

WATCH NIGHT

A Play in Two Acts

by

J. E. Robinson

An Expressionistic journey of a woman from awaiting sale
in Saint Louis in youth to spiritual reunion with her mother
as a free person in Chicago, 1855.

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WATCH NIGHT

Cast of Characters*

Malika	“Queen,” mother/mentor/spirit
Izzy	short for “A’isha,” “Princess,” daughter/escaping slave
Seymour	a tomcat/rogue/vagabond
Myself	Omniscient, Omnipresent spirit
Mrs. Kelly	a free woman of color in Illinois, Underground Railroad conductor
Isaac Kelly	free man of color in Illinois, a barber, not as involved as Mrs. Kelly

*While listed separately, the characters may double to accommodate two female actors and one male actor.

Scenes

Act I, Scenes I and II:	Slave trader’s warehouse in Saint Louis, circa 1850’s
Act I, Scene III	Within the spiritual world of America’s slave years
Act I, Scene IV	The Isaac Kelly cabin, Alton, Illinois (near Saint Louis), 1853
Act II, Scene I	The Isaac Kelly cabin, 1853, continued
Act II, Scene II	Within the spiritual world of “freedom,” during America’s slave years
Act II, Scene III	Chicago, 1855

WATCH NIGHT

Act One

Scene One: "Felicitations!"

At curtain, a bare, empty stage illuminated by a single, harsh light at the center. SOUND EFFECT: A door creaking open, then slamming shut. MALIKA ENTERS, setting a high foot stool in the light. IZZY ENTERS, wearing a white wedding dress, downcast and pensive. Malika kneels at the stool.

MALIKA

(resigned)

Set your foot up there, so I can hem.

(Quiet, Izzy rests her foot on a wrung of the stool)

MALIKA

(matter-of-fact)

Not there. Higher.

(Izzy rests her foot on the top of the stool)

MALIKA

(busy hemming)

Don't know why you like that.

IZZY

Don't know why you say that.

MALIKA

Told you. They ain't never letting you take no cat with you.

Some people need to listen to some people.

(Quietly, Malika resumes hemming the wedding dress. Izzy remains pensive.)

IZZY

He came back, looking. You should have seen him, pushing his way to the front, elbowing everyone out of his way.

MALIKA

(busying herself with hemming)

Don't think nothing about him, Izzy. You know well his kind, all look and no nothing. Trash! Knowing his kind, he ain't got two cents in his pocket to keep each other warm.

IZZY

They said he's a doctor, Malika.

MALIKA

(laughing)

“Doctor?” I bet he’s a “doctor!” “Doctor” this!

(Malika pretends to drink a shot of whisky)

That looking kind, they ain’t got nothing! Sure ain’t got that two hundred dollars, earnest money, this chump asking for! That’s why he’s “elbowing” up front, looking! Looking to remember, because he knows he ain’t getting! Mind him, just like you mind the rest! The beckoning ones are the ones I worry about! Two hundred, earnest money? Those beckoning ones, they got five hundred, cash on the nail! You know as well as I do, he pays attention to that and only to that! Put that foot back up here, I got work to do.

(Izzy returns her foot to the top of the stool. Malika resumes hemming the dress.)

MALIKA

(busy herself)

Alright. Turn around.

(Izzy turns around on the top of the foot stool, almost in a silly pirouette. Laughing, Malika removes the straight pins from her mouth.)

MALIKA

(laughing)

Girl, keep that up, and that “doctor” will return, looking again, two hundred dollars earnest money or no two hundred dollars earnest money! Now, dance still.

(As directed, Izzy stands still as Malika hems.)

IZZY

(conciliatory)

You know, you do good work, Malika. You learned the tailoring trade well. I know, if I need me a seamstress—

MALIKA

(sarcastically)

Yeah, call on me.

(Sullen, Malika continues hemming.)

IZZY

(reading Malika carefully)

He beckoned? When?

MALIKA

Said he’ll come with earnest money in two days. He said, contract will be done before the end of the week. It seems, I got until the end of the week to get paid for this wedding dress. End of subject.

IZZY

Where?

MALIKA

Some place some place. Don't move. I got that hemmed.

(Malika retrieves a pair of high heel shoes and a long, lace train from the shadows. Izzy dons the shoes as Malika fits the train to the rear of the dress. Again, Izzy stands on the foot stool. Malika adjusts the train, then studies her handiwork.)

IZZY

Very nice!

MALIKA

(pleased!!)

Agreed. Don't lose my pins.

(Malika removes the train from the dress. Izzy removes the high heel shoes. Izzy slips out of the wedding dress to reveal herself in formless shirt and trousers, her preferred wardrobe.)

IZZY

Does it look like you will get to that five hundred before he does?

MALIKA

If I get time to get through this hem, and if he got no more beckoners showing up. This gal's daddy, he looks good for it. Put down fifty dollars, earnest money, to get me started. If his gal likes this, and he pays cash, that's all I need. I'm as good as across the river, before the end of that day! Lovejoy, Illinois, here I come!

IZZY

(applauding, in joy)

That sounds like a plan, Malika!

MALIKA

Tell me about it, though! Yours? Or, you waiting on that "bachelor doctor," elbowing up front, to make his move? Don't hold your breath! You got time. As I said, Izzy: no sweat for that "looking" kind. He needs to show him earnest money, then beckon for you, and that "looker?," take my word: no two cents in that pocket to keep warm!

IZZY

I don't mind. I am almost halfway there.

MALIKA

How much?

(Izzy removes from her trouser pocket a small purse, handing it to Malika. Malika counts the contents for her.)

IZZY

See?

MALIKA

"I sees," says the blind man to the Father.

IZZY

And, how much?

MALIKA

(returning the small purse)

From what I see, three hundred. Not “almost halfway.”
You got more than half of it.

(Izzy puts the purse into her trouser pocket, and applauds.)

MALIKA

That “bachelor doctor” ain’t interested in you. He’s
interested in that. Wouldn’t surprise me none.

IZZY

A trader?

MALIKA

Straw-buyer, maybe. Maybe acting as a go-between.

IZZY

“Somebody interested” acting for “somebody interested.”
That’s just what I need in my life.

MALIKA

Or a trader. For all you know, might be somebody in
Memphis. Never know. And, if I were you, wouldn’t
want to find out, on my life!

IZZY

Three hundred down, now, you say? Another two
hundred, and I won’t have to worry about asking
somebody to let me take a cat, bachelor doctor straw-
buyer or no bachelor doctor straw-buyer. I will pick
up that cat myself.

MALIKA

For somebody, that’s goal—

IZZY

That’s a goal for anybody!

MALIKA

“Somebody interested” acting for “somebody interested,”
“bachelor doctor,” straw-buyer, beckoner, elbower, or
just passing through, window-shopping—three hundred
down?—I would think quick about that other two
hundred, if I were you. “Somebody interested” might
end up being “someone fixing to move,” if you don’t
get up to five hundred fast enough! He would have
what’s in your wallet and you, too, and you can
forget about that cat!

IZZY

You think I’m simple, Malika? Of course, I know that!
I lack that seamstress talent you got. I can only cook—

MALIKA

Don't blame me: I tried teaching you something. And, cooking? Something tells me, with all that "elbowing," that "bachelor doctor" is intent upon someone cooking something!

IZZY

And, you don't think I know? Like I said, I'm not simple, or slow. I know their gaze. They want their gazes, the least thing I can get is a cat. They get all them gazes they want, just let me get my cat! Scratch their eyes out for all that gazing, if they don't!

MALIKA

You tell them, I tell you. I tried teaching you something.

IZZY

I teach them something! "Bachelor doctor," elbowing, gazing, coming when he's around? Scratch them eyes out! Keep those eyes? Give me my cat!

MALIKA

Well, Izzy, hear Malika teach you something: you learn compromise some way. Sooner or later, all of us—each and every one—we learn compromise some way.

IZZY

(not quite crestfallen, but close, almost resigned)

I hear, Malika. I hear.

(Scooping up the wedding dress and shoes, Malika deposits them and the train in a darkened corner away from the action on the stage, anyplace that would do. Izzy turns pensive, seated on the footstool, facing the audience.)

MALIKA

(to herself, about the sewing)

There! Tend to that, after I attend to eating.

(to Izzy)

How now, little girl, tell Malika what troubles you now. You mixed them collards with poultry, instead of pork, like you're supposed to?

IZZY

(laughing at the silly suggestion)

I look like I did?

MALIKA

You do that, we all got reason enough to worry. What's on your mind?

IZZY

I'm thinking about—nothing.

MALIKA

(shrugging)

Very well.

IZZY

I got feet and ears in it.

MALIKA

That sounds good.

IZZY

That does a good job. Makes a good pot liquor.

MALIKA

That's cornbread I smell in it, too? Greasing! Luck this year, luck this year!

(Malika produces a holly bough from the shadows of the stage and shapes it into a wreath or a crown. Izzy ascertains that the purse went into her pocket.)

IZZY

Oh, yes, ma'am, yes ma'am! Very much so! After all, how's all that good pot liquor supposed to be got, without sopping it up? Greasy greasing, if you ain't greasing with that, that's all I know.

MALIKA

(preoccupied with fashioning the bough)

No, ma'am, I don't know nothing better than that.

(presenting the holly bough)

There!

IZZY

For?

MALIKA

You, of course, my friend. Kneel.

(Before Malika, Izzy kneels. Malika places the holly bough on Izzy's head, as if placing a royal crown. Malika places her hands upon Izzy's shoulders, as if anointing.)

MALIKA

(to Izzy, to whomever, as if an incantation or proclamation)

"Issued forth from a race of kings, from you shall issue forth a race of kings!" Next time that elbower shows, "bachelor doctor" or no, "straw buyer" or no, you tell him that! Tell him that I say! "From Nona, to Nona! From 'Queen' to 'Queen!' Whatsoever peasant endeavors to commingle his blood with yours, even through force, exalts his lowly, ignorant ancestors to that of mere kaffirs!" Quote me!

