

JIMMY REDD

a Play in Two Acts
by Ken Love

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CHARACTERS (All African American except where noted)

LUCRETIA

Eighties. First wife.

JOYCE

Seventies. Second wife.

LOTTIE

Mid-fifties. Third wife.

MARY

Seventies. Fourth wife.

GUINEVERE

Mid-twenties. Fifth wife.

JUANITA

Mid-fifties. Jimmy's sister.

BIG SAL

Seventies. Former madam of a brothel.

HAZEL

Sixties.

ERNIE

White male. Assistant funeral home director. Mid-thirties.

PLACE

The chapel of a funeral home in the South.

TIME

Fall. 1998.

*“Oh, this bitter earth
Yes, can it be so cold?
Today you’re young
Too soon you’re old
But, while a voice
Within me cries
I’m sure someone
May answer my call
And this bitter earth
Will not be
Oh, be so bitter
After all.”*

Dinah Washington

ACT ONE

(Lights up inside the chapel. A closed casket is before the altar. Ernie is aligning pews, prepping flowers, dusting, etc. Juanita enters. Ernie notices her suddenly)

Pastor Roberson?

ERNIE

Ernie, I presume.

JUANITA

That, I am.

ERNIE

Hi. Am I late?

JUANITA

No. A little early, even.

ERNIE

Good.

JUANITA

(She looks around)

It's all so comforting. Just as the lady I'd spoken with yesterday had promised.
Thank you.

We do our best.

ERNIE

(She notices the coffin)

I never forgot. Many years ago my brother said he didn't want his face shown.
And I remembered.

A lot of folks now-days request closed coffins.

ERNIE

You'd think it would make this easier. They should all be coming in soon, I hope.

JUANITA

ERNIE

The list is already by the door.

JUANITA

Thank you.

(Silence as she scrutinizes Ernie's face)

Curtis Riggins, "Riggins General Merchandise." You're related, aren't you?

ERNIE

He's my granddaddy.

JUANITA

And you look just like him.

ERNIE

Although, I do believe my teeth are better.

JUANITA

I glanced at the call board out front and noticed the assistant directors' last name and thought I'd take a chance. It's almost as if I know you, Ernie.

ERNIE

That's small-town life for you.

JUANITA

Where is your grandfather these days?

ERNIE

Would you believe he's still running that store?

JUANITA

You've got to be kidding!

ERNIE

Seeing that he's as old as some of the merchandise, we ought to turn it into a museum.

JUANITA

Wait a minute – do you mean to say that old bicycle he's been carrying since –

ERNIE

The Depression . . .

JUANITA

Is still –

ERNIE

There! And collecting dust. Oh, yes.

JUANITA

And that big toy fire engine?

ERNIE

From the 1920's, I think . . .

JUANITA

The one I used to sit in when I was just a little girl –

ERNIE

As for that, someone finally took it off our hands. A collector from up north, roaming the country, buying up antiques.

JUANITA

How much did you get for it? If you don't mind me asking?

ERNIE

Enough to restore that old place.

JUANITA

Well, when you see him, give your grandfather my best. I'd stop by and say hello myself, but right after the trip to the cemetery for the burial I'm on a plane back home.

ERNIE

California, am I right?

JUANITA

Yes. My church is in Oakland.

ERNIE

Ah! Earthquake country.

JUANITA

Perhaps, but we choose not to think on it too much.

ERNIE

I'd love to live in California. The mere thought, though, of living in a place where the ground could shake gives me the willies.

JUANITA

No place on earth is immune from nature. In fact, didn't a tornado rip through here late last summer?

ERNIE

Yes. But, if I had to choose between twisting wind and shifting ground, I think I'd place my bets on the former.

JUANITA

Six of one, Ernie.

ERNIE

As long as I'm able to flee, pastor. This is my yardstick. I don't believe I'd get much traction on bucking mud.

JUANITA

Suit yourself.

ERNIE

Well, if you'll excuse me, I'll wait at the door for the others. Can I get you anything? A cup of coffee, or . . .

JUANITA

No. I'm fine, Ernie. Thanks.

ERNIE

I'll send them in as they arrive.

(He exits. Silence. Then, she begins humming a soothing hymn as she reads from the program)

JUANITA

James Allen Redd. Born January 14, 1930. Died October 6, 1998.

Bless him.

(Ernie re-enters)

ERNIE

Pastor, I just remembered: we'd gotten a call from a Mrs. Guinevere Todd a little bit ago. Her plane was delayed. So, she'll be late.

JUANITA

That's fine. I'll hold off on starting the service and wait for her.

(Ernie acknowledges, then exits)

Wife number five. The final love of his life.

Somehow, I managed to pull everything together and reach all of my brothers former wives. And in spite the man Jimmy Redd had been, they agreed to come. Bless them.

(She hums. Silence)

I'm happy that he came to be so accepting of death. Yes, I suffer because I miss him. Yet, I'm pleased in the assurance that, though he died in prison, he perished of natural causes and bore his passing with ease.

I still, however, remain ignorant as to why he was jailed. And that bothers me. Deeply.

(She hums a little more, then stops)

He'd thought I'd lost my mind when I told him I'd been called into the ministry. He even asked my husband if I was alright. I managed to bring him around only after I'd been installed as a pastor of a church in California. In fact, when he heard, he dropped everything to come and hear me preach. He'd just gotten out of jail – his first time – and I decided to direct my whole sermon at him. He appreciated it and was proud. He smiled and hugged me for a good, long time, saying over and over how proud he was of his sister. He made me cry – I couldn't help it.

My husband died about ten years ago. It wasn't much of a marriage, to be honest. There was love, but not much of it. Over time, we had resigned ourselves to playing the role of two folks who lived together and put up with one another. So, my dungeon didn't shake a great deal when he passed.

Years later, I would meet a woman, fall in love, and finally know exactly what love was. When I struck up the nerve to tell Jimmy, he never flinched. He took it well, hugged me again, and once more spoke of his pride for me. And though I smelled the tonic on his breath from being more than a little loaded that time, I hugged my brother back. And cried again, too.

(She hums, then reads again from the program)

James Allen Redd. Born in Leasburg, North Carolina to Willard James Redd and Louise Ann Lee Bishop.

At eighteen, he'd gotten together with nine other young men one night and in two cars – passing a bottle of liquor between them as they rode side by side at top speed – smashed front end first into a truck as they crested a hill. The man in the truck had his head lopped clean from his neck by the shattered windshield. Since he was riding along and wasn't one of the drivers, Jimmy was given a choice: join the Army, or go to jail.

He enlisted and served in Korea.

Daddy, of all people, started Jimmy's drinking. He'd been more of a running

partner to him than a father. Mother couldn't do a thing with either of them. And though she'd worked as hard as her health allowed as a domestic, the little she brought in only kept us poor. Depending on daddy was out of the question, seeing as that he was barely a presence in the house. The only steady work he was willing to lower himself to was bootlegging. And even with that, whatever he made went into foolishness.

One Christmas, daddy made a batch of bad liquor. And more than a few folks died from it. The sheriff and two deputies came to the house to get him before the kin of those who had perished from the liquor had a chance to. They searched the place and turned up nothing. Daddy was gone. He'd concocted his poison, smote some lost souls with his wrath, and then had the indecency to disappear. We never saw him again.

But we were blessed. Or, maybe, just plain lucky. A white man named Curtis Riggins owned the general store. He was a widower. And he'd always have a kind word to say to mother. And with such a lowdown, now non-existent husband, he had no problem extending credit whenever she needed it, which was often.

When he got word that father had gone, right away he paid her a visit. He said he was aware of how much she struggled. He told her he respected her and would always be around to offer a leg up. The next day he brought a load of vegetables from his garden and a ham. Every so often, he'd stop by and drop off a bag of candy. "For the little girl", he'd say. As a child, I honestly believed him to be the kindest man I'd ever known. And he'd elicit such happiness from mother.

Soon, every so often, mother would ask Mr. Riggins to stay to supper. After we'd eaten, sometimes he'd help with my schoolwork. Then he and mother would sit on the front porch and talk until it would be time for Mr. Riggins to go home.

I woke earlier than usual one morning and saw his car still parked out front. That morning I would step from my room and see Mr. Riggins just as he closed mother's bedroom door behind him, his shoes in his hand, walking softly on his toes in his socks to the stairs. Later that day I'd ask if he would be my new daddy. Mother told me to hush.

Jimmy, meanwhile, was now as young and full of evil as he wanted to be. Mother turned to our pastor, Rev. Harrell, and asked that he speak with him. He told her he'd be glad to help.

Rev. Harrell sat with Jimmy and said he was too young to be leading such a wretched life – drinking and running around all night, fighting and cavorting with trash. Jimmy asked what should he do – wait till he was big enough to do grown folks mess? Rev. Harrell told him a man could have the privilege of being grown if he walked with the Lord and respected himself, and not simply did what he was big enough to do, which made him little more than an animal.

But Jimmy was hardheaded. As young as he was, he laughed at the Reverend. Then said if he wanted to preach to somebody, he ought to be putting the switch to mother who was committing sin on a regular basis with a white man. Not knowing what to make of it, he did, in fact, speak to mother, who couldn't lie, but owned up to all of it. She confessed her heart and told him she was in love with Mr. Riggins. Rev. Harrell said she was playing a dangerous game and wasn't

doing anything but setting herself on a path toward a lot of heartache. Mother told him she couldn't help herself.

Hearing this, Mr. Riggins came up with a plan that would help us all: mother and me would come to live with him in his house where she would work as a domestic, and therefore have things just as she wanted them: to be well provided for and to keep Mr. Riggins as her lover.

Yes, I was a child. Yet, I hold myself responsible for ruining it all. The way I saw it, Mr. Riggins was my new daddy. And I was so excited that I could not hold my tongue. This worried mother, and she warned me to never refer to him in such a way. "It will cause trouble," she said. This would be our great big secret. And no one must know of it. She made me promise.

Ever so innocently, though, I passed it on to another little girl at school. Word spread, finally reaching those close to Mr. Riggins. A meeting was called by the elders and deacons of his church, where he was brought in and given an ultimatum.

I can't recall if he and mother had ever said goodbye to one another, it happened so quickly. And in such silence. We'd move away, and mother would find work as a domestic. She'd also occupy more and more of her time with the Bible. She would teach it to me. And with all her might try to build solace for the two of us.

Yet, the hurt could not be undone. I let my mother down. She cried a little every day for a month. And all I wanted was to die in that heartache.

(Big Sal enters, aided with a cane, followed by Lottie)

BIG SAL

You sure that bastard in there is dead?

JUANITA

Should I not be?

BIG SAL

I'd stick somethin' in him, if I was you.

JUANITA

Let's see – you must be Sally. Sally Baines.

BIG SAL

Though, I'm still known in particular corners as *Big Sally*. And if you care to march back a notch to what folks usta call me, it's *Big Sal*. You can call me Big Sal, too, if you want.

JUANITA

Jimmy told me all about you.

BIG SAL

Worts, corns and all, I s'pose.

JUANITA

I do not judge.

BIG SAL

Hah!

JUANITA

I'm sorry . . . ?

BIG SAL

It ain't nothin', honey. Nothin' at-all. Well! Look-at-here! You sho is a woman of the cloth, ain't you?

JUANITA

Looks that way. I'm Juanita. Jimmy's sister.

BIG SAL

As I been tol'. He spoke well of you. Didn't he, Lottie?

LOTTIE

All the time. I'm Lottie.

JUANITA

Oh, yes. I know all about you, too.

BIG SAL

Is that so?

LOTTIE

Sal be quiet.

JUANITA

Again, I do not judge.

BIG SAL

But, you a preacher. Ain't it yo' business to call folks out?

JUANITA

I believe the Bible says – *Judge not lest ye also be judged.*

LOTTIE

Works for me.

BIG SAL

In that case, since we's havin' us a non-judgin' party, let me be the first to say I was the one this gal here usta work for. And I'm right proud of her, too. Could turn more tricks in one night than a greased-up card shark.

LOTTIE

That was a long time ago, Sal. And I have children now.

