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Act 1

Act 1, Scene 1

SCENE 1

Wedding corset. *White satin with pink roses*

Lower Manhattan, 1905

A bedroom. It is simple, unadorned with the exception of beautifully embroidered curtains and a colorful crazy quilt.

A clumsy ragtime melody bleeds in from the parlor. In the distance the sound of laughter and general merriment.

Esther, a rather plain African American woman (35) sits at a sewing machine table diligently trimming a camisole with lace. She is all focus and determination.

MRS. DICKSON

(O. S.) Don't be fresh, Lionel. I know your Mama since before the war.

Mrs. Dickson (50), a handsome impeccably groomed African-American woman, enters laughing.

MRS. DICKSON

(cont'd) There you are. Mr. Charles was admiring the bread pudding and I told him that our Esther made it. It seems he has a sweet tooth.

ESTHER Mr. Charles is overly generous, come, the pudding ain't nothing special.

MRS. DICKSON And did I mention that our most available Mr. Charles was promoted to head Bellman at just about the finest hotel in New York? Yes.

-- 3 --

ESTHER But he still fetching luggage.

MRS. DICKSON Not just any luggage, high-class luggage.

ESTHER And is high-class luggage easier to carry?

MRS. DICKSON I reckon it is easier to haul silk than cotton, if you know what I'm saying.

Mrs. Dickson laughs. And he sporting a right smart suit this evening.

ESTHER Yes, it cashmere.

MRS. DICKSON You can tell more about a man by where he shops, than his practiced conversation. 'Cause any man with enough tonic can talk smooth, but not every man has the good sense to shop at-

ESTHER/MRS. DICKSON Saperstein's.

Esther laughs. Mrs. Dickson examines the embroidery.

MRS. DICKSON Lovely.

ESTHER It's for Corinna Mae's wedding night.

MRS. DICKSON Don't tell me you've been in here all evening? Corinna Mae is getting ready to leave with her fiancée.

ESTHER I wish I could find my party face. It really is a lovely affair. You done a fine job.

-- 4 --

MRS. DICKSON Come now, it ain't over yet. Put aside your sewing and straighten yourself up. There. You'll have a dance before this evening's out.

ESTHER Please, Mrs. Dickson, I can't, really. I'll just stand there like a wallflower.

MRS. DICKSON Nonsense, I've danced a half a dozen times, and my feet are just about worn out.

ESTHER If I had your good looks I'd raise a bit of dust myself. Ain't nobody down there interested in me.

MRS. DICKSON Esther, you're being silly. You've been moping around here for days. What is the matter?

ESTHER If you must know, I turned thirty-five Thursday past.

A moment.

MRS. DICKSON Oh Lord, I forgot child. I sure did. Look at that. With Corinna Mae carrying on and all these people, it slipped my mind. Happy birthday my sweet Esther.

Mrs. Dickson gives her a big hug.

ESTHER It's fine. You had all this to prepare for. And I been living in this rooming house for so long, I reckon I'm just another piece of furniture.

MRS. DICKSON Never. You were a Godsend when you come to me at Seventeen. Yes. I remember thinking how sweet and young you was with a sack full of overripe fruit smelling like a Carolina orchard.

-- 5 --

ESTHER And now? Twenty-two girls later, if you count Lerleen. That's how many of these parties I have had to go to and play merry. I should be happy for them, I know, but each time I think why ain't it me. Silly Corinna Mae, ain't got no brain at all, and just as plain as flour.

MRS. DICKSON Your time will come, child.

ESTHER What if it don't? Listen to her laughing. God forgive me, but I hate her laughter, I hate her happiness and I feel simply awful for saying so. And I'm afraid if I go back in there, she'll see it all over my face, and it's her day.

MRS. DICKSON There are a number of young men open to your smile. A sour face don't buy nothing but contempt. Why our Mr. Charles has had three servings of your bread pudding.

ESTHER And he shouldn't have had any.

Esther laughs. He weighs nearly as much as your horse.

MRS. DICKSON Nonsense, he weighs more then poor Jessup. Shhh. He is a good man, poised for success. Yes.

ESTHER But he's been coming to these parties for near two years and if he ain't met a lady, I'd bet it ain't a lady he after. I've been warned about men in refined suits. But still, Esther would be lucky for his attention, that's what you thinking. Well, I ain't giving up so easy.

-- 6 --

MRS. DICKSON Good for you. But there are many a cautionary tale bred of overconfidence. When I met the late Mr. Dickson he was near sixty and I forgave his infatuation with the opiates, for he come with this rooming house and look how many good years it's given me. Sure I cussed that damn pipe, and I cussed him for making me a widow, but sometimes we get to a point where we can't be so particular.

ESTHER

(snaps) Well, I ain't going down there to be paraded like some featherless bird.

A moment. I'm sorry, would you kindly take this down to Corinna Mae.

MRS. DICKSON I'll do no such thing. You can bring it down yourself.

Mrs. Dickson starts for the door, but abruptly stops.

MRS. DICKSON

(cont'd) It tough Esther for a colored woman in this city. I ain't got to tell you that. You nimble with your fingers, but all Corinna Mae got be her honey colored skin. And you good and smart and deserve all the attention in that room, but today's her day and all I ask is that you come toast her as I know she'd toast you. Put aside your feelings and don't say nothing about Sally's piano playing, the girl trying and for God's sake this a party not a wake.

Mrs. Dickson extends the letter.

-- 7 --

MRS. DICKSON

(cont'd) And I thought you might want this letter. It come this morning, I didn't want to forget.

ESTHER Who'd be writing me?

MRS. DICKSON

(reading) Mr. George Armstrong.

ESTHER It ain't someone I know. Armstrong? There was an Armstrong that attended my church, but he dead a long time now. Will you read the letter to me?

Esther takes the letter.

MRS. DICKSON I got a house full of people. You best remind me tomorrow. And I will see you downstairs, shortly. Plenty of punch left and it better than New Year's, so best hurry. I made certain everybody be leaving this party happy.

Mrs. Dickson exits. Esther examines the letter, then places it on the sewing table unopened.

Lights cross fade.

Panama bunk. George, a muscular handsome African Caribbean man, rises from his cot. He wipes mud from his face, as he speaks with a musical Barbadian accent.

GEORGE Dear Miss Mills, My name is George Armstrong. I work in Panama along side Carson Wynn, your Deacon's Son. We digging a big hole across the land, they say one day ships will pass from one ocean to the next. It is important work, we told. If importance be measured by how many men die, then this be real important work. One man drops for every twenty feet of canal dug, like so many flies. Carson say if we eat a can of sardines, they'll protect us against the mosquitoes and fever. I say, not as long as we be digging. Lord knows our minds deserve a bit of shade. But ain't such a thing to be had, not here at least. Don't think me too forward, but I thought it would be nice to have someone to think about, someone not covered from head to toe in mud, someone to ward off this awful boredom. Carson speaks so highly of his church that I find comfort in his recollections. I ask if I may write you? And if you so please, I'd welcome your words. Sincerely, George Armstrong

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Act 1, Scene 2**SCENE 2**

Gardenia Ball Corset. *Pink silk and Crepe de chine*

An elegant boudoir.

The silhouette of a naked woman moves gracefully behind a translucent screen. She slides her torso into the fitted lingerie.

Esther sits at the dressing table exploring the carefully arranged silver grooming set. She jumps to attention at the sound of Mrs. Van Buren's voice.