(Malika removes her hands, allowing Izzy to rise. Izzy remains humbled by the experience.)

IZZY

Oh, very much so!

(SOUND EFFECT: In the distance, bells toll midnight, the start of a new year.)

MALIKA

(after the count of twelve)

"Send not for whom the bells toll..."

IZZY

(oblivious to bells tolling; she can't count!)
Don't worry, not for me.

MALIKA

Me, neither. None of us. New year, for them. For us?
Just "same old same old." It kept a'tolling along.

IZZY

Might even have scared him away.

MALIKA

What? That "bachelor doctor" of yours?

IZZY

Shoot, no! Nothing can scare him away, save my
price tag.

MALIKA

New year now, and he might loosen his purse. Give him
a whole year to get them taxes for you—

IZZY

Whole year, and I'll have my five hundred by then. And,
Watch Night next, watch me bust out! Shoot, no! I'm
talking about that cat...hungry?

(Izzy retrieves a wooden bowl from the shadows, symbolizing collard greens and cornbread. Izzy and Malika sit on the floor in the light, sharing the wooden bowl between them. Their conversation ensues as they eat with their hands.)

MALIKA

What's his name?

IZZY

(chuckling at the thought)

Who? That "bachelor doctor?" "Elbow!" I ain't studying
him--

MALIKA

Ain't studying him, neither. Asking about the cat.
You name him yet?

IZZY

(contemplating a name while eating, then suddenly...)
"Seymour." Got to be "Seymour." Say, he sees more
than me, then take off!

MALIKA

Oh, "Freddie-Cat—"

IZZY

They all "Freddie-Cats." He's Seymour d'Freddie-Cat,
New Orleans. Got to be, with that French name. Yes,
ma'am! Them cathedral bells took to tolling, and Seymour
saw enough of Saint Louis, wanted to see less. Seymour
d'Freddie-Cat said, "forget Saint Louis! Get me back to
New Orleans!" And, ma'am, did he take off! Probably
hit Memphis already.

MALIKA

Sound like he had enough of Saint Louis—

IZZY

And he didn't need this five hundred dollars. Seymour d'Freddie-Cat, he didn't need this five hundred dollars, this Saint Louis, that, that powder, and no store-bought hair! He got clear them apron strings, and took off. All that store-bought hair did, give him a hairball! And Memphis heard him come, just hacking all over. More?

(Malika nods, licking her fingers. Izzy goes into the shadows, retrieving another serving. Again, seated in the light, Malika and Izzy share the wooden bowl, again eating with their fingers.)

MALIKA

(nodding)

Yes, ma'am, hairball!

IZZY

(laughing, imitating a cat)

“Hack! Hack!”

MALIKA

That Seymour must have said he had himself some kind of hairball!

IZZY

Sure did! And that Seymour d'Freddie-Cat, he said, he said, “ain't nothing like a cat hacking up a hairball! Worse than ‘bachelor doctor,’ ‘straw-buyer,’ ‘elbower’—“

MALIKA

Or “beckoner.”

IZZY

(laughing)

Or “beckoner,” yeah! “Hack! Hack!” Memphis can't choke them out.

MALIKA

(licking her fingers)

He give you anything to wash this down?

IZZY

(laughing)

Now, Malika, you know how he is: he wouldn't give us nothing to wash this down! “Rain water?” We on our own.

MALIKA

(standing)

Rain water would do.

(Malika enters the shadows, returning to the light with a metal cup, symbolizing water, which she shares with Izzy. Saluting each other in turn, Malika and Izzy drink from the cup. Malika suppresses a belch, unsuccessfully.)

IZZY

(laughing and applauding the belch, in gratitude)

Thank you, Malika! Thank you!

MALIKA

(laughing at herself)

No; thank you! Wait for a man to belch. A man's way into a woman's heart?, it is a belch. "Bachelor doctor" or no "bachelor doctor," "straw-buyer," beckoner or elbower, all!—got to hear them belch. Then they're serious.

IZZY

(laughing and applauding, still)

Indeed, indeed!

MALIKA

Izzy, you missed your calling—

IZZY

He call my name?—all He has to do is call!

He call?—I'm gone!

MALIKA

He might call tonight. No need for three hundred more.

He call tonight?—you gone tonight!

IZZY

(taking the cup, setting it aside)

He ain't gonna call me. He call me?—maybe find my way to the five hundred I need to buy myself from that bloodsucker...maybe tonight?—I'll settle for that.

MALIKA

(reaching for the cup)

He might call you tonight. Like He did for the Disciples.

"You!"

(Standing, Malika gets more water for them to drink and refills the cup.)

MALIKA

You know what Solomon was; you know what David was. Abraham?—you know him! Mary Magdalene still worked as good as they, as far as He was concerned. Listen to the wind, and the wind will carry your name from His lips.

(Malika offers Izzy the cup. Izzy drinks. As Izzy drinks, a strobe light, symbolizing snow, cascades around them.)

IZZY

And you?

MALIKA

Don't study me. I get this wedding dress done for that gal? No need to study me. I'm across in Lovejoy, Illinois, and no paddle-wheeler moving, no way! I got my five hundred, complete, and good as well in Illinois! Here, there! Hear that? No need to study me! "Study me?" Study my dust! I'm gone!

(Izzy hands Malika the cup. Hands out, Izzy marvels as she tries catching snow. Playfully, Izzy blows at the snow.)

MALIKA

(marveling as well)

Well, as the old folk in Maryland say, Watch Night is one magic time of the year!

(Catching the snow in the cup, Malika drinks once more. Izzy balls the light in her hand and throws the ball at Malika. Laughing, Malika throws the contents of the cup at Izzy. The women laugh together.)

IZZY

Let that “bachelor doctor,” “elbower,” “straw-buyer” or no “straw-buyer”—

MALIKA

Or “beckoner!”

IZZY

Or “beckoner”...even him! Let them show up now!
He get something to gawk at!

(Balling up the light in her hand again, Izzy throws the ball into the audience, laughing. Malika laughs as well, applauding.)

IZZY

Yes, indeed! I know what David was!

(Malika hands the cup to Izzy and retrieves the wedding dress and train. Malika steps away.)

IZZY

Is it time?

MALIKA

Yes, indeed, it is time.

IZZY

Must you go now?

MALIKA

(resigned, quietly)

Can’t you hear, Izzy? He beckons for me. Every one of us goes when He beckons. “You.” Remember your calling. Never forget it.

(Quietly, MALIKA EXITS while the strobe light continues portraying snow as Izzy watches.)

IZZY

(after Malika)

Mama.

(Izzy watches the wings. The strobe light persists.)

IZZY

(singing, in a way)

“Sometimes, I feel like a Motherless child
Sometimes, I feel like a Motherless child
Sometimes, I feel like a Motherless child
So far away from home...”

So far, so far, away—

(Izzy stands alone. The strobe light persists, as the snow continues to fall.)

IZZY

(in shock, maybe)

So.

(SOUND EFFECT: the opening verse of “Joy to the World!” as if sung by carolers outside in the snow. Izzy stands silent, as if reflecting while listening.)

IZZY

(singing, as if responding to the carol)

“Sometimes...so!”

(Izzy removes the holly crown, setting it upon the high stool. Izzy jiggles audibly the purse in her pocket.)

IZZY

(spoken, in resolve)

Sometimes. So!

(SOUND EFFECT: at the first chorus’ completion, “Joy to the World!” fades as if the carolers have moved on. Izzy returns the purse to her pocket. Amid the strobe lighting, Izzy cuts a solitary figure. Izzy stands silent. Still snow, the strobe lighting scintillates around Izzy, almost as if the communing of spirits.)

Scene Two: “Somebody’s Praying, Lord!”

IZZY

(to herself, to “Them,” wherever)

Everyone. Every moment. All. This moment. Those
to come. Stay. We need You!

(Izzy pantomimes closing an open window shut, with some effort. Suddenly, the strobe lighting ceases scintillation. SEYMOUR ENTERS from the dark, unnoticed, carrying a holly bough, which he keeps behind his back. Seymour brushes Izzy arm gently, making Izzy jump.)

IZZY

(startled at first, then laughing at her silliness)

Oh, you!

SEYMOUR

(mimicking a cat)

Meow!

IZZY

(laughing still)

I told you not to do that! Almost cost me each and every one
of my nine lives—

SEYMOUR

You seemed so lost in thought; I thought I would get your
attention.

IZZY

A word and a half, for a word and a half.

SEYMOUR

(romantically, offering the holly bough)

Happy New Year, Izzy.

IZZY

(equally romantic, accepting the holly bough)
Happy New Year, Seymour d'Freddie-Cat.

SEYMOUR

You got that right. You going to New Orleans with me?
(Izzy brushes snow from her shoulder as if brushing away Seymour's suggestion. Seymour reaches for Izzy. Izzy turns her back to him.)

SEYMOUR

(reaching a conclusion)
Chicago, then. Or, thereabout. That's you—

IZZY

(resolute)

Has to be. Down to New Orleans, that's no place for me.

SEYMOUR

It's good money there, in this epidemic. They pay, they pay eight dollars a day burying people in the cemetery. That's good money. And that cemetery is above ground. All you got to do is push the bones aside and put that new body in. Nothing to it! Eight dollars a day? Good money for that!

IZZY

Some things are worth more than money. Five minutes, and it's cold in your hand. Just thirty pieces of silver: who can't get that?

SEYMOUR

I can't, Saint Louis, Chicago, or any place up here—

IZZY

Down in New Orleans, and anybody can get that for you. Pieces of silver, same as in Rome! Price of a slave. Except, in New Orleans, they call it "eight dollars a day."

SEYMOUR

Eight dollars a day. In a month, I got your money. Think about that, Izzy. Don't forget that.

IZZY

Cheap money—

SEYMOUR

Honest money—

IZZY

(mockingly)

"Honest money?" Slave money!