BIG SAL

Which changes things more 'n money, I reckon.

(Big Sal looks at the casket)

Bastard!

(She tries to suppress her tears. Juanita hands her a handkerchief)

Ain't it a shame that nothin' you had rubbed off on 'im. Nothin' at-all! I bet he gave you and yo' poor mama a piece of grief when he was a young buck.

JUANITA

We loved him, nonetheless.

BIG SAL

Give what you have – take just what you can get, in other words. I understand.

(Lucretia, breathing with the aid of an oxygen tank, which she pulls behind her, enters assisted by Joyce)

LUCRETIA

Which was always the trouble with you – you ol' bat!

BIG SAL

You ain't got no cause in callin' nobody no bat, you ol' toad!

JUANITA

How you doing, Joyce?

JOYCE

Just fine, Juanita.

BIG SAL

How's yo' spunk these days, Miss Lucretia?

LUCRETIA

About as dead as a ol' womans cooch ought t' be. How's your'n?

BIG SAL

It's still got some kick in it, truth be tol'. Matter fact, I got me a twitch the other day. Spied this nice lookin' youngblood glidin' up the street. And I'll be beat with a stick if it didn't feel like hoppin' in my bloomers and runnin' behind him.

(Juanita reacts. Joyce and Lottie laugh)

JUANITA

How've you been doing, Lucretia?

BIG SAL

Yes. How come ain't nobody buried you yet?

LUCRETIA

As a matter of fact, I don't b'lieve it'll be long at-all before I'm stretched out in a box just like this 'n with coin over my eyes.

BIG SAL

Seein' as you's the oldest wench in here.

LUCRETIA

You better hush up 'fore I knock a hole in you.

(They laugh and embrace)

BIG SAL

Speakin' of which, what's that in your nose, gal?

JOYCE

Lucretia had a lung removed.

LUCRETIA

Took it out and threw it away like some ol' tire. Won't be long before this one I'm left with blows a flat, too, come to think of it.

BIG SAL

Ain't it somethin': you get old and to keep you going they got to cut stuff outta you.

LUCRETIA

And life, too, to keep itself going, gets to a time when it needs to cut *you* out.

(Lights in the chapel dim. Overhead spot on Lucretia)

‘Course, there’s the healing. But everything don’t heal, do it? Some things leave holes in you with pain so awful the healing gets lost – lost in the very space inside that hole.

I had Jimmy when he was young. That’s right! I was pushin’ forty when he got to lappin’ at my doorstep. It didn’t make no difference how unruly he was. It won’t possible for a woman to feel nothin’ but sweetness with that boy. And being such a fool and so took with love I would’ve died a dozen times for Jimmy. Failing that, I’d satisfy myself and take all the hurt in the world for him if love proved too little.

His sister Juanita showed me a picture Jimmy’d sent her from Korea whilst he’d been fightin’ the war over yonder. There stood Jimmy, as young and pretty as he wanted to be, all hugged up with some Korean gal. By the shine on his face, she looked to be keepin’ him good and happy, too.

Meantime, I’d been courting a man named Parrish, a widower with one grown daughter. There won’t nothin’ ‘bout him to make a woman foolish, but he’d been a decent enough man. He worked in the saw mill. And worked hard, too, or so I’d been told. He owned a nice little white clapboard house, knew how to raise his own vegetables and had something in the bank. I would have preferred a man with a little more fire in his spit, but I recall mama saying that kind of man was for a gal who wanted nothin’ but a high time. A smart, God-fearing woman, though, will run after something more sedate. And Parrish was sedate enough to make you cry. So, I heeded mama’s word and let this sedate gentleman court me.

Parrish was as good a man as any woman would want. And I soon thought it proper to offer to cook for him, along with his daughter and her husband one Sunday afternoon. After church, he had us all over. We ate, talked and laughed a little bit. When the eating was done, Mr. Parrish sat with his son-in-law on the porch while I and his girl cleaned and straightened up. After ‘while, she’d pull me aside to say she had two daughters of her own whom she would not bring to her father’s house. And she herself would not place a foot here without her husband. She was scared of her father, scared for being as sure as a person had reason to that he knew more about what happened to her mother than he was willing to let on. Even went as far to say that she believed he killed her. And that if I had any plans on marrying him and if I had any sense, I might be served better and think twice.

I did not know what in the world to make of all this. Although I did tell her out front it sounded like somebodies red-faced lie. “And you oughtn’t say such things about your own father. It’s a sin! Don’t you know that?” All of a sudden, the girl looked like she’d been beat down. Then told of something ought to’ve made me laugh, if it hadn’t scared me so: at the funeral, when she won’t but a little girl, just as her mother was being put in the ground, she looked off into the woods and saw a woman who looked to be waving at her. The child broke off and ran toward the woman, then stopped cold when she made out the woman’s face as that of her

mothers. Right as the woman moved her mouth to speak, she felt her daddies' hand on her arm. She watched her mother reach for her as her daddy pulled her away, squealing and crying to get him to see it, too. To him, the child was out of her head with grief. After 'while, he got her to hush, then took her up and carried her on back.

That evening, after she'd went to bed, she heard her daddy arguing and fussing with somebody in his room. She got herself up and went and stood before the closed door: he was hollering back at somebody – somebody who sounded like a woman! He said to the woman she could torment him if she wanted to. But she needed to understand who she was dealing with. He told her to go ahead and make every one of his waking hours a living-dying hell. Just be good and aware, though, of how he could make the same kind of hell for their daughter. And being a man with her nothing but a little girl, they both knew what he was capable of.

From that night, she did not see or hear tell of her mother's spirit at that house again. And her father, from that day hence, could not have been more loving, kind or providing. She would not want for nothing.

It won't until the daughter left home and got married that her mother would turn up again: on her wedding night, after she'd made love with her husband. She'd see the woman standing at the foot of her bed while her husband slept.

I could not bring myself to believe nothin' 'bout that girls story. And I told her so. She said she'd pray for me. And I appreciated it. It ain't that she looked to be no kind of crazy woman. And I won't suspecting nothin' evil. I just didn't believe her.

They soon bid goodnight. And Mr. Parrish offered to take me home. In the car, I asked 'bout his wife. "Like I told you, she'd been a sick woman. Her mind was wrong. And the poor thing soon went off and killed herself. Won't nothin' I could do to stop her." He drove on and got very quiet. And as he pulled up to my front door, I felt his hand on my arm. Something cold pushed through me. "What did my girl say to you?" I was so scared all I could think to do was tell a lie. "She didn't say nothin'." He looked at me hard, them lines cuttin' deep in his face. "I don't believe you," he said. "And whatever she told you – you need to drive it out your head. And you bet' not breathe a word to nobody, or – I swear 'fore the living God – I'll make you sorry!" I near 'bout broke my neck getting' out that car. "And be ready Wednesday evening. You goin' with me to Miss Anne's Kitchen for supper after prayer meeting. You hear?"

Yes, I heard. But I won't having it! Something finally felt wrong – all wrong. The next morning, I paid his daughter a visit. She looked at the fear all over me. And it affected her. And what's more, she'd seen her mother's spirit glidin' 'cross the yard again the night she got back from visiting me. *No knowledge on what happened?* Nothing, she said. Whatever the cause lay between them. And the only way to get to the bottom of it was to go to her father's house that very night and wait outside the closed bedroom door and listen.

We waited until half-past midnight. Then I rode with her to Mr. Parrish' house. Back then, folks living in little country towns and rural areas never saw fit to lock their front doors. So, we let ourselves in, very quietly, of course, and made our

way upstairs to the hall, then to the bedroom. Sho nuff, the door was closed. After ‘while, we heard talking. And as they talked and hollered at one another, it won’t long before we’d get the full story –

Parrish had been messin’ with a woman – a young woman who lived with her crippled mother. He first came upon her when he’d gone with some other men to deliver firewood from the sawmill to her house. She ain’t had to grin at him but one time for ‘im to lose himself to her. He’d soon make more deliveries of wood – by himself, that is. And always made it his business to sit and talk with the girl when he did.

It won’t long before she had him tippin’ back late in the night to keep company with her. Soon enough, he’d get her pregnant. When it got around to his wife, the poor woman went on and worked up a way to poison the gal and her mother, too. Then told Parrish of it after he’d come home from work that night. He went crazy and choked the life out ‘er when he’d went and seen with his own eyes what she’d done. Then fixed it so folks’d think she’d killed herself.

That was a-plenty for me! I’d go ahead and wait for him to bring his evil self to my doorstep Wednesday night, like he said. And I’d have something for him. When he drove up, won’t he quite surprised to see me totin’ my britchloader! I told him I wouldn’t care to see him no more. I’d had a visit with his daughter. And I’d now knowed a thing or two. I said he ought to gon ‘bout his business or I’d plug ‘im like you do a hog at killing time. “I’m a man!” he said. “Don’t no woman talk at no man that-a-way. It ain’t Christian.” It ain’t, I said. And I told him if he didn’t get in the wind, he was fixin’ to be one Christian man who was good and dead! But I reckon in his mind, he won’t having it either. He opened the door and brought his big self out that car – after which I drew back and put a great big ol’ hole all the way through his leg with that shotgun – from which he’d make a even bigger hole with his mouth when he hollered. Oh, he lived! And he knowed better from then on not to darken my doorstep again.

Time flew on and I’d come to regret it. All of it. I might’ve reaped something good with that man, truth be told. I’d been yet a fool. I listened to that damn girl of his. Who’d cared if I’d been blind to something like that? The world is blind, ain’t it? Besides, I’d have me a man! But I messed it up. More men would come my way. Yet, I’ll be slapped with a dishrag if everyone didn’t turn out to be either a dog of the worst kind . . . or just not up to par.

The ache set heavy in my heart. Until Jimmy Redd finally came marching home.

(Juanita hums a gentle tune)

Korea had made him a man. He won’t that scrawny, half-starved lookin’ young’n that got run away from here. Oh, naw! He’d filled out right fine. In all the proper places. And looked to have more of a sense of himself.

(Humming stops)

He'd learned a little something 'bout motors whilst he was in the Army. And when he'd come back, Joe Willie Simms took him under his arm, taught him a thing or two, and put him to work as a mechanic in his shop fixin' cars. When he'd get done with work some evenings, he'd come by to say how do and sit and have a beer with me. Every so often on a Saturday, too, he'd come to rest his hat and maybe have a bottle of pop and a slice of pie. It surely was pleasant, once in a while, to have a nice lookin' young man for company. Won't nothin' devilish in my heart toward him, at least not at the time. But, having him at my doorstep did something to me. Something way down.

I asked about the Korean girl in the picture his sister showed me. She won't nothin' but some gal he knew, he said. Then he told me he was scared to think on it, but he might have got her pregnant. He didn't know for sure. And I could see he won't willing to talk more on it, neither.

Then he looked at me and asked what in this world something as pretty as me was doing without a husband, or at least a man? "It ain't natural", he said. "There ought to be a law." I couldn't do nothin' but cry. He saw my tears, moved close and hugged me so tight I thought he'd squeeze more tears out of me. "It's alright. You'll find somebody. God willing."

He brought me flowers the next day. And asked if I wanted to go cut the rug with him. He'd borrow Joe Willie's car and said we could stay gone all night, if we wanted to.

We went to Pete's Place, a nearby juke joint, and had us a grand time. I danced and drank myself silly. Then flopped around and threw myself at another man. Jimmy'd seen it and thought some stud was getting fresh. He went crazy. They got to fightin' and carryin' on until they'd beat themselves numb. Jimmy reared up and said to the man he'd better watch where he puts his next footstep. "This here's a woman!" He said. "As fine a woman as you'll see before life ages you blind. And don't nobody disrespect no woman of mine 'less he wants his legs broke off at the hips."

I fell in love that night. A month or so later, I married him.

(Overhead spot fades in on Joyce. Fade on
Lucretia)

JOYCE

And the wedding was fine, sister. A fine wedding in May. I wished wonderful things for you and your new husband. I didn't know how to pray. I could only wish. It's childish, isn't it? Wishing? Grown-ups, folks with any wherewithal, learn the value of prayer. I guess that's always been my dilemma for as long as I can recall: I've never been able to grow up.

