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Act 2

Act 2, Scene 1

ACT II SCENE 1

The Wedding Corset. White satin embroidered with orange blossoms.

Esther stands in a pool of light, she wears a spectacular white wedding gown.

Another pool of light engulfs George, he wears a worn gray dress suit frayed around the sleeves, certainly his best.

Lights rise. A spare studio flat, an iron bed dominates the room. George and Esther stand on either side of the bed, which is covered with the crazy quilt. A silence divides them.

Finally Esther speaks.

ESTHER Don't really feel much different. I guess I expected somethin', to be different. It was a nice ceremony. Didn't you think? I wish my family coulda witnessed it all. My mother in particular. When the minister said man and wife I nearly fainted, I did. I been waiting to hear those words, since. . .they nearly took my breath away. Man and wife, and the truth is we barely know each other. I've written you near everything there is to know about me, and here we is and I fear I ain't got no more to say.

Note: George's accent is heavier, and more distinctly Barbadian than in the first act.

GEORGE We ain't need to say nothin' now. We got plenty of time for that. It late.

George takes off his jacket and tosses it across the bed. He loosens his top button. Esther picks up the jacket, quickly surveys the label, then neatly folds it, placing it at the bottom of the bed.

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ESTHER Do you wish to wash? I'll fetch the basin.

George kneels on the bed and extends his hand to Esther.

GEORGE Why don't yuh come sit by me. Let me see yuh.

Esther sinks on the bed with her back to George. He gently strokes her cheek. Esther trembles.

GEORGE

(cont'd) Are yuh afraid of me? Yuh shaking.

ESTHER Am I? None of this be familiar.

GEORGE Give yuh hand 'ere.

Esther gingerly passes her hand to George.

He sits next to her, kissing each of her fingers then places her hand on his crotch.

GEORGE

(cont'd) See. It ain't scary at'all.

Esther leaves her hand resting on his crotch, uncomfortable. A moment.

GEORGE

(cont'd) I expected yuh to be --

ESTHER Prettier.

GEORGE No, I was gonna say --

ESTHER It's okay I lived with this face all my life, ain't no surprises. We should say what we think now and get it out of the way.

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GEORGE I suppose from yuh letters-

ESTHER I described my character. And I think you'll find me truthful.

George begins to unbutton Esther's dress. She stiffens at his touch.

ESTHER

(cont'd) You're very handsome. More than I thought and I must say it do make me a little uncomfortable.

Esther withdraws her hand from his crotch. And the other thing I think you must know, I ain't been with a man before. I been kissed and done some kissing, but you know what I'm saying. And it might be awkward on this first night, even if we man and wife --

GEORGE Then we'll make it less awkward.

George slips Esther's dress off of her shoulders and plants a kiss on her bare back. She's wearing a stunning wedding corset of white satin embroidered with orange blossoms.

GEORGE

(cont'd) Real nice. Pretty. I like it.

He runs his fingers across the delicate lace covering her breasts.

ESTHER Wait. I made something for you.

Esther stands up and quickly fetches the smoking jacket.

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ESTHER

(cont'd) Here.

GEORGE What it?

ESTHER It's Japanese silk. Put it on.

George clumsily pulls the smoking jacket around his muscular body. He clearly isn't comfortable with the delicacy of the garment.

ESTHER

(cont'd) Careful.

George explores the jacket with his weather worn fingers.

ESTHER

(cont'd) It ain't too small?

GEORGE Nah. But I afraid, I soil it.

George removes the jacket and puts it on the bed. He pulls Esther in his arms.

ESTHER

(cont'd) Not yet.

GEORGE Yuh got somethin' in mind?

ESTHER Couldn't we wait a bit?

GEORGE Minister say man and wife.

ESTHER I'd like to know about your mother or about your birthplace, Bar-ba-dos. Something I don't know. That wasn't in the letters. Something for us, right now.

A moment

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GEORGE Like what?

Esther pulls away, and picks up the smoking jacket.

ESTHER I come here from North Carolina at seventeen after my mother died of influenza, God bless her loving spirit. My father died 2 years later, he was a slave you see and didn't take to life as a freeman. He'd lost his tongue during a nasty fight over a chicken when I was a baby, so I never heard him speak, no complaints, no praise, no gentle words, no good bye. He was . . . silent. Broken really, I come to this city by myself, worked my way North little by little, picking berries in every state until I get here. An old woman in the rooming house teach me to sew intimate apparel, saying folks'll pay you good money for your discretion. It was just about the best gift anybody give me. It was as though God kissed my hands when I first pulled the fabric through the sewing machine and held up a finished garment. I discovered all I need in these fingers.

A moment. I wanted you to know that about me.

GEORGE My parents were chattel. . . born to children of chattel.

George takes off his shirt. We cut sugar cane and die and that our tale for as long as anybody could say. Nothin' worthy of a retelling, really. I come here, so the story'll be different. That I hopin'. Now if yuh don' mind, I spent many nights on a hard wood floor, a bed be long overdue.

Esther gives him her hand.

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GEORGE We married. I ain' gonna commit no crime 'ere, a man and wife don't have no quarrel in the bedroom.

George gently pulls her onto the bed. The lights slowly fade as Esther succumbs to his embrace. Ragtime piano, fast and furious.

Cross fade to Mayme's Boudoir. Mayme kneels on her bed.

MAYME What is he like?

George climbs out of bed, he stands in a pool of light and slowly goes through the ritual of dressing.

Esther kneels on her bed wrapped in the crazy quilt.

ESTHER He handsome enough.

Lights. Mrs. Van Buren's Boudoir. She also kneels on her bed.

MRS. VAN BUREN Come, what did he say when he saw you?

Esther climbs out of bed, dressing as she speaks.