SEYMOUR

"Cheap money," "honest money," "slave money," silver... gold—

IZZY

Filth!

SEYMOUR

“Filth?!” Food, Izzy. Food. Free—

IZZY

Slave. “Eight dollars a day,” slave. Please let me get my own here.

SEYMOUR

(surrendering, for now)

Let’s not think about it here. Not now. Some other time.

IZZY

That suits you; that suits me. You got an appetite, for food, too?

SEYMOUR

And your cooking? Indeed, I do.

(Izzy motions for Seymour to sit on the high stool, handing him the holly bough, to his surprise.)

IZZY

(flirting)

No woman can serve a man, even on Watch Night, with three hands. The Heavenly Father gave me but two. See?

SEYMOUR

Seymour sees more. Indeed I do! Indeed I do.

IZZY

(still flirting, but also mocking)

Like my mama said she told my daddy in Kentucky: Heavenly Father, He gave woman but two, but for man, He gave him eyes—

SEYMOUR

(flirting)

Eyes can work.

IZZY

Eyes can work.

SEYMOUR

(turning a bit serious)

You never talk much about your daddy—

IZZY

You talk about yours? Mine was in Washington, in Europe. He liked my cooking. He liked all of his children’s cooking. And boy, could that man belch!

SEYMOUR

(laughing)

I will do more than belch for you!

IZZY

Belch all you want; my butt still not going with you to New Orleans! And, don’t worry: chicken bad luck for Watch Night, for me, too! Collard greens, with pot liquor!

SEYMOUR

I will do more than belch for that!

IZZY

You better believe you do!

(IZZY EXITS. Waiting, Seymour humors himself with ham-boning, making up a tune with scatting lyrics, nonsensical sounds that soon turn into grunts as he seems to refer to a night with Izzy. This lasts for a complete chorus [think something by Ray Charles, or by James Brown, but do not quote directly, if at all possible]. At the second verse, Seymour taps his feet along with the ham-bone and the scatting. In the middle of the second verse, Seymour pauses to suppress a belch. He looks toward Izzy's exit, to see if she heard him ["did you eat at another woman's table before coming here, Seymour?"]. Quietly, Seymour resumes entertaining himself with tapping, ham-bone, and scatting.)

SEYMOUR

(singing to himself, maybe)

"Player...Player...Carry me away, Player!"

(Seymour proceeds with a ham-bone cadenza, accompanied by steady tapping. Seymour punctuates it with hand clapping.)

SEYMOUR

(singing)

"Player...Player...Carry me away, Player!"

I got that appetite for your meal, tonight!

"Player...Player...Carry me way, way, away, Player!"

I got that appetite for—

(Again, Seymour suppresses a belch. Again, he tries to see if Izzy approaches.)

SEYMOUR

(to himself)

I better put that down, once and for all. Izzy won't like hearing that, before I eat. She might smell my afternoon meal on me.

(Once more, Seymour suppresses a belch. Seymour pantomimes opening a window. From the wing, a bright light—signifying the moon—illuminates the space at an angle. Holly bough in hand, Seymour waves atmosphere outside, watching for Izzy's return. Something on the street catches Seymour's eye. Flirting, he waves at the person.)

SEYMOUR

(to himself, flirtingly)

Now Seymour sees more!

(IZZY ENTERS, checking on Seymour, but she doesn't catch him.)

IZZY

(rushing in)

It's going to be a minute.

SEYMOUR

(distracted by the flirt)

Take your time, Izzy. Take your time!

(IZZY EXITS, satisfied in a way. Seymour returns to admiring his flirt outside.)

SEYMOUR

(flirting)

Yes, ma'am. Seymour sees more! How foolish men
can be, when women can make a man be foolish!
"Merry Christmas, and a Happy New Year!"

(Holly bough in hand, Seymour waves and blows a kiss at the flirt outside.)

SEYMOUR

(to himself)

Ma'am, you are sure worth staying in Saint Louis and
finding a way to eight dollars a day during a yellow
fever epidemic here, some kind of way. Me down in
New Orleans, and no telling what infection might find
you! "Meow!"

(now calling the flirt, a "wolf-whistle")

Baby, just tell me who your master is, I would give five
hundred for your freedom, for sure!

(In response, the strobe light scintillates suddenly over Seymour's head and shoulders, a
snowball thrown in disgust. Ego stunned, Seymour brushes the snow from his face and shoulders
as the strobe lighting fades.)

SEYMOUR

(to himself, sort of)

All right, then, baby, you be like that. Be a slave. See if
I give a care.

(Seymour continues brushing the snow from his face and shoulders. He gathers the snow in his
hands, balling it up, and throws the snow out the window, to the sound of chimes.)

SEYMOUR

(to himself, in a way)

There! You take that!

(IZZY ENTERS, carrying a plate for Seymour. Seymour pantomimes closing the window,
killing the moonlight. He makes sure to rid himself of anything that would lead Izzy to suspect
him of flirting with anyone but her.)

IZZY

(oblivious of the flirting)

I got this, and it is good! Collard greens, with pot liquor,
and cornbread to sop it up!

SEYMOUR

(pleased)

Collard greens, pot liquor, and cornbread! A feast! I am
impressed!

IZZY

(modestly)

No need to be impressed. I am just a simple cook, that's all.
Belching for me, that's a woman's "thank you" from a man.

(Accepting the plate, Seymour sits and begins eating as Izzy retrieves a cup of water.)

SEYMOUR

(in gratitude, while eating)

You know what they say: the way to a man's heart?—through his stomach!

IZZY

Well, like my mama say, the way to a woman's heart, for a man, is his belch. "Listen for his belch," she say, "and you know he's serious."

SEYMOUR

Well, I'm serious.

(Seymour tries to belch, but cannot. He laughs)

Well, know I'm serious, anyway!

(Izzy laughs at the flirt.)

SEYMOUR

(earnestly, sort of)

I am. You and me in New Orleans?, you will see me serious. Belch all day, every day, when you cook, Izzy! Hear me belch all day, every day, with me, in New Orleans! Hear me say?

IZZY

(returning flirt)

I hear you say!

SEYMOUR

Hear me say; know me say. Believe you me, Izzy, I am a man of my word. In New Orleans, your cooking, hear me take to belching all day, every day, each and every day, every way, each and every day!

(Charmed, Izzy laughs behind her hand, self-conscious. Eating, Seymour winks at Izzy, another one of Seymour's flirts.)

SEYMOUR

Tell me, Izzy—Miss Izzy, I mean—I really would like to know, if I am to do all this belching for your cooking, Saint Louis, or New Orleans, or—

IZZY

Chicago?

SEYMOUR

Chicago?—all right by me—Chicago! But, please just say.

"Izzy" your real name?

IZZY

(returning flirt; he's wrapped!)

Tell me: "Seymour d'Freddie-Cat" yours?

(Seymour and Izzy share a laugh.)

IZZY

What your mama call you? Thought so!

SEYMOUR

You want me in Chicago, you want my belch, now, my name?—Izzy, whoever you is, you one demanding woman!

IZZY

(insistent, not quite flirting)

You want me in New Orleans with you, you want my eats. Now, my name?—Seymour d’Freddie-Cat, for a tomcat, talk about one demanding man! We, a matched pair!

(Together, Izzy and Seymour share a knowing giggle, for the flirt continues.)

SEYMOUR

Whisper your mama’s name in my ear. I won’t tell, certainly not him, that peckerwood wouldn’t listen to me, anyway, you know that. Whisper in mine; I whisper mine in yours. Keep it between us. Promise.

IZZY

“Promise?” You sound like a politician. My daddy was a politician. He promised my mama he would never sell a child of his, and then he needed money for an election, and there he go, selling two houses of us, girls first! “Promise.”

SEYMOUR

That’s them peckerwoods for you. I look like a peckerwood?

IZZY

You expect me to answer that?

SEYMOUR

Yeah. Tell me what I look like.

IZZY

(saucy, afterthought)

You look like some man trying to move on his stomach and trying to keep from getting caught in the process. That’s what you look like, exactly!

(Taking the cup from Seymour, Izzy retrieves more water for him, leaving Seymour speechless until her return.)

SEYMOUR

(coming to his “senses”)

Izzy, did you just read me?

IZZY

Sure I did! You think she was the only one that noticed what you were doing? I was only in the other room, but I could hear you! Didn’t need the window open; you were busy letting the whole block know! “Seymour d’Freddie-Cat”, or whatever your name is.

(Izzy offers Seymour the cup of water. Taking it, Seymour splashes the water in his face.)

IZZY

And, you expect me to go with you to New Orleans...
I know what you going to do when we get to New
Orleans, even if I got my freedom: I can find myself
in some kitchen, and here's you, somewhere, anywhere,
with a side piece! Tomcat! "Meow!"

(Stunned at being discovered, Seymour still suppresses a belch.)

IZZY

Now, you belch. I supposed you expect to impress me
that's me. Don't get too close to me: I just might smell
whose it is.

(Taking the plate and the cup from Seymour, IZZY EXITS. Seymour remains stunned, watching
her exit. Again, strobe lighting scintillates, simulating additional snow falling. Amid the snow,
Seymour rubs his face. After a moment, Seymour hums "Jacob's Ladder." He does a chorus.)

SEYMOUR

(to himself)

"Every rung..." Each and every rung. Low and low
past low. "Every rung..." What do I have to do? What
do I have to do?

(From his pocket, Seymour removes two slips of paper. He might not have known how to read,
but he knew their importance. He kisses each slip, setting them upon the high stool.)

SEYMOUR

(to the slips of paper)

"Every rung..." Each and every rung! No New Orleans?
Chicago, then, I say. Chicago, then. Fine with me. Each...
"Every rung goes and goes! Every rung goes and goes!
Every rung goes and goes!" Go on, soldier! Go on!

(Seymour sets the holly bough on top of the high stool, holding the slips of paper in place.)

