:

EXT. EAST TARBORO - TAR RIVER BRIDGE - 1865 - SUNSET

Main street Tarboro is lit by oil lamps for over eight hundred yards. White townspeople line the street. Over a hundred freed slaves slowly cross the bridge at a snail's pace. They have the clothes on their backs and a crude or worn tool here and there, that's it. They have no lanterns.

Slave songs fill the night air. Several WHITE MEN guard the bridge. Many white people from Tarboro look on.

Some look angry, some ashamed. Everyone seems confused. Turner looks desperately for Sarah. They finally meet eyes.

TURNER PRINCE
(yells) Sarah! Over here!

Sarah and Turner run to each others arms. Turner has a lamp.

SARAH PRINCE
Oh Turner we're free. We're finally free. Now what are we gonna do?

TURNER PRINCE
I got this oil burner from Miss Howell. She knows I saved Edward. She says he'll be OK in a few days.

SARAH PRINCE
I mean, what are we gonna do? There's nothing over there. Just the old Union camp. They ain't gone feed us. Where we gonna bathe? What are we gonna do Turner? What?

Turner puts his arm around Sarah.

TURNER PRINCE
Shh. Shh. Shh. It's gonna be fine. Listen to me. We'll be fine. Come on. Once we get there you'll see.

Sarah takes his hand. They join the deliberately slow procession of more than a hundred newly freedmen crossing the Tar River bridge. They join in the heart wrenching song. It becomes obvious they are being forced to leave Tarboro.

FREEDMEN ON THE BRIDGE
(slow painful singing) Freedom... freedom... finally the war is done. Freedom... freedom... the day we're free is gonna come. Freedom, freedom, finally the war is done. Freedom, freedom, the day we're free has fin'ly come.

Several ANGRY WHITE MEN guard the bridge and keep the flow moving. The 300 yard walk only takes about five minutes, but tonight it takes them two hours. Emotions are mixed and high.

ANGRY WHITE MAN (O.S.)
Lincoln didn't think this all the way through. Now who's gonna prime my 'bacca and pick my cotton?

One of the ANGRY WHITE MEN snatches Turner's lamp away and lunges at him. Turner doesn't flinch and resists temptation to strike back. He and Sarah continue across the bridge into the darkness singing with the rest of Tarboro's freed slaves.

CUT TO:

EXT. OLD UNION CAMP - LOW SIDE OF THE RIVER - 1920 - NIGHT

The union camp is dark and abandoned. There is nothing left.

SARAH PRINCE

Turner, what are we going to do?
Where are we going to sleep?

Turner looks back at the Tar River bridge. The Tarboro street lamps go out. Its completely dark on this side of the river. Soft crying harmonizes with the slave songs. Sarah sniffles.

TURNER PRINCE

Come sit with me by this big pecan
tree. You can rest your head on me.

Out of the darkness, a familiar shadow, Edward appears, soaked from the waist down, carrying tools and lanterns.

FADE TO:

EXT. OLD UNION CAMP - LOW SIDE OF THE RIVER - 1865 - NIGHT

Several campfires light a small community of freed slaves. Edward, the only white in sight, dries his britches by the fire. Sarah lights a lantern. Turner holds a hammer.

TURNER PRINCE

Thank you E'ward. Tha's enough
nails to get us started. We can use
some of this ol' lumber from the
camp. At least that's somethin'.

Sarah smiles at Edward. Edward puts his dry pants on.

SARAH PRINCE

This oil won't last more than two
nights. I can swim Edward.

EDWARD ZOELLER

It's too many snapping turtles and
snakes this time a year Sarah. I'll
get back over here by Friday.

Edward takes off towards the river bank. We hear a splash.

TURNER PRINCE

We got to make a decision Sarah.
Are we gonna stay here on this low
piece of land owned by Mr. Dancy, a
white man. What if he comes and
kicks us off. What then?

Sarah holds Turner close as if to reel him in.

SARAH PRINCE

Listen to me Turner Prince. We both
know those crops over on the other
side of this river ain't gonna jump
in the carts and drive themselves
to market. Without us, who's gonna
bail that cotton, who's gonna prime
it and tie up all them 'bacca
sticks. Miss Howell? And mess up
her pretty hands? Hah! So we just
wait right here until they get
desperate. They'll come a callin',
you'll see.

TURNER PRINCE

You're just as smart as you are
purdy my lil' butter biscuit. But
does that mean we go back or stay..

SARAH PRINCE

On this side of the river.

Turner stands up and looks out at the dark.

TURNER PRINCE

On this side of the river.

Sarah holds Turner's hands and tries not to look scared.

FADE TO:

EXT. OLD UNION CAMP - LOW SIDE OF THE RIVER - 1865 - NEXT DAY

It's very damp. The fires are fizzled out. Everyone wakes up
cold and stiff. People pee in the bushes. Some wash in the
river. One baby starts to cry, then two, then three.

SARAH PRINCE

Turner. Do something.

Turner walks up the side of a hill and calls everyone over.