MRS. VAN BUREN I feel exposed. I think the straps need to be tightened, Esther.

ESTHER No Ma'am, that's the way it's meant to be, but I'll add a little more fabric to-

MRS. VAN BUREN No, no if this is what you made for that singer. It is what I want. All right. I'm coming out.

Mrs. Van Buren emerges from behind the dressing screen wearing a very low corset embossed with lavender flowers. She's an attractive white woman in her early thirties, and attempts to carry herself with great poise and confidence.

MRS. VAN BUREN

(cont'd) Oh God, I look ridiculous, and I'm behaving absolutely foolishly, but I'm not sure what else to do. Look at me. I've spent a fortune on feathers and every manner of accouterment.

Esther begins to tighten the lacing of the corset.

-- 10 --

MRS. VAN BUREN

(cont'd) They've written positively splendid things about me in the columns this season.

ESTHER I'm sure they did.

MRS. VAN BUREN But does it matter, I ask? Does it matter? Has he spent an evening at home? Has he so much as complimented my gowns this season or noticed that I've painted the damn boudoir vermilion red? Just look at this awful color, looks like a bohemian garret. But, does he notice?

ESTHER Well he should. You look lovely, Mrs. Van Buren.

MRS. VAN BUREN Ha! I feel like a tart from the tenderloin. Granted I've never been, but I'm told. Are you sure this is what you made for that. . . singer?

ESTHER It is identical to the stitching.

Mrs. Van Buren examines herself in the mirror, at first with disgust, which eventually gives way to curiosity.

MRS. VAN BUREN And you say the French women are wearing these?

ESTHER So I'm told.

MRS. VAN BUREN I don't believe it. It hardly seems decent. But I suppose the French aren't known for their modesty.

She strikes a provocative, though slightly self-conscious pose.

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ESTHER Well, it the rage. Some ladies ain't even wearing corsets in private.

MRS. VAN BUREN Is that true?

ESTHER Most gals don't like 'em, even fine ladies like yourself. Truth is I ain't known a man to court pain for a woman's glance.

MRS. VAN BUREN You're not one of those suffragettes, are you?

ESTHER Oh God no, Mrs. Van Buren.

MRS. VAN BUREN Indeed. I'd just as soon not tamper in men's business.

Mrs. Van Buren pours a snifter of brandy.

ESTHER Talk and nickel will buy you five cents worth of trouble.

Mrs. Van Buren gulps back the brandy.

MRS. VAN BUREN It's come to this. Look at me, if Mother dear could see what has become of her peach in the big city.

Mrs. Van Buren clumsily tugs at the bodice.

ESTHER Come, let me fix it.

Esther runs her fingers gracefully along the seam, down the curve of Mrs. Van Buren's waist. Mrs. Van Buren tenses slightly at the sensation of being touched.

MRS. VAN BUREN I hear Sadie Jones got quite plump.

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ESTHER That's being kind. Two yards of fine black satin, and the corset still ain't fit. And she had the nerve to get mad at me.

MRS. VAN BUREN She's such an awful prig, isn't she? It serves her right. . .

Mrs. Van Buren touches the beading along the corset, in doing so, she allows her fingers to tenderly brush Esther's hand. Oh dear, do we need all of these dangling things?

ESTHER Oh, I hope you ain't mind, that I added a touch of beading along the trim.

MRS. VAN BUREN It is different.

ESTHER Do you like it?

MRS. VAN BUREN I confess, I almost do. It's a bit naughty.

(giggles) Yes, I might even wear it beneath my gown tonight. Do you think anyone will notice? It is the annual Gardenia Ball, quite the event of the season.

ESTHER So I hear.

MRS. VAN BUREN And do you know what that means?

A moment. They'll all be there, parading their good fortune. I'll have to smile, be polite, because I'm known for that, but I will dread every last minute, every bit of forced conversation with the Livingstons and the Babcocks, and their clan. They want to know. All of them do. It's on their lips, in between the perfectly measured words. "When are you going to have a child, Evangeline?" And my answer is always the same, "Why we're working on it dear, speak to Harold." And dear Harry will be in a sour mood for a week. You probably don't even know what I'm talking about. Have you children?

-- 13 --

ESTHER No, Mrs. Van Buren. I ain't been married.

MRS. VAN BUREN Never? Can I tell you something?

ESTHER Yes. If you like.

MRS. VAN BUREN I've given him no children.

(whispered) I'm afraid I can't. He is an important man, travels in circles where progeny is essential. It's not for the lack of trying. One takes these things for granted, you assume when it comes time that it will happen, and when it doesn't who is to blame? They think it's vanity that's kept me childless, I've heard the women whispering. If only I were that vain. But it's like he's given up.

ESTHER But you're so beautiful.

MRS. VAN BUREN You think so?

ESTHER Yes. I can't imagine he'd ever lose interest.

MRS. VAN BUREN But he has turned to other interests. Trust me. I thought that if I could entice him. . . This will stay between us? I'm told you're discreet.

ESTHER I just sew Mrs. I don't hear anything that I ain't supposed to.

MRS. VAN BUREN You understand why. I'd rather not be a divorcee, at my age it would prove disastrous.

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ESTHER Do you think there is something wrong with a woman alone?

MRS. VAN BUREN What I think is of little consequence. If I were

(whispered) young. . .no. . . If were brave I'd gather my things right now and find a small clean room someplace on the other side of the park. No, further in fact. And I'd. . .But it isn't a possibility, is it?

A moment.

ESTHER I don't know that I'll marry.

MRS. VAN BUREN Of course you will, it's just a matter of finding the right gentleman.

ESTHER You reckon? Ma'am. I been working since I was seventeen with barely a day's rest. In fact, the other evening I was at my sewing machine and I stopped work and all this time had passed, gone. Years really. And I know right there that some things ain't meant to be. And that's all right, ain't it? And I wouldn't have thought no more about it, but then I got this. . .

Esther stops mid thought and busies herself with her sewing basket.

MRS. VAN BUREN Yes?

ESTHER I'm almost ashamed to say it. At my age it foolish, I know.

MRS. VAN BUREN What is it?

-- 15 --

ESTHER A gentleman. . . A gentleman has taken interest in me.

MRS. VAN BUREN Really? How wonderful! Is he respectable?

ESTHER I don't know, I mean, I don't know him actually. I got me this letter from Panama. A man in Panama. He wrote about two weeks back. I been carrying it around since. But, I ain't so sure I should answer.

MRS. VAN BUREN And why not?

ESTHER I ain't much of a writer, no, I ain't a writer at all. The fact is I can't read.

MRS. VAN BUREN Do you have the letter? May I see it?

Esther hesitates, then pulls the letter from her smock and hands it to Mrs. Van Buren, who quickly peruses it and smiles.

MRS. VAN BUREN

(cont'd) Panama. He has lovely penmanship, that's important. He isn't careless with his stroke, that's the mark of a thoughtful man. It's a good thing, I believe.

ESTHER I won't respond, of course, if it ain't appropriate.

MRS. VAN BUREN Nonsense. He's half way across the world. I'm sure he's perfectly harmless. A bit lonesome perhaps, that's all.

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ESTHER But if I have Mrs. Dickson over at the rooming house help me she'll get all up in my business. And she's got an opinion about everything and I'd rather not be lectured or questioned or bothered. She's just about the busiest. . . in any event, she said to rip it up promptly, a decent woman wouldn't resort to such a dalliance. But as you can see he has taken interest in me.