ESTHER He ain't say much of nothing. He just stood there for a moment regarding me with his eyes. Yellow, cotton and cane eyes. I didn't have no tongue.

MRS. VAN BUREN There must be something of a romantic about him. He traveled halfway across the world because of some promise on a paper.

ESTHER And he still smell of salt and ground nuts. It make me sick and it make me excited.

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MRS. VAN BUREN I was tipsy on my wedding night. I recall being in love with the notion of love, and everything took on a rosy glow. Harry was foolish and confident and I was frightened to death.

MAYME Is he as we imagined?

Mayme and Mrs. Van Buren reluctantly retreat into the darkness.

ESTHER Yes, he is sturdy enough and quite a pleasure to behold. His hands thick, stained dark from work. North Carolina field hands. But he got a melodious voice, each word a song unto itself.

Esther and George button their shirts.

ESTHER

(cont'd) And when he finally fell asleep I placed my head on his chest, and listened for the song of cicadas at dusk, and imagined the sweet aroma of the mango trees and the giant flamboyant with it's crimson tears.

Esther and George stand on either side of the bed, dressed.

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Act 2, Scene 2

SCENE 2

Valenciennes Lace.

Esther's Boudoir. A rag plays.

George smoothes down his overgrown hair, pleased with himself. His clothing is worn but that doesn't seem to trouble him.

Esther takes in George from the corner of her eye, quickly averting her gaze when he glances over. He smiles to himself.

ESTHER Do you want me to fix you something?

GEORGE I ain't really hungry, you know.

George puts on his shoes.

ESTHER Where are you going? It Sunday. I promised Mrs. Dickson we'd dine with her this afternoon after the church social.

GEORGE That woman ask too many questions for me liking.

ESTHER That's what ladies do. She's just being attentive.

George grabs his hat and toys with it for a moment. He ventures to speak, but stops himself.

GEORGE Say Mrs. Armstrong, you got \$2?

ESTHER What for?

GEORGE I need a proper hat if yuh want me to look for real work. It near 3 months now, and this a farmer's hat I tol'. The rag man wouldn't even give me a penny for it.

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ESTHER \$2. That's a lot of money. I tol' you I'd make you a worsted suit. Right smart.

George gently touches Esther's hand.

GEORGE C'mon, Mrs. Armstrong. Just \$2.

ESTHER But this is the last time. Hear?

Esther, reluctant, goes over to the quilt and opens the seam with her scissors. She digs in and pulls out \$2.

ESTHER There.

GEORGE That all you got?

ESTHER Yes. Why do you need to go out?

GEORGE I tell some fellas I stop off for a quick ale, be back 'fore yuh know.

ESTHER But it Sunday. I'll put on some tea, and sit let me mend your shirt. You can't go out with a hole in your shirt.

Esther touches the hole in his shirt.

ESTHER

(cont'd) What will they say about your wife? I won't hear the end of it from Mrs. Dickson.

GEORGE She a real Madam. "Yuh working, George?" "Oh, nuh?"

(chupses) I ain' been this idle since aboy in St. Lucy. But that busylickum ain' 'ear nothing.

(Chupses again) I got me pats on the back from white engineers, and a letter of recommendation from the Yankee crew chief heself. But 'ere, I got to watch buildings going up left and right, steel girders as thick as tamarind trees, ten, twelve stories high. Thursday last I stood all day, it cold too, waitin' for the chief, waiting to interview. Do yuh have tools, boy? Yes! Do yuh know how to operate a machine, boy? Yes. But 'e point just so to the Irishmen, the German and the tall Norwegian who's at least fifty years plus five. And I got more experience than the lot. I tell 'e so. Next time, 'e say. Next time, George. Can you believe? 'e pass me this damn note like it money.

George takes a letter from his pocket and unfolds it.

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GEORGE

(CONT'D) Look.

He hands the note to Esther. She examines it, and then pretends to read it.

GEORGE

(cont'd) What do you t'ink?

George watches her ever so carefully. . .

ESTHER I don't know what to say. I suppose he mean what he say.

She anxiously places the letter on the table.

GEORGE But what do you t'ink? You t'ink what he say true?

ESTHER Why wouldn't he be truthful?

Frustrated, George takes off his shirt and tosses it to Esther. He then throws himself across the bed and lights a cigarette. Esther goes about mending George's shirt.

ESTHER

(cont'd) Did you try over at that butchers? Like I asked. I know they could use an extra man 'cause it's always crowded in there. Especially on Friday.

GEORGE I don' know. We'll see.

ESTHER There are worse things you could do. And I thought maybe we could go to the church social before Mrs. Dickson's.

GEORGE I ain' a church man, really.

Esther stops sewing.

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ESTHER You do believe, don't you? Why in letters you said-

GEORGE I say a lot of t'ings

A moment. Esther returns to sewing. George feels the quilt.

ESTHER Please, I ain't been to a social. I sat up in Saint Martin's for years, and didn't none of them church ladies bother with me until I walked in on your arm, and suddenly they want Mrs. Armstrong over for tea.

GEORGE Yuh and yuh monkey chaser yuh mean?

ESTHER Oh that ain't so. Most of them folks ain't been nowhere to speak of. But they are fine people, and who knows where help will come from?

GEORGE I want to build t'ings, not polish silver or port luggage. Them fine jobs for yuh Yankee gentlemen, but not me. I ain' come 'ere for that! They'll have me a bootblack 'fore long, let the damn Italians blackened their hands, I say. Mine been black long enough. A man at the saloon, smart looking fella', say the onliest way for a colored man in this country is for 'e to be 'e own man. Have 'e own business, otherwise 'e always be shining the white man nickel. You understand, no? And really, how it look to people. Me, sitting 'ere, waitin' on fortune, you out there courtin' it.

ESTHER I am your wife, and what ever I got, yours. And George mind your smoking on the bed. The chinaman two floors down burn up that way.