Lucretia's father died when she was five. His heart failed one afternoon while he worked in the field. I would lose my mother at three in a car wreck: daddy and me would survive. Mother died.

Our families attended the same church. Daddy and Mrs. Waylock – Lucretia’s mother – would find a way to draw themselves to one another. They’d marry and I soon found myself sharing my room with a new step-sister.

Late one summer, a fever would burn its way through these parts. As a little girl, I’d nearly die from it. My stepmother, being a superstitious woman, would apply different remedies when nothing conventional worked. I’d get worse. And in desperation she brought over an old Obeah woman who wore a blue patch over one eye to conjure something – anything – to dispel this illness. The old woman said to wait through one day and one night. Then, at the rise of the full moon, they would carry me to the cemetery, and just before the strike of midnight pass me back and forth over my mother’s grave. I was a little older than a baby, yet I still hear the old woman wailing and speaking in tongues as my stepmother prayed.

They took me home and fed me a broth made from the meat of a rooster and sweetened with a few drops of crows’ blood. I was then rocked in the old woman’s arms as she hummed a soothing hymn. She rocked me all night, moaning deeply, gently. With sunrise the cock crowed, releasing me from my sickness. I fell into a long sleep. My stepmother cried and thanked God.

Before Jimmy had come our way, I’d hooked up with Clinton Farrell, a light-skinned boy with soft, curly brown hair. He told me he was part black, part Irish – his mother had been black and his father an Irishman, who at one time had something big going in the days of Prohibition. Clinton was down here staying with his aunt on his mother’s side. She’d raised him, but his father’s stain was all over him. He quit school early to run him a gambling racket he’d got going in back of the juke joint in town. The sheriff didn’t bother with him too much, seeing wasn’t nobody but colored folks taking part in it. And he did good by it. For instance, he’d never – ever – bring himself to see me without sportin’ a suit sharp enough to cut you. He drove a red Cadillac convertible. And won’t a time when a bank roll as thick as his fist wasn’t in his breast pocket, along with a nickle-plated .38 in a black leather holster under his arm. A man who was pretty, young, loaded and dangerous. Lord help me if it won’t enough to kill a woman!

It won’t hard to see he’d put a shine in Lucretia’s eye, too. My father, though, couldn’t stand him. And forbade me to see him at all. Even putting the switch to me to seal the order.

But my heart cried louder! The truth is, I now realize something else was doing the crying, but – however you’d name it – I wasn’t letting anything keep me from what the angels had blessed me with. I threw my packed bags out the window one night, then ran away to meet him in his Cadillac sitting at the top of the road. He had people in Florida. We’d go there, get married and live good. “You hear what I say now!” he said. “We’ll live good!” He wasn’t telling me anything I didn’t already know. Of course, we’d live good. How could we not?

We got to Florida and went before a Justice of the Peace. Though I was barely sixteen, the fact that Clinton was twenty-something made it legal, I suppose. Either way, we stepped out as husband and wife that day, then hooked up with the folks he knew down there – as shady and scary a bunch as you’d ever look to hide

from. And they feared nothing, not even dying. They ran juke joints, gambling halls, strip clubs, pool halls. They dealt in dope and prostitution. Some were guns for hire! Yes, as a younger gal, I liked me a little wildness and danger, but – now that I can think on it – what I wanted was the kind that made my coochie itch, not that which made you want to run!

We had us some nice times, though. And we did good, even if we had to keep watching our back while we were enjoying it. But you can't watch yourself all the time. And everything living has a weak spot.

Clinton, my beautiful husband, sure loved his dangerous life. He ached for it. So what if he had a wife afraid for him because she loved him like a mad dog? Who cared if he kept me up at night worrying myself blind? I guess having a loving woman at home wasn't enough. Oh, no! He had to have his shit, too!

And he sho had it. More than he knew what to do with: through all his dirty dealings, he soon got himself on the bad side of the Cuban Mafia. I'd just fixed supper one Thursday evening when somebody from his crew stopped in and told me Clinton was dead. "Them Cubans gave him one of their neckties," he said. To this day, I haven't the vaguest clue as to what that is. All I know is that it killed my husband.

They put on a big gangster style funeral for him. Them high time crooks lined up to kiss me on the cheek and tell me not to worry, that I'd be well provided for. One of them offered to marry me. I turned him down. I was through with that life. I realized I didn't have the stomach for danger, after all. I'd been born and brought up for more of a small town, small time lifestyle, I guess, where I'd not have to worry 'bout dodging bullets every five or ten minutes.

Lucretia and I had written to one another through this. And one day I received a letter telling of my stepmother and how bad off she'd been. I took a long bus ride home, the longest of my life, it seemed. Daddy couldn't refuse his only natural child back into his house but would not so much as spit in my direction once I'd gotten there. He spoke not a mumbling word to me. I accepted our condition and went on to attend to my stepmother in the best way I could.

The sickness soon took the life from her. And I grieved not so much for her as I did for Lucretia, who took it so hard she nearly lost herself.

After the funeral, she'd ask me to stay with her and Jimmy.

LUCRETIA

You was tired, girl. I near 'bout couldn't take lookin' at you. Pitch your tent with your sister for a while. I needs the company, anyhow. And it will do us good to look after one another.

JOYCE

And I was so glad to see how she enjoyed her life with Jimmy. He'd weaned himself off the bottle, was making a fairly good living working with Joe Willie and was providing for his wife . . .

LUCRETIA

. . . Although, every so often, bein' his wife, I'd have to box his ears a time or two when he'd step outta line. But, through it all, he was a good husband.

JOYCE

She was happy. And I was happy. Or, rather . . . I should have been happy.

LUCRETIA

I couldn't figger it. What in the devil got into you, Joyce?

JOYCE

I no longer seek an explanation for things anymore. It's too painful. In fact, I think the world would be better served if everybody just accepted what came. Dealt with it. And moved on.

Jimmy'd grown into himself beautifully. *Beautifully*. Myself and Lucretia . . . we'd always looked at boys differently. But what Jimmy had become was something new entirely. There was a decent, strong, good looking *man* in our presence, whom we'd practically watched grow up.

Jimmy and I would sit and talk while she pattered around the house doing this or that. I loved talking to him. More and more I'd seek his company, his advice –

LUCRETIA

Advice? What kinda advice can you take from that boy?

JOYCE

Stop calling him a boy, Lucretia. He's your husband.

LUCRETIA

That's right. Which means you don't know him like I do.

JOYCE

I'd find myself hollering at her with each passing day about how she treated him. Jimmy said it didn't bother him, but it drove me crazy.

LUCRETIA

Well, he's *my* husband. Now when – and if – you get a mind to pull that stick from out your bottom and find a man fool enough to have you – why, then you do him like you want. Meantime stay out my business.

JOYCE

But, I couldn't. I'd become very protective of him, jumping to his defense over anything – however slight. He'd been such a sweet and young thing. He needed love, not her. He should have had a woman who knew something about being a woman. Not Lucretia. It wasn't possible for him to want her. What did he see in her, anyway? She knew nothing about what it took to be a wife. She's never even

been able to keep a man!

LUCRETIA

Girl, what in the devil'd come over you? To this day, I can't figure it.

JOYCE

He heard me crying one night. He knocked and let himself in. He said he couldn't stand to hear a woman cry. He told me to dry my tears. I felt his arms holding me. Hush, he said. "If you keep on you gon get me to crying, too."

He held me for a long time. It was good. Until Lucretia's presence soured it. "Break it up!" she said. She went after Jimmy, smacking and flailing at him like some mad crow. "Look at you," she said. "Just look at you! Behind my back and in my house! YOU GOT YO' NERVE!" Then she was all over me. She said she wanted me gone before sunrise, sister or no sister. Jimmy told her she ought not accuse her own kin of what won't true. She wouldn't hear it. In fact, she said he needed to be gone by sun up, too. And she pulled the shot gun on both of us to seal the threat.

Jimmy got Joe Willie to put us up till things cooled down. We stayed on there and, after a while, I finally told Jimmy I loved him. Not knowing what to say, he said thank you. But, let me know he would need to find his way back to Lucretia.

And she'd have him back. It won't long, though, before he'd leave her again. For good, this time. I guess I'd put something in his head: he didn't eat Lucretia's shit anymore. He'd stand up for himself. And soon found he could no longer bring himself to look at her without cussing. She'd made him sick. And to get well he'd have to go.

She divorced him. And in time he'd marry me. A month later, I almost jumped out my skin with joy when I became pregnant with Jimmy's child.

LUCRETIA

I never forgave you, sister.

JOYCE

I'd gotten ill, though. Very ill, while pregnant. As if my sister had worked some spell on me. After seven months, I'd been sick for so long I feared for my life. Very late one night I ran from the house. Outside in the yard, under one of the peach trees Joe Willie's grandfather had planted when he was a boy – under that tree, I gave birth to a stillborn baby. With my hands, I dug into the earth and buried it. My tears wet the ground. I would bear no more children.

LUCRETIA

And I still won't ever forgive you.

JOYCE

I figured as much.

I was depressed for over a year. Crying every day. Too scared to kill myself.

Too weak to do anything but creep through the house, day and night, like a ghost. We lived in a little place then – if you want to call what we did living. Jimmy couldn't reach me. I was now lost, and I didn't want to be touched. In fact, I decided I no longer wanted a man. I needed to be alone. Broken hearted, Jimmy turned back to the bottle. Later, just about every weekend, he'd gamble and drink up most of what he made. I'd fight him. Cuss at him. Holler. Call him outside his name. Then, one day, I'd wind up locking him out of the house. *You ain't worth the time it'd take to spit at you!*

One morning, I woke and saw he'd left just before daybreak. For good.

(Lights rise in the chapel as Mary enters)

MARY

Pastor Roberson? I'm . . . I'm Mary. Mary Hadley?

JUANITA

Oh, yes. Come in. Have a seat. We're waiting on one more. I got word earlier her flight was late. So, if no one minds, I'd like to hold the start of the service for her.

JOYCE

It ain't like nobody's in any kind of hurry.

LOTTIE

I know he ain't, at least.

(Mary touches the casket)

MARY

Was it true? About how he died?

LOTTIE

It's what we were told.

JUANITA

In the prison hospital. Of old age.

MARY

The woman, his last wife . . . What was her name?

JUANITA

Guinevere.

MARY

I heard he was protecting her.

JUANITA

Protecting . . . ?

LUCRETIA

She was his wife. Ain't that his job?

MARY

Not if she deliberately put him in harm's way.

BIG SAL

What is you saying, Miss?

MARY

That it's always a woman, isn't it? To lead a man to a bad end?

BIG SAL

Is anybody makin' sense of this 'ere woman?

JUANITA

Ms. Hadley –

MARY

Mary. Please.

JUANITA

Alright, Mary . . .

(Ernie enters)

ERNIE

Excuse me. I'd just like ya'll to know there's coffee, juice and water out here in the lobby. So, please feel free to help yourselves.

JUANITA

Thanks, Ernie.

(He exits)

BIG SAL

Juice. Water. Coffee. What do he think this is? Church?

LUCRETIA

Have some respect, gal.

(Juanita has been comforting Mary)

MARY

I'm a fool. I still miss him.

LUCRETIA

The world's full of fools.

MARY

And I will live to be among the worst of them.

JUANITA

Come on, now, Mary.

MARY

I'd never stopped praying for him, pastor. I gave him my best.

JUANITA

That's not something to regret.

MARY

He took everything I had. But I loved him. And I didn't care.

JOYCE

Ain't no sense in love.

JUANITA

Just think of what you had with him.

MARY

I do. And it makes me crazy.

LUCRETIA

If only the craziness and hurt would kill you. And let you be.

JOYCE

Just ain't no sense in love.

LOTTIE

Especially . . . when you no longer have it.

(Lights fade in the chapel and rise on Lottie)

When all that's left for certain folks is the loneliness. And the bitterness.

