

YOU GO TO MY HEAD: A MELODRAMA

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CHARACTERS

SERENA

White female/Mid-twenties

MERTIE

Black female/Mid-twenties

SWEET SAM

Black male/Late thirties

MISS DARCY

Black female/Fifties

PLACE AND TIME

Los Angeles. Late summer 1962

Texas. Spring 1965

*You go to my head
And you linger like a haunting refrain
And I find you spinning round in my brain
Like the bubbles in a glass of champagne*

*You go to my head
Like a sip of sparkling burgundy brew
And I find the very mention of you
Like the kicker in a julep or two*

*The thrill of the thought
That you might give a thought to my plea, cast a spell over me
Still I say to myself get a hold of yourself
Can't you see that it never can be?*

*You go to my head
With a smile that makes my temperature rise
Like a summer with a thousand July's
You intoxicate my soul with your eyes*

*Though I'm certain that this heart of mine
Hasn't a ghost of a chance in this crazy romance
You go to my head
You go to my head*

Haven Gillespie/J. Fred Coots

(A summer night in Los Angeles, 1962. Lights rise on Serena singing “You Go to My Head” in a nightclub. Lights then rise on Mertie sitting in their hotel apartment listening to Serena on the radio, a drink which she hasn’t touched by her side along with a packed suitcase. A cigarette burns between her fingers. After a few moments, the nightclub scene fades, and a mournful jazz tune emits painfully from the radio.

As the nightclub scene fades, lights rise on Serena returning home early the following morning, removing her shoes as she enters)

SERENA

Hey! Guess what? Some friends of the owner happened to be in town. They liked me! They liked what they heard, then offered to buy me breakfast. These weren’t record businesspeople, mind you, but Franky says they’re well connected –

(She notices the suitcase. Mertie rises)

What’s this?

MERTIE

Serena . . . baby, I want you to know I’m gon love you till the day I die.

SERENA

What’s going on?

MERTIE

I’d rather not say.

SERENA

Why?

MERTIE

Look, I need to cut. I got to get away from here. Out from under this city.

(Serena turns off the radio)

SERENA

Honey, sit down. Talk to me.

MERTIE

Ain't no more room for talkin'.

SERENA

You aren't sick again . . . ?

MERTIE

No! No . . . it ain't that.

SERENA

Then what? . . . Is someone after you . . . ?

MERTIE

Maybe. Might be the devil. One just don't know sometimes.

SERENA

You're not making sense.

MERTIE

I know. Don't nothin' make sense no more.

SERENA

Well . . . is there anything I can do to help?

MERTIE

I need money.

SERENA

What for . . . ?

MERTIE

You got fifteen hundred dollars in the bank, right? . . . Right?

SERENA

My savings, yes, but –

MERTIE

I'm in a bad way. And I need that money. Will you give it to me? . . . Yes, or no?

SERENA

Why?

MERTIE

Let's say I'm up to my neck in it. And leave it at that.

SERENA

How so? Tell me!

MERTIE

Can you help me?

SERENA

By giving you all my money? You're out of your mind –

(Mertie suddenly pulls a gun)

MERTIE

The bank opens in another two hours. We gon sit and wait at the Howard Johnsons across the street. We'll sit and drink coffee until it's time for the bank to open . . .

SERENA

This is crazy . . .

MERTIE

At which time, we'll go in and draw the money out –

SERENA

And what if I don't?

MERTIE

You ain't no fool. If it comes to it, I'll shoot my own mama if my living depended on it.

SERENA

Just tell me what's wrong –

MERTIE

And I'll say again – I won't draw the breath it would take to let it out my mouth!

SERENA

Well, I won't give you all my money, Mertie. Not when . . .

MERTIE

Then, I'll put a bullet in your heart . . .

SERENA

No, you won't . . .

MERTIE

. . . and another one in my head!

SERENA

And if you get the money, what then? Do you think I'll let you run off with it like some crook?

MERTIE

Like you gon put the law on me?

SERENA

Don't give me too much credit, baby.

MERTIE

That's just the thing, sugar: you got all the credit in the world.

SERENA

Mertie, please. Tell me what happened.

(Mertie takes up her suitcase while holding the gun on Serena)

MERTIE

We th'ough talkin'. Now come on.

(Serena puts her shoes back on and takes up her purse. They exit)

(Lights rise in a bar on Crenshaw Blvd., Los Angeles. Sweet Sam is dancing slowly with Miss Darcy)

MISS DARCY

California ain't gon sit right with me.

SWEET SAM

You just got here. Ain't even tried it on good yet.

MISS DARCY

Well, it don't take no time at-all to know when them brand new kicks is pinchin' y' feet.

SWEET SAM

Wha' chu wanna do? Blow?

MISS DARCY

On the next thing smokin'.

SWEET SAM

Now, Miss Darcy, we done talked about this. I need for you to stick this thing out. That's right – I got to lean on you somethin' awful to get everything to move like it ought to. Y' dig?