George puts out the cigarette.

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GEORGE Listen, this fella' at the saloon talk about a man sellin' a stable with a dozen strong draft horses. 'E in a bit of debt, and need money quick quick. A dozen horses for nothin'. Did you hear what I say?

ESTHER That saloon talk. That man'll take your money to Shanghai. It just a dream, it ain't gonna feed you today.

GEORGE You t'ink I stupid?

ESTHER No. But supposin' he honest, where would you get the money for twelve horses?

GEORGE Where, Mrs. Armstrong?

George gently strokes the quilt.

GEORGE

(cont'd) Am I wrong?

ESTHER My quilt? Never mind with that money. It just there and it gonna stay there.

GEORGE Yuh a squirrel, for true. That's what yuh call them city rats, no?

ESTHER A squirrel ain't a rat. That money for my beauty parlor, I told you that.

George laughs.

GEORGE That funny.

ESTHER Why's that funny to you?

GEORGE You ownin' a beauty parlor.

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ESTHER Yes.

George studies Esther. She self-consciously returns to sewing.

GEORGE Look at yuh. How yuh know pretty from the lookin' glass?

A moment.

ESTHER

(wounded) I make pretty things.

George pops up off the bed and takes Esther's in his arms.

GEORGE I sorry, Mrs. Armstrong, I ain' know what I say. Yuh be real sweet, if you done up yuh hair, nice. Put a little paint on yuh lips.

George runs his hand across Esther's mouth. He grabs her and tries to do a quick dance.

ESTHER I ain't that kind of woman.

GEORGE No, yuh ain'.

George lets go of Esther's arm.

GEORGE

(cont'd) (Gently) Please, Esther.

ESTHER No, I can't. That eighteen years there.

GEORGE

(chupses) Yuh vex me so. Where's me shirt?

ESTHER It ain't finished.

George grabs the shirt from the sewing machine, and puts it on.

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ESTHER

(cont'd) Be careful you'll tear-

GEORGE I going o'er to the Empty Cup for an ale. I see yuh later.

ESTHER That a notorious place.

GEORGE How yuh know?

ESTHER I know.

George chupses dismissively.

ESTHER Why you are so cross with me? You got your ale money and enough for God knows what else. Ain't that so?

GEORGE Yes, it yuh nickel. How do think that make me feel?

ESTHER You got a good arm George Armstrong, and I'd be proud to walk in on it whether it shining shoes or picking cotton.

George puts on his hat. Esther moves to stop him.

ESTHER

(cont'd) George. . .

Esther breaks off a loose thread hanging from the shirt.

ESTHER

(cont'd) Wait-

Esther tenderly turns down his collar. He brushes her hand away.

GEORGE I off.

-- 73 --

ESTHER What about Mrs. Dickson and the social?

GEORGE I be back for supper.

George grabs his coat and exits.

Esther picks up George's work letter and tears it up.

Cross fade to Mr. Marks Boudoir.

Mr. Marks hums a rag as he searches through the piles on fabric.

MR. MARKS Here it is. Scottish wool, it isn't as expensive as one would think. It is very good.

ESTHER Are you humming a rag, Mr. Marks?

MR. MARKS No, it's a Romanian song. I can't remember the words. It is driving me mad.

Esther smiles.

ESTHER And. . .I'm very happy to see that you replaced the button on your suit.

MR. MARKS

(proudly) You noticed. It was time, don't you think?

Mr. Marks displays the fabric.

MR. MARKS You wanted Scottish wool, yes?

ESTHER Scottish wool. Yes.

Esther feels the fabric. It's so heavy. Would you wear a suit made of this?

MR. MARKS Well, yes. You see how soft it is. I bought it from a gentlemen who said it came from his village. He had a wonderful story about his mother caring for the sheep like small children. He said every night she'd tell them a fairy tale, and each morning give the creatures a kiss and a sprinkle of salt. The neighbors would watch and laugh. Watch and laugh. But come time to shear the animals, what wonderful wool they produced for his mother. Like no other.

Esther feels the fabric, lovingly. Mr. Marks revels in her delight.

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MR. MARKS He could have been a thief for all I know, but the color is a lovely coffee, very subtle. Don't you think? So I pay too much, but not enough for the quality. Ah! Yes. I have something else to show you. It's here. Where is it? Where are you? Here we are.

Mr. Marks unfurls a roll of lace.

MR. MARKS I almost let it go last week, but I was waiting for you. I wanted you to see it.

ESTHER Oh, yes.

MR. MARKS I knew you'd like it.

(elated) The wait was worth seeing your smile again.

Esther, bashfully, drapes the lace over her shoulder. In his excitement, Mr. Marks takes a step closer to Esther. They find themselves standing dangerously close to each other. They are so close that they can inhale each others words.

MR. MARKS

(cont'd) Miss Mills, if I may say-

ESTHER Armstrong.

Esther drops the fabric.

MR. MARKS I apologize. I forget. I forget.

A moment. Mr. Marks picks up the lace.

ESTHER It is pretty, thank you, but today I've come for fabric for a gentleman's suit. Next time.

Mr. Marks releases the fabric.

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MR. MARKS Yes. Just a minute, I have some other wools, gabardine, if you'd like to see? I have no story for them, but they are sturdy and reliable, will give you no problems.

As Mr. Marks turns to search for another bolt of fabric, Esther gently runs her fingers across the lace. Mr. Marks retrieves the dark drab suit fabrics.

Mr. Marks slowly rolls the lace, his disappointment palpable.

MR. MARKS Next time.

ESTHER Mr. Marks?

MR. MARKS Yes?

Esther wants to say something, but she can't quite find the words.

MR. MARKS Is there-?

ESTHER No. No. . . I'm sorry. . . I can't do this.