SEYMOUR

(as if Izzy shares the stage with him, though she doesn't)

I love you that I love you. Whereso ever you wish to go,
I shall follow. I say "New Orleans," and you say
"Chicago." At some time, may we see each other, betwixt
and between. This is what the cat drug in. "Meow!"

(Now calling)

Izzy! Izzy! Come here! Come here! "Meow!"

(IZZY ENTERS, wiping her hands on a dish rag, for she had been washing his dish.)

IZZY

(shushing him)

Sh! Sh! Fool tomcat, keep your crying down! I ain't
deaf, and Heavenly Father from up above knows,
that slave trader can hear, too! In this warehouse, them
walls got ears!

SEYMOUR

(defiant)

That so? Hear me, then, peckerwood! Hear me!

(to Izzy, gently, as if caressing)

Hear me: Chicago, Alton, Illinois, Altona packet in the morning.

(referring to the two slips of paper on the stool)

Ticket. Pass. You will need both to ride the river. Without it? That peckerwood will catch you before you make it to the wharf. Ticket. Pass. Altona packet. Alton, Illinois. A barber at a hotel will help you. Colored man, named Isaac—

IZZY

(shushing him, for the walls have ears)

How you know that?

SEYMOUR

(shushing her)

“Meow.” Toms know what we know. Who knows? Someday, a tom might show up in Chicago! “Meow!”

IZZY

(hopeful)

Wait...(?)

SEYMOUR

(imperative)

Don't! They send somebody. “Every rung goes, higher and higher!” “Always, they send somebody, so keep your eyes open!” Hear?

(Izzy offers a sound of assent. Seymour extends an upright palm as a good-bye. Izzy meets it with her upright palm, although the hands remain distant, not touching. Izzy nods an agreement.)

IZZY

(hopeful)

“Every rung goes, higher and higher! Every rung goes higher and higher!” “Always, somebody, they send...” Keep my eyes open? Keep my eyes open! I will look for that little dove, Seymour d'Freddie-Cat! “Meow!”

(Together, they share a laugh.)

IZZY

Don't dare wait for me. Look for someone I will send. Meow.

SEYMOUR

(scheming about Izzy's passage)

You should dress up. Long dress, hat and parasol, a veil. Like that, you could be the president's wife and they wouldn't know, at least until they lift that veil up. What I would do, if I were you, go as a boy—

IZZY

(laughing, referring to herself)

Like this? That's all the excuse they need to dunk me.

SEYMOUR

Suit yourself. Use a veil. "Hush, hush! Somebody's calling my name! Hush, hush! Somebody's calling my name!" Ask me? Long dress, hat, gloves, parasol, veil. They will keep them doors open for you. "Meow!"

IZZY

"Meow." Isaac?

(Seymour shrugs sheepishly. They share a knowing laugh.)

IZZY

(preparing to exit)

I got me just the dress!

SEYMOUR

No, not now. Surprise me later, when we see each other again. Chicago, New Orleans, Saint Louis, wherever.

IZZY

"Chicago, New Orleans, Saint Louis..." That might be in death. We don't even know each other's names.

SEYMOUR

Yes, we do. "Meow!" Cats got nine lives. Remember?

IZZY

"Meow." As slaves, how many we got?

SEYMOUR

(smiling)

Always, one more than they. "Meow!"

(Again, they share a knowing laugh.)

IZZY

"One more..." Sound like my mama. Alright. "Meow!"
Who's your people, then—

SEYMOUR

(shushing her, again)

"Hush! Hush! Somebody's calling my name!"

"Hush! Hush! Somebody's calling my name!"

"Hush! Hush! Somebody..."

(Having said their good-byes, SEYMOUR EXITS quietly, blowing a kiss. The strobe lighting scintillates as Izzy watches him depart. Please note that Izzy does not wave.)

Scene Three: “Lesson from the Prophets”

Lights on, bright, to expose the stage as a stage, with the high footstool still in place, the holly bough still upon it, but the two slips of paper removed. Please, the actor portraying Malika should ENTER AS MYSELF, in a flowing robe. Bearing a most heavy burden, perhaps she ought to carry her “book.”

MYSELF

Peace be unto you! At this moment, I portray no one but Myself. Do not feel distress; feel Peace. Someone has returned home this hour! Perhaps you. Might as well. Wherever the Mind finds itself “comfortable,” the Soul remains “at home.” So, welcome “home.” Prepare yourselves for Truth, that you may go forth, so you wish, without straying as far afield next hour, as you have last.

(Myself sits upon the high footstool as stage lights dwindle in intensity, focusing upon the stool on the darkened stage. Myself opens “book.”)

MYSELF

“Upon our once time”—oh, indeed! You understand those words as they say it, “once upon a time,” but, remember, please: their world is Babylon, and their Babylon remains confused...say it as we ought: “Upon our once time!”---right!—Upon our once time, after our empire had dissolved, the people of the Akan fought amongst themselves and sent one another across the seas...that is how you got here...and the Babylonians held the people of the Akan in their darkness, calling us—no, I will never say that! Not here!

(Myself tears the page from “book,” tossing it behind the shoulder.)

MYSELF

“Fast-forward?”---alright then: fast forward—and Babylon, this time, defeated Persians and Greeks, and the people of the Akan remained held in darkness, forgetting themselves and accepting only the names Babylon saw fit to call them, even consuming filth as feast, merely because Babylon allowed the people of the Akan to have it...excuse me, for I Myself feel sickened and saddened by the thought...and, yes, in Babylon the people of the Akan continued to fight amongst themselves, like crabs in a barrel. Among the people of the Akan, even—no, I will never say that, either! Not here!

(Again, Myself tears a page from “book,” tossing it behind the other shoulder.)

MYSELF

People of the Akan surpass all names! Hear, people of the Akan, even here in Babylon! Hear! Even in darkness, even in Babylon! Hear yourselves! Shush! Shush! Listen! Hear your neighbors' hearts, as they are the same as yours! Captives still in Babylon, though Babylon may call you "free," hear your own first! Hear, now, sons and daughters of the Akan, lost among Babylon: "Shush! Shush! Listen! Each other, one another, alone! You need nothing more!" Such is the Lesson from the Prophets!

(Myself closes "book." MYSELF EXITS center stage, "book" in hand, kicking the balled pages aside. The stage lights brighten after Myself vacates the center stage, then subdues, focusing upon the holly bough left on the high footstool. Now occupying a corner, Myself exchanges "book" for a hat, slipping out of her robe in clear view of the audience, becoming "Mrs. Kelly.")

Scene Four: "Devotions"

(Once the stage lights have returned to normal, for a stage production, ISAAC KELLY ENTERS, hat in hand. Isaac picks up the balled pages, depositing them in the hat. He continues picking up—what?—"collard greens," most likely, for he hungers.)

ISAAC

(exasperated, often)

Heavenly Father, teach me!

(MRS. KELLY ENTERS—please demonstrate to her memory the respect denied her in life, during which whites would call her only by a personal name, as if a harlot—Mrs. Kelly removes her hat and adjusts her hair, as though viewing herself in a mirror.)

ISAAC

Did they follow you?

MRS. KELLY

(dismissively)

No one followed me.

ISAAC

See to it. When you cross, take care. Don't know who's looking out there.

MRS. KELLY

Remember, Isaac Kelly, it's not my first time.

ISAAC

Mrs. Kelly, you don't take care, it can be your last. You don't take care, next you look up, you in Memphis, heading who knows where, and even I don't know. Take care! Just take care!

MRS. KELLY

Mister Kelly, don't forget I'm with other people. We go there together, we row over together. We stay together. Nobody try and break us up.

ISAAC

You know as I do, sometimes, that don't even help.
Heavenly Father from up above, teach me!

MRS. KELLY

You got that right: He needs to teach you! Needs to teach
you something, acting like you still down in Georgia.
You think I don't know about Illinois?—I'm from
Illinois! Nobody bother you, even at night, if you walk
together! Stop worrying me about worrying me! Playing
in my mind—that's all you doing.

ISAAC

Mrs. Kelly, now, you listen! You listen. You don't care
now, and see where you end up, the end of next week. A
world of a world of trouble!

MRS. KELLY

You pick my greens? Well, then, get over there and pick
my greens, if you expect to eat. Man worrying so much,
not worrying a thing about eating. Isaac Kelly, need to
give some worry about that. Eat you some raw greens—
that'll worry you!—bind you up, but good! Keep you
from talking?—keep you from—

ISAAC

(admonishing her for preparing to use profanity)
Shush, Mrs. Kelly!

MRS. KELLY

(laughing)

“Shush?!” Sure shush you! Pick! And remember, not a
stem in one!

(Seated on the high footstool, Isaac begins picking collard greens, pantomiming putting the
cleaned stems in his hat. As he does so, he and Mrs. Kelly exchange “glares.” It is their way of
flirting, though. Isaac begins humming “Keep Your Lamp Trimmed.”)

ISAAC

(gradually singing the spiritual)

“Keep your lamp trimmed and burning...”

“Keep your lamp trimmed and burning...”

MRS. KELLY

(stomping her foot)

Isaac Kelly!

ISAAC

(singing)

“Keep your lamp trimmed and burning...”

“The time is drawing nigh!”

(In response, Mrs. Kelly hurls her hat at Isaac, missing him, to her frustration.)

MRS. KELLY

Got a mind to take out my broom!

ISAAC

(an “innocent?”)

For what? Picking your greens?

(Isaac hums “Keep Your Lamp Trimmed” softly, to himself, apparently. Mrs. Kelly retrieves her hat, dusting it off. Isaac continues picking greens, humming all the while, to himself, as Mrs. Kelly fumes, then stills.)

MRS. KELLY

(calmed, conversational, confessing)

We plan to row back across next—

ISAAC

Don’t tell me till you return; I don’t want to know.

Worries me. I don’t know—nobody can ask me nothing. Just as well. Keep me worried.

MRS. KELLY

Keep you “worried?”—“nobody ask you nothing?”—
Fine. Fine.