MISS DARCY

Can't find nobody else?

SWEET SAM

Nobody I trust as good as you.

(He kisses her)

MISS DARCY

I'm gettin' too old for this mess.

SWEET SAM

But, not too old for me. It don't matter how old you get, you're still my bottom girl. And ain't a woman alive who can hold fire to that.

MISS DARCY

Nigger, you talk just as sweet as you want to.

SWEET SAM

And what woman born could run from my sugar?

MISS DARCY

Not even your own mama?

SWEET SAM

Especially not my mama.

MISS DARCY

You ol' dirty dog.

(They laugh, stop dancing and sit)

SWEET SAM

Now, tomorrow afternoon, we'll go and look at the house.

MISS DARCY

It ain't got no stairs, do it? You know I can't stand livin' no place where I got to climb a whole lotta steps –

SWEET SAM

The house is one level. A big house, but one level.

MISS DARCY

Good.

SWEET SAM

Already got the first three months' rent paid. In about a month, I'll be back in San Diego while you sit pretty and run the house for me here.

MISS DARCY

How many girls you got lined up?

SWEET SAM

I done talked down three. I'm working up to another four. Good girls, too. One with hips that role like the Mississippi river when she walks –

(He stops when he notices Miss Darcy looking toward Serena, who has entered)

SERENA

I'm . . . I'm sorry, but I'm looking for someone. A friend – a woman. The bartender said you'd be the man to see.

(Silence)

My friends name is Mertie – Mertie Brown.

(Miss Darcy glances at Sam)

She's a very close friend. She's in trouble. I need to find her.

SWEET SAM

In trouble, huh?

SERENA

Yes.

SWEET SAM

I see. And you are . . . ?

My name is Serena.

SERENA

Pretty name. Care to sit?

SWEET SAM

(Serena sits)

Drink?

SERENA

Oh, nothing.

SWEET SAM

Please. It will be my pleasure.

SERENA

Alright, uh . . . white wine?

SWEET SAM

Miss Darcy, have the barkeep fix a white wine for the lady. And a refill on my scotch . . . Miss Darcy? If y' would, please?

(Miss Darcy rises slowly, eyeing Serena as she exits for the bar)

You know Mertie, huh?

SERENA

Like a sister.

SWEET SAM

Hm.

SERENA

Do you know where she is?

SWEET SAM

Allow me to introduce myself first . . .

SERENA

The barkeep said you were Sam.

SWEET SAM

Uh uh. It's *Sweet* – Sweet Sam. Like *Mister*? Only I don't go by Mister. I'm Sweet.

SERENA

Alright, then, Mr. – I mean . . .

(Sam laughs)

Where is Mertie?

SWEET SAM

We'll get to that. First, tell me a little about yourself.

SERENA

Why?

SWEET SAM

I'd like to know who Mertie was keeping company with.

SERENA

Like I said, my name is . . .

SWEET SAM

I got the name. Now I want the story behind it.

SERENA

It's not very stimulating.

SWEET SAM

Let me be the judge of that.

(Miss Darcy returns with the drinks)

Now, would you do us a favor?

MISS DARCY

Let me guess: *blow*.

SWEET SAM

Quick-like . . . Miss Darcy?

(Again, she eyes Serena, then exits slowly)

Don't pay her no mind. As long as you with the Sweet, it's cool.

SERENA

She doesn't scare me.

SWEET SAM

Oh?

SERENA

Is that a problem?

SWEET SAM

It depends. Miss Darcy looks out for me. She's what I'd call a good judge of character.

SERENA

Then, if I don't want my feelings hurt I won't ask for an assessment.

(Again, Sam laughs)

I see you're easily amused.

SWEET SAM

Sugar, I just love life. I eat it up like some good home cookin'.

SERENA

Be that as it may, I still haven't found my friend.

SWEET SAM

And I still don't quite know you.

SERENA

That could take time.

SWEET SAM

Which is what we got.

SERENA

What about Mertie?

SWEET SAM

Don't you worry 'bout Mertie. Wherever she is, she ain't goin' nowhere.

SERENA

Where is she?

SWEET SAM

Let's see – you're not from down south. Anybody could see that.

SERENA

I'm from San Francisco.

SWEET SAM

Is that right?

SERENA

Born and raised.

SWEET SAM

Ain't that somethin'? I'm from San Diego, m'self. By way of New Orleans. And with the passing of all the setting suns, what do I see: a white chick fine enough to start a war, sittin' pretty in the pocket on the dark side of town. You ought t' be quakin' in your heels, girl.

SERENA

The truth is, I've always been comfortable with colored people.

SWEET SAM

Is that so?

SERENA

What's more, I'm a singer. A lot of what I sing is jazz. I dig the music. I dig the scene.

SWEET SAM

And I reckon you think that evens it up? Being white, yet singing the niggers music and digging his scene?