(*distraught*) I thought I'd be able to, but I can't. I can't come here anymore. I -

MR. MARKS Why do you say this? Did I do something to offend, tell me, did I-

ESTHER No.

MR. MARKS Then-

ESTHER Please, I think you know why.

A moment.

MR. MARKS How many yards will you need for the gentlemen's suit?

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ESTHER 4 yards. The Scottish wool . . . and if you would, please wrap the Valenciennes lace. Thank you.

Cross Fade to Mrs. Van Buren's Boudoir. Light pours into her room.

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Act 2, Scene 3

SCENE 3

Rose Chemise.

Mrs. Van Buren's Boudoir.

Mrs. Van Buren sits on the bed cradling a snifter of brandy. She's upbeat, almost cheerful. However, Esther is distracted, consumed by her own thoughts.

MRS. VAN BUREN He's gone to Europe.

ESTHER I'm sorry to hear that.

MRS. VAN BUREN You needn't be. It's a relief actually. Some business thing, I don't expect to see him for months. He'll find ways of prolonging his stay, no doubt. Anyway, I'm considering a visit with friends in Lenox this summer. It'll be good to escape the city. Don't you think? You could come, of course, I'll recommend your services to several women.

ESTHER I thank you, but I can't.

Esther drapes the Valenciennes lace over the bed post. Here. I found some lace for your rose chemise. I know it ain't exactly what you wanted, but-

MRS. VAN BUREN I had all but forgotten. I ordered it over four weeks ago. Four whole weeks. It's not like you to -

ESTHER I been busy.

MRS. VAN BUREN Oh? Indeed. How is our Mr. Armstrong?

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ESTHER Good. Well, he . . . good. Work scarce, and he so particular. He wanting, but his pride make him idle. And I try, I do, but he ain't really take to this city.

MRS. VAN BUREN But he will. I am certain. Oh Esther, it must be wonderful to be in love.

ESTHER I suppose.

A moment. Mrs. Van Buren quickly examines the lace, indifferent, she tosses it onto the bed. Esther bristles at her employer's lack of interest.

MRS. VAN BUREN Is everything all right?

ESTHER Yes.

MRS. VAN BUREN Such a pensive face so early in the day. I won't allow it.

Esther doesn't smile. Come.

ESTHER I'd like to settle matters. Please. You ain't paid me in two months and I need the money.

MRS. VAN BUREN Of course, I hadn't realized.

Mrs. Van Buren sits at her dressing table. You know what? I miss writing our letters. I do! I've been absolutely without purpose for months.

ESTHER

(snaps) Let's not talk about the letters!

MRS. VAN BUREN

(surprised) Fine, we won't.

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ESTHER I'm sorry, Mrs. Van Buren.

MRS. VAN BUREN Something is wrong.

ESTHER No. Nothing.

Esther sits on the edge of Mrs. Van Buren's bed. She carefully refolds the lace, attempting to hold back tears, but they come anyway.

MRS. VAN BUREN Esther, what is it?

ESTHER The other day George asked me to read a letter. I took it in my hand and I lied. I lie everyday. And I'm a Christian woman.

Mrs. Van Buren takes Esther's hand and sits down on the bed next to her.

MRS. VAN BUREN We do what we must, no? We are ridiculous creatures sometimes.

A moment.

ESTHER Do you love, Mr. Van Buren?

MRS. VAN BUREN I am a married woman, such a question is romantic.

ESTHER But I fear my love belongs someplace else.

MRS. VAN BUREN And why is that?

ESTHER I shouldn't say. No, I can't. Perhaps, I'm wrong.

MRS. VAN BUREN Perhaps, not.

Mrs. Van Buren pulls Esther close, and plants a kiss on Esther's lips. Esther for a moment gives in to the sensation of being touched, then abruptly pulls away. Shocked.

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MRS. VAN BUREN

(cont'd) I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that. I'm sorry. Please don't go.

ESTHER ... I don't want you to think that I'm of the sort to allow --

MRS. VAN BUREN I don't think that. I just wanted to show you what it's like to be treated lovingly.

ESTHER Please, don't say that. You don't love me.

MRS. VAN BUREN How do you know?

ESTHER I think I must go.

MRS. VAN BUREN I think you must not. Please. We will forget this and continue to be friends.

ESTHER Friends? Mrs. Van Buren and Esther. No, if we was really friends you'd have a first name and I'd have a last. You love me? What of me do you love?

MRS. VAN BUREN Your freedom.

ESTHER Eighteen years, working every single day just to make rent. That ain't freedom.

MRS. VAN BUREN It is to me.

ESTHER And should I pity your privilege?

MRS. VAN BUREN It needn't be pity.

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ESTHER I ain't one of your precious objects.

MRS. VAN BUREN You are the only one who's been in my boudoir in all these months. And it's only when I'm here with you that I feel. . . happy.

ESTHER I'm sorry. I can't.

MRS. VAN BUREN

(screams) Coward!

A moment.

MRS. VAN BUREN

(cont'd) I didn't mean to say that.

Mrs. Van Buren digs into her dressing table drawer, and produces a wad of money. She tosses the money on the bed.

MRS. VAN BUREN

(CONT'D) There.

ESTHER I'm not the coward.

Esther picks up the money.

Cross fade to Mayme's boudoir. Mayme plays a slow seductive rag. George enters, he watches Mayme gracefully regard the instrument. He places money on top of the piano, then straddles the piano bench behind Mayme. He kisses her neck and cups her breasts in his hands.

Cross fade to Esther and George's Boudoir.

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Act 2, Scene 4**SCENE 4****Scottish Wool.**

George and Esther's Boudoir

Esther places the wool fabric on George's side of the bed. In half-light she waits. Alone.