(Isaac hums some more. Mrs. Kelly continues pantomiming doing dishes. Otherwise, stillness settles. Neither pays attention to the other, at least for a chorus.)

ISAAC

(idly)

When?

MRS. KELLY

(exasperated)

What?

(Isaac pats his stomach. He needn’t remind her, as Mrs. Kelly turns her back to him.)

MRS. KELLY

She says by summer.

ISAAC

Cross over to West Alton with those AMEs all you want. You ain’t crossing over there for very long. It will attend to that. Not while carrying my child. One of them hear you’re there, with that belly, he will wait and you and she as good as gone! Now, tell me a story! Tell me!

MRS. KELLY

(calming herself)

Isaac Kelly, like I say, you sit there and pick my greens.
Just pick my greens.

(After exchanging a more hostile glare, Isaac resumes picking greens. Mrs. Kelly proceeds as though drying dishes. Eventually, Isaac resumes humming “Keep Your Lamp Trimmed,” causing a reaction from Mrs. Kelly. Each attends their work, nonetheless.)

ISAAC

If you cross over, hope you scare up a haint or two.

MRS. KELLY

Can’t say. Never know when you got a haint or two.
That Mississippi River, got a lot of haints. Can’t say.

ISAAC

Night like tonight, you find out. Night like tonight.
Want me to pick more than a cup or two, for me and you?
Them haints can be hungry.

MRS. KELLY

Pick about three cups. Never know about them haints.

(Isaac pantomimes buttoning his lip. After a moment, Isaac crosses the stage, carrying the holly bough. Isaac pantomimes lighting the holly bough, as if it were a lamp, and sets it at the corner of the stage, his home's window.)

ISAAC

Never know about them haints. Some haints can't
see for the dark.

(Isaac returns to the high footstool, resuming picking greens. Both exhale, carefully.)

ISAAC

There's New Philadelphia. They don't know it's there.

MRS. KELLY

No New Philadelphia. Alton. They need us across river.

ISAAC

They can need us in New Philadelphia. Ralls County,
Missouri, just a short row from that. Dark as dark there.
Find need in Ralls County as easy as Orchard Farm or
West Alton.

MRS. KELLY

Isaac Kelly, why you so set on New Philadelphia?

ISAAC

Why you so set on Alton? No need to tell me.
I heard about West Alton—

MRS. KELLY

(resolute)

Now, hear me, Mister Isaac Kelly, and hear me good:
nothing about West Alton! Hear me? Nothing about
West Alton! Nothing from me going to hear nothing
about that! It comes by summer, and fear is going to
be gone! Nothing!

ISAAC

You want that? You got it. For you, and you want to
do from Alton, it goes to my grave.

MRS. KELLY

See to it West Alton goes past the grave.

(Isaac nods, touching his lips and his heart. Isaac hums "Keep Your Lamp Trimmed" as he continues picking greens. Mrs. Kelly busies herself with dishes. Isaac concludes a chorus.)

ISAAC

(quietly, intimately)

You didn't see her about—

MRS. KELLY

No need to see nothing about nothing but your child.
See about doing me a baby quilt.

ISAAC

(relieved, smiling)

“Keep your lamp trimmed, trimmed, trimmed...”

“That time, o that time, is nigh!”

I say—hear me, Mrs. Kelly—she is going to see herself
a new day.

MRS. KELLY

You believe so?—

ISAAC

Indeed, I do.

MRS. KELLY

We need see what summer holds.

ISAAC

(sounding optimistic, for both of them)

Summer holds flower, butterflies, vegetable gardens—

(Mrs. Kelly sneezes loudly)

ISAAC

(laughing)

Summer holds that, too!

MRS. KELLY

(suppressing a sneeze successfully)

Excuse me, please!—and flies! Don’t you forget them
flies!

ISAAC

Heavenly Father from up above, forgive me! I didn’t
not mean to forget them flies, especially when they
make me dig another privy!

MRS. KELLY

That’s right, Isaac Kelly. Especially when them flies
chase me out of your privy with them biting.

(Again, Mrs. Kelly sneezes loudly, a fit leading her to suspend doing dishes.)

ISAAC

You need a shot of turpentine, Mrs. Kelly?

MRS. KELLY

We got vinegar here—somewhere.

(Mrs. Kelly pantomimes searching the cupboard for vinegar, like turpentine, a common cure-all
in that period. Isaac continues picking greens as she searches, watching her.)

ISAAC

Sure hope we do! No collard greens pot liquor without
vinegar, you know that, for sure as you know tomorrow
follows today.

MRS. KELLY

(searching, teasing)

Man, stop sounding like some Remus from Georgia!

A-ha!

(Mrs. Kelly pantomimes finding the vinegar hidden in the cupboard, proceeding to pour a shot in a cup and drinking it.)

MRS. KELLY

There, that do it!

(Mrs. Kelly pantomimes returning the vinegar to its place in the cupboard, then finishing work with the dishes. Mrs. Kelly dries her hands.)

MRS. KELLY

Woman's work...you picked my greens? Keep going!
Need another cup.

ISAAC

This haint you expecting must be the Missouri militia...

MRS. KELLY

Never know, with some haint's appetite. That lamp still burning? Let it burn, let it burn—"nigh time!" Nigh... That vinegar hit my spot..."nigh time!"—haints, they need see what they smell. Some them haints, they got an appetite to suck a tick out of house and home. Got them three cups yet? Keep picking, keep picking.

ISAAC

Since you done with them dishes, you can help me. I get them three cups fast with two hands; them four hands, like a piano, faster!

MRS. KELLY

That's just showing what you think. Never heard a piano faster with four hands, just louder. And, this cabin, it's going to be loud enough after this summer. All over, but the—

ISAAC

(laughing, teasing, flirting)

Shush woman, watch your mouth!

MRS. KELLY

(catching the flirt, reciprocating)

Don't "shush" me...you behind the times saying that, at least two months behind!—she said!...about two months too late!

ISAAC

(teasing, flirting still)

I didn't hear you say that two—

(Mrs. Kelly covers her ears, howling!!)

MRS. KELLY

Man, just get to my three cups! Let me get that water ready.

(MRS. KELLY EXITS. Isaac continues picking greens. Isaac completes picking, separating leaf from stem. He pantomimes discarding the stem outside, throwing an empty hand into the audience. Isaac addresses...)

ISAAC

Be whatever you may mean, West Alton. For you, Mrs. Kelly, may West Alton never mean anything more than a countryside across the Mississippi River to me. "Get thee behind me, Satan!" May West Alton remain behind each and all, everyone, in my home. Hear me!

(Hat in hand, ISAAC EXITS. No other need say more, at least until the audience's cough comes. The cough serves as Izzy's cue [count to ten, otherwise]. IZZY ENTERS, appearing in a young man's work clothes, as if a stevedore on a riverboat, breathless from a climb. Stage lights should bear a nightshade with them, amid the sound of crickets and toads.)

IZZY

(doubled-over, catching her breath)

Never thought I would get up that hill! That hill liked to be a mountain! I thought Illinois supposed to be flat. "Flat?" If Illinois' flat, I would hate to see Kansas! That there a lamp? Firefly? No—lamp!

(ISAAC ENTERS, facing the audience, standing as though in a door and taking in the night air. Uncertain whether he is "friend" or "foe," Izzy acts as though concealed within a thicket. SOUND EFFECT: a dog bark nearby. Isaac stands at attention, as though he bears an axe handle in hand.)

ISAAC

(calling out)

Who there?! HAH!! Git!! Who there?!

IZZY

(revealing herself)

You friend of Dorothy?

ISAAC

(responding)

Why? You family?

IZZY AND ISAAC

(simultaneously)

Who's your people?

(Izzy comes forth further.)

IZZY

(drawing half a fish with her toe)

"I am of the fish..."

(Isaac approaches Izzy. With his toe, he complements Izzy's fish.)

ISAAC

"And of the fish, I shall remain." Quick! In here!

(Izzy rushes behind Isaac, as though heading inside. The stage lights brighten. In the full light of Isaac Kelly's cabin, Izzy and Isaac see something from within each other they recognize as kindred, even though this is their initial meeting. No touching, just staring, asking almost "now, in which dream did I meet you?" MRS. KELLY ENTERS, observing quietly.)

IZZY

Is there something?

ISAAC

Sir?

IZZY

Is there—

MRS. KELLY

(consciously obscuring names)

Who is it, husband?

ISAAC

(equally obscuring)

Just some haint, wife, looks like, the wind, that's all.

MRS. KELLY

If that's all, man, then, close the door. It's cold outside.

(Isaac pantomimes closing the door. The stage lights intensify in the growing warmth. Mrs. Kelly approaches Izzy, to get a view of her. Mrs. Kelly flinches, as though her child leapt in her womb.)

MRS. KELLY

Rest your bones. Warm yourself by the fire, boy. You got a name to tell us?

IZZY

(staying in character, sitting on the stage)

I would say "Nicodemus," or "Simeon," if it pleases.

MRS. KELLY

Tell me that, and you can call me "Thomas." Well—we shall leave it at that. A boy need but his mama's name to sleep here. Who is to say? You might be the very Jesus of Nazareth, for all we know—

IZZY

And you the Baptist at that, as far as that could be.

MRS. KELLY

Could be, could be, as far as anyone can tell. Tell me nothing, and I tell you absolutely nothing, and we both sleep fine for the next month. We'll just say, this home turns no stranger aside. Husband, don't just stand there staring, like you ain't never seen a growing boy before! Fetch him some water.

(Still gazing, ISAAC EXITS, as directed. Izzy and Mrs. Kelly warm their hands before the fire.)

MRS. KELLY

No need to know anything about you, boy. The less we know, the best it is. We will eat soon. When you got out of that cold and dark, you carried with yourself an appetite?

IZZY

O, yes, ma'am! Very much so!

MRS. KELLY

(laughing, teasing)

“Haint!” Haint, nothing! All boy! Boys and tomcats—they always know where to find free food. Yeah, must be tired. Lay your head; you’re safe here. Come now tomorrow, you can move.