SERENA

Well, you're a pimp. You've got a stable in San Diego and you're pulling together another one here in Los Angeles. My guess is that you've got plenty of colored whores and more than a few white ones, to boot. So, that must even it all up, too, right?

SWEET SAM

And whose coat tail did you pull . . .

SERENA

The streets talk, daddy. I heard your name broached more than a few times even before I'd hit this bar. When you prowl the streets, the streets talk back.

SWEET SAM

And it's good you understand the language.

SERENA

I get around.

SWEET SAM

In that case, I've known Mertie for a long time. We done crossed many a river.

SERENA

And which one do I need to cross to get to her?

SWEET SAM

San Francisco, huh? And what brought you to Los Angeles?

SERENA

I don't think this is the time to . . .

SWEET SAM

You came here to sing, didn't you? To make the big time. Cut a few records and be a star?

SERENA

Okay? So?

SWEET SAM

You got a gig?

SERENA

I sing at a club in Santa Monica.

SWEET SAM

Hmm!

SERENA

In fact, come see me sometime.

SWEET SAM

Maybe I will. As a matter of fact, I bet Miss Darcy would . . .

SERENA

Look, where Mertie is? It's very important that I find her.

SWEET SAM

What kind of trouble is she in?

SERENA

That's the thing – she wouldn't tell me.

SWEET SAM

And she just up and left?

SERENA

Well, not exactly. She . . . she made me give her money. All the money I had, in fact.

SWEET SAM

She *made* you?

SERENA

She pulled a gun.

SWEET SAM

Oh! Then, you just want your money back?

SERENA

NO-NO! I could give a shit about the money. I'm worried about my friend. I've got to find her. Something may have happened, and –

(She is suddenly fighting back tears)

SWEET SAM

Have your drink. Go ahead.

(She forces a few swallows of wine down)

What makes you think she ain't left town?

SERENA

She's here.

SWEET SAM

You sure?

SERENA

Yes, I'm sure. We . . . we were at the Howard Johnsons. Having coffee. I watched her get up and make a phone call. She said . . . I mean, I

overheard her tell someone that she had to hole up for a few days before she could split.

SWEET SAM

I see. You hungry?

SERENA

What?

SWEET SAM

Have you ate yet?

SERENA

No, I . . . Listen, if you can't help me . . .

SWEET SAM

Mertie's gone. Some stud knocked her up. Damn near went out of her skull over it. She came to me for money, said she needed it to abort the baby, leave town . . .

SERENA

I don't believe you.

SWEET SAM

Then I'll drag Miss Darcy back here and have her tell it. She'll be glad to spill the beans and won't be none too nice about it, neither.

As said, Mertie'd come to me for money. She had to have enough to be sure the baby was cut out right so she wouldn't bleed to death. And that was more money than I was willing to part with. Besides, I'm a pimp. Charity ain't my bag.

Let me take you to get something to eat.

SERENA

No, please . . . just leave me alone –

SWEET SAM

I'm sorry 'bout Mertie. I am. Now come on. We'll go someplace where the cookin's good. And if you're as to-home with niggers as you say you are, you won't mind eatin' where Mistah Charlie fears to show.

(Serena hesitates, then rises. As they go, Miss Darcy watches them. Fade out)

(Mournful blues from the radio in the hotel bedroom of Serena and Mertie's apartment. Mertie is in her slip, sitting in a chair by the bed, smoking a cigarette and reading the paper. After a moment, Serena emerges from the bathroom wearing a bathrobe. She's just had a bath)

MERTIE

Marilyn Monroe died yesterday. They say she killed herself.

SERENA

I heard. Jesus . . .

MERTIE

Pills. Overdose.

SERENA

What a waste.

(She takes the cigarette from Mertie and reclines on the bed)

MERTIE

Yeah. Po' thing.

(Serena gives Mertie back the cigarette)

Want a drink?

SERENA

Should I? It's so late.

MERTIE

Or early. Depending on what hours you keep.

SERENA

I don't want any gin.

MERTIE

How 'bout some coffee?

SERENA

I gotta sleep.

MERTIE

Gin's all I got, as far as liquor.

SERENA

Gimme the gin. Just a drop, though.

(Mertie rises and takes up a bottle of gin.
She pours a little into a glass and hands
it to Serena)

What are you doing home anyway? That dump doesn't close until six.

MERTIE

By the time three AM had come around I'd made close to a hundred skins
for Sporty. With that, I told him I felt justified in callin' it an early night.

SERENA

And he didn't squawk?

MERTIE

Come to think of it, no. 'Course, it wouldn't have made no difference if he
had.

(Mertie puts away the paper and lies
beside Serena)

Sporty misses you.

SERENA

Honey, his tongue was out for me and every other piece of trim in that
joint.

MERTIE

But, girl, you were the one who had his nose.

SERENA

Well, isn't that too bad?