A pool of light finds George and Mayme engaged in a sensual dance. He reluctantly pulls away. Mayme tries to prevent him from leaving, but he nevertheless must go. The lights fade.

Esther still sits on the bed waiting, resigned. Fully clothed, she drifts off to sleep.

Laughter in the distance.

George enters. He strokes the quilt, then sits on the edge of the bed with his back to Esther and begins to weep quietly. Esther awakens and caresses his back. He tenses, surprised by the tender gesture, and pulls away. Silence.

ESTHER Where-

GEORGE Shhh.

ESTHER George.

GEORGE Yes.

ESTHER Never mind.

A moment.

ESTHER I was worried-

GEORGE Give me quiet.

ESTHER It late. You find-

GEORGE Don't say it, it in yuh voice. I can't 'ear it again. It wearing me.

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ESTHER What I done?

GEORGE I just tired of comin' home to put me hand in yuh pocket.

ESTHER I come here with nothing.

GEORGE Don't look at me so.

ESTHER I slept in a cold church for nine days, and picked up breadcrumbs thrown to pigeons.

GEORGE Yes, yuh done good, but five hundred days digging don' amount to nothing 'ere. It always gray, why it so gray? Work on the Isthmus, it hard, but 'least the sun shine.

ESTHER It will. Come, lie down.

GEORGE I don't feel like so.

ESTHER I know you here 'cause of me, and I want you to be happy. We stood in that church, and promised before God to take care of each other. That means something, even if it gray. And believe me it gonna be gray now and then. But George, we'll look back at this night, and we won't even remember that we was ever strangers. It burn now, I know. I do know.

George sits on the edge of the bed with his back to Esther. She wants to touch him, but does not.

ESTHER You listenin'?

GEORGE I listenin'.

A moment. A gentle rag plays.

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ESTHER Why are you restless tonight?

GEORGE The moon open wide and everything be lit.

George lies down.

Esther climbs out of bed and opens the blinds.

Cross Fade to Mayme's Boudoir. Light pours into her room.

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Act 2, Scene 5

Scene 5

Gentlemen's Suit.

Mayme's Boudoir.

Esther enters. Mayme is dressed in a red flowing dressing gown, and bubbles over with excitement.

MAYME I've saved up every penny I have. And I want something new Esther. Simple, this time, without all the pronouncement. Something a young gal might wear on her wedding night.

ESTHER Wedding night? What ain't I heard? I don't believe those words got any place in your mouth.

MAYME Seriously.

ESTHER What's going on? C'mon, are you gonna tell me?

MAYME It ain't nothing really. A fella', perhaps.

ESTHER I thought you said you didn't feel nothing for these fools.

MAYME Nothing ain't never felt so good.

ESTHER Who is he?

MAYME He ain't nobody really, but he real sweet. Like a schoolboy almost. We call him Songbird, 'cause he sing to speak. He come in like all them others. Hands crude and calloused, a week's wage in his pocket.

MAYME But when we done I didn't want him to leave and I asked him to have a drink. Fool drunk up all my liquor, but it ain't bother me. In fact I was fixin' to run out and git some more, but he placed his hands around my waist, real gentle and pulled me close. I actually wanted him to kiss me, I didn't even mind his sour tongue in my mouth, I wanted him there, inside me. He ain't like a lot the colored men who pass through here with anger about their touch. He a gentleman. Comes three times a week on schedule like the iceman. He was here last night until midnight, but he don't every stay later. He just leaves his scent, which lingers until two a. m. or three, and I stay awake until it dissipates.

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ESTHER He sounds wonderful.

MAYME Yeah, I reckon.

ESTHER What?

MAYME He got a wife. Yeah. A rich wife. But she troubles him, he say. Troubles him to no end. You should hear him go on about this poor gal. Made me feel bad for her.

ESTHER She terrible, I'm sure. But just the same, you on uneasy ground.

MAYME You find it shocking?

ESTHER Yes, I find it shocking.

MAYME Hush your mouth, you wouldn't understand. You want to see what my Songbird give me?

Mayme holds up George's Japanese smoking jacket.

MAYME And you know me, I don't usually take gifts from men, but when he give me this, it took my breath away. It's so pretty and delicate. Look Esther. Feel it.

ESTHER He give you this?

MAYME Yup.

ESTHER He must like you a bunch to give you something so fine.

MAYME What can I tell you, the man got taste.

ESTHER I've only seen fabric like this just once before. It's Japanese silk.

-- 87 --

MAYME How'd you know?

ESTHER It's expensive fabric. Very hard to find. You see the pictures were painted by an imperial artist he signed it there. He give you this?

MAYME He say I his gal. But this time a little part of me is hoping he telling the truth.

ESTHER And what about his wife?

MAYME What about her? I'm sure she just a sorry gal.

ESTHER How you know she ain't a good person? And he just saying what you want to hear. That his words are a kind of smooth tonic to make you give out what ain't free. How you know his wife ain't good?

MAYME I don't know. But do it matter?

ESTHER Yeah it do. Don't you ever think about where they go after they leave here? Who washes their britches after they been soiled in your bed?

MAYME No, I don't actually. Why would I?

ESTHER Because there's some poor woman out there waiting, getting up every five minutes, each time a carriage pass the window or a dog bark. Who thinks a great deal of her husband, thinks so much of him that she don't bother to ask questions, accepts that there are places that he goes that gentlewomen don't belong. She can't imagine what sort of place that would be, what sort of place he goes to at night.

-- 88 --

MAYME I don't want to hear it.

ESTHER She thinks he's playing cards or simply restless. She even accepts the smell of booze, it's familiar and therefore comforting. She don't even bother to mention anymore how it sickens her. But still when the door opens and he lies down next to her, that poor stupid woman don't feel angry, because his body is warm and she ain't alone.

MAYME A sorry predicament, if you ask me.

ESTHER Why do you toy with them?