MRS. VAN BUREN Would you like me to help you, Esther?

ESTHER I couldn't ask.

MRS. VAN BUREN You needn't, I insist.

ESTHER I never done this before.

MRS. VAN BUREN Nor have I.

ESTHER Maybe it ain't such a good idea, Mrs. Van Buren. No, I ain't really got much to say.

MRS. VAN BUREN Goodness, of course you do.

ESTHER No, I don't! I live in a rooming house with 7 unattached women and sew intimate apparel for ladies, but that ain't for a gentleman's ears. Sure I can tell him anything there is to know about fabric, but that hardly seems a life worthy of words.

MRS. VAN BUREN It is a beginning.

Mrs. Van Buren sits at her dressing table and retrieves a sheet of stationery.

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MRS. VAN BUREN

(cont'd) Come Esther, don't be shy. It'll be a laugh.

ESTHER I go to church every Sunday, well practically, but I don't really listen to the sermons, I just like the company and the singing of course. . . And on Tuesdays. . . I climb five flights in darkness to this tiny apartment on Orchard Street. And when I open the door my eyes are met by the most brilliant colors-

The lights rise. Another bedroom in a cramped tenement flat. It is small and cluttered with bolts of fabric.

A handsome orthodox Jewish man scrambles to straighten out the room as a knock sounds on the door. He's wearing a black suit, which is missing the top button. With haste, he folds up his bed roll and opens the door breathless. Esther stands in the doorway.

ESTHER

(cont'd) Mr. Marks? Am I too early?

MR. MARKS No, not at all. Come in. I've a number of new things to show you.

ESTHER Good.

He unrolls an extraordinary length of silk.

MR. MARKS Ah. Feel this one. Japanese silk, your special order for the lady on Fifth Avenue. It took me nearly one month to find this very piece. I had to go everywhere. Lovely. Yes?

-- 18 --

ESTHER Lovely. Look at how finely woven. Beautiful. I never-

MR. MARKS I have two extra yards left, I give to you for next to nothing. If you'd like.

ESTHER Next to nothing is too much for me. You know my answer. What will I do with it?

MR. MARKS Make something lovely for yourself.

ESTHER It will be wasted on me.

MR. MARKS You'll never see this again. I guarantee. I'll let our Fifth Avenue lady cover the difference. How about that? I see how much you like. I promise it is the very best quality. She don't know what she has, she don't come down here to feel the fabric herself, to feel the difference, the texture, she don't know how remarkable a weave.

ESTHER I could make a shawl.

MR. MARKS Or a smoking jacket for your gentleman, perhaps.

ESTHER

(bashfully) My gentleman? Oh no.

Esther self-consciously runs the fabric across her face, then releases it.

ESTHER

(cont'd) You've distracted me, Mr. Marks. You always get me to buy something I don't need.

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MR. MARKS When I see something of quality, I like to share with my favorite customers. Everybody want the same thing. But you want different. I like that.

ESTHER Thank you.

Mr. Marks smiles at Esther, she averts her gaze, allowing her eyes to fall on the spot where he's missing a button. She ever so politely points to the spot.

MR. MARKS Ah, look at that. I lost a button.

Mr. Marks self-consciously touches his jacket, then without missing a beat returns his focus to the fabric.

MR. MARKS I buy at the docks yesterday morning, it come right off a ship from the Orient, I see it and think Esther Mills will like. Of course. Everybody else gabardine, wool, nainsook. But it isn't often that something so fine and delicate enters the store. Look at the way the blue thread is interwoven; a hand took the time to gently wind it through each and every stitch like a magician. It is magnificent, yes. You'll make something exquisite. I can see from your hands that you are blessed with the needle and the thread, which means you'll never be without warmth.

ESTHER I'm afraid it was either learn to sew or turn back sheets for 50 cents a day.

MR. MARKS You make it sound too simple. My father sew, my brother sew, yes, for the finest families. But I don't have the discipline, the fingers. Look at the size of these hands. Like Cirmati, Romanian sausage. I wish for your hands.

Esther laughs and returns to examining the fabric. Marks watches her with pleasure.

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ESTHER It's fruit dye. Am I right? It smells like--

MR. MARKS --an imperial palace, it is signed by the artist right there. I wouldn't be surprised if it was created for an empress.

ESTHER You really want me to buy this, don't you? Alright, it means I'll go without sugar for a week, will that make you a happy?

MR. MARKS It makes you happy, it makes me happy.

ESTHER Oh Lord, I do want it.

Esther affectionately grasps Mr. Marks' hand, he abruptly pulls it away. Esther is taken aback.

ESTHER

(CONT'D) The color won't rub off on you.

MR. MARKS No, no. I'm sorry. It's not that. Please. My religious belief doesn't permit me to touch a woman who is not my wife or my relative.

ESTHER Oh, I see.

MR. MARKS It is the rabbinical law, not mine.

ESTHER Your wife must be a happy woman.

A moment.

MR. MARKS I am not married. Not yet. My fiancé is in Romania. Um, my family made the arrangement years ago.

-- 21 --

ESTHER Oh? I bet you miss her something awful.

Marks rubs his hand where Esther touched him. He laughs, a bit self consciously.

MR. MARKS I haven't ever met her, actually.

Lights cross fade.

Mrs. Van Buren sits at her dressing table with a pen in hand.

As she speaks, Esther crosses back to Mrs. Van Buren's bedroom.

ESTHER He keep a wealth of fabric in that apartment. But you wouldn't know it. He can find anything you need, even things you don't know you need. That's what-

MRS. VAN BUREN You're jumping a bit ahead of yourself. Shall we begin with Dear Mr. Armstrong--

ESTHER Yes. That's good. Dear Mr. Armstrong--

MRS. VAN BUREN I received your letter-

Lights cross fade. George sits in his bunkroom, undressing for the evening.

GEORGE Dear Miss Mills, I received your letter. It two months in the coming, so please forgive me I've already written you twice since. I am most happy to make your acquaintance, and I'm anxious to hear all about you. As for me, I'd like to report on our good progress, but it isn't the case. This canal seem a near impossible mission, but here we be, digging until day end bathed in mud up to our necks. They say a mad Frenchmen dreamed up this Panama project, and convinced the devil to give him an army of workers. The price, this great fissure across the land that reach right into the earth's belly. Indeed, chaos is a jackhammer away, that's what be said here anyway. But when the great oceans meet and the gentlemen celebrate, will we colored men be given glasses to raise? Or shall it be on Nebruary morning? Today we severed the roots of a giant flamboyant, and watched it tumble to the ground. I stood thigh deep in crimson blossoms, swathed in the sweet aroma of death and wondered how a place so beautiful could become a morgue. But the days aren't all bad. If you take a moment to listen to the forest around us there is so much life just out of sight. And there be men from every corner of the Caribbean, sharing downalong tales around fires, heads light on acid and laughter.

A rag plays on the piano. Esther sits at her sewing machine. But now, I read your letter. I see you sitting at your sewing machine. I hear the sound of the wheel turning, the tiny stitches drawing together the pieces of satin. They got machines here that take six men to operate, and slice through stone like butter. All this wonder and waste, but your letter be the most splendid thing and shall ride in me pocket, until the next. Yours considerately, George Armstrong.

A rag continues to play in the distance. Esther holds up a pale blue corset.