And I refuse to become a woman who is lonely or bitter. It does not suit me. Besides, I have something to live for now. I've got a man – a husband, to whom I've given children – two boys. I'm not like them – these women, dying in the

past. I have a life. Which means there's nothing to regret. It's gone. Dead! All of it. As dead as the man lying in that box. Do you hear me? You're dead to me, Jimmy. DEAD! If you ever had even lived. If what we had together wasn't what anyone would dignify as a life. YOU ARE DEAD! The life that is now gone . . . is dead!

. . . He'd leave Joyce. And keep on with the bottle. Running. Cut a man over gambling. Spend a month in jail. Get turned loose. Fall out with Joe Willie, quit the job, then break into his shop and steal the till. They'd throw him back in jail for two months more. To which they'd turn him loose again. He'd run, run . . . then stop. He needed to quiet down for a while. Got his head beaten in during that last lock up. Took some of the "bad" out of him. Went to work for a white man named Bill Allen as a hand on his farm. Jimmy'd work. And on Friday and Saturday nights spend his money at Lowell's Place, a joint down the road . . .

Lowell was my man. I was nineteen years old, waiting tables for him. And every so often, if he knew a man well enough, and for a price, he'd let him take me upstairs to a little room he fixed for, as he put it, some privacy. With me, that is.

It was an arrangement. And it sat just fine with me. I mean, Lowell was treating me right. And we made good bread. And it won't like I played with just anybody. It had to be a man whom Lowell knew and believed he could trust. Which cut out all the roughnecks, the drunks and the scum that'd flit through the place a little more often than he cared for. So, truth be told, I liked our . . . *arrangement*.

Then I got to eyeing this nice-looking cat who'd always park at a table in the back. He wouldn't order nothing but Johnny Walker Red. I asked him his name. "Jimmy. What's your'n?" *I'm Lottie. You got good taste in liquor.* He smiled, and Lord smack me with a fist if it won't like a light shining all over my face. Right away, I put something in Lowell's ear that I'd seen enough to know he'd be alright. Lowell wanted to hold off, but I convinced him. He went on and let Jimmy pay up. Then I found myself walking up those steps with the youngest man who'd had me at the time other than Lowell.

True to form, Lowell dealt with his plateful of bad apples. One in particular was a cat who called himself Black Sam, a gambler who lived to bet high. It didn't matter if he dressed sharp as a roosters claw, drove a white Oldsmobile and pocketed a roll as thick as your leg. Lowell wanted nothing to do with him, going so far as to shut Sam out the place. "Among other things, he's got a big mouth," Lowell said. *What are the other things*, I asked. He told me – number one – he didn't like him. And what was number two? He *really* didn't like him!

Sam had to have time with me. Lowell told him no. Sam persisted. Lowell stood firm – *no*. Every other day he was in Lowell's face. "*Ain't nobody lookin' to pimp nothin'*," he said. "*I just want the trim, baby.*" Lowell said he didn't care. He told Sam to keep his money and he would keep his time. And he was gon plug him if he didn't quit riding him about it. "*We'll see,*" Sam said. And went on about his business.

I'd been in the room with Jimmy again one night when Sam slipped through the

back way, then busted in. He'd pulled a knife and he and Jimmy were all over each other, tearing the place apart. Sam had Jimmy to the wall and was pressing the knife at his face. Lowell rushed in with the shotgun, took it by the barrel, swung it like a bat, then hit Sam in the head and split the skin on his skull like the peel on an apple. With blood weeping down his neck, Sam turned Jimmy loose and came at Lowell with the knife. Lowell pushed the butt of the gun in his stomach – and Sam dropped the knife, to which Lowell turned the gun around and unloaded it in Sam's belly. He fell and the room shook. When things got quiet, Lowell looked at Jimmy – “Take Lottie and cut out,” he said. “Sam was tight with a lot of scum in these parts. I'll try and keep this quiet for as long as I can. But we all know it won't be long before the devil sends somebody here to visit me, if you know what I'm talking about.”

It sure was hard to leave Lowell. We'd been through hell and the hot kitchen together. He wouldn't hear of me staying no place near him, though. “You got to live, girl,” he said. I cried and it hurt. But I went on and left. Besides, I was cutting with Jimmy Redd!

True to his word, in time, the devil'd send somebody to visit him one night just as he was closing the place. They'd break in and shoot Lowell to pieces.

So much for our arrangement.

Before we'd left, Lowell told us we might want to hitch up with a woman he knew named Big Sal. She ran a house. And she'd probably put us up.

Jimmy'd asked me if I'd ever been married. I told him no, I never thought to. “You wanna get married? Might make stuff easier.” How, I asked him. “You know . . .” But I didn't know. And I'd lay odds, neither did he. He was Jimmy Redd, though. How could I turn him down?

We knew we needed to visit Sal. Before that, though, Jimmy got it in his head to try his hand at pimping. I thought he'd lost his mind. In the short while I'd known him, I could see he wasn't no pimp. “Ain't nobody a pimp until they set out to be one,” he said. But there are men who are born for it and men, like you, who ain't. It's like singing: you are either Billy Eckstine or Nat Cole, or you ain't.

I couldn't tell him nothin'. I decided to go along and let him make a fool's ass of himself. First thing he did was find some girl he'd seen standing in front of the pool hall on Rawhut Street, some li'l skank who probably couldn't even wash herself good. Jimmy said she was ready to go. “She's what I'll start with,” he said. “Before long, I'll have me a stable, sho 'nough!” I took a good, long look at this child – eighteen going on fifty. And didn't look like nothing a dog would raise his hind leg at. She put you in mind of something that'd steal the nasty bloomers off you if you so much as blinked. “She ain't much, but . . . you know men.”

“Are you sure you know what you're doing, Jimmy?”

“I'm a man, ain't I?”

“And what's that supposed to mean?”

“You don't understand,” he said. “And you never will. So just siddown and watch the money roll in.”

He put the girl on the street all night that first time. Next morning, she came to

the house and gave him ten dollars. And that fool grinned. “Good . . . for the first night.” I said to Jimmy wasn’t he able to see that something won’t right. “What?” he said. I told him even with the little scraps I’d known of a pimp’s game, it looked to me like the girl had more money then what she gave him.

“How you know?”

“I suspect it, Jimmy. Shake her down!” He grinned at me again, just like the fool he was. “You just jealous, is all.” I could’ve hit the roof! Jealous? Of what? Some nasty, rat-lookin’ skank? “If you think you can do better, go ahead and hit the street yo’self?” I was so mad I almost took him up on it.

She went out again the next night and dragged herself back the following morning – grinning just like him. She handed him fifteen dollars. “See?” he said, looking at me. “A little better the second night. Won’t be long ‘fore she be totin’ fifty dollars in here, every mornin’.” If she ain’t got that much already, I said. I looked at the girl trying to send the bad eye my way. “She don’t like me, Jimmy.” “Don’t you fret, baby,” he told her. “She just gets it in her to act like somebodys mammy from time to time. Don’t pay ‘er no mind.” OOH! I could’ve tore a hole in him!

The third night she went out and didn’t come back. A few nights after that, real late, I heard a noise in the house, like something running out the back door. I got up and saw that the shoe box where Jimmy kept his money was gone. The girl took it. ‘Course, he won’t gon hear that, but it was as clear as water to me. And he had nobody to blame but himself.

(Lights fade on Lottie and rise on Big Sal)

BIG SAL

Naw. Jimmy Redd might’ve been many things, but he sho won’t cut to be no pimp. The boy had too much heart.

Yep! There was a time when I was known for runnin’ a sportin’ house. And what I needed was a man to sit by the front door with a britch loader on his lap. Two times scum fell up in there to stick up the place. And there’s always some hard head itchin’ and layin’ to rob a whorehouse. They knows you can’t call the law when somethin’ outside the law gets hit.

So, I hired Jimmy to be my archangel. And his li’l wife would now work as one of my li’l girls.

Right off, I took a shine to him. We’d set and talk and play cards when it was slow. He loved his tonic the same as I loved mine, and we sho enjoyed havin’ us a nip or two together.

Sho was good comp’ny. And enough of a man to make a woman catch herself when her eyes’d get to runnin’ over him.

‘Course, it won’t like I ain’t never had a man of my own. I’ve had a-plenty. Yessah! Don’t nobody call me Big Sal for nothin’. Honey, I could roll with the best of ‘em. And if it won’t for this stiff back I’d be somewhere rollin’ now. Matter fact, I’d had me somethin’ good and solid for a time. A stud named Dover. Never did marry ‘im, but we sho loved each other to death.

He'd been a pool playin' man – a shark. When I'd met him, I was cleanin' and cookin' for a white lady. My nights off, I'd go and set in Will's Bar and have me a taste. Will had pool tables in the back. And there I beheld Dover, shootin' them balls with that stick like lightnin' splittin' a rock. And fleecin' the scratch from them suckers he'd beat like it won't nothin'. I watched him turn his head at me, that bankroll in his hand thick as the meat of a baseball bat. He'd say the way he looked at it, a man couldn't get enough of a big woman. "I always wanted me somethin' that'd shake the world," he said. "Shake it and tear my house to pieces." Talk such as that can't help but rush to my head. I'd got so silly, I near 'bout slid off the chair and fell on my hot rump. It won't long before I even let that devil sugah talk me into goin' home with him.

I'd found he'd done a little pimpin' on the side, with maybe two girls under his belt who tossed 'im a right nice piece of change every now and again. Such a thing won't exactly foreign to me: there'd been times I'd get short on bread and sell a piece once or twice to cover myself. And, likewise, I'd put out for Dover here and there, too.

Dover beat some sucker at a pool game who, come to find out, didn't have enough to cover his stake. Dover was fixin' to cut him when, scared as he was, the man up and gave Dover all he had, which was a nice sized house on Route Nine. Dover took that house. Which meant we now had us a place to work out of.

I quit the woman and put my time into settin' up the sportin' house. We found us some girls, passed the word in all the dark places, and – as time crept on – here and there, conjured up some business.

Dover kept to his pool playin'. He'd just took in another roll one night in another town and won't five minutes from steppin' on the street when some hoods knocked him over the head. They dragged him in the alley, beat him till his skull split open, then took off with his money.

I hadn't had a man since.

Had this white preacher who usta stop by the house. Rev. Whitlow. One of my best customers. Oh, yes! Me and him was tight. He'd get in the pulpit on Sunday morning a-hollerin' and a-preachin' and carryin' on 'bout the wages of sin, 'bout men-folk too sorry and no-account to look after their own families, and 'bout how unclean and wicked it was for the white race to wallow and fornicate with black trash. And he'd preach of any man low enough to even rub elbows with Big Sally Baines and her host of harlots had Satan in him and was doomed to damnation just as sho as God blessed America. He'd get to whoopin' it up with all that fuss and hot wind – and I'll be smacked with a monkey stick if he didn't traipse through here every Thursday night lookin' like a starved polecat for the darkest gal in the stable. He was somethin'! "I'd kill for a colored gal, Sally," he'd tell me. "You understand, though, I got to be the way I am with my congregation on account of . . . well, if I'm gon live, I got to keep my head. Right?" Po' thing. I'd baby talk him and put him and his two-faced self at ease. "It's alright, sugah. When it comes to mens Big Sal knows, Big Sal understands. It's why I'm here."

I couldn't be too hard on that ol' preacher. If it won't for him, we wouldn't have

got that great big farmhouse at the end of that dirt road outside town. His brother owned the land. And for a fair price every month, I could stay there with my girls. And keep me a bigger stable if I'd a mind to – which is what I done.

Well, before long, don't you know that preachers wife come to see me! She looked to be such a weak, timid thing I almost got mad at m'self. She sat and told me to please refuse service to her husband. Told me I was wreckin' her home by bringing sin between them. She said she'd always known of what he did. Lord knows, he tried, but he won't able to hide nothin'. "It's in your best interest," she said, "to heed me."

Thursday night, like clockwork, the preacher brought hisself through the door. "Your wife stopped in and sat a spell," I told him. What little color he had went right out of him. "Said she don't want you here no more. Said I ought to turn you 'way. Now, it ain't in me to do such a thing to a payin' customer. But I think you should know how things sit with your other half."