MAYME You know what I do. What? You troubled because he married? They all married. You ain't completely clean of this business. Truth. No, I don't care to think about those women. I don't care to think about the kind of lives that keep them sitting in their windows, worrying while their husbands---

ESTHER I pity your heart. You are the worst sort of scavenger.

Lights rise on George and Esther's Boudoir. George stands in a brand new suit.

MAYME What's the matter with you?

Esther touches the silk jacket.

ESTHER I don't feel so good. That's all.

MAYME I thought you'd be happy for me.

-- 89 --

ESTHER I think I'm gonna go home, if you don't mind.

Lights cross fade. Esther and George's Boudoir.

George stands in a new wool suit. He looks sharp and he knows it. Esther stares at him longingly.

GEORGE It seem to me that the fella's be wearin' shorter jackets with a touch of color.

She crosses the stage and kneels beside him, and then proceeds to pin the hem of his pants.

ESTHER Sporting fella's, they ain't gentlemen. This Scottish wool. It white folk quality and it'll keep you warm through the winter. There is a lovely story-

GEORGE Yeah? I'm sure it excitin'.

Esther runs her hands down George's legs, then adjusts the hem. He does not respond to her touch.

ESTHER Be that way, I won't tell it then. There. You look good, George. Really. Now take off the pants so I can hem them proper.

GEORGE I need them for this evenin'.

George takes off his pants.

ESTHER This evening? Why?

George puts on his old pants.

ESTHER Don't go out. I bought fresh pork chops from Mrs. Franklin's son. . . I was gonna smother them in onions, the way you like. But it ain't worth the trouble if you ain't gonna eat. And. . .and I have something for you, I was going to save it for later. . .but. . .

A moment. Do you want to see?

-- 90 --

GEORGE

(excited) Sure.

ESTHER Close your eyes. C'mon. And don't smile.

George closes his eyes.

Esther nervously slips off her dress, revealing an elaborate corset similar to Mayme's.

ESTHER You can open your eyes.

Esther awkwardly poses, awaiting George's reaction. His disappointment is palpable. He clearly was expecting something else.

GEORGE What yuh doing?

ESTHER Don't you like it?

GEORGE Come, put yuh clothin' on.

ESTHER What's the matter? Ain't this to your liking? Ain't this what you want?

Esther places George's hands around her waist.

ESTHER

(cont'd) Feel it. It satin. See.

GEORGE No, don't do this Esther. C'mon, this ain' yuh. 'ear.

ESTHER Why won't you touch me?

A moment.

GEORGE You want me to touch yuh?

ESTHER Yes.

George grabs Esther around the waist. He plants a heavy hard kiss on her mouth. She nevertheless succumbs to his touch.

-- 91 --

GEORGE Like so? You want me to touch you, like I've touched every inch of this island. You want me to bend and please, so you can feel mighty. No.

George pushes Esther away. 'Least in Panama a man know where 'e stand. 'E know 'e chattel. That as long as 'e have a goat 'e happy. 'E know when 'e drunk, 'e drunk and there ain' no

judgment if so. But then 'e drink in words of this woman. She tell 'e about the pretty avenues, she tell 'e plentiful. She fill up 'e head so it have no taste for goat milk. She offer 'e the city stroke by stroke. She tantalize 'e with Yankee words. But 'e not find she. Only this woman 'ere, that say touch me, George. And ask 'e to lie down on what she promise, lie down on 'e stable with a dozen strong horses for the work sites, ask 'e to lie down as they haul lumber and steel. Strong sturdy beasts. They are. 'E lie down, but what 'e get? No, 'e don' want to lie down no more.

ESTHER Stop it. Why you talking this way?

GEORGE I t'ink yuh know.

ESTHER No. Can't you pretend that the money ain't there?

GEORGE But it there dreamin' a fine fine house wit' it own yard. It taunt 'e so, 'e can't even show what kind of man 'e be. What 'e hands can do.

ESTHER No. That half my life. Thousands of tiny stitches and yards of fabric passed through that old machine.

-- 92 --

GEORGE And for what, huh? For it' sit?

ESTHER No.

GEORGE Stop sayin' no! Ain't yuh see, if 'e own wife ain't willin' to believe in 'e, then who will? 'e stand in work lines that wind around city blocks. But 'e don't have to no more, 'cause 'e know a fella got twelve draft horses and want to sell them quick quick. And 'e buy them and in two years, they'll have enough money for a beauty parlor even. They'll have the finest stable in New York City. People'll tip their hats and pay tribute. They'll call them Mr. And Mrs. Armstrong. The Armstrong's. Them church ladies will clear the front row just for them. And 'e will-

Esther wants to believe him.

ESTHER He will what?

GEORGE 'E will sit with she and nod graciously to the ladies. 'E will come home for supper every evenin'.

(seductively) 'E will lie with she.

A moment.

ESTHER Only she?

George strokes Esther's back tenderly, she savors his touch. He kisses her neck, her back, her shoulders, her breasts. He embraces her, almost too much so. Esther nevertheless surrenders to the unexpected affection.

-- 93 --

ESTHER Are you telling me the truth? Is this the truth?

GEORGE Yes.

ESTHER Please, you're not just saying that. You're not going to laugh with your friends later. You're not laughing at me are you?

GEORGE No, I ain' laughin'.

Finally, Esther breaks the embrace. She hesitates, then tears into the quilt, wrenching it apart with her bare hands.

She pulls the money out and examines it, before placing it in George's outstretched hands.

ESTHER There. There. There.

She's almost relieved to be shedding the money.

Surprised, George smiles and gathers the money into a pile.

GEORGE So much 'ere. Sweet mercy, look at it all. Good lord, that fella' ain' gonna believe it. I gonna place the money square in 'e hand, wipe that silly yankee grin off 'e lips. I show 'e.