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Act 1, Scene 3

SCENE 3

Heliotrope Handkerchief.

Another bedroom. A canopy bed dominates.

Mayme, a strikingly beautiful African American woman (30) sits at an upright piano. She plays a frenzied upbeat rag. Her silk robe is torn, and her face trembles with outrage.

Esther enters carrying a carpet bag.

ESTHER I been knocking for ages. Didn't you hear me? . . . What's going on?

A moment.

MAYME They really do make me sick, but around the holidays a steady customer is just about your best friend. Always stinking of ignorant oil. And look what he done. It's the only pretty thing I own and look what he done.

Mayme pulls her torn silk robe tight around her body, doing her best to brighten up.

ESTHER That ain't nothing, I can fix it for you.

MAYME All the pawing and pulling. For a dollar they think they own you.

Mayme washes her face and privates in a basin, then pours herself a glass of moonshine.

MAYME

(cont'd) You don't approve of me, Esther. I don't mind. Sit. I'm awfully glad to see ya, 'am. When you knocked on the door, I thought Christ almighty not another one. I'm so damn tired, I don't know what to do.

Mayme sits back down at the upright piano and gracefully plays a slow well-considered rag.

-- 24 --

ESTHER Pretty. Did you write that, Mayme?

MAYME Yeah.

ESTHER It's beautiful. Don't stop.

MAYME

(continuing to play) My daddy gave me twelve lashes with a switch for playing this piece in our parlor. One for each year I studied the piano. He was too proper to like anything colored, and a syncopated beat was about the worst crime you could commit in his household. I woke up this morning with the sudden urge to play it.

Mayme stops playing.

ESTHER You must have gotten a lot of licks in your time.

MAYME Yeah, baby I wasn't born this black and blue.

Mayme picks up a bottle of moonshine and takes a belt.

ESTHER That there the reason you tired, that wicked oil is unforgiving. Best let it lie.

MAYME Oh bother, stop playing mother hen and come show me what you got.

ESTHER Anything else, Mistress?

MAYME Hush your mouth, you're far too sweet for sarcasm.

Esther pulls a corset from her bag, it's pale blue with lines of royal blue glass beads ornamenting the bodice.

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MAYME

(cont'd) (touched) Is that for me?

Mayme leaps up from the piano and holds the corset up to her body.

ESTHER I made one just like it for a lady on Fifth Ave.

MAYME It's so pretty. This is really for me? No kidding? Can I try it on?

ESTHER Of course you can.

MAYME Feel it. It feels like Fifth Avenue, does. You out-done yourself this time, honey.

ESTHER Stop talking and go put it on.

Mayme gives Esther a kiss on the cheek.

ESTHER

(cont'd) And look at the flowers, ain't they sweet? It took me a whole day just to sew them on.

Mayme undresses and changes into the new corset.

MAYME For shame. This the prettiest thing anybody ever made for me. Truly.

ESTHER You know that white lady I talk about sometime, she keep asking me what they be wearing up in the tenderloin. All that money and high breeding and she want what you wearing.

MAYME No kidding?

-- 26 --

ESTHER What she got, you want, what you got, she want.

MAYME Onliest, I ain't got the money to pay for it. Give me a hand.

Esther ties the corset.

MAYME

(cont'd) Whatcha think? Do I look like a Fifth Ave bird?

ESTHER Grand. You look grand. I wish Mr. Marks could see you. That satin foulard is his favorite. He say it's made for fine ladies in China.

MAYME No kidding.

ESTHER I wasn't going to buy it, but he-

MAYME Mr. Marks?

A moment.

MAYME Who is this Mr. Marks?

ESTHER He just a salesman. That's all.

MAYME It sound to me like you bit sweet on him.

ESTHER Me? Oh no, he a Jew.

Mayme looks into Esther's eyes.

MAYME

(cont'd) And? I been with a Jew, with a Turk even. And let me tell ya, a gentle touch is gold in any country.

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ESTHER I see the bodice is bit snug-

MAYME Is he handsome?

ESTHER I ain't noticed.

MAYME Good, patient, Esther. Come, he wouldn't be your first, would he?

ESTHER I ain't even going to dignify that question with a response.

MAYME

(softening her tone) You dear thing.

Mayme laughs long and hard. Esther doesn't respond.

MAYME

(cont'd) No kidding. I can't even remember what it was like. Ain't that something.

ESTHER Let's not talk about this.

MAYME Mercy, what you must think of me.

Mayme suddenly self-conscious, touches the beading on the corset.

ESTHER If you must know, I'm being courted by a gentleman.

MAYME Courted by a gentleman. Beg my pardon. Not that Panama man? Oh come on, don't tell me you still writing him.

ESTHER He writing me.

MAYME You'd rather a man all the way across the ocean than down Broadway. Are you expecting him to arrive in the mail like some tonic from a catalogue?

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ESTHER Please don't make sport, Mayme.

MAYME I'm just playing with you.

ESTHER

(wounded) I ain't expecting nothing.

A moment. Mayme acknowledges Esther's hurt. She caresses her friend's face.

MAYME Sure you are. Sure you are. And why the hell not?

Mayme sits at the piano. I am a concert pianist playing recitals for audiences in Prague and I have my own means, not bad for a colored girl from Ohio. . .

Mayme plays a lovely waltz, but doesn't complete it, instead allowing it to become a rag for several bars.

MAYME

(cont'd) And following a concert, Judith, that's my good biblical name, takes tea with her dear friend Miss Esther, who's known in circles for. . .for what? I forget.

Esther is reluctant to share her dream.

MAYME Come on, Miss Esther don't be proud.

ESTHER I. .I own a quaint beauty parlor for colored ladies.

MAYME Of course.

ESTHER The smart set. Someplace east of Amsterdam, fancy where you get pampered and treated real nice. 'Cause no one does it for us. We just as soon wash our heads in a bucket and be treated like mules. But what I'm talking about is someplace elegant.

Mayme stops playing the piano.

-- 29 --

MAYME Go on Missie you too fancy for me.

ESTHER When you come in Miss Mayme, I'll take your coat and ask "would you like a cup of tea?"

MAYME Why, thank you.

ESTHER And I'll open a book of illustrations, and show you the latest styles.

MAYME I can pick anything in the book?

ESTHER Yes.

MAYME How about if I let you choose?

ESTHER Very well. Make yourself comfortable, put your feet up, I know they're tired.

MAYME Shucks, you don't know the half of it.

ESTHER And in no time flat for the cost a ride uptown and back, you got a whole new look.

MAYME Just like that? I reckon I'd pay someone good money to be treated like a lady. It would be worth two three days on my back. Yes, it would.

ESTHER You think so?

MAYME I know so.

ESTHER And if I told you I got a little something saved? I keep it sewed up in the lining of a crazy quilt.

-- 30 --

MAYME On a cold lonely night wouldn't that quilt be a poor woman's dream.

ESTHER I been saving it slowly since I come North. It for that beauty parlor. I ain't told nobody that. Honest, for true.

MAYME Where'd you get such a damn serious face?

ESTHER Why not?

MAYME Because, we just fooling that's all. I ain't been to Prague, ain't never gonna go to Prague.

ESTHER But come, is this what you want to be doing ten years from now, twenty?

MAYME You think I ain't tried to make a go of it. You think I just laid down and opened my legs 'cause it was easy. It don't look like nothing, but this saloon is better then a lot of them places, ask anybody. Only last night one of Bert Williams's musicians sat up front, and he stayed through the entire show and offered up his compliments freely. You think some of those gals in the big shows didn't start right where I am.