(Izzy rests her head on the stage as the stage lights cool, darkening. Mrs. Kelly watches her as she withdraws. MRS. KELLY EXITS.)

END OF ACT ONE

WATCH NIGHT

Act Two

Scene One: "Dreams..."

At curtain, the stage lights suggest moonlight amid stars. SOUND EFFECTS feature ambiance, birds chirping, long before dawn. At curtain, Izzy sleeps peacefully on the stage, some light snoring. Perhaps, Izzy can move a bit, scratching her nose, as she sleeps. A quilt, offered during the night, covers Izzy; Izzy kicks it off a bit as she stirs.

SOUND EFFECT: an owl call. A shadow overhead moves swiftly past the stage lights, perhaps an owl catching prey.

ISAAC ENTERS. Isaac covers Izzy with the quilt, then stands aside. Yes, Izzy stirs a bit but does not wake. Isaac sinks to a crouch, as if bearing a tremendous weight, possibly from years, upon his consciousness that later generations can only imagine. He wrings his hands, then into prayer.

ISAAC

(haunted, perhaps)

My Lord, My Lord, I come to you, without one
plea. That I may see in this here boy but kith and
kin from long, long time passed must mean something.
My God, O my God! Have mercy upon—

(Izzy coughs loudly, disturbing Isaac's prayer, then clears her throat, resting.)

ISAAC

(to Izzy, but continuing prayer)

Peace! Peace! Be still! Rest! You find solace beneath
this roof, sanctuary within this door. This roof, this
door, this house fails to find a stranger. Heavenly
Father from Up Above, I pray, allow this boy to rest
peacefully this night!

(Izzy stirs once more, as a spot light shines directly upon her. Encased in the quilt, Izzy rises, not as herself, for she remains asleep, but as Spirit. As Spirit, Izzy faces Isaac, who remains undisturbed by the sight. Then, the spot light dims, leaving only the stage lights illuminating; Sprit becomes Izzy again. As such, Izzy sits on the high footstool.)

IZZY

Why bother me, once thing in bondage, since now man
in Illinois? Must you disturb my sleep?

ISAAC

Must you disturb my sleep? Come morning, I got to shave
men and cut hair.

IZZY

Fair. We disturb each other. Now, what have we to say?

ISAAC

(tentative)

In you, boy, I see something that, that, unnerves me.
Almost that I have seen you before.

IZZY

“Mister Thomas,” man in Alton, Illinois, I am no spook—now,
I have been called “spook” before, but I assure you, I am
no spook. Does that easy your mind a bit? “Sleep be unto you.”
Sleep becomes me.

(Izzy tries to return to sleep on the stage floor, but Isaac presses forward.)

ISAAC

But—do you know anything about Georgia?

IZZY

Do you know anything about Kentucky?

ISAAC

(acquiescing)

Go on and rest your nappy head, boy. Morning time is
enough time to worry us about each other, soon enough.

(Izzy returns to sleep. Again, birds chirp in the ambience. Isaac prepares to step away.)

IZZY

(calling for Isaac)

Say, “Mister Thomas,” if that’s supposed to be your real
name—you say you shave and cut hair?—in your barber
shop?

ISAAC

Indeed, “Simeon,” in the hotel down the hill, at the riverfront.

IZZY

(sitting up, very interested)

Care to take on a porter? I can shave with the best of
them, with these two hands—

ISAAC

That’s what these hands are for, little boy. A porter?—
all a porter in a barber’s shop needs hands for is to
handle a broom. They got brooms in Kentucky?

IZZY

They got brooms in Georgia?

(Together, Izzy and Isaac share a kindred laugh.)

ISAAC

(preparing to leave)

Get sleep, boy. Even in January, I open my shop just
after dawn. And, just after dawn come awfully early,
even in January. I got to get myself some sleep, too.

Till that rooster! Till that rooster. And, we are “Kellys.”

(ISAAC EXITS. The stage lights dim. After lying down momentarily, then faces the audience,
thinking a thought to herself.)

IZZY

(to herself)

This Alton could as well be Chicago, as far as I am concerned. And they see me as a boy who calls himself “Simeon?” Yes, I can be their “Simeon;” this place can be my “Chicago.” This Alton sure can be “Chicago.” Please, let no one wake either one of us from this one!

(Izzy sits quietly, debating with herself. SOUND EFFECT: a cat’s meow.)

IZZY

That you, Mister Seymour d’Freddie-Cat? “Meow!” You chase me, follow me, up to Alton? It’s—no!

(Standing, Izzy approaches the door, the stage lights brightening to assume the effect of the moon and stars, lighting an open, exterior door. Izzy steps back, as if hiding behind a frame.)

IZZY

We all know, and we all know well: escaped, even as haint. And they hunt and trick, even up in Chicago, or in Detroit City, for great money could be had, even in Michigan or in Illinois. That was all we were, for most of them. And you know me: I got me some couple hundred dollars, couple hundred dollar—they would take that, too. One place, just stay one place, just long enough—

(Izzy begins humming “Over My Head,” jiggling her purse in the process.)

IZZY

“Over my head, I hear music in the air!”
“Over my head, I hear music in the air!”
“Over my head, I hear music in the air!”
There’s just got to be God here! “Over my—“
Please, now, guide me on!

(SOUND EFFECT: Cat’s meow, but artificial this time. The stage lights dim, from Izzy closing the door. Izzy huddles, shelters on the high footstool, rocking and sucking her thumb in anxiety.)

IZZY

(softened, quieted voice)

Let you not be Seymour d’Freddie-Cat, come to capture me. Let you not be! Get thee to New Orleans, haint!
Let you not be! Let you let me!

(Izzy hums “Over My Head” again, stilling herself.)

IZZY

This Alton not Chicago; I needs me Chicago!
“Over my head, I hear—“

(SOUND EFFECT: an owl, swooping for the kill, followed by a dying cat’s scream. The sounds unnerve Izzy further. Izzy rocks more. Silence ensues, absolute silence. Not even crickets.)

IZZY

(to herself)

“Nobody here but us—“

(Izzy fails to complete the line, choosing to whistle to soothe anxiety, without success.)

IZZY

(to herself)

“Chipper, Chipper, I ain’t here!”

(Again, Izzy whistles a bit, unsuccessfully. Her rocking and thumb-sucking resume.)

IZZY

Yes, indeedee, this Alton not Chicago; I needs me some Chicago! If that you out there, Seymour d’Freddie-Cat, I get you in here to keep me from losing my dang-fool mind!

(More silence, and it unnerves further.)

IZZY

Talk about a motherless child, so far, so far from home—
“mama...”

(As Izzy rocks, she holds her stomach, as if soothing a sourness.)

IZZY

(weepy, a bit, very quietly)

All alone here—this “Mister Thomas,” “Mister Kelly”—
whoever!—he and his her might got some wolf outside
to get them my reward!—then, I would see New Orleans
the very, very hard way—“Mama!”—only Good God
Almighty know what come of me then!

(The rocking and stomach holding continue. Izzy holds her head in her hands to keep from racing her thoughts so much. Quietly, Izzy shakes.)

IZZY

(still quietly)

Nobody here, but nobody here! Chicago, get to Alton,
real fast, but now!

(singing, to herself)

“I hears me a cat, that means I smells me a rat!”

“No, sir! I sure ain’t happy ‘bout that!”

(Izzy hums the tune briefly, then stops suddenly; might she have heard a sound?)

IZZY

(singing, and humming alternatively)

“I hears me—“ Got to be! Got to be!—“No, sir!”

“I sure ain’t happy ‘bout—“

(A second sudden stop, perhaps a second sound heard. Izzy covers her heart, as though trying to prevent it from thumping. Instead, Izzy begins tapping her foot. Soon, a drum accompanies the tapping from nearby. Izzy taps around the floor, a stomp and a juba, all with the drum accompaniment. As Izzy taps behind the high footstool, a deadened strike of the drum sounds. Izzy taps there again, and the deadened sound repeats itself. Izzy smiles.)

IZZY

(in discovery[!])

Root cellar? Root cellar!

“There must be God somewhere!”

(SOUND EFFECT: a cat’s meow outside. IZZY EXITS, as if into the root cellar. Quiet silence ensues, broken by dogs barking nearby, as if tracking a scent. The sound—the only one

produced, for now—continues until the dogs sound barking in the distance, as if their scent had moved on, and they follow the trail. SOUND EFFECT: a bird chirp the morning, then a rooster. Calm has returned.)

(After calm reasserts itself. MRS. KELLY ENTERS, dressed for bed, but carrying an axe, for the passing dogs had awakened her. Mrs. Kelly clutches the axe for self-defense as she sits on the high footstool.)

MRS. KELLY

(reflecting)

Dreams become as nightmares become, and hoped-for Heavens turn to Hell. Like the old folk say, never, never pray: too hard—and that’s the least any can do—and the prayers end in you crying yourself asleep so many, many nights...like the old folk say, in the olden days: this earth last for nothing meaningful, hard times never stay forever. “Take heart to that, children...verily, I say unto you, heed! Tears, they soon enough dry away.” So, I say, “arm yourself for this moment only. Dreams, nightmares, heavens, hell... they all pass, whenever you wake!”

(Mrs. Kelly sets the axe beside her, but down.)

MRS. KELLY

(philosophical, heartened)

There. They must have gone. Might have been that band of Illini coming for water at our well—they do that, every night or so, with their dog pack leading them to water...or, perhaps someone from down the hill looking to hurt that coyote that ran off with someone’s chicken...coyote still wander here, that and wolf and cougar—they fear no one at all, especially that cougar...except, maybe, Mama Bear. Once, Mama Bear took on that cougar, for trying to run off with her cub. Mama Bear, old gal knocked that poor cougar silly—“POP!”—out cold! We thought she dead. But, cougar, by dawn, shook them cobwebs and took to moving—she thought Mama Bear might come back, and that cougar, she lost enough teeth! Cougar found herself somebody else’s cub, after that! So, old folk from olden days said it right: “things pass, things pass.” Let that night be...”Joy comes in the morning!” Come to think of it, a cougarskin rug would warm up this floor...the draft on this floor get cold!