ESTHER It's late, let it wait until morning. It'll still be here.

GEORGE Woman, how yuh get so much?

ESTHER Leave it. Come.

Esther beckons him to the bed. He looks at her pleading outstretched hand, but instead chooses to fetch a worn bag for the wrinkled money.

Esther, humiliated, studies her husband with growing horror. Aghast, she slowly lowers her hand, and pulls on her dress.

-- 94 --

ESTHER

(cont'd) George?

George continues to take unbridled delight in the money.

ESTHER George?

GEORGE What?

ESTHER

(whispered) Do you love me?

GEORGE What the matter wit you? You look as though you seen a duppy.

ESTHER Do I?

GEORGE Why yuh look at me strange?

ESTHER I asked you something.

GEORGE Yuh my wife, ain't yuh?

ESTHER Am I?

(whispered) I didn't write them letters.

GEORGE I didn' hear what yuh said.

ESTHER

(louder, almost too much so) I said I didn't write them letters.

George studies Esther with disbelief. He laughs.

ESTHER

(cont'd) All this time I was afraid that you'd find me out. This good noble man from Panama.

Esther retrieves a pile of letters tied with a satin ribbon.

-- 95 --

ESTHER

(cont'd) I have all of your letters here. I look at them everyday. I have one that looks as though it's weeping, because the words fade away into nothing, and another that looks as if it's been through a hard day, because there's a smudge of dirt at each corner, and it smells of kerosene and burnt sugar. But I can't tell you what it say, because I don't read. I can't tell whether there are any truths, but I keep them, 'cause George give me his heart, though it covered in mud and filthy, but he give it to me in one of these letters. And I believed him. I believed him!

A moment.

ESTHER But you ain't the man in these letters, because that gentle man would have thanked me. Who wrote them letters, George? Tell me!

George considers.

ESTHER YOU TELL ME!

GEORGE An old mulatto man. I paid him ten cents for each letter, ten cents extra for the fancy writing.

ESTHER I ain't really Mrs. Armstrong, am I? I been holding on to that, and that woman ain't real. We more strangers now, than on the eve our wedding. At least I knew who I was back then. But I ain't gonna let you hurt that woman. No! She's a good decent woman and worthy. Worthy!

-- 96 --

GEORGE Esther!

George reaches out to Esther.

ESTHER No, don't touch me!

Esther backs away from George.

GEORGE Please. I ain' a thief. No. They warn't my words, but that don't mean I ain't feel them t'ings. I go now, but I be back.

ESTHER I hope they real strong horses.

GEORGE You'll see. I'll be back.

George takes Esther's hand, she forcefully withdraws it.

GEORGE And we'll begin here.

Lights Cross Fade. Mayme's Boudoir.

Ragtime music plays, fast and furious.

-- 97 --

Act 2, Scene 6

SCENE 6

Smoking Jacket.

Mayme's boudoir.

Mayme prepares for a client, putting on rouge and powder, and finally the silk jacket. A knock sounds on the door.

MAYME Just a minute. Hold on, hold on.

Mayme, laughing, opens the door.

MAYME

(cont'd) Did you get the-

Esther, calm, enters. Mayme's unable to disguise her surprise.

MAYME

(cont'd) Esther. What. . . I got someone coming shortly. You can't stay.

Mayme nervously wraps the robe around her body.

MAYME

(CONT'D) I can't put him off. You understand. Come back later and we'll catch up.

Esther grabs Mayme's arm.

MAYME

(cont'd) What's wrong?

Esther gathers her strength.

ESTHER He gone.

MAYME Who gone?

ESTHER George.

-- 98 --

MAYME You ain't serious.

ESTHER He has another woman.

MAYME How do you know?

ESTHER She told me so.

MAYME She did? Well, she must be a cruel heartless heifer.

ESTHER You think so?

MAYME Yes.

ESTHER But, she ain't. When I left home this morning I intended to do harm to his whore. I was going to march into her room and scratch her face with my scissors. I was going to scar her. Make her ugly. Make her feel what I'm feeling. But, she deserves him every bit as much as I do.

MAYME You're being very strange. And I don't like it.

A knock sounds on the door. A moment.

MAYME

(cont'd) You gotta go now.

ESTHER No.

Another series of loud knocks.

MAYME Please, we'll talk about it later. Come, I'll let you out through Anna's door. I got someone coming.

ESTHER Do you know what I done? I tore a hole in my quilt and give him my beauty parlor. Half my life bent at the machine, and I give it to him, just like that.

-- 99 --

MAYME Oh, Esther. Why?

ESTHER I wanted to be held.

(distracted) I thought if... He ain't come home last night. I sat at the sewing machine all night, trying to make something, I just kept sewing together anything I could find until I had a strip a mile long, so long it fill up the apartment.

A moment. My money gone.

Mayme runs her fingers along the fabric of the jacket.

ESTHER

(CONT'D) Do you know where he is Mayme?

MAYME Why would I know?

ESTHER Because, you're wearing the jacket I give him on our wedding night.

A knock on the door.

MAYME How come you ain't say nothing before?

ESTHER What am I gonna say?

Mayme pours herself a whiskey, and then struggles with whether to speak. She opens the piano and then slams it shut. Finally.

MAYME Last night Songbird come around the saloon in a new suit with bottomless pockets, throwing dice all night, and boasting of easy money. I ask him where he got the money and he say his luck turn and he was gonna ride it out. If you can imagine that. He was gonna buy himself draft horses. The world changing and he wants big strong horses. He made me laugh. He promised to take me out someplace special, but I didn't have nothing nice to wear. And honestly it made me think about how long it been since I done something nice for myself. Gone someplace like you said, where a colored woman could go to put up her feet and get treated good for a change. And I see the dice rolling, and I think Lord, God, wouldn't a place like that be wonderful. But every time the dice roll, that place is little further away. Until it all gone. And then I put my arms around this man, and I know who he is. He George. And maybe I know all along.