MERTIE

You broke the chumps' heart, Serena. And it don't bother you none?

SERENA

Oh, leave me alone.

(Mertie laughs)

MERTIE

I'll tell you what, though, baby – you was makin' long scratch in that shit-hole. You were the star!

SERENA

Look at what I had to put up with.

MERTIE

But, the scratch, honey.

SERENA

And even if it had amounted to a million bucks a night, that stripping racket was never long term. It was always an arrangement. Until times got better. And they are.

MERTIE

Big time is startin' to grow all over you, ain't it? Like briars in a patch.

SERENA

Interesting way to put it.

MERTIE

Sure.

SERENA

Hey, I'm determined. I'll make it.

MERTIE

If you say so.

(Serena rises)

SERENA

Don't start.

MERTIE

Start what?

SERENA

You know what I'm talking about.

MERTIE

Well, what difference do what I say make? You on your way to the stars, girl. The real ones, in fact. Just like Marilyn Monroe.

SERENA

Now, that was cheap.

MERTIE

I'll bet she couldn't take the truth, neither.

SERENA

What? Are you saying she liked girls, too?

MERTIE

No. But, you do.

SERENA

There's a clincher, though: I also like guys.

MERTIE

Which means you'll have your cake –

SERENA

And my meat and gravy, too.

MERTIE

But when push comes to shove –

SERENA

I'll figure it out.

MERTIE

Or maybe life and this town gon figure it out for you.

SERENA

Will you can it?

MERTIE

You the one that wants this Hollywood shine, or did you bother to think of what you was gettin' into before it started?

SERENA

From what I can gather, honey, Hollywood is replete with queers – of the male and female variety.

MERTIE

And that's gon make things easier?

SERENA

No, it means . . . Oh, what the hell do you know, anyway?

MERTIE

I know enough.

SERENA

Well, you don't.

MERTIE

Keep on.

SERENA

Or, what? Mertie, you're from Muscle Shoals, Alabama, for chrissakes. *Alabama!* Could anybody from that hole in the dirt know anything? You didn't learn to read until you were ten and barely had the wherewithal to finish the fifth grade. Which means you don't know shit! So take your stale-assed gin and leave me alone!

MERTIE

I just love to look at a cracker dyke bitch get mad. It gets me so hot my tongue near 'bout melts through my mouth.

(Serena relents, then gets back on the bed with Mertie. They kiss. Mertie then comforts her)

SERENA

You and the whole world can go to hell on a freight train.

MERTIE

We'll go, too.

SERENA

I mean it.

MERTIE

I know you do.

SERENA

I'm gonna make it.

MERTIE

Yes, you are, but listen: there's a great big mean world out there, baby. And I can't have you ending up –

Like Marilyn Monroe?
SERENA

Just watch yourself.
MERTIE

(One more kiss and Serena rises from the bed and exits. As she walks off, Sam appears, standing by the bed, staring at Mertie. Lights fade)

(Serena and Sweet Sam have finished dinner. They've been drinking beer. Serena is a little drunk)

What kind of man was he?
SERENA

What do it matter?
SWEET SAM

My heart wants to know.
SERENA

Your heart?
SWEET SAM

She's my friend.
SERENA

Alright, some stud.
SWEET SAM

Was he handsome?
SERENA

Yeah. He was pretty.
SWEET SAM

Like, Belafonte pretty?
SERENA

Pretty enough to eat.
SWEET SAM

SERENA

You're lying!

SWEET SAM

What's to get so uptight about? The woman got a man. What of it?

SERENA

He knocked her up!

SWEET SAM

And she took care of it.

SERENA

With my money.

SWEET SAM

Damn right. So, if I was you, I wouldn't be sittin' here cryin' in my piss. I'd be lookin' for the bitch to plant my Florsheim up her ass.

SERENA

Oh, please.

SWEET SAM

Miss Darcy tells me Mertie did some stripping at some dump just outside of –

SERENA

Yeah, she did. And for your information, that shithole wasn't foreign to this white-bread gal, either. I bared my own ass in there on more than a few occasions. And I did good for myself, too.

SWEET SAM

Well, ain't this a knock upside the head! And with a pretty thing like you, I bet the scratch was as long as a good lie, won't it?

SERENA

Yeah, but what does it matter? I'm through with that dump. That chapter of my life is dead.

SWEET SAM

You sure?

SERENA

Don't get any ideas, mister.

SWEET SAM

Excuse me?

SERENA

You're a pimp. I know what you're thinking.

(Sam laughs)

What's more, I've got a gun in my handbag.

(She shows him. Sam is impressed)

Nothing personal, but . . .

SWEET SAM

No offense taken. Smart move, as a matter of fact. It ain't good to plod through this nigger's jungle unarmed.

SERENA

And another thing: if you knew Mertie so well, why did she never mention you?

SWEET SAM

That's a good question.

SERENA

Well?

SWEET SAM

Damn if I wouldn't love to hear you sing.