The very next Thursday night, though, sho 'nough, he came in a-high steppin' like it won't nothin'. He went upstairs with Arlene, one of my darker girls. He's up there doin' his business with her when his little wife come bustin' through the door like one of "The Untouchables." And Lord slap me if that shotgun she was totin' won't big as her – child, I was scared she'd hurt herself! Jimmy saw her first, but before he could drop his jaw the woman'd shot him in the leg.

Before it was all finished, she'd gone upstairs and caught the preacher trying to jump through a window with nothin' on but a pair of socks and a necktie – caught him and plugged him in his back side. That's right! She killed him with a bullet in his behind.

The sheriff, being a good customer hisself, covered things for me. The woman went to jail. Jimmy lived, though he walked with a limp from that night on. And won't he a scary cat to behold when you stepped through the door with him comin' at you, limpin' and totin' a rifle, with eyes on you like a man fixin' to lay you out.

My Jimmy!

After a time, he'd come in late and I could see that something . . . something 'bout him won't right. He didn't limp so much as drag. His eyes looked glazed over. "What ails you, boy?" He grinned at me, sleepy like. And went on and got the rifle and took his place at the door.

Every two, three days from then on he'd come at me that same way, like a half dead man sleeping. I won't no fool. I knowed what was wrong. I just didn't want to own up to it. After he'd sat down and nodded off with the rifle in his lap, I pulled up one of his sleeves and 'bout cried when I seen them needle bites in his arm.

Where . . . where in this country town was it for somebody to get at some *smack* – *WHERE?* Won't no use in asking, though. The stuff was in him.

Sho 'nough, he'd fixed it so Lottie got on it. And two of my girls. I went to Jimmy and told him I ain't one to judge nobody, but this here is bad business. You hear me? BAD! Nothin' but evil! Don't you know that fool laughed at me? I

kept at him, cryin' and pleadin' – I didn't care how it looked. And Lord help me . . . Lord help me if he didn't cuss me – cuss me down like a dog. *"Who you think you is, you ol' heifer? Somebodies mama? You ain't shit to me. You hear? BITCH! Now stay out my business 'fore I fuck you up! . . .* I might have been served better if he'd kicked my head off. *Jimmy cussed me – ME!* Ain't that somethin'? All I knowed was to sit and look like a mother with the wind knocked plumb out of her by her own child. *Jimmy cussed me.* Then laughed in my face.

Honey . . . I was th'ough.

Jimmy and one of the girls, high on that stuff, got to playin' with the rifle at the front door one evening. Played until he messed around and shot one of her eyeballs plumb through the back of 'er head.

Jimmy and Lottie packed and blew. I reckon they was expecting the worst. I stayed at the house. And cleaned up the mess.

(Lights fade on Sal, and rise on Lottie)

LOTTIE

We left Sal and went to Memphis where I was born and raised. I'd known folks there. It didn't take long, though, to see that most of that ol' crowd had moved on. Those who had stayed in the life were either in jail or in the grave. And those who were out of it had gotten religion or went straight.

Me and Jimmy got us a broke down hotel room just off what used to be Beale Street. I turned tricks to keep the rent paid and food in our mouths. Jimmy beat his head in trying to hustle. And through it all, neither of us wanted to turn that stuff loose. We had to hold on to something to keep us lit up in that dark night, something to curse us so we'd stay blind.

I'd come back one morning to see Jimmy in the room with some white woman. He grinned at me and said her name was Tina. Her boyfriend dealt smack, which meant she knew a thing or two about dealing it herself. "We gon start us up a operation, sho nuff," he said. "Big time is here, girl!" It didn't take a lot of smarts to see they'd been doing more than just spiking and talking business. But by then, time and the ordeal of life had bled the fight plumb out of me. And not even a gunshot to the head would have so much as blown my hair out of place.

At night, I'd work the streets while Jimmy and Tina stayed in the room and minded the store, hawking dope. During the day, when we weren't sleeping, the three of us would lay together in bed, defiling ourselves either with sex or, more and more, with that stuff. The end wasn't coming – we'd brought it to the doorstep.

Early one rainy summer morning I stepped back to the hotel to see Memphis P.D. running all over it like roaches. They brought Jimmy out in handcuffs. He told me later that Tina's boyfriend had caught up with her, said she'd stolen the dope from him that she and Jimmy were peddling. They'd got to fighting in the room. He knocked Jimmy against the wall, then took and threw the woman out the opened window – from seven stories up.

That was his story. And I believed him. But who would take as truth such a tale

from a black junky?

Jimmy'd been lucky, though. They ended up giving him ten years when we both knew it could have been a lot worse. They said if he was willing to tame himself, he'd be free in six. I wanted to be a good wife and wait for him. I really did. But, I thought, why should I?

I broke his heart when I visited and gave word of cutting him loose. The way I saw things, it was for the best. And I told him so. And left. Besides, I saw him start to cry. And I didn't need to be around any tears.

(Lights fade on Lottie and rise in the chapel as
Guinevere enters)

JUANITA

Guinevere.

GUINEVERE

Yes.

JUANITA

Welcome. I'm Pastor Roberson.

GUINEVERE

I'm so sorry. My flight . . .

JUANITA

Oh, don't worry about it. We held the start of the service for you.

GUINEVERE

Thanks.

LUCRETIA

Where you from, child?

GUINEVERE

Baltimore, Maryland.

LUCRETIA

And you was married to Jimmy?

GUINEVERE

Yes, ma'am.

JOYCE

Must've seen a lot in him.

GUINEVERE

What can I say? I fell in love.

MARY

And weren't you with him when he passed?

GUINEVERE

Yes. I was.

MARY

How did he go?

GUINEVERE

He died . . . with ease. There was no pain or torment. He'd been at peace.

MARY

Good. And with that . . . I think we ought to pray. All of us.

JUANITA

Good idea, Mary.

LOTTIE

Come to think of it, I feel like . . . like I ought to go. I don't have no business here. If Jimmy was alive, he'd spit in my face. Besides, I'd said it once and I'll say again – I ain't got no need or wish to linger with tears. Not anymore.

BIG SAL

In other words . . . what's dead is gone?

LOTTIE

As dead as the life I had with that man. And the wrong I did to 'im.

JOYCE

We all, in our own way, at one time or another, did Jimmy wrong.

JUANITA

Let's go ahead and start the service . . .

MARY

I never wronged him.

LOTTIE

Well, be that as it may, I cannot bring myself to stay here.

BIG SAL

Well, I ain't ready to go yet.

LOTTIE

I'll wait in the car.

BIG SAL

Lottie, sidddown!

LOTTIE

No! And don't you holler at me, Sal.

GUINEVERE

Look, I should be the one to go. This was a mistake. And I knew better.

LUCRETIA

Something tells me if anybody was to see him dead, he'd want it to be you.

JUANITA

And why would you say that?

LOTTIE

Come on, Juanita! It's as plain as your color. This one got the best of him.

GUINEVERE

You have no right to say that –

LOTTIE

I'll say it anyhow!

GUINEVERE

All I will say is that Jimmy and I –

BIG SAL

Ain't no use in foolin' yo'self, child. And we needs to quit foolin' ourselves, too.

LUCRETIA

You sayin' everything we had with Jimmy was a lie?

BIG SAL

I'm sayin' he was a rooster and we was the hens. We give – he took. Next thing, he done flew the chicken coop. And it's mighty peculiar he never found it in 'im to bounce back, not even to say hello-dog-lick-my-rump. Not a-once! It's enough to hit you like a good-sized rock.

JOYCE

He'd been such a sweet lover, though.

LUCRETIA

True. He sho knew what it took to get a woman to holler.

BIG SAL

So what? A zucchini will make you holler.

JUANITA

Can we start the service, please?

GUINEVERE

You know, maybe . . . maybe you're right. I probably was a fool, too.

(Guinevere looks upon the casket)

Excuse me.

(She exits)

LOTTIE

She's laughing at us. That's what she's doing.

LUCRETIA

You think he married something like her to spite us?

LOTTIE

I wouldn't put it past him.

JUANITA

What is wrong with you all?

JOYCE

Something ain't right.

JUANITA

What?

JOYCE

A young piece of trim like her and an old man who didn't own a nickel to scratch his hind parts with. It don't make sense.

JUANITA

Like you said – love never does.

LOTTIE

And after he got 'er, how'd he wind up in jail, anyway? Didn't somebody think to ask that?

LUCRETIA

I sho didn't.

BIG SAL

Me, neither. Didn't think it our business to know.

LOTTIE

I say we make it our business.

(Ernie enters)

ERNIE

Pastor? A lady who's not on the list, who says she knew the deceased, asks to be allowed to pay her respects.

JUANITA

Uh, sure. Yes, of course. Show her in.

ERNIE

This way, ma'am

(Hazel enters, Ernie exits. Mary sees her and is startled, then angry)

HAZEL

Hello, Pastor Roberson. I'm –

MARY

What do you want? *WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING HERE!?*

(Blackout. End Act One)

ACT TWO

(Lights rise in the chapel. The women sit in a tableau. Juanita is humming a hymn)

BIG SAL

I got out the whorin' business after 'while. Though I did try to hold on for a little bit longer, when my girl had that accident I came to see my heart just won't in it no mo'. And times was changin' and tightenin' up, too. The sportin' house business didn't sit with folks and the law like it once did. Matter fact, somebody soon got it in their pretty head to burn mine down. And most of what I had went with it.

The little I did keep I used to get me a trailer and open a gamin' hall where folks could set, gamble and play cards and what-not. That kept me fed for a spell . . . until two knuckleheads went crazy and shot one another's innards out in the place and got me shut down. Then, with another lady, I opened me a lounge, which kept my table set until the barkeep got the big eye for some underage gal and sold her one too many drinks and what – likewise – got me shut down again.

Now-days I works as a hostess at Li'l Mel's Fish Hut. You go in, set down, eat, drink beer and listen to the live blues band. You can get up and dance if you want to. I sits by the door and welcomes folks in – it suits me well. In fact, I done got to be somethin' of a side show in there on account of my days runnin' that house. Oh, yes! Big Sal still lives good. She ain't got no man. But she still lives good . . .

JOYCE

. . . I didn't want to see another man when Jimmy left. I ended up going back to Lucretia. We lived like two old hens until the time came for us to grow into two old hens. I hear Lucretia's dreams sometimes. She still misses Jimmy. And I do think of him. And, despite everything, I miss him, too. A little . . .

LOTTIE

. . . I left Jimmy, went to New York, and worked in a club as a go-go dancer. Had a thing with the owner who was Italian, who would soon end up in jail for, among other things, cooking his books. Did some stripping in another club and was an item with this owner, too, who was Puerto Rican, who'd also wind up in jail – this time for allowing drug dealers to operate in the place, which the cops shut down. I got off smack but soon settled into another habit – cocaine. Messed around and got hood-winked into doing blue movies. Fell deeper into the habit. And got busted. Went to jail. Got with a program. Cleaned up again. And by luck – found a man. A good man with whom I'd have children.

I yet live, though, with what I did to Jimmy. I live with the image of tears wetting his face. And I live with having left him when he needed me. Yes – I, too, yet live with a man who's dead.

(Juanita stops humming)

JUANITA

I had wanted to convince Jimmy to come to California and stay with me. He liked California, but he thought I'd be too strong an influence. "You'll cramp my style", he said. Sometimes Jimmy made as much sense as a zebra at the Kentucky Derby. And though he laughed at me for doing so, I prayed for him. It made me so mad to have him make fun of me, yet I prayed just the same. One could feel so helpless with him, like watching a man fall and seeing him shrink as he fell . . . smaller, smaller . . . while the earth around him grew . . . then swallowed him whole.

(Lights fade on all except Mary)

MARY

I'd never given my heart to anybody before Jimmy. It belonged to God. A life in His service and in His church was the only commitment that mattered. I didn't want a union with a man. And I was as happy as I was well enough to be, or so I'd thought.