(ISAAC ENTERS, also dressed for bed—perhaps not a nightshirt, but long underwear, most likely. Isaac claims the axe.)

ISAAC

Perhaps cold will do. Perhaps the night is not worth taking for ourselves, and, perhaps, neither the wintry days, but some time, some summer, lifetimes from now, summer—yes!—perhaps that is worth encountering. Bright, warm sun, so close, and that cooling, comforting evening wind, and we standing at a soothing pool of water—like Bethesda, yes!—among friends. Perhaps we shall walk miles upon miles awake, but that none can call “an easy walk.” Walks can break any fool neck! But, hear this, verily: behold, through these wintry days and nights, that seem to last through Eternity, we see not just one nation, but vast nations upon nations. In their pasts, they had begged for deliverance through an illuminating cloud of fire, but, after long last, they realize any illumination kindles as lamps deep within each and every one of us.

MRS. KELLY

(singing)

“This little light of mine—“

ISAAC

No, ma’am! Singing time ended eons ago. Time for silence. Silence disquiets Babylon. Babylon quakes before our silence.

(Isaac sets the axe amid the shadows of the stage.)

MRS. KELLY

Be that. Let Babylon quake. Cougarskin rug for my floor would do.

ISAAC

Cougarskin for cold floor? Your cold floor will stand by for the morning, Mrs. Kelly.

MRS. KELLY

That’s what you think. Keep thinking that. Cold floor, and it makes for a hard sleep.

ISAAC

(flirting)

Cold floor, and the hard sleep makes for something more—

MRS. KELLY

Man, hold your horses! You got a guest in your house! He will hear you—

ISAAC

From the way that boy look, he might hear, but Good God Almighty telling, he sure won’t know!

(Isaac tries taking Mrs. Kelly into his arms, laughing, but she, laughing as well, eludes him.)

MRS. KELLY

Man, not now, not now! Wait till he go!

ISAAC

(flirting still, singing)

“But, baby, it might get warm—“

MRS. KELLY

(singing a flirtatious response)

“Warm, maybe, baby, but you still too hot to trot!”
Be that as it however may, I’m still with child, Isaac!
Too far along to fool around.

ISAAC

(resigned???)

What in the world a man supposed to do before then?

MRS. KELLY

I don’t want to know, and I don’t need to know. My mind goes silly with imagination in the dark, but I hope you didn’t learn nothing from that Georgia cracker that owned you!...hate to imagine how he handled it, when his missus got big and sick with his child...knowing them—

ISAAC

(serious)

Shush! Don’t say it!

MRS. KELLY

(not heeding, almost)

Yessir! Who among us don’t know, that’s exactly what he did! Lurked betwixt the privy and the cabins along slave row, just like he was a young boy, and made somebody, he don’t care who, do—

ISAAC

(admonishing further)

Shush, now! This my house! I don’t allow that talking sin in my house! Now, you honor that! No talking sin!

MRS. KELLY

(exasperated, but chastened)

Not talking sin. Talking what you know.

(Mrs. Kelly retrieves the axe and sets it within reach of the high footstool.)

MRS. KELLY

Now, Isaac Kelly, Georgia-born, call me a lie. Just call me a lie. At any rate, that was not my sin, nor yours. That’s that, that Miss Betsey, never woman enough to control her man! Miss Betsey put her foot down to Mister Charlie, saying “no sin in my house!,” no telling who all wouldn’t be here! That the way it is in Missouri, and I know that the way it was in Georgia among the crackers, and everywhere. See it in what comes through from Saint Louis! See it in that boy sleeping under your roof! And you, Isaac Kelly, fool enough to say to me “no talking sin in my house!” “No talking sin” and you got no house! Miss Betsey and Mister Charlie, sure enough, especially!

(Reduced, Isaac sits on the high footstool, a sullen slump. Pensive silence ensues.)

ISAAC

(resigned)

I hear you, Mrs. Kelly. I hear you. You dressing in the morning?—very well. You dressing in the morning. Good Lord knows, I don't want to know. The less I want to know, the less I know. When you dress, get that boy where he need to go. Please, mercy!—the less I want to know, the less I know.

(Dressed for bed, ISAAC EXITS, as if to roll over in the bed and sleep, so drained from this discussion. In his absence, Mrs. Kelly assumes the high footstool, sitting as the stage lights mute and a spotlight illuminates the location. Silence ensues again. SOUND EFFECTS: birds chirping, for the pre-dawn, a cat's meowing twice. Mrs. Kelly holds her hands as though holding a book. Pensive, she addresses the light.)

MRS. KELLY

(reflective)

Yes, Zion. Babylon hears. Babylon hears. Babylon hears. Nights like these, I study everything: down river, a tree. I want to stay home. Then, I know. Yes, Zion. Babylon hears. Babylon hears. Me dressed, someone beside me, or hiding underneath, and my buckboard, and Babylon hears. Aboard my buckboard, my axe beats any gun. "No talking sin" about it. No, sir, Mister Kelly! News get back you find me in a tree, know it is about me putting up a fight. My left hand still know its cunning.

(singing, almost)

"Freedom, O Freedom! O Freedom! Over me!"

"And before I be a slave—"

They will bury me!

(MRS. KELLY EXITS, as though rolling over and returning to sleep. She takes the axe with her, dragging it, not carrying it, too weighing burden to bear. The spot light stays with the high footstool. SOUND EFFECT: a cat's meow, in the distance, as if in search. Then silence. Within the silence, the spot light brightens and intensifies illumination, still set upon the high footstool.)

ENSEMBLE

[pre-recorded, please]

(antiphonal presentation preferred, but not necessary. No stentorian address, though)

Listen, children...listen, listen, listen, children...listen!
Hear, children...hear well. For the majesty endowed by
the Creator upon his creations, be they animate or not,
human or not, is their capacity to forgive. Now, now as
then true, we fail to see it often—from too many, we
see it not at all—but it beats within themselves the
comprehension of forgiveness, just as He forgave Adam
and Eve upon the Expulsion, and let them live. They
did not deserve it—they had defied Him—but He granted
them life. If this example is worthy of Him, who among
us would say it is not worthy of us? Listen, children...
listen, listen, listen, children...listen! Yes, we speak to
you! We are all far worthier than our worst moments.
If He didn't hold to that, would He really let us occupy
this spot this very second? Selah...Selah...Selah...
“study war no more!”

INDIVIDUAL

[pre-recorded, please]

(again, not stentorian!)

...this you see and may someone forgive...

(Afterwards, the spot light dies and the stage lights dim, returning to a moonlit, starlit night effect. Quiet returns. SOUND EFFECT: a cat's meow, distant and singular, again as if in search. Then silence.)

WATCH NIGHT

Act Two

Scene Two: “...Way...Land...”

(This remains a golden hour of sorts. Keep the stage lights as they were at the end of the previous scene. The robe worn by Myself remains on the stage. IZZY ENTERS, wearing a hat. Izzy dons the robe seamlessly, then fixes the hat as though it had a veil. Thereafter, the stage lights brighten, as though placing a smile upon her. In pantomime, Izzy does her hands as though also donning a pair of gloves. Thereafter, she sits upon the high footstool, first in profile to the audience, making a point of not crossing her legs. She holds her purse in her lap.)

IZZY

(turning to the audience)

The road to Chicago, and it was a road for me. In the year of Our Lord eighteen hundreds and fifty-three, the road by Chicago and Alton Railways. It took some hours, but it took me there. Small, through nothing, a desert, really of farms and fields, to—what?—huge! All railyards, miles upon miles, amid the smell of cattle, and of chicken, and of hog! My mother Malika would pray, if she knew me here, working with hog! Some people, though, trifling people, and they will eat anything. All anyone need do is cook. And, me?—I can cook! Once in Chicago, anyone can earn a living, even from trifling people. Trifling people never give no care at all; like I say, these trifling people, they eat anything. Good thing I didn't have to work in them yards to watch them do it, but I heard about it, I heard about it! My meat, I got fresh from the corner butcher! I need to know where all it had been! And can I cook!

(Standing, in profile to the audience, Izzy fixes her hat as though adjusting it in a mirror. Soon, its appearance pleases her. Izzy faces the audience again.)

IZZY

(addressing the audience, as if a suitor)

Well, now...how do I look? "Ladylike?"—that is, if you would call Negro women "ladies" and mean it, like too many of you won't. Well, what you people think never mattered to me. I am your cook; I got me. "Trifling people..." And these "trifling people" will sometimes ask "auntie, who are you?" "Trifling people..." Trifling people, they always say that. Nothing to them, and they call you "gal;" fill their bellies, and they make you "auntie," their "bestest friend." Me? "It is 'Mrs. Barlabie,' to you." After that, they go back to eating. That suits me fine. Please, pass on to Malika when you see her next. Please, be sure to address her as "Mrs. Henry Clay," especially when the Senator's wife is there. Now, it is still only eighteen hundred and fifty-five, and, though now dust, Senator Henry Clay got a lot of wives still alive, and enough children to work one of his supporters' cotton plantations! Trifling people, they hardly think about that. They think all of us just fell out of the sky. Only eighteen hundred and fifty-five!

(Thereafter, coldly, IZZY EXITS, humming “Trifling people...” under her breath, to herself. Once she has vacated the stage, the lights darken to produce extensive shadows.)

IZZY

(singing to “O Freedom,” off-stage)

“Trifling people...trifling people... Trifling people...”
“Over me—“

WATCH NIGHT

Act Two

Scene Three: “Promised!”

(The vacated stage quiets amid its shadows. SOUND EFFECTS: distant cat meowing, alternating with approaching dogs barking, as if chasing through darkness, or cats and dogs living their separate lives. SOUND EFFECTS: footsteps, steady, multiple, rapid, perhaps [if that pleases the interpretation]. The footsteps stop suddenly. Quiet for a second, then the footsteps return.)