SERENA

You know where to find me.

SWEET SAM

Y' know, a long time ago Miss Darcy was freaking with this white cat who sang. He won't no jazz singer, though. The cat sang that white country gospel. Man! I'd hear that shit on the radio when I was a young'un. Damn if it didn't get under my skin. The stud was big time, too. Cut records, had a radio show. And once every few days he'd crawl over to Bourbon Street to bone Miss Darcy. And you know she damn near fell for the cat?

SERENA

How could she?

SWEET SAM

She said he was good to her.

SERENA

And, sometimes, that's all it takes.

SWEET SAM

If only more of these studs out here understood that.

SERENA

The way you understand it?

SWEET SAM

Oh, yes Lord.

(A slow, sensual tune is heard)

SERENA

Who could possibly understand you? Besides your mother?

SWEET SAM

Oh, plenty of girls. Good girls, in fact. Just like you.

(Serena laughs)

Sweetheart, I'm the end of the road for a lot of these chicks.

SERENA

The last man in the world!

SWEET SAM

And a woman can't love but one such man in a lifetime. Listen, you ain't got to take my word for it. Pull a few of these hems. And hear it for yourself.

SERENA

How 'bout I do you one better and make my reservation?

SWEET SAM

Don't be daring me, now.

SERENA

And don't try to pick me up.

I ain't trying to do nothing, sugar . . . but ask.

SWEET SAM

For what?

SERENA

A dance.

SWEET SAM

Ha!

SERENA

Please.

SWEET SAM

You're crazy!

SERENA

Over you.

SWEET SAM

Oh, stop it.

SERENA

Come on.

SWEET SAM

No –

SERENA

Come on, now. Be a lady. And dance with this gentleman.

SWEET SAM

(She hesitates, then rises. They dance slowly. The song is “When Sunny Gets Blue.” Serena sings a few bars)

You sing like you got some darky in you.

Why, thanks!

SERENA

(They laugh)

As a matter of fact, I learned to sing from a colored woman who'd done the chitlin circuit. After school, I'd sneak to her house and listen to her play stride piano. And at the time I thought it was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen or heard. And she sang. And as young as I was, I sang with her. We sang the blues. Together. I learned so much from her. She told me it would take a few years before the blues would find a home in my blood. And she was right.

(Serena sings, then stops)

You never answered my question.

SWEET SAM

Refresh my memory.

SERENA

Why didn't Mertie ever speak of you?

SWEET SAM

Mertie would probably like to forget me.

SERENA

Why? Did you ever . . .

SWEET SAM

No. I wouldn't let her whore for me.

SERENA

Why not?

SWEET SAM

I had my reasons.

(They dance closer)

How many men you done had in your life?

SERENA

What do you care?

SWEET SAM

Ever been married?

SERENA

Sure. Twelve times.

SWEET SAM

You somethin'.

SERENA

It's true!

SWEET SAM

Alright, and what did you do? Drive every one of 'em crazy?

SERENA

No. I murdered them for the insurance money.

SWEET SAM

Okay – if that's the way you want to play it.

SERENA

What? You getting rattled?

SWEET SAM

You's a tough one. I can see that.

SERENA

I must be. I'm seeing sweat.

(He laughs)

Of course, if my hill's too steep to climb, there are other girls in this joint.

SWEET SAM

And they all know me. Even from way out here.

SERENA

I'm impressed.

SWEET SAM

Sweet, ain't it?

SERENA

I see a lot of men, too.

SWEET SAM

And most of 'em, according to Miss Darcy . . . most of 'em knew Mertie.

(Lights rise on Mertie in US limbo.
Music stops abruptly. Serena and Sam
stop dancing)

MERTIE

I'm fixing to go through some dark places, girl . . .

SERENA

I can help. Just . . . tell me how to find you.

MERTIE

Might be that neither one of us will find our way back.

SERENA

Wherever you are, be careful.

SWEET SAM

She said Mertie won't above getting friendly with one or two of 'em every
now and again when she needed some scratch to warm her pocketbook.

MERTIE

This thing we had going, Serena . . . neither of us planned it, did we?

SERENA

We didn't, but . . .

SWEET SAM

I guess the chick could've gone into business for herself.

SERENA

Mertie, baby, nothing will come between us.

MERTIE

Why do I feel so scared all of a sudden?

SERENA

There's nothing to fear . . .

MERTIE

I'm in harms way. It's all over me!

SERENA

That doesn't make any sense . . .

MERTIE

Don't nothin' make sense no more.

SERENA

You can always come back.

(In spite of her anguish, Mertie laughs)

Why are you laughing . . . ?

(Mertie suddenly feels pain in her abdomen)

What is it? . . . What's the matter?

MERTIE

I'm totin' something from the devil, Serena.

SERENA

Mertie!

MERTIE

I didn't know! I swear, I didn't know . . . !

SERENA

Can I help you?