ESTHER You got this beautiful piano that you play better than anyone I know. There are a hundred church choirs-

MAYME Let me tell you, so many wonderful ideas been conjured in this room. They just get left right on the cabinet, in that bed there, or on this piano bench. They are scattered all over this room.

Mayme slams the piano shut.

-- 31 --

MAYME

(cont'd) Esther, I ain't waiting for anybody to rescue me. My Panama Man come and gone long time now. It sweet that he write you but, my dear, it ain't real.

ESTHER Yes, he here in my pocket in a cambric walking suit, he has a heliotrope handkerchief stuffed in his pocket and a sweet way about him. He so far away, I can carry him in my pocket like a feather.

Esther laughs and produces a letter from her apron.

MAYME You're funny. You and your silly letter.

ESTHER Ain't a week go by without one. It got so I know the post man by name.

Esther holds out the letter.

MAYME I ain't interested. Put it away.

ESTHER C'mon now, you know you want to read it.

A moment.

ESTHER He write real pretty. Things I can't even say aloud.

Esther begins to put it away.

MAYME Hell, give it here.

Mayme snatches the letter and quickly peruses it, allowing herself a smile.

MAYME Ooo.

-- 32 --

ESTHER What it say?

MAYME Your man got himself a new pair of socks. Wait. . .he wants to know what you look like. Ain't you told him?

ESTHER No. I'm afraid, I don't know what to say.

MAYME Tell him the truth.

ESTHER That I don't look like much.

MAYME You tell him that you're about as lovely a person as there is.

ESTHER You know that ain't so.

MAYME Of course, it is. And what does it matter? You think half the men that come in here bother looking at my face. No ma'am. He don't care about this.

Mayme grabs Esther's face, and gives her a kiss on the forehead. She opens her robe revealing the lingerie underneath.

MAYME

(cont'd) He interested in this, my dear. This is what he's asking about.

Mayme laughs.

ESTHER I wouldn't dare write about something like that. He Christian!

MAYME And it's in his weakness that he'll find his strength. Hallelujah! C'mon, I'm just playing with you.

-- 33 --

ESTHER I'm being serious and you got your mind in the gutter.

MAYME For God's sake, the man just asking what you look like 'cause he want something pretty to think about come sundown.

ESTHER Truly? Then will you help me write something.

Mayme hands back the letter to Esther.

MAYME What about your white lady? Why not have her do it.

A moment. Esther opens the dressing drawer.

ESTHER 'Cause I'm asking you, my friend.

MAYME No, my writing ain't perfect.

ESTHER Don't bother about the hand writing, we'll tell him I pricked my finger while sewing. He'll understand. Please.

Mayme fetches a sheet of paper and a pen and sits on the bed. Esther lies next to her.

MAYME I ain't romantic, I find this silly, really I do. How do I begin?

ESTHER Dear George.

Mayme concentrates, then slowly writes. She crumples the page. She thinks, then begins again.

MAYME

(savoring the notion) A love letter to a gentleman. I know. Dear George, I write you wearing a lavender silk robe with-

Esther giggles.

Lights cross fade.

George sits his cot illuminated by a lantern.

-- 34 --

GEORGE Dear Esther, Thank you for your sweet words. It quiet now. The only motion is the rain. The only sound is the rain. It is the white season, and the work all but stop. It be a lonely time though, there is much quarrelling amongst the men. Here we sit, watching our hard work covered over by the persistence of the elements. The rum shop be the onliest business that do prosper. I seen months of hard work lost in an evening and good men befriend the devil overnight. And if I told you it's been months since I've seen a decent woman it wouldn't be a lie. There are caravans of sweet-faced Indian girls offering up their childhood for a half-day's wage. But the Priests aren't far behind to cleanse the guilt with their sanctified words, and talk of purgatory. Many men leave here with less than they come. I shan't be one, I say. It isn't appropriate, but I will say it. I crave a gentlewoman's touch, even if only be to turn down my collar or brush away the dirt in the evenings. Indeed, I imagine the cobble stone roads and the splendid carriages on the avenues, and a dry place to sit. I'd like to meet you as a gentleman. I think much about the suit I will wear, and the colors that your eyes find pleasing. I think of you running silk thread between your fingers and find a bit of holy relief, for your letters arrive just in time to ward off temptation. Yours affectionately, George

-- 35 --

Act 1, Scene 4

SCENE 4

Raw Silk.

Esther's Boudoir.

Esther sits at the sewing machine, working on a silk camisole. Mrs. Dickson enters carrying a letter, which she hands to Esther.

MRS. DICKSON I don't trust him, not one bit. He writes too often.

ESTHER It's open.

MRS. DICKSON I'm sorry, I opened it by mistake. I didn't mean to, but I'm glad I did.

ESTHER 'cause you the landlord don't give you the right to tamper with my things.

MRS. DICKSON What are your intentions?

ESTHER We corresponding. That's all.

MRS. DICKSON I know these kind of men. Sugared words, but let them stick to the page and go no further. He'll steal your common sense, he will and walk away. It just don't seem like you, Esther, you're too practical a girl for this.

ESTHER Don't set your clock by my habits.

MRS. DICKSON His tone is very familiar. And I don't approve.

ESTHER I'm sorry, but I needn't your approval.

-- 36 --

MRS. DICKSON My goodness. I hope you're not expecting anything to come of this.

ESTHER And if I am?

MRS. DICKSON Our Mr. Charles has asked me twice about you this week. I told him he was most welcome to call.

ESTHER Why'd you go and do something like that?

MRS. DICKSON Have you seen him in uniform? For a portly fella' he can look down right handsome.

ESTHER Mr. Charles is a fool and a glutton. And I'm sure he don't even know who I am.

MRS. DICKSON You are a stubborn little country girl. And very particular. And it wouldn't hurt you to be more receptive.

ESTHER To who? Mr. Charles? Remember it's me you're talking to, not Doreen or Erma, or one of those other silly open-hearted little gals. And yes, I'm writing letters to a man. And it may come to nothing. But I am his sweetheart twice a month, and I can fill that envelope with anything that I want.

MRS. DICKSON Yes. It's an innocent enough flirtation, and I had my share in my youth. And believe me when I say I was romanced by many bright and willing young men.

Mrs. Dickson takes Esther's hand.

-- 37 --

MRS. DICKSON

(cont'd) It's potent, I know, but I'm not ashamed to admit that my pride ultimately led to compromise. And I ain't ashamed of how I came by this rooming house. And if you're not careful, Esther --

ESTHER This quilt is filled with my hard work, one hundred dollars for every year I been seated at that sewing machine. It's my beauty parlor. So you see I don't need Mr. Charles for his good job and position.

Mrs. Dickson pulls the quilt off of the bed.

MRS. DICKSON You think this is enough? Do you? You think this gonna make you happy when another half dozen girls waltz away in camisoles of your making. When the Bellman's Ball come around another year and you here fluffing ruffles for some girl from Kentucky, who just happy to be wearing shoes.

ESTHER No, I don't think that. And I'd give this quilt and everything in it to be with someone I care for, I would. But I-

MRS. DICKSON This man in Panama, he's paper and I'll show how easily he goes away.

Mrs. Dickson rips up the letter.

ESTHER Mrs. Dickson!