My father would say a girl should not run after a boy. "Let him find you," he said. Mother hated it when he spoke in such a way. "What does anybody get from acting like a shrinking rose?" I have never appreciated my mother's forward outlook. She'd been a nurse when she met my father, who'd been in the Army. She'd gone to college and had read a book or two. So, she knew how to think. Daddy was the blunt instrument in our household, a chief deputy as well as a deacon who knew the Bible and made no apologies in laying the law of it down hard. Mama didn't fight him. In her own quiet way, though, she resisted him. "I just have questions," she'd tell him. Daddy kept saying he'd answered them. But, clearly, not to mama's liking.

Mother and father were poles apart emotionally. And I had been brought up between them. From mother, I was taught patience, to think before speaking, how to listen, and – especially – the value of knowledge which, for her, was of particular importance to black women. I must confess, though, that daddy would prove the stronger influence, for it was from him that I'd ultimately seek a life with God. Yes, he was a tough man. When it came to the showing of anything resembling love or tenderness, he was all thumbs. But I was drawn to him because of that which he committed his existence to. I loved mother. Yet, I would seek to walk in my father's steps, for I believed he followed those left by God.

I had no knowledge as to how deeply any of this had divided our household during those years until the time would come for me to leave home. Then, unexpectedly, mother divorced father. And it hit me cold. I'd shake further at how it upset daddy. He believed she'd come to the decision years ago. Mother understood that father would not allow her to take me if she left and she didn't want to leave me alone with him. So, she held out. As far as father was concerned, "*She'd sat and waited all these years to make me a fool.*" I'd see mother and talk with her about how he'd taken it, that the deed had been done simply to make him look bad. "I'm sorry if the man got his pride hurt," she said. "It's just that I could

no longer *find myself* in that house. You, your father . . . every object, each piece of furniture . . . the lost words and thoughts we'd had between us – the whole of it – everything, had a place. Except me.” I told her I knew she had troubles with daddy, but he had only wanted what was best for us. “I was never sure of that,” she said – which I found to be silly. Then I asked if she wanted to go to heaven and if she believed in God. “I’m not in the business of putting myself through hell for anything, heaven or no heaven. As for God – I have questions.”

Now I, like father, was angry, too.

On my own, I'd pray for mother daily and would visit with her as often as time would let me. I decided to make it my business to prove that daddy was right and that she ought to go back to him. Each time, though, she'd quietly resist and respond in the same way: *I still have questions*. One day I got totally beside myself and told her those damn questions would be her undoing. “God doesn't want to hear any questions,” I said, “when he's already left you the answers.” Mother asked, “Where?” I took a Bible from my purse. “Where do you think?” She looked at me in that smug way I'd always hated.

“Sorry, daughter. You'll have to do better than that.”

“And I would do better if I thought you were worth it!”

That took the wind out of her. “You go on, then,” she said. “And find yourself somebody to holler at who *is* worth it.”

I will always believe in hell – the actual place and the one created by our actions and thoughts. The Buddhists have a saying that hell is in the heart of a man who hates his father. I hated neither of my parents. But, anger toward my mother was hell enough. And if it was self-made, I could undo it.

Over time, I'd pray for atonement and for God to allow me to be civil toward my mother, and to see her again. All too aware of my unworthiness, He'd answer my prayer, and mother and I would reunite.

Father had since died. And mother was receiving treatment for cancer. I'd see her in the hospital and would feel shame and cry and hold her against me as if the very act of human contact would heal her. What I didn't know was that she'd done some healing herself. “I still love you, my daughter,” she said. “And the fact that you're here tells me my prayer was answered, too.” I sat at her bedside as she passed. And before her eyes shut on the world for the last time, she looked up at me in that calm, reserved way of hers and said, “I still have questions, though.” And she died. Smiling.

I have questions, too, mother.

Beginning and ending with the man who would be my husband, sitting alone in church that Sunday morning, looking to be a man in his late fifties, but years younger, his eyes closed as he attempted to pray with all his strength.

I'd been a member of a church that ran a special program for ex-cons and wayward men and women who wanted to get a hold on life, a function of which Sister Hazel Hughes was the administrator. We'd bus folks who wanted to attend service on Wednesday night or Sunday morning from the halfway houses to the church. There were also counseling and job placement services available.

For three Sundays in a row, I listened and watched Jimmy struggle with prayer until I gathered the will to sit and pray with him. He let on right away how much he appreciated it. He said he'd never learned how to pray and that he had trouble believing in a God who would hear such terrible praying from a sorry, no 'count something like him. I took Jimmy's hand and held it tight so he could feel the love of the spirit. And I told him God especially heard the prayers of men such as himself because he could say with his heart what he could not express in words. "It's like you're giving all you have." Jimmy told me he had nothing. To build him up I said that was the point, and I made a promise to be his partner in faith and to pray with him every Sunday. "Thank you," he said. And smiled at me, a smile as wide as a rainbow. "What's your name?" I told him Mary. And that I already knew his.

We sought each other every Sunday morning and Wednesday night thereafter to pray and share in the reading of the Bible. There were times when he wasn't able to bring himself to pray at all, only cry. In my private moments I felt Jimmy's pain. Sometimes, we'd find ourselves alone at church, reading from the Bible or talking amongst ourselves.

After a while, I'd pick him up and drive him to church myself. Every so often, we'd stop for coffee or lunch. He seemed so beaten down, so subdued, yet eager. I couldn't tell whether this was from life or just him. It sounds perverse, but I found myself drawn to it – a man discontent, yet unafraid and ready to grow, like a child looking to be raised.

A man who needed somebody.

The way I saw it, I had a friend – a best friend, which gave me happiness, someone close who wanted my help. It became hard to get him out of my head. He had excited me so. I'd talk to him in a way I'd never thought I'd speak with a man – *openly*, and I'd not been open with anybody. Then slowly, ever so slowly – praise the Father! He began to trust me enough to share things about himself and his former wives, specifically his last and how she nearly destroyed him. "Like the devil had kicked me in the face and left me for dead." He shook his head, then looked at me and smiled. "Now I want to find myself and live."

I told him with God he would do just that. "Yes," he said. "There's got to be more, though." What more can there be when He is all you need? Jimmy touched my hand. "A man and a woman get to a place where they can't live by them Bible verses alone." Then he grinned that little boys grin. I couldn't help it. He'd made me laugh. At myself . . . at what he said. *Jimmy made me laugh*. There wasn't a whole lot, if anything that could bring me to laughter. But, Jimmy Redd did it! And as it broke out of me, everything was clinched. *I can do this. I can love a man. God has sent me someone with whom I am willing to give myself to – a man!*

We'd see one another again and talk. Recalling what father had said – he would have to move first. Though I could help it along and make it so he'd have no choice, he would have to make the initial move.

After a day or two, he finally buckled under. With a smile, of course. And we

were married on a Sunday.

(Lights fade on Mary, rise on Hazel)

HAZEL

Yet, perhaps, marriage is overrated. I've not seen a happy one yet, including my own. My husband works very hard. I've not wanted for anything. Though I haven't given him any children, I sense he still loves me. Even if, to this day, he doesn't show it. And we've talked about that part of it – the “showing” of love in our marriage. “Rest assured, it's there,” he'd say. “The other stuff . . . I just don't find necessary.”

Through the program at the church, we'd put forth our best for the men and women who came to us after having been released from prison or who simply needed a leg up. And I confess to having become quite fond of a number of them. Particularly the men.

For instance, there'd been a young man who'd had enough of the thug life, as he put it. He made the decision to turn his back on dealing dope and live straight, like a man. He wanted to go to school and learn about computers, then get a job, make money legitimately, and for once live as a real human being. I told him he'd always been human, and he'd always been real. He only needed to learn to live up to it.

In the interim, just to get him started, I helped get him get a job at a moving company. I was so pleased to see how much he appreciated all I did for him, which made me want to do more. When he finally moved into his own apartment, I stopped by with a bottle of champagne. I knew he was on parole and that he wasn't supposed to be drinking, but I promised I wouldn't say anything. “Besides, we're celebrating!” That put him at ease. A little.

We sat on the floor and drank and listened to music and talked about the future. I asked if he'd had a girlfriend. He said yes, before prison, but not at the moment. She'd been a girl with whom he'd bore a son. “Do you see him?” When I can, he said. Then he wanted to thank me again for all I had done, but I told him the credit was his and his alone. “But you helped,” he said. “And I'll never forget it.” I took his hand. He was such a young man to have gotten into so much trouble so early on – little more than a boy. Where was his mother? What kind of woman was she? Where was his father? Where were those in his life who should have cared? “You'll make out fine,” I said. Then, I kissed him. And I kissed him again. And again. And again, until we got tired of kissing and pulled off each other's clothes and made love on the floor.

Later, as we dressed, I asked him to promise to keep this between us. He looked scared. “What's wrong?” This couldn't have been his first time – not with the satisfaction that warmed me. I asked again if he was okay. And yet again, he said nothing.

I'd stop by other times, with a couple of beers or maybe a present like a sweater or, once, with a book of poems I'd seen by Langston Hughes. He really liked that – reading those poems. Then we'd kiss, hug and make love, with him always

looking so uneasy when it was done. “Are you okay with this?” I asked. I guess so, he said. I tried to comfort him by saying we weren’t doing anything wrong. After all, we’re adults. Only, it’s still best for this kind of thing to be kept quiet. You understand that, don’t you? Sure, he said.

We carried on for a while until the day I went to visit and found him not there. I checked with his job – no one had seen him for a week. I got scared and I prayed. And went through a whole month of looking and praying when word got back that he was in jail again, this time for armed robbery, as well as rape of the lady who’d been working in the store that night. I visited him and asked why. He gave me a scared look. And said nothing.

I would take another gentleman under my wing. His name was Louis, a man in his thirties who’d also pulled time. He smiled a lot and was slow mentally, yet – despite having done time – he seemed gentle and forthcoming. He studied the Bible and prayed fervently. He was awaiting the call, he said. The call to minister. And he’d wait till the judgment if he had to. Whenever we prayed together, he insisted on leading.

He’d pulled two stretches in prison. The first for burglary. The second for attempted murder. A man he’d known and broke into houses with had an awful habit of, as he put it, talking *bad* at him: he’d call Louis names and belittle him in front of others. That perpetual smile of his gave the illusion of him not being phased, but – in truth – those words ate at him like a rat gnawing at a wall. “Now that I can think on it,” he’d say, “I won’t doin’ nothin’ but waitin’ – waitin’ and holdin’ out for the right time to snap that suckers neck like a wishbone.”

One night in front of two women in a bar, the man drank and bragged about his criminal exploits, then started in on Louis, calling him a dumb black bunny – which Louis hated. He kept on, breaking him down while the women laughed themselves crazy. Louis said that something inside his head tried to punch its way out. And before he’d thought to take another breath, he was all over that man, beating him until, as Louis put it, you didn’t want to look at him anymore. Somebody had to hit him over the head with the biggest chair in the place to stop him from committing outright murder.

He was able to function on his own. He rented a room from Sister Stewart, one of the elder ladies of the church. And he even drove his own car. He worked and appeared to be stable – an honest man of faith who could not bring himself to cease smiling. If he’d only known how infectious he and that smile were.

If he’d only known. Or, perhaps, I should have seen it coming. He took me aside one day and admitted his fondness for me, that he’d had this crush for quite some time. And in his own harmless way he asked me out. “To dinner, some place. Y’ know?” He asked if he could take me to L’il Mel’s Fish Hut. “I’m not sure,” I told him. “You do know I’m a married woman.” He said he knew. “I jus’ wanna do somethin’ nice, is all.” He looked down at his feet and smiled. I told him I understood. And I did. Yet I let him know that I would have to speak to my husband.

Sure. I’ll sit with my other half and tell him over supper that I’m going on a

date. He won't mind. Of course, when the time came, I wasn't as obtuse about it. Although, I did allude to him that I'd be accompanying another man to dinner.

"A friend?"

"Yeah. I guess you could call him that."

Okay. Have a nice time. I was dying to ask an impertinent question, like – did he still love me. Then I thought better of it. I didn't want to irritate him with something as silly as an expression of love. *We're married. We're husband and wife. What do you think we've been doing together all these years? Skipping rope?* No, but sometimes I wish we were.