(Mertie notices Sam watching her. She cowers and screams)

MERTIE!

MERTIE

Serena . . . pray for me . . .

(Lights fade on Mertie)

SERENA

MERTIE! MERTIE! . . .

(Serena weeps. After a moment, Sam embraces and comforts her. She looks into his eyes)

You think a lot of yourself, don't you?

(Silence. Then Sam kisses her long and passionately until Serena breaks)

Who are you?

SWEET SAM

I ain't nothing but a man.

SERENA

And that being said . . .

SWEET SAM

I don't want much.

SERENA

Of what, exactly?

SWEET SAM

You'll figure it out.

SERENA

Why is everybody so willing to give me all the goddamned credit?

SWEET SAM

Let's say you got have a way with folks.

(Another kiss)

SERENA

I won't be your whore.

SWEET SAM

Good.

SERENA

And I'll probably end up killing you.

SWEET SAM

We'll see.

(Silence as he kisses her again. Black out)

(Lights rise on Mertie in U.S. limbo)

MERTIE

My little girlfriends and me . . . we went in the cupboard and pinched some of daddys liquor one evening. We drank till we got good and righteous. Then turned the radio on and danced just like the women we'd see at the hoochie-coochie show at the fair . . . danced until daddy walked in and caught us. Everybody got run off except me. And I got one of the worst whoopin's I'd had as a child. *Where'd you learn to shake your hind parts like that?* I'd not seen daddy so mad or beheld such a look behind his eyes as what my dancing and nasty moves brought out of him when he hollered at me.

Serena . . . the look in his eyes chilled my bones. And whatever it was I'm sure he felt it, too. 'Cause he went on and whooped me again.

He was my daddy, but it didn't mean he won't a man, too.
The same as my brother.

(Blackout)

(Night. Serena is standing in her slip by the window, smoking. Sam enters from the bathroom, then lies on the bed)

SWEET SAM

Go ahead. Ain't no need to be 'shame.

SERENA

Did you say something?

SWEET SAM

I said go on and take a bath if you want to.

SERENA

When I'm ready.

SWEET SAM

Alright. But don't wait too long to wash off that nigger stink.

(She laughs)

SERENA

If I took this seriously, I'd kill you.

SWEET SAM

That supposed to scare me?

SERENA

It'd scare me.

SWEET SAM

I fear no woman.

SERENA

OOH! A fearless man! Does that make my coochie drool?

SWEET SAM

Aw, shut up. And come on back over here.

SERENA

No.

SWEET SAM

Come on, now, girl.

SERENA

Not until you say please.

SWEET SAM

Please. Your majesty.

(She butts the cigarette in an ashtray and rejoins Sam on the bed. They embrace and kiss)

SERENA

Treat me right. Or I'll cut your balls off.

SWEET SAM

Anybody ever say you was a lotta fun?

SERENA

Wait and catch me when I'm really mad.

SWEET SAM

With something like you corrupting my stable, I'd be outta business.

SERENA

Poor thing. Then you'd have to humiliate yourself and get a job.

SWEET SAM

I'm workin' now.

SERENA

Don't be stupid. You know what I'm talking about.

SWEET SAM

And what kinda job would suit your highness? Loading trucks? Mopping floors? Cuttin' some peckerwoods grass? Cleaning the shit off his commode?

SERENA

I'm sure a man like you, though –

SWEET SAM

Can what? Be president?

SERENA

I'm serious.

SWEET SAM

No, you ain't. So, cool it.

SERENA

Look, I'm only . . .

SWEET SAM

I said button it!

SERENA

I'm sorry. I'll mind my own business.

SWEET SAM

Safer that way.

SERENA

Mertie used to climb all over me about my big mouth. And how the world didn't necessarily dig my high-assed patronizing.

SWEET SAM

Listen, I been pimpin' since I was fourteen. I can't do nothin' else. Other than farming. And I'll be kicked in shit before I catch myself pushin' a plow behind somebody's mule again. My first whore was thirty years old – Miss Darcy. That's right. I'm fourteen and my stuff was so sweet she put her husband out then took me in. And the bitch has been on her back for me ever since.

SERENA

That being said, there's no future for us. You know that. Right?

SWEET SAM

Let me do the figuring on this thing.

SERENA

Don't I get a say?

SWEET SAM

Why? You wanna cut?

SERENA

Of course not. We just – Is that what you want?

SWEET SAM

I *want* to finish adding to my stable.

SERENA

And I've already said . . .

SWEET SAM

I'm cool with that. I can always cop a whore. Now, I'd like to see if I can make it with a queen . . .

(He kisses her)

. . . Who either pulled herself up from a great fall or got to where the square life won't cuttin' it for her.

SERENA

You're too smart for your own good.

SWEET SAM

What was you runnin' from? And how did things get so bad for something so white and together to wind up shaking your bare ass for some low-down scratch?