MRS. DICKSON You'll thank me.

Mrs. Dickson exits. Esther picks up the pieces of the letter. Lights cross fade to George in Panama, as he picks up pieces of fabric.

-- 38 --

GEORGE Dear Esther, I opened the letter and these tiny bits of fabric tumbled out onto the ground. Imagine my surprise, gray wool, pink silk and the blue flannel, which I tucked in the back of my shirt this morning --

Lights cross fade to Marks' Boudoir.

Marks unrolls a cobalt blue roll of silk.

Esther touches the various fabrics muslin, taffeta, satin, tulle.

Marks unfurls a vibrant roll of magenta cloth.

MR. MARKS It is raw silk, I washed it yesterday and look.

ESTHER Yes, beautiful.

MR. MARKS Have you ever seen anything like that?

ESTHER No.

MR. MARKS It looks coarse, but feel.

Esther runs her hand across the blue material and smiles.

MR. MARKS

(cont'd) Ah, it will feel even better against your back.

ESTHER The ladies will like this indeed. You shouldn't have shown me this.

She pulls the fabric around her shoulders. He then wraps a strip of magenta cloth around his shoulders.

MR. MARKS Look at this color.

-- 39 --

ESTHER It look very good on you, Mr. Marks.

MR. MARKS Does it?

Esther laughs. Mr. Marks laughs.

An awkward moment.

ESTHER Your button. If you take off your jacket, I'll sew it on for you.

MR. MARKS Don't worry. It is fine. Look. The jacket still closes.

Mr. Marks buttons the remaining buttons on the coat.

ESTHER It'll take me no time.

MR. MARKS No. Thank you. Truly. It is fine.

A moment.

ESTHER Why do you always wear black? You sell all of these magnificent colors, and yet every time I see you, you're wearing black.

MR. MARKS You ask a very complicated question. It's an act of faith, that is the simplest way I know how to explain. It is one of the many ways that I show my devotion to God.

A moment.

ESTHER Is marrying someone you don't know another?

MR. MARKS It is a thousand years of history and struggle behind the answer to that question.

-- 40 --

ESTHER And yet it seems as simple as shedding an overcoat.

Marks removes the fabric from around his shoulders.

ESTHER I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you.

MR. MARKS You haven't upset me.

A moment.

ESTHER I -

MR. MARKS Yes?

Esther removes the material from around her shoulders and passes it to Mr. Marks.

ESTHER If you wrap the two yards of magenta, I'll pay you next week.

Marks carefully measures out the fabric and cuts it.

MR. MARKS To answer your question, it has always been that way in my family.

ESTHER But they are so far away, and this a new country.

MR. MARKS But we come with our pockets stuffed, yes. We don't throw away nothing for fear we might need it later. . . I wear my father's suit. It is old, I know, but this simple black fabric is my most favorite. Why? Because when I wear, it reminds me that I live everyday with a relationship to my ancestors and God.

As Marks turns to wrap the fabric, Esther ever so gently touches the back of his collar. He doesn't register the gesture. Or does he?

Lights fade around Mr. Marks's Boudoir. As they rise in Mrs. Van Buren's Boudoir. Mrs. Van Buren wears a robe and corset made of raw magenta silk.

-- 41 --

MRS. VAN BUREN Raw silk? Is it popular?

ESTHER It will be by Fall.

MRS. VAN BUREN Really? I'll have to weave that tidbit into conversation this evening. My in-laws are coming. The frog and the wart. Oh, and did I tell you? I saw Mr. Max Fiedler of Germany conduct selections from Don Juan. I had to endure an encore from the Soprano, what was her name? Something Russian, no doubt. It was really all a grand disappointment. I'd rather have gone to the electric show at Madison Square Garden, but you see Harry isn't impressed with electricity. "Miracle upon miracle, but there remain things science will never be able to give us," he says, so he refrains from enthusiasm.

Mrs. Van Buren lights a cigarette.

MRS. VAN BUREN

(CONT'D) By the way, I bled this morning, and when I delivered the news to Harry, he spat at me. This civilized creature of society. We, us women, we all bleed, Esther. And yet I actually felt guilt, as though a young girl again apologizing for becoming a woman.

Mrs. Van Buren sheds her Kimono, revealing a low cut magenta corset with a pale pink camisole beneath.

MRS. VAN BUREN

(cont'd) Maybe I'll be a bohemian, a bohemian needn't a husband, she's not bound by convention. I could shed all these bothersome layers of civility.

-- 42 --

ESTHER I don't see why you let him do you this way Mrs. If you don't mind me saying.

A moment.

MRS. VAN BUREN Have you been to the opera?

Esther aware that she over stepped, nervously adjusts the bodice.

ESTHER Never.

MRS. VAN BUREN Oh God, you're lucky. It's one of those things required of me. I'm sure you've found much more engaging means of entertainment.

ESTHER I actually only been to the theatre once.

MRS. VAN BUREN Really? What did you see?

ESTHER Nothing special. A blind gal from Alabama sang spirituals. I need you to lift your arms.

MRS. VAN BUREN Like this?

Mrs. Van Buren seductively lifts her arms.

MRS. VAN BUREN

(cont'd) It's pinching me right here.

Esther runs her fingers along the top of the corset, then wraps her arms around Mrs. Van Buren's torso and begins to tighten the bodice.

MRS. VAN BUREN

(cont'd) I've never been to a colored show, I'm told they're quite good.

-- 43 --

ESTHER I suppose.

MRS. VAN BUREN I should like to see one for myself. You must take me to one of your shows.

ESTHER And will you take me to the opera next time you go?

MRS. VAN BUREN I would, if I could. It would be marvelously scandalous, just the sort of thing to perk up this humdrum season.

Mrs. Van Buren touches Esther's hand with an unexpected tenderness. Esther politely withdraws her fingers.

MRS. VAN BUREN It is so easy to be with you.

(whispered) Your visits are just about the only thing I look forward to these days. You, and our letters to George, of course. Shall we write something dazzling to him? Something delicious.

A moment. Esther seems hesitant. What? Why not?

ESTHER Perhaps something simple this time, I believe there real affection growing.

MRS. VAN BUREN Yes, one would hope. He seems quite taken.

ESTHER I don't want him to be disappointed.

MRS. VAN BUREN And he needn't be. We'll send him your warmth and he'll find it irresistible.

-- 44 --

ESTHER No. no.

Esther touches Mrs. Van Buren's silk corset.

ESTHER I want you to describe the silk. It warm slide. Will you tell him what it feel like against your skin. How it soft and supple to the touch. I ain't got the words, but I want him to know this color, magenta red. What it make you feel right now. It-

MRS. VAN BUREN The silk? Are you sure?

ESTHER Yes.

MRS. VAN BUREN Mercy, if my friends knew I spend the day writing love letters to a colored laborer, they'd laugh me out of Manhattan.

ESTHER People do a lot of things that they don't ever speak of.

MRS. VAN BUREN I smoked opium once, with the most proper of women. She dared me and I did it. And you? What have you done?

A moment.

ESTHER I touched someone, who I knew I wasn't supposed to touch. I touched them because I wanted to, it was a violation, but I couldn't help myself.

Mrs. Van Buren takes in Esther's words.

The lights cross fade. George sits on his bunk illuminated by a kerosene lantern.