I went with Louis to Mel's where we ate and danced and had a wonderful time. I hadn't a care in the universe that night. And it wouldn't have bothered me an inch if the church, the town, or God and the angels knew of it. We left in his car and drove way out past the lake and parked on the side of a dirt road. And I let Louis have his way with me. He almost broke me in half in that car of his, huffing and groaning like some big, rough dog. If he had torn me to shreds, it wouldn't have mattered. I needed to feel that somewhere a man existed who wanted me.

He laughed as he drove me home. And spoke of everybody who'd made fun of him and what they'd think if they'd seen what he did. I tried to plead with Louis not to tell anybody, to keep this between us. And to remember that I was a married woman. He slowed the car down and pulled over. "You 'shamed of me," he asked. "No, Louis. Not at all. I just think that for our own good we need to be discreet. Don't you understand?" He wasn't smiling anymore. He bared his teeth, but not in a grin.

"Wha' chu mean? I understands plenty. I ain't no dummy."

"Of course, you aren't. But, please – *please* – for the sake of my marriage, let's keep this to ourselves."

He'd call the house after that night ten, twenty, maybe even thirty times a day – calling, then hanging up when one of us would answer. On two occasions my husband wanted to call the sheriff when he spied somebody lurking in the yard. I went to see Louis to ask what was wrong. We sat in his room. Sister Stewart was out. "Do you still pray?" I asked. "Don't you still want to preach?" He looked at the floor. The smile seemed gone for good. "I'm sorry, Louis. I really am." I got up to leave – and right away fell face first on the floor when the full weight of his body knocked me down. I turned over and the sweaty skin of his chest pressed against my face. I heard clothes being torn and I screamed into his body. He pinned me to the floor. I pushed and scuffled. His hand was between my legs – when it all stopped. Sister Stewart had stepped through the downstairs back door.

"Louis?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Whose car is that out front?"

"Ain't nobody. They'll be gone in a minute."

It had been late. We both waited in silence until she'd gone to bed. And without looking at him, I gathered myself and left. Louis sat on the bed, crying into his hands.

I never saw him again. Yet, I got a restraining order just the same. I pray for him – as I pray for all the men and women in the program. As I still pray for Jimmy.

MARY

Yes! God had blessed me with a husband. And right away we'd seek to have a child. I'd not known such joy, almost numb with the belief that a full life with a family of my own was out of the question, and that I could only hope to settle for myself. Things were different now. And to think that all it took was a man like Jimmy to step from a prison cell to change my life.

As it turned out, Jimmy wanted a baby more than I did. And – praise the Father! – I did become pregnant. Four months later, though, I miscarried. It almost broke me. Jimmy was so loving and supportive as I tried to heal. And I prayed and thanked the Lord, for I could not have weathered this without him.

We'd press on and work to have another baby. Yet, five months into a second pregnancy, I would miscarry again. Now I was nearly destroyed. I prayed and begged for answers. Then I began to wonder about Jimmy. Was God unhappy with us and our marriage? Or, was it just Jimmy?

HAZEL

I'd have sessions with Jimmy, and he'd talk of the strains in his marriage. Since his wife's last miscarriage, she'd been depressed. He understood this and wanted to help in any way he could. But, for some reason, Jimmy said she blamed everything on him and his "sinful life", as she put it. She said God was punishing him by not letting her bear a child. I told him that was silly. And his wife ought to be ashamed.

I hadn't shared this with Jimmy, but I'd known Mary for years and had never pictured her as the marrying kind. I found her headstrong and self-righteous, the type of woman primed to henpeck a man. My daddy would wonder how such a mean woman – if she did happen to be married – could temper herself enough into allowing her husband to make love to her. And Mary had a mean streak wide enough to put brakes on a bear.

Consequently, Jimmy would return to the bottle. I didn't blame him for it. I don't judge. I try to understand. I sensed him to be a man who enjoyed women and had no trouble expressing love. He just needed the right woman.

I'd closed up one night and was about to go home when Jimmy came to me. He'd been drinking. And he was crying. I took him inside, sat him down and listened, which brings such comfort to me: the act of listening to another's heart. And Jimmy gave his that night. In fact, I was moved to tears myself. I touched his face, wet from crying. I searched his eyes. And I kissed him . . .

MARY

. . . He lay beside me one night and put his hand on me. I pushed him to the other side of the bed. I told him if God has him in any kind of a bad light, he needs to fix that first before he gets anything from me. And I meant it. "Besides, it's the

last thing you ought to have on your mind. In fact, from now on until times get better, when the urge hits you – *pray!*”

It all made me so mad – how dare he! Then one night he had the gall to come home drunk. The smell filled the house, it was sinful.

Yet, something else stopped me. I smelled liquor, but another scent lit my nose. A different smell. Something stronger.

(Lights up in the chapel)

HAZEL

I didn’t come here to make trouble, Mary.

MARY

Seeing as you brought enough to start a war, as it is.

HAZEL

I think I have a right to pay my respects. That is, if it’s is fine with you, Pastor.

MARY

And before you give your seal of approval, you ought to know a thing or two about who you’d allow in your dead brothers presence.

HAZEL

We don’t need to go there.

JUANITA

Perhaps we can discuss this after service.

BIG SAL

Sho gon be a whole lotta discussin’ and carryin’ on when this gets th’ough, ain’t it?

JOYCE

Scores have to be settled, it seems.

MARY

Pastor, for Jimmy’s sake, you do not want this woman contaminating this service.

LUCRETIA

HA!

BIG SAL

Honey, there’s contamination in that ‘ere box to make every bit of water in the Mississippi River go bad.

MARY

Nobody's saying Jimmy was a saint, but . . .

JUANITA

Just sit down, Mary. You, too –

MARY

No, I will not! And what business do you have calling yourself a pastor? Don't you read the Bible?

JUANITA

Yes, I know the Bible. And I'm also aware of . . .

MARY

I suffer not a woman to teach . . . but to keep in silent.

JUANITA

Paul said that, yes.

MARY

So why do you –

JUANITA

It's all a matter of interpretation.

MARY

Really? And I guess it's all about interpretation when it states implicitly that two men should not lay together.

BIG SAL

What's that got to do with her? She ain't no –

MARY

Oh, quit being stupid! You know what I mean.

JUANITA

Would you like to step outside for a bit, Mary?

MARY

Why? Do you want to beat me up?

BIG SAL

YES!

JUANITA

No, listen. I just think you need to calm down.

MARY

Do something about her first.

HAZEL

I'm not going anywhere. I have a right –

MARY

A right! What right? To attend the funeral of a man you laid with while he was married? *To me?*

HAZEL

Mary, I am sorry, but there's nothing I can do about . . .

MARY

Of course, there isn't. Like there's nothing to be done to change the rest of the story, is there, Sister Hughes?

HAZEL

Please, not here.

MARY

Where, then? Should we go back to the church? Do we need to talk to some of those young men who were lost and fighting their hearts out to make a way for themselves while you seduced them behind church doors like some ten-dollar slut and destroyed their lives?

HAZEL

And I've since left that church. I refuse to work with them again. I came to hate what I did. So . . . I left.

MARY

You sure? 'Cause it looks to me like you just got too old to put out anymore. Too old for anybody to even want to look at.

HAZEL

I'm here to offer my condolences. And to see Jimmy one last time.

MARY

Next thing you'll say is you loved him.

HAZEL

Very much, yes.

MARY

I could tear your face off your skull.

(She looks at Juanita)

And you. How on earth do you justify yourself?

JUANITA

Excuse me?

MARY

I've heard of you. I know a little about you. And I wonder how many of these women know it, too.

LUCRETIA

Is it anything we need to have knowledge of?

MARY

If you care a wit about your religion and what's decent.

JUANITA

And I do care. I love my religion and I love my God . . .

MARY

Don't make me laugh –

JUANITA

And I have nothing to justify myself to. I answer to one God. And if that doesn't sit right with you – go! I won't have this at my brothers' service.

(Guinevere re-enters. Lights fade in the chapel as an overhead spot fades in on her)

GUINEVERE

I married him a week before he went to prison. Our first night together was, in fact, our last.

When I met Jimmy, he'd been a practicing Muslim for about two years. He was the custodian in my building. A very nice man – a sweet man. He'd do his work around the place – repairing, fixing, cleaning. And he'd excuse himself at intervals during the day to perform his prayers – five times, I think. I'd pass his apartment every so often and could hear his praying through the closed door. And he'd stop to talk with me from time to time, always carting something for Malik, my four-year-old son, like a cookie or a piece of candy or fruit. Sometimes he'd greet me with the Quran in one hand and the King James Bible in the other. Once,

I asked if he was a Muslim or was he trying to decide. He said certain things in Islam and the Bible are very compatible, like the acknowledgement of Abraham as a founding father. Even the Jews concur with this. “Besides,” he said, “I stay in the Old Testament. As long as I’m doing that, I’ll be alright.”

I told him I never cared for that religion because I didn’t like the way Muslims treated women. Jimmy said, for him, it was all a matter of respect, about holding to nothing which would defile a woman. “I look at women differently now,” he said. “Allah teaches that a man is a woman’s caretaker. And we got to watch over and protect all our sisters. We ain’t layin’ nothin’ inferior on them. I just see a woman as precious, is all.” I’ve never been one to be religious, but I was impressed. His eyes showed he lived all that he believed.

He’d tell me of leaving his wife and falling back on the bottle. Of running in and out and back into jail for drunkenness. Of riding up to Baltimore in a stolen car with another drunken soul to “squat” with a woman this riding partner of his had been – as he put it – “messin’” with, who happened to be an alcoholic herself. Getting fired from a job for theft and more drunkenness. And nearly killing himself after falling down two flights of stairs. A.A. soon picked up his tab. And a good influence brought him to Islam. “I didn’t think I had it in me to live right,” he said. “Lord! If them folks back home could take a look at me now!”

As for myself, I was living *good*, but I wasn’t living *right*. And I knew it. Me and my son lived off his father – my boyfriend, Shaquan, who sold dope. He’d grown up in that neighborhood in East Baltimore. And our plan was to hole up there for only a little while longer, then move to a nicer part of town. Shaquan said he had one last score he wanted to make with Rocco, who ran the outfit. That was the plan: wait, then hit big and move out. Everything . . . *everything* was just down to waiting.

At the time, though, I didn’t understand it, all this waiting. Why wait?

I think if I could do it again, I’d have held out for someone like Jimmy earlier. I came to love not just him, but the kind of life this old man who walked with a limp represented. I suppose having him as a husband when I did showed me there really is something to “living right”, that I actually could do better.

Before Jimmy, I thought what I had was the best I’d ever get. Or, maybe I just didn’t want anything better. There was certainly nothing in my upbringing to encourage it. I’d been my mother’s third child by her second boyfriend. She was sixteen, her first two children wards of the state. Things weren’t that much better when I came along. From the few pieces of evidence I’ve held to, my father was just another dope peddling loser girls like my mother seemed to attract like green flies. The most vivid memory I have of him is, at five years old, seeing a bullet punch through his face then rip off – like a sheet of cardboard – the back of his head. The police had raided the house. And there was a shootout. I watched my young teenage mother and two other girls being hauled away in handcuffs.

My mother would pull three years. They'd let her out. And she'd try in her own little way with all she had to get me back. By then, I'd already been spoken for, i.e. *adopted*. And when the state told her no dice, she decided to try a different tack and, with an accomplice, kidnap me: the court had allowed her a supervised visit, at which time the case worker and my foster parents would be held at gun point, and I would be taken away in broadest daylight by two women who hadn't even the good sense to plan what to do next. We all just jumped in a car and rode. I think we hop scotched over five states, at one point holding up a store when the money ran out. Soon, the only option open was to take me to a hospital and turn themselves in after I'd gotten sick from some very bad food. Somewhere in Ohio, I think.

She'd do five more years. And I'd lose contact. I do, however, recall seeing my mother's face on the news sometime later with two other men. They'd robbed a bank and an "innocent bystander" was killed. And, God help me, but I can't even recollect if it was her or one of the men she was with who'd yanked the trigger.