SERENA

I'd met Mertie.

SWEET SAM

Keep going.

SERENA

I met her at a bus stop. She told me she stripped for a living. And the scratch was good. And I needed a job. There was no reason anybody I knew had to have knowledge of it, she said. I didn't know a lot of people, anyway. So, why not.

The truth is I'd just gotten out of jail –

SWEET SAM

Wait - *you* was in the pen?

SERENA

For thirty days.

SWEET SAM

Well, I'll be muthafucked!

(He laughs, then stops suddenly)

Quit pullin' my crank.

SERENA

You think I'd admit to something like that if . . .

SWEET SAM

What for?

SERENA

Pulling some bastards crank.

SWEET SAM

You saying it was on account of some *john*?

SERENA

Okay . . . for a while I was what you'd call a kept woman. I'm fresh off the boat from Frisco. I'm looking for singing gigs, to score. But I gotta eat. I'm working at Bullocks On Wilshire. Ladies wear. And this fat cat who looked a lot like Gregory Peck, so much I almost thought it was him, he walks in looking for an anniversary gift for his wife. I help him find something nice – a handbag with matching hat and gloves. He pays, he leaves, and that's the end of it, right? Well, a day or so later he's back. He says now he needs something for his lady friend. It's none of my business. I'm there to do my job. Nothing more, nothing less. He picks out this good-looking hat. I would've gotten it myself if I could have afforded it, but . . . Anyway, I box it up and he buys it. End of story.

Then, it's closing. I'm on my way out when I see him waiting by his car. He's holding the box with the hat he'd bought under his arm. I'm walking by and he stops me. And . . . and he gives me the hat. He says, yeah – it's for me, the lady.

Then he takes me to dinner, to a five-star restaurant in Bel Air.

(Sam whistles, impressed)

Yeah! Exactly. I asked what he did. He said he was an attorney. I told him I sang, that I'd come to Los Angeles to start a career and cut records and maybe make a picture or two. I found he knew people in the business. And he said . . . he said he'd help me.

He swept me off my feet and kept me floating for . . . God, a whole summer. He bought me clothes, a car. He took me dancing. I'd been living in a room at a hotel. And he wanted to help me look for an apartment in a nicer area. And when I'd gotten settled, he told me we'd have lunch with some music businesspeople he'd been connected with and . . .

(Silence. She fights back tears)

One night, the cops show up at my place to arrest me. What the hell for? What did I do? *Prostitution*. Can you believe it? It seems my pet Gregory Peck had a wife. And from what I could gather, her plan was to first rape him financially, then divorce him. The whole thing got nasty – and I mean really nasty. And I guess she decided to take some of that nastiness out on me. Apparently, she'd attended more than a few functions, more than a few fund raisers and dinner parties with the Los Angeles Chief of Police. They were like bum chums. And over the years, she'd done her part to fatten the department charities with donations. So, the – the dirty cunt simply called in a favor. And there wasn't a damned thing I could do about it. I spent thirty days in jail. And, man, did the world change.

(She pulls herself together as Sam kisses her, then rises and puts on his clothes)

SWEET SAM

If I was a fool, I'd offer to take care of you.

SERENA

And if I were just as foolish, I'd agree to it.

SWEET SAM

Maybe.

SERENA

I'm not gonna wait for you to get tired of me.

SWEET SAM

And right before *I* get good, tired and ready to kick your ass out my bed and through that window, I'll give notice.

SERENA

Deal.

(Sam is now fully dressed. Crossfade from the bedroom to the same bar on Crenshaw. Sam sits, lights a cigarette and begins nursing a drink. Miss Darcy enters)

MISS DARCY

You fixin' to turn that woman?

SWEET SAM

I like her the way she is.

MISS DARCY

What good is she to you, Sam?

SWEET SAM

Ain't nothin' to worry yourself over.

MISS DARCY

Sometimes a woman can't help herself.

SWEET SAM

Then, suck it up and deal with it.

MISS DARCY

I deserve better than this.

SWEET SAM

Than what? Ain't nobody doing nothin' to you.

MISS DARCY

Sam, there's whores – myself included – who'd hump scratch outta dirt for you. Who'd bleed for you, nigger. With all that, wha' chu need with a keep-woman?

SWEET SAM

I don't know. Maybe I got a big appetite.

MISS DARCY

Don't forget yourself with me, man.

(Sam laughs)

I ain't nothin' to play off, neither.

SWEET SAM

You need to get your ass to that house and 'tend to my business.

MISS DARCY

While you don't do nothin' but spit in my face?

SWEET SAM

Listen, I'm telling you like I told her: I can always nab a whore. Got plenty of 'em, matter fact. Now, with all that, I think I deserve a li'l somethin' sweet after I've had my supper.

MISS DARCY

And what about me?

SWEET SAM

You can go get you a man if you want to. If you can find one who'll have you, as old as you is.

MISS DARCY

Now I done got old, all of a sudden?