GEORGE Dearest Esther, It dawn. No work has begun, the morning is still holding the ocean, not yet blue. But I can see past everything green to the horizon. And it is here in half-light that I imagine you. Six months have passed since our first correspondence, and I never thought I'd miss the hills of Bimshire and the calm of the sea after a day's labor.

Lights rise on Esther. She moves to her bed, and carefully sews money into the crazy quilt. A water boy from my parish died, taken by fever two nights past. All their magic machinery and there's nothing could be done for this boy. It got me thinking about his family behind and the wife he'd never meet. He die so easy. Why he? His young life end, and not more than a word from the Yankee Chief, 'cept regret that the new boy ain't so quick. This morn I try to remember his small blackened face and can not even recall his smile, though his hand give me water each and everyday since I be here. Why this boy go out my mind, I ask? Tomorrow I too could be sucked into the ground without tears and ride the death train that pass through here five times a day. When I first come a solid ox was the dream of this man. But I watch the splendid way the American gentleman touch their fine machines and laugh away the jungle, and I know what great and terrible things their sleep brings. Indeed, your America sounds like a wondrous place, a man such as myself would be willing to surrender much for a taste of the modern world. My time here is near through, and I don't want this place to be my final memory. Yes, I see beyond the tilting palms, through the mangroves and across the Caribbean sea to where you sit. I kneel beside you at this moment and I tell you, I am a good strong man. What I've come to feel for you can best be described as love. I love you. There is no other way to say it, will you marry me? Most adoringly, George

-- 45 --

-- 46 --

Act 1, Scene 5

SCENE 5

White Cotton bed linen.

Mayme's Boudoir.

Esther smiles, her face exploding with expectation.

MAYME You smiling, too big. Close your mouth 'fore your teeth dry out.

ESTHER He's asked me to marry him.

MAYME What? Get out of here.

ESTHER It there in writing.

MAYME And do you love him?

ESTHER As much as you can love a man you ain't seen. I'm thirty-five Mayme, and he wants to marry me. And there ain't gonna be no more opportunities I'm afraid. I've told him yes.

MAYME Well, Goddamn. I'm sure he's a fine man.

ESTHER Yes, I suppose. Any man go through this much trouble to court a woman must have his virtues.

MAYME I reckon.

ESTHER He write that he arriving next month.

MAYME That soon. . . we hardly ready.

ESTHER I know. I'm getting' married! -Oh God, will you come to witness the ceremony?

-- 47 --

MAYME Me? You want to bring me around your new husband?

ESTHER I want you there. It would be nice to have a friend witness.

MAYME No, I ain't been to church since I was seventeen. It ain't about you, it's just a promise I made to myself years ago. I ain't got nothing to say to God, and it don't seem right to go up into somebody's home and you ain't on speaking terms.

ESTHER It just a building.

MAYME Just the same, I'd rather not be reminded. But thank you, my dear, it's a long time since I been invited anyplace proper.

ESTHER Me too.

Mayme laughs and digs into her trunk, producing a bottle of liquor.

MAYME Hell, we ought to celebrate. Somebody give me this gin. It look expensive. Whatcha think? Should I open it?

ESTHER Sure. Why not.

Mayme pours them each a glass.

MAYME A toast to one less spinster in New York.

ESTHER Oh God, I hope I ain't making a mistake.

MAYME You'll be fine. You're about the most sensible gal I know. Enjoy this, Honey. It's a splendid feeling. I know, 'cause I was engaged once. You won't tell nobody. Nice fella in Ohio. A mortician's apprentice who hated music. Need I say more.

-- 48 --

ESTHER Do you regret not marrying him?

MAYME Some days. No, some evenings.

Mayme does not allow herself the regret, she thrusts her glass into the air. But here's to Esther, you will be a beautiful bride, and may happiness follow.

They toast and drink.

Mayme sits at the piano and plays a fast cheerful rag, she begins to sing a bawdy song like "Deep Sea Diver", urging Esther to join in. They sing together, Mayme continues to sing as Esther contemplates her decision. Uncertain.

MAYME My dear Esther, when you marry you'll go to socials and other ridiculous functions that married folk attend. Drink lots of lemonade, God forbid, and become an awful gossip. It won't be appropriate to visit a place like this.

ESTHER Who say?

MAYME

(snaps) I say.

A moment. You sure about this? He could be anybody, this George, all fancy cursive and fragrant paper.

ESTHER He says he loves me. And if someone offered you a brand new pair of walking shoes wouldn't you take them?

A moment.

MAYME I don't know. Show me the letter.

Mayme examines the letter. There it is. Our Miss Esther is getting married. Promise me, you'll still come around and you won't think less of me?

Esther smiles.

-- 49 --

ESTHER We friends, ain't no Panama man gonna change that.

MAYME I hope he is wonderful.

Mayme returns to playing the piano.

The lights cross fade. Esther's Boudoir. Mrs. Dickson folds clothing and places it in a trunk.

MRS. DICKSON Who is going to sit next to me at the table? There is Bertha, but she has no conversation. Oh I could move Erma down closer, but she and Bertha don't speak.

Esther steps into the room.

MRS. DICKSON It'll be an absolute mess at the dinner table without you. That's for certain. Oh, it's gonna be a shame to let this room to anybody else. It has so many of your sweet touches. Yes.

ESTHER You wasn't always pleased with my conversation if I recall.

MRS. DICKSON Who told you that? Well, they lie.

Mrs. Dickson holds up a dress.

MRS. DICKSON Oh no. Not this little frumpy thing, really Esther. My grandmother wouldn't even wear a collar like so and she was a right proud Christian soldier. Yes.

ESTHER Well, I like it. It's the most refined thing I own. I paid 5 whole dollars for it.

-- 50 --

MRS. DICKSON You'll scare off your gentleman, and it ain't worth \$5 of misery. You needn't be a prude. Trust me, your man'll have needs, and it's your duty to keep his member firmly at home. Yes.

ESTHER Excuse me?

MRS. DICKSON I shan't repeat it. But there ain't no greater disappointment than a husband without much . . . vigor. Believe me, I know. And sometime he gotta be pleased to ensure your own satisfaction. You understand. I ain't an expert, but I do have some experience. And I'll tell you, give and take make for the best of partnerships. Never mind what the minister tells you about decency, what go on between a man and wife be their own business. He will test you and he will try you, but don't let him beat on you, don't take no shit from him, understand.

ESTHER Mrs. Dickson.

MRS. DICKSON Excuse me, for saying, but if he raises his hand once, he'll do it again. I thought we should have this conversation before you go off. I don't mean to scare you, but I know you come as an innocent and we're friends so I feel I can speak plainly.

ESTHER Thank you, but I do believe I'm old enough to handle things for myself.

MRS. DICKSON Just the same, I thought I'd say it. Now whatcha want me to do with this dress?

-- 51 --

ESTHER It that bad?

MRS. DICKSON Let's just say we'll give it to Deacon Wynn and let the church ladies fight over it. Yes.

Mrs. Dickson sits on the bed. You really going to do this, ain't you?

ESTHER You didn't expect me to be here for the rest of my life?

MRS. DICKSON I guess I sort of did. I'm so used to hearing your sewing machine and foot tapping up here. Yes, I reckon I'm going to miss it.

ESTHER Another gal will move into this room and by supper you'll be fussing about something new.

MRS. DICKSON You say that with such certainty. You hurt my feelings, Miss Esther Mills.

Mrs. Dickson dabs her eyes with a handkerchief.