My foster parents had been educated, civilized people who provided a decent home, and – among other things – taught me to speak well and to carry myself as one with a high disposition. If I'd had the sense to see past my short nose, I would have noticed how good things were and taken advantage of the situation and made good for myself. My head wanted the gutter, though. It's where all the fun was, or so it seemed to me. I started sneaking around with Shaquan. He'd quit school to start working for Rocco, who was said to have run the biggest dope racket in Baltimore. The life with my foster parents was too dead for me. But, with Shaquan, the whole world looked like it was moving. What's more, he wanted me. So, I ran away from home to latch onto his sails. I would be his woman. And everything else could go to hell.

When Shaquan said he needed to wait till the deal went down with Rocco before we could go anywhere, I went ahead and took it for granted that he knew what he was doing. He'd always gotten paid without any waves before. He'd seen men killed, but he never had to cap anybody himself. He knew his world and was at home in it. This time, though, something was wrong. There were days when he'd just go off on me for no reason. At night, he'd bounce around in bed, get up, then walk through the apartment talking to himself. Or sit and say nothing while looking at nothing in front of him. Once I saw him standing in front of our building, crying into his hands. He went a whole day without eating. I asked him what was wrong. "Just this deal we getting' ready for's got my nerves, is all. I'll be alright." He kept me out of the details of his business, and I preferred it that way. But, this jumpiness or whatever on his part got me more than a little concerned and curious about what kind of deal this was.

Then one night I opened the bathroom door and saw him standing in front of the toilet stripped to the waist. I'd thought he'd jump through his skin when I caught him. He said he was getting ready to meet Rocco to discuss business before the night of the deal. I'd forgotten Shaquan had even gone to the bathroom. And what I beheld when I stepped in was more than I wanted to see: he'd strung a thin black wire down his back, connected it to what looked like a little thin box hooked to

his belt, with the other end taped to his chest with something like a button sticking out. "You got to understand," he said, "They was gon throw me under the jail, baby. You hear? Under the muthafucker! And I can't pull no time. I can't!" He fell on his knees and hugged my legs. And cried like a boy who was about to get a whooping. He kept begging for me to understand. I told him I'm sorry, but I was the least of his problems. In fact, going to jail was, too. "Don't you know this could get you killed?" He told me not if he played it right. "You mean with the cops?" Yes, he said. He spoke about the deal he'd cut. The police had been sniffing after Rocco for the past three years. "They want him," he said. "He's the prize. And this score is just a way to nail his ass." And he was helping them. It would keep him out of jail. They'd protect him, me and Malik. And they'd even let him raid Rocco's coffers. Shaquan said he knew where the stash was. "Rocco don't know it . . . that I know. But, seeing as I do, they say I can jack it."

I had doubts about the whole damn thing. How were the cops going to protect us? And why should they, for that matter? Rocco was big, but not big time enough for the Feds to be involved so they could toss us into witness protection. Which left us at the mercy of Baltimore's finest. That's protection? Wouldn't we be better off just leaving the state?

But Shaquan was nailed. There was nowhere to run. As with me, he and Jimmy had become close. Shaquan respected him. And he told me if anything should happen to him, he'd made arrangements with Jimmy. He'd know what to do. He'd take up the slack.

It hurts me to say it, but this latest piece of news didn't bring any greater sense of comfort. It only got me scared. And what's more, Shaquan soon went from nervous agitation to obsession. And I knew what caused it – he could not tear his mind from Rocco's money. He wanted that stash. And now something was telling me he wasn't about to wait for it. In fact, I'd sniffed out his plan of attack before he'd thought to verbalize it: Shaquan was priming to steal that money, then blow – cops or no cops, deal or no deal, perhaps with his family in tow, or perhaps not. I looked at him and watched as the craziness of his thinking chewed away at him like a man dissolving ever so slowly before my eyes.

Well, the morning after the big deal was supposed to go down, I got word that Shaquan hadn't showed. I'd also heard somebody had busted into Rocco's hideaway and jacked his stash. Two days later the body of a young man was discovered in a dumpster behind an old gutted building. Somebody called the cops, and one of them had to scare away the dogs that'd been eating parts of him. The coroner would identify what was left as Shaquan Davis.

I was losing myself in grief when Jimmy knocked on the door and told me we had to go. "Where?" I asked. Jimmy said he'd take us out of state, to Pennsylvania or Virginia, maybe. "Shaquan left that crooks stash with me," he said. "I'm s'posed to take ya'll someplace where that Rocco and his bunch can't get to you. And he'll be comin' up in here any minute with the devil runnin' behind him." I packed a little very fast, then took my son and got into Jimmy's old car with him, feeling the breath of that devil on the back of my neck as we rode off.

He got us a motel room in Richmond, Virginia. Then we had something to eat and tried to settle in. Jimmy was restless, which made me more scared than ever, not so much for myself than for Malik. Jimmy said that man of mine wanted to do good. “He couldn’t live with himself bein’ no cheese. And he sho didn’t want to go nowhere without fixin’ it so his own’d be well took care of.” He said those boys, like a hound with blood on its tongue, won’t ever quit looking for us and that stash. “And I ain’t above shootin’ a dog when nothin’ else’ll stop him.” So, he’d go back to see what he could do. And promised he wouldn’t be long.

Over the next few days a story broke all over the news of a gunman in Baltimore targeting members of a particular gang, killing them randomly, without provocation. One of whom was the leader, James “Rocco” Preston. Whoever this killer was, black folks in the neighborhood were calling him a hero and pressing the cops into letting him alone. An old lady with no teeth was on TV saying God had answered her call to levy His judgment on those swine.

I’d just put Malik to bed when Jimmy came back – bled of color, sweating and scared out of his head. I went and held him for a long, long time until I shivered with him. I kissed his face, cold from sweat. He fell from my arms to the floor and cried, weeping and pleading to be forgiven for what he had done. Fear tore through him like a sickness. I cried, too. I’d started this mess. All of it. From a young age, I’d put the whole of it in motion. I dropped to my knees and cried with him. Other than Shaquan, I’d not prayed a day in my life for anything or anybody. Yet, there I was following Jimmy’s throes into hell for atonement.

After we’d calmed down, I told Jimmy I’d been curious as to whose directive he had operated under in taking out Rocco’s whole crew – his or Shaquan’s. Jimmy said the Old Testament backed it up. And left it at that. Then he told me he wanted to take me back to Baltimore, where it was now safe, then turn himself in.

“Why?”

“What I did, won’t like it don’t come with a price,” he said. I told him the price was paid with the reality of my little boy being safe and free. “They were scum anyway. The police probably won’t bother with it.”

“Oh, they gon bother with it, all right. They got to do their job.”

“And what are you doing? Saving them the trouble?”

I cried and pleaded with him not to go. I and my baby needed him. Shaquan was gone. And Jimmy was the last thing – the only thing in the world for me to hold on to.

“You a young woman,” he said. I told him – so what? That didn’t mean anything. Yes, I’d come to love Jimmy – as a friend, a kind soul, a good influence on my son, a protector, and as a man. Yes . . . this was all a little surprising, but I wasn’t fighting it.

I stopped and thought awhile about what I’d say next. Then, I let go: “Jimmy, if you want to turn yourself in, I can’t stop you. But, think – you’ll still need somebody in your corner. And you and I know that any man, if he is to keep a lifesaving grip on his sanity when he’s locked away in a man-made hell, just to maintain the simple act of breathing in such a place – this man has got to have a woman who will endure a bath of fire just to love him.” I told Jimmy I wanted to

marry him so I could visit. And I promised to be his until one of us gave up the ghost and left the world for good.

We went before a Justice of the Peace in Richmond. Then we returned to Baltimore and found a place in a nicer part of town. We spent a week together. And on the night before he'd turn himself over to the police, we made love for the first and the only time.

The police, for Jimmy's protection, made no mention to the press as to why he'd put himself in their hands. I was thankful for that. He lived in peace for the final two and a half years of his life, until the day when he would expire from kidney failure. And I'd been fortunate in being able to sit with him as he passed.

(Lights rise in the chapel. Juanita has been at the podium)

JUANITA

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.

We love Him, because He first loved us.

My brother was a deeply flawed man: irresponsible, weak, easily swayed, naïve. Yet, blessed equally with patience, kindness, gentleness, and – above all – the capacity to love – his strongest virtue. It shone from him, then through and into us all. We saw it. Even when seeing too little of everything else.

My last word with him was when he called from prison. We talked of small things. I asked what he'd do to be locked up again. He said he'd ran out of reasons and excuses. And they locked him up out of habit. He made me laugh, as usual. When he was released, I begged him to come visit. He asked me to pray for him. I said I'd never stopped.

(She steps from the podium)

Let us join hands.

(Slowly, some reluctantly, some with eagerness, follow suit and join hands)

Each of us has taken the podium to recount our time with Jimmy. And I pray, too, that no one departs here today darkened with anger, and that not one of you leaves burdened with longing. I pray that you be happy and at peace with the love still burning at heart. The memory of Jimmy will no doubt remain with us until that day when we ourselves make that transition. Then perhaps the journey might be well if we, by chance, hear Jimmy's laughter as we make our way along that final passage.

I pray with my life that we remember one another not as ex-wives but as sisters who broke bread at the table of commonality. For as sisters we share in something

eternal: the love of one man. *Our* man. Lover. Brother. Son. Friend. *A man*.
Jimmy Redd.

Bless him!

(After a moment, the women release hands. Lottie holds on to Guinevere)

LOTTIE

Why did Jimmy go to jail?

GUINEVERE

I'm sorry, but . . . it should remain between us.

LOTTIE

I see.

(There is a silent, emotionally charged moment, then the two women hug)

HAZEL

Mary . . . I am sorry.

(Mary is unresponsive. After a moment, Hazel exits)

JUANITA

You'll come to the cemetery with us?

MARY

No . . . no. I don't think so.

JUANITA

Then go in peace.

(Mary nods, then exits)

What about you, Sal?

BIG SAL

Naw, honey. I'm a hot mess as it is. Le's go, Lottie.

(They exit)

LUCRETIA

Joyce? . . . I know I ain't been the kindest ol' bird this side of the funny house.

And ain't no tellin' how much breath I got left in this wore out bag of a body. But, whilst I'm here, I'm sho gon need somebody to keep holdin' on to. Somebody I can set with and feel t' home.

(She takes Joyce's hand, which affects her)

JOYCE

I understand, sister.

(To Juanita)

We'll be going to see Jimmy buried, Pastor.

LUCRETIA

Walk with me, Joyce.

(Before exiting, Joyce clutches Guinevere's hand. She acknowledges, and they smile at one another. Joyce then exits with Lucretia)

GUINEVERE

Pastor, I . . . I'd like to go to the cemetery for the burial.

JUANITA

You'll ride with me.

GUINEVERE

Thank you.

(Ernie enters)

ERNIE

Well! Did everything run smoothly?

JUANITA

Without a hitch, Ernie.

ERNIE

Good. All set for the next step?

JUANITA

Yes. The cemetery.

ERNIE

We'll get the casket loaded for the drive shortly.

(He exits. Juanita touches the casket)

GUINEVERE

That was lovely, Sister.

JUANITA

Thank you.

GUINEVERE

Jimmy would have appreciated it.

JUANITA

I still have questions, though, as to why he spent those last years in prison. And, Guinevere, the questions make me uncomfortable. And the fact that I'll never know makes me feel worse.

GUINEVERE

And I am sorry about that, but . . .

JUANITA

All I can do, now, is pray that he will be forgiven.

GUINEVERE

Please! Do that!

JUANITA

Before we leave, though –

GUINEVERE

I can't. Jimmy loved you. And he made me promise to let nothing . . .

JUANITA

But I deserve to know.

GUINEVERE

Again, I'm sorry, but I promised him, Sister!

JUANITA

And I still deserve to know. Before I bury my brother.

(She takes Guinevere's hand)

Jimmy will forgive you. I'll see to that.

(They laugh tentatively. Then, after a moment,

Guinevere nods. She takes a seat, with Juanita sitting beside her. Lights then fade as Guinevere, with difficulty, prepares to speak)

(End of play)