(Through the shadows, SEYMOUR ENTERS, breathless, as if chased. He stays in the shadows, watching for someone coming behind. No one follows.)

SEYMOUR

Thought sure they saw me. Just shadows. Nothing else.
“Meow!”

(Nothing responds. Silence ensues.)

SEYMOUR

(offering call to the distance)

“Meow!” “That you, Santa Claus?”

(Again, no response. Silence persists.)

SEYMOUR

You gone? “Meow! Meow!” Long gone? Doggone!
Long gone!

(Relieved, Seymour stands. The stage lights lift as if heralding a new day, or a new mindset. As the stage lights lift gradually, strobe lighting signals snowfall, flurries perhaps. Seymour holds his hands out, catching the snow, and laughs.)

SEYMOUR

(laughing, rejoicing)

Snow! This here’s snow! This must be Chicago!
Chicago!—“sweet home!” New day! Rejoice!
Sweet home!—New Day! Got snow in my hands!
Got snow at my feet! Snow’s on my shoulders!
“New day! New day! Rejoice! Rejoice! FEEL!”
New day! “Meow!” What?—that me, Santa Claus?

(Amid Seymour’s rejoicing, MALIKA ENTERS, a bit foot-weary. Malika sits on the high footstool and removes her shoe as if ridding herself of a pebble. Malika rubs her feet.)

MALIKA

Chicago?

SEYMOUR

(rejoicing still)

Chicago! Got to be! Got to be, Chicago!

MALIKA

I could smell them hogs down in Anna..."Anna—"Got to Anna and said "I ain't got to be here!"

SEYMOUR

This sure ain't Anna, Malika! Rest easy: we far, far, so long from there—

MALIKA

(skeptical)

So, you done promise me, Seymour d'Freddie-cat—

SEYMOUR

I promise! Lookie here, all this snow!—don't snow like this anywhere near Anna! Chicago! Got to be! Sweet home!

MALIKA

Heard that meow the first time—

SEYMOUR

Hear again! Hear once more! "Chi—"

MALIKA

I know, I know! "Chicago!" Never seen a rusty man, so slaphappy about being able to vote in death, in my whole afterlife! "Chicago! Chicago!" I know!

SEYMOUR

No "sweating-like-you-going-to-vote" about it! This here "Chicago!" Breathe in that Lake Michigan air!

(Like Seymour, Malika inhales, but she holds her nose at the smell.)

SEYMOUR

(laughing)

Chicago. The yards put the pork in the pork barrel for politics! You smell that, that, money mixed in opportunity!

MALIKA

(very wryly)

Stink almost as bad as Anna after that lynching!

SEYMOUR

(brushing the comment aside)

Just the way some places smell in their day. This is Chicago! Sweet home! Got to be! "Meow!"

MALIKA

(simply unimpressed)

Miss Daisy said it best to her little boy Freddie Kittrell, about them not giving them a new washing machine: "half of nothing is nothing—"

SEYMOUR

(dismissively)

That was Homewood. And you and me, we both know
Freddie forgot all about that! But this—Chicago!
Sweet home! “Meow!” She near here! Got to be!
I can smell her!

MALIKA

Search me. I can’t smell nothing, for all them stockyards.

SEYMOUR

You being one of these fuddy-duddies, Malika. She’s
here. Find her here, take her across. Then, we can
sleep, our work done. Now, call me a lie! Don’t that
sound like a plan?

MALIKA

If it gets us going, get going.

SEYMOUR

There! That’s it!

(As the strobe lighting continues, Seymour helps Malika to stand.)

SEYMOUR

(calling around)

“Meow! Meow! Meow!”

MALIKA

(sarcastic)

Hate to break this news to you, Seymour d’Freddie-cat:
you sound more like some hungry little boy than some
tom in heat.

SEYMOUR

(returning sarcasm)

That only this snow, putting on the chill. “Meow!”

MALIKA

Snow chill, big chill.

SEYMOUR

“Meow!” Malika, you should try meowing.

MALIKA

I am not doing that.

SEYMOUR

How you mean that?

MALIKA

I say I am not doing that. I am not that type of queen.
You a tom, uncle, meow all you want! So, meow!

SEYMOUR

“Meow!” Like He said: He sends us here to call her
name—“meow!”—so, Mama, if you don’t want to
meow, call her name—“meow!”

(Seymour continues the tease with a laugh, which Malika disregarded.)

SEYMOUR

(laughing)

I know you: you upset He woke you up from your sleep—that's how come you cranky!—He woke you up, and you got from the wrong side of the bed!

MALIKA

Go on, Uncle Tom, with your bad self! Meow! I will call her, in my own time. He sent me here to identify her anyway...you do the calling!

SEYMOUR

(laughing)

“Meow!” Can you help me, “Mudder,” please? “Meow!”

(Malika shares the laugh with Seymour, in spite of herself. Momentarily, Malika turns her back to the audience as if viewing carefully their surroundings, while the strobe lighting continues to signal falling snow. Malika inhales audibly.)

MALIKA

She's here. I can smell her cooking. That her. My girl! Izzy can still spice up a soup or a stew! Or greens! Bet that her pot liquor simmering! Bet a block on anything! Pot liquor by Izzy! My girl!

SEYMOUR

Told you! Hungry, Malika?

MALIKA

(scoffing at the question)

Seymour d'Freddie-cat, Malika always hungry for that Izzy pot liquor...my tummy took to growling, just now! How that cat doing, Uncle Tom?

SEYMOUR

(laughing)

“Meow! Meow!”

MALIKA

Now you sounding! More hunger than heat! Keep going. Let them rip.

SEYMOUR

(now, calling!)

“Meow! Meow! Row, row...meow!” Summon her, Malika! Everyone answers their mother's voice.

MALIKA

(clapping, calling)

Izzy! Izzy, girl! You hear me? Malika calling you!
Izzy!!

(As if responding, IZZY ENTERS, dressed to cook, a discreet rag on her head. She carries the hat, as though a bucket of cleaning water. Like a bucket, Izzy pitches its contents out.)

IZZY

Ain't heard that name since Saint Louis. Who you? Santa Claus?

SEYMOUR

Just some who know. Recognize us? “Meow?”

IZZY

(dismissive)

That mind, playing games with you again, Mrs. Barlabie.
Nothing but that old wind!

(Hat in hand, IZZY EXITS, as though returning inside. Malika laughs.)

MALIKA

That Izzy! That my girl!

SEYMOUR

Let Seymour d’Freddie-cat take to this again—

MALIKA

(laughing)

Be my guest. Knock that tom out, uncle! She might
respond another time.

SEYMOUR

“Meow! Meow!”—come on, mama!—Uncle Tom need
a mother’s hand!

MALIKA

(clapping, calling)

Izzy! Izzy! Izzy, girl! Malika, here, calling! Izzy! Girl,
don’t you hear me calling you? Izzy! Come forth!

(to Seymour)

That my girl—she headstrong, almost nearly as bad as
any boy. Her daddy sparing the strap did that, so don’t
blame me.

(now calling, whistling)

A’isha! Princess! Izzy, girl, don’t you hear Malika calling
you?

SEYMOUR

(participating in the call)

“Meow! Meow!”

MALIKA

(to Seymour)

I just about find myself happy she refuses to answer.

SEYMOUR

He did say she stubborn, Malika, clinging to that long life.

MALIKA

Not too stubborn for her Queen Mother.

(now, calling)

A’isha! Princess! Hear me! Come forth!

(Malika lets loose a loud whistle. The strobe lighting subsides, and the stage lights turn subtle [open to lighting designer’s interpretation, for we are deep in the afterworld]. IZZY ENTERS again, again carrying the hat, as if a bucket. Now, Izzy “sees” her Visitors.)

MALIKA

(to Izzy)

Put that bucket down. Now's time. Recognize me?

SEYMOUR

Meow.

(Hat, as if a bucket still, still in hand, IZZY EXITS quickly, to her Visitors' frustration.)

SEYMOUR

Now, ain't that just like a woman: playing hard to get. My mama done told me!

MALIKA

Tomcat around, Uncle Seymour d'Freddie-cat. My mama told me "Malika got this!"

SEYMOUR

(EXITING)

"Meow! Row-meow!"

(SEYMOUR EXITS. Malika stands on stage, as though standing at a shut door, and as though knocking upon it desperately. No response follows. The stage lights narrow upon Malika, a spotlight, please, as Malika moves the high footstool into the center of the spotlight and sits upon it, wearily. Malika shudders and shakes, as though waking or responding to frustration. Malika removes her shoes and rubs her feet.)

(Silence proceeds. In the silence, IZZY ENTERS, carrying the hat, like a bucket once more. Malika recognizes her, but doesn't move. Before Malika, Izzy steps out of the robe of Myself and stands before Malika.)

MALIKA

The name I gave you at birth, "A'isha," couldn't summon Izzy, what name would have? How do the free peoples of Chicago know you, if they don't know you by your own name?

IZZY

The free peoples of Chicago know me by the name "Gertrude Barlabie," and they make sure to fix a "Mrs." Before it.

MALIKA

(approvingly)

Fitting. You learned them well. Did it take time?

IZZY

Eighteen hundred and fifty-five took nothing but time.

MALIKA

Time most got, till it's time.

IZZY

They ain't took my money. I got, I got five hundred dollars! See?

(Izzy produces her purse, and presents the money to Malika.)

IZZY

Only cooking and baking. They find a meat cleaver in them, if they elbow for anything else.

MALIKA

(laughing)

Them beckoners and them elbowers! My little girl!
Learn them to run, if they aim for anything else!

IZZY

Yes, ma'am. Very much so!

MALIKA

(resolute)

Now's time, Izzy. Put that foot here.

(Izzy stands before Malika, between her and the audience, in the bright spotlight.)

CURTAIN

END OF PLAY