MRS. DICKSON

(cont'd) Eighteen years is a long time. Yes. I don't reckon I've known anyone else that long. It'll be lonely.

ESTHER You have plenty of suitors to keep you busy.

MRS. DICKSON But ain't a working man amongst them.

A moment. You know you don't have to do this.

ESTHER Yes, I do. I stay on here I'll turn to dust one day, get swept up and released into the garden without notice. I've finally found someone. Just as you found Mr. Dickson.

-- 52 --

MRS. DICKSON I married him, because I was thirty-seven years old, I had no profession and there wasn't a decent colored fella' in New York City that would have me.

ESTHER But you come to love each other.

MRS. DICKSON I suppose. He give me some laughs. But you see, my mother wanted me to marry up. She was a washerwoman, and my father was the very married minister of our mission. He couldn't even look out at her there in the church pews, but she'd sit there proudly every Sunday, determined to gain God's favor. Marry Good. She didn't want her child's hands to look like hers, she didn't ever want me to be embarrassed of my fingers the way she was of hers. I'd watch her put witch hazel and hot oil on her delicate hands, but they remained raw and chapped and she kept them hidden inside gray wool gloves. In the winter they'd bleed so bad sometimes, but she'd plunge her hands into the hot water without flinching, knead and scrub the clothing clean. Fold and press for hours and hours, the linen, the bedding, the stockings and the britches sometimes wearing the frayed gloves so as not to leave bloodstains on her precious laundry. She wouldn't even let me help her, she didn't want my hands to show the markings of labor. I was going to marry up. Love was an entirely impractical thing for a woman in her position. "Look what love done to me," Mama used to say. "Look what love done to me.

A moment. So she borrowed gowns from her laundry baskets, and dressed me up in taffeta and satin for fancy socials. Marry up. I offered up my most pleasing smile. But I didn't know those proper colored gentlemen never considered me worthy. I didn't know that I was too generous with my affection. So when the invitations to the socials stopped, I did what was necessary to gain favor. You understand? I allowed myself to be flattered by married men. They give me gifts, sweet, useless things, but never love "Mama". Yes, this "pretty" gal done things, unpretty things, for this marble mantle, gaslights in every room, a player piano and an indoor toilet.

-- 53 --

ESTHER But Mr. Dickson was a good man.

MRS. DICKSON Bless his broken down soul. He had fine suits and perfect diction, and was too high on opium to notice that he was married. But I would not be a washerwoman if it killed me. And I have absolutely marvelous hands to prove it.

Mrs. Dickson laughs, displaying her hands.

MRS. DICKSON But you have Godly fingers and a means, and you deserve a gentleman. Why gamble it all away for a common laborer?

ESTHER . . . Love.

MRS. DICKSON Don't you let a man have no part of your heart without getting a piece of his.

Lights cross fade to George.

GEORGE Dear Esther, I held in the port of Havana, Cuba awaiting passage to New York City. A passenger come down with cholera. So here I wait, fighting patience. We sail tomorrow.
Yours, George

Cross fade to Mr. Marks's Boudoir. Esther hesitantly enters.

MR. MARKS Miss Mills, where have you been? I thought I'd lost you to a competitor.

A moment. I keep looking out the window at Mr. Friedlander's shop, he's giving away thread with each purchase. Yesterday, stress tonic. Tomorrow, who knows? I saw this morning Mrs. Simons, Mrs. Simons my cousin's wife go into Mr. Friedlander's.

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MR. MARKS His fabric is inferior, I tell her this. But she wants the stress tonic. . . then go to the pharmacy I say. He is a clever thief, this man. I know because I see what he buys. What am I going to stand in front of the shop and tell everybody that his fabric is cheap. Cheap.

A moment.

MR. MARKS Where have you been? I've been going crazy? I couldn't bear to loose you to Friedlander.

ESTHER I'm sorry, I --

MR. MARKS No, I'm sorry. You've been busy, of course. I thought something might have happened to you.

ESTHER Don't tell me you were worried about me.

MR. MARKS Well, yes. I didn't have your address, otherwise I would have inquired about your health.

ESTHER I'm very well, thank you.

A moment. Esther smiles. Mr. Marks shyly looks away.

MR. MARKS I found something I think you'll love.

(excited) Do you have a moment?

ESTHER Yes.

MR. MARKS I'll get it.

He fingers through the bolts of fabric, but suddenly stops himself. He struggles for a moment with whether to broach a question.

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MR. MARKS

(cont'd) I just made tea, would you have a cup of tea with me?

ESTHER Thank you, that would be nice.

Mr. Marks clears a chair for Esther. She sits, a bit disarmed by the invitation.

Mr. Marks pours her a cup of tea, then one for himself. He sits down on the bed across from her.

A moment. He touches the spot where the button is missing.

MR. MARKS Is the tea hot enough? Milk? Would you like sugar, of course?

ESTHER No, thank you, it's fine.

Esther smiles.

MR. MARKS You have a lovely smile.

Esther stops smiling. Mr. Marks stands up, embarrassed by his candor.

MR. MARKS

(cont'd) Let me show you the fabric.

ESTHER Actually, I have a special request. I'll need fabric for a wedding gown, something simple, Mr. Marks. The bride don't got a lot of money to throw away.

MR. MARKS Satin? Chiffon? Cotton? Silk? Yes. Tulle?

ESTHER Satin, I think.

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MR. MARKS She hasn't told you?

ESTHER Silk.

Mr. Marks pulls down several bolts of fabric. Esther examines each one, her excitement muted.

MR. MARKS That one you're touching is very popular. And the price will please you. 30 cents a yard.

ESTHER 20?

MR. MARKS 25 cents. The bride will like.

ESTHER It's too much. Something less expensive, I'll dress it up with lace and ribbons.

Esther points to a faded old roll.

ESTHER

(cont'd) How about this one?

MR. MARKS It's a wedding. This is for an older woman-

ESTHER I ain't so young.

MR. MARKS -the bride's mother perhaps.

A moment.

MR. MARKS You are getting married?

A moment.

ESTHER Yes. You seem surprised.

He is.

MR. MARKS No, no. Not at all. My congratulations.

Mr. Marks pulls out his finest wedding fabric.

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MR. MARKS Please. I'm sure the rich lady who ordered this didn't appreciate the delicacy of the fabric. She gave no thought to who crafted this perfection, the labor that went into making it. How many hands touched it. Look. Beautiful. You deserve to wear it on your wedding day.

ESTHER It's so beautiful, it looks like little fairy hands made it. It's too fine for me.

MR. MARKS Come, look at it and then refuse. Please. Touch.

Marks watches Esther run her fingers across the fabric. He also touches it, sensually. She closes her eyes. He watches her.

MR. MARKS

(cont'd) It is exquisite. The company ran it only once. Miss Mills, many fine ladies have worn it against their skin, but it was made for you. I know this, so I will wrap it.

Esther holds the fabric to her face and begins to weep.

MR. MARKS

(cont'd) May it be your first gift.

He wants to offer comfort, but he cannot touch her.

ESTHER I won't let you.

MR. MARKS It would be my pleasure.

They look at each other. Esther unfurls the gorgeous wedding fabric, allowing it to roll across the stage. As she does, George appears in an ill fitted suit - his best. _ A moment.

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GEORGE Esther? As Esther turns toward George, the lights fade around Mr. Marks. Now Esther and George face one another for the first time.

END OF ACT I

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