-- 100 --

ESTHER Why didn't you stop him?

MAYME Because, he belong to me as well.

Mayme takes off the silk jacket like it's tainted, and places it in Esther's hands.

MAYME But this yours.

ESTHER Foolish country gal.

MAYME No, you are grand, Esther. And I ain't worthy of your forgiveness, nor will forget what you done for me. You ain't never treat me like a whore. Ever.

Another series of knocks.

ESTHER Please don't answer that door. Please don't, please don't answer. He restless.

A series of knocks.

MAYME He's going to leave.

ESTHER LET HIM GO!

Mayme moves toward the door, Esther grabs her arm. Another knock sounds.

ESTHER

(cont'd) Let him go. He ain't real, he a duppy, a spirit. We be chasing him forever.

Footsteps.

Silence.

Mayme sits on the piano stool, but doesn't play. She removes the rouge and powder from her face.

Esther clinging to the smoking jacket, touches Mayme's shoulder.

Cross fade to Mr. Marks Boudoir, as Esther moves into Mr. Marks Boudoir.

-- 101 --

Act 2, Scene 7

SCENE 7

Japanese Silk.

Marks Boudoir.

Mr. Marks unfurls a roll of ocean blue fabric, as he turns he finds himself facing Esther.

ESTHER Hello, Mr. Marks.

MR. MARKS

(surprised) Miss Mills, I'm sorry, Mrs. Armstrong. Ah, yes. Come, don't worry about the mess. How have you been?

ESTHER

(cont'd) I seen worse days. And you?

MR. MARKS I've seen better days.

He laughs.

ESTHER I've been meaning to stop in. I walked past here a half dozen times trying to get up the courage to come in. You remember you sold me a rather special length of fabric some time ago.

MR. MARKS Please, remind me.

ESTHER Japanese silk, with --

MR. MARKS Of course, I remember it.

ESTHER Well, I made it into a man's smoking jacket, at your suggestion.

She holds it up.

MR. MARKS It is very nice, it will please your husband, I'm sure.

A moment.

-- 102 --

ESTHER I want you to have it.

MR. MARKS Me? I can't --

ESTHER Yes, you will.

Marks accepts the jacket, genuinely touched by the gesture.

MR. MARKS Thank you.

ESTHER I can't stay long.

Esther begins to leave.

MR. MARKS Wait, one moment.

He removes his outer jacket, revealing the fringes of his Tallit Katen. He carefully puts on the silk jacket.

MR. MARKS What do you think?

ESTHER It fits wonderfully.

Esther takes a step toward Marks, hesitates, then takes another step forward. She raises her hands.

ESTHER

(cont'd) May I?

He nervously holds his breath and nods yes. Esther reaches toward Marks expecting him to move away.

She smooths the shoulders of the garment, then expertly runs her hands down the jacket's lapels, straightening the wrinkled material. Marks does not move.

Silence. Their eyes are fixed upon one another.

A gentle rag plays.

Lights cross fade; we're in Esther's original Boudoir.

-- 103 --

Act 2, Scene 8

SCENE 8

Patchwork Quilt

Esther's Boudoir.

Mrs. Dickson's rooming house. Mrs. Dickson folds laundry, humming a ragtime tune.

Esther enters.

ESTHER The girl downstairs told me I could find you up here.

MRS. DICKSON My Lord, Mrs. Armstrong. I been telling everyone how you forgot us.

ESTHER It ain't been that long.

MRS. DICKSON Feel so.

The women hug. Look at you. I was about to take some tea, come on into the kitchen, I'm glad for the company. These new girls are always out and about. They trouble me so these days, but whatcha gonna do? And I want to hear about everything.

ESTHER Have you rented my room?

MRS. DICKSON Why do you ask?

ESTHER I don't much feel like saying why. If you please, just a yes or no would suit me fine.

MRS. DICKSON No.

ESTHER Well then, you won't mind another person at supper this evening. It's Friday and you don't know how I been missing your carrot salad.

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MRS. DICKSON Of course. Esther-

ESTHER I'm fine.

Esther takes Mrs. Dickson's hand.

ESTHER

(cont'd) And I'd love that cup of tea.

MRS. DICKSON Come on downstairs and we'll catch up. I'll tell you about Corinna Mae, girl's as big as a house, I swear to God.

Esther barely listening eases onto the bed.

MRS. DICKSON

(cont'd) She didn't waste any time getting pregnant and already talking nonsense about her man. When they first was married he was good enough for her, but to hear it now you'd think the man didn't have no kind of sense.

ESTHER I don't care to hear about Corinna Mae.

MRS. DICKSON Oh, I thought --

ESTHER I'd like to sit here for a moment.

MRS. DICKSON Oh, yes. I gotta bring a few more things in off the line before the sunset, I'll see you downstairs shortly.

ESTHER Of course.

ESTHER Mrs. Dickson, thank you for not asking.

Mrs. Dickson lovingly takes Esther's hand, giving it a supportive squeeze.

Mrs. Dickson picks up the laundry basket and exits.

Esther rubs her belly, lovingly. A moment.

She walks over to the old sewing machine and begins to sew.

A slow gentle rag plays in the distance.

The lights rise in the other boudoirs.

Mayme sits at her piano playing a rag.

Mrs. Van Buren pours herself a brandy, then lights a cigarette.

Mr. Marks, wearing the smoking jacket, pours himself a cup of tea.

Mrs. Dickson folds the laundry.

As the lights fade George slowly crosses into the darkness.

Esther breaks into a glorious smile.

Projected Title Card:

Unidentified Negro Seamstress. Ca. 1905

Black out

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