SWEET SAM

Woman, go somewhere and let me alone. Make yourself useful and iron some goddamn clothes, or something.

MISS DARCY

There ain't no cause to talk out the way to me, Sam. Long as we done . . .

SWEET SAM

I'm th'ough with it, Darcy!

MISS DARCY

Sam, before you know it, this ofay bitch will have you by your dick. I see it coming. I can smell it. And it's bad, baby. Bad!

SWEET SAM

Well, right now, I don't smell nothing bad.

MISS DARCY

A chump-ass square wouldn't have the nose for it, neither.

SWEET SAM

I can't get mad, Darcy. You'd have to know what you talking about for that to happen.

MISS DARCY

Or, maybe I can't see the man you was no more.

(Silence. He then stands before her.

There is a deadly silence between them)

What's this? Gon prove something to me now?

SWEET SAM

Don't be testing me.

MISS DARCY

Damn fool! You bringin' the test on yourself! Only thing I got to say 'bout it is have fun with your new gray daughter. Get all of it whilst it's hot. It's almost done, baby.

SWEET SAM

Wait a minute – did I hear right?

MISS DARCY

The world's got surprises. And it's got secrets, too.

SWEET SAM

Darcy, think about what you doing . . .

MISS DARCY

Oh, now he tryin' to cop a plea?

SWEET SAM

I'll tell you what – gon do your worst. I'm a man. And what you'll see is that nothing from no woman will ever rattle that.

(Miss Darcy exits. Sam sits as Mertie enters. He gestures for her to join him.

She does so, and he offers her his drink.
 She takes it and drinks. Sam then
 reaches over and begins to unbutton her
 top. Lights fade)

(Lights rise on Serena singing “What a
 Little Moonlight Can Do.” When the
 song finishes, Miss Darcy enters)

MISS DARCY

When I won't but a child, only schoolin' I had was what my mama taught me out the Bible, which she showed me how to read. There'd been a little school in back of the church. It got burned down. Along with the church. Willie Gene Snipes got drunk up in there one evening. And set the whole place afire when he dropped his liquor and his cigarette. Everything burnt black and to the dirt. School books, 'n all. The Bible was all we had then. And mama tried to teach me 'bout the world through the reading of it. None of it made sense, then or now. The world I was looking at was something folks could make a way in. That which I beheld in the Bible won't nothin' but a story.

I loved when she told of Jesus, though. And, in time, Lord help me, if I didn't come up on a Jesus of my own! A high-yellow boy from Alabama. I latched on to him for a good while. But high times and wild living took him from me. I'd find another, sweeter Jesus who had a little more on the ball and marry him. Yet, the sweetness went as bad as old milk. Turns out he won't nothin' but a chump. Didn't have the backbone of a rocking chair. And I woulda crucified him if they'd let me get away with it.

Sam was my last Jesus. He'd come to me like the third day morning Resurrection. And changed me in the twinkling of an eye. Been changed ever since. And it's still sweet and as good to me as cool sweat runnin' down to the small of my back on a dog-hot day.

SERENA

I hope I don't spoil any of this.

MISS DARCY

Or maybe I won't give you the chance.

SERENA

I'm not looking for anything permanent with Sam.

MISS DARCY

But it's sho good to get y' coochie scratched when it needs it.

SERENA

I'd been looking for my friend.

MISS DARCY

And found somethin' else.

SERENA

What do you want me to do? Split?

MISS DARCY

I wish you would, not that it'd change nothin'.

SERENA

What? Do . . . do you know where she is?

MISS DARCY

Mertie's in Texas.

SERENA

Texas?

MISS DARCY

You heard right. She said she was goin' to get a new life for h'self.

SERENA

In Texas?

(Miss Darcy nods)

Why didn't she . . .

MISS DARCY

Sam tells me you packin'. If it's so, don't think to do nothin' dumb with that heater, y' hear?

SERENA

Wha' – what are you . . . ?

MISS DARCY

Mertie sho was a pretty somethin', won't she? That girl'd walk them streets and, Lord strike me if there won't a man born who could help hissself 'round her. And when word of what befell her cut my ears, I'll be blinded if it didn't get me to cryin'.

SERENA

This man . . . the father of her child . . .

MISS DARCY

We need to get somethin' straight right here: I don't owe you nothin'.

SERENA

Fine.

MISS DARCY

If it was up to me, I'd cut your tongue out just as soon as look at you.

SERENA

What else do you know?

MISS DARCY

First, tell me one thing: what's got you so sick over that woman? It ain't natural.

SERENA

It's not your business.

MISS DARCY

Why? Looks to me like you sweet on her.

SERENA

Spill it, big mama, or – I swear – I'll never leave you alone.

MISS DARCY

'Less I kill you.

SERENA

You do, and I will haunt you crazy, day and night, until you croak.

MISS DARCY

And as old as I am, I sho ain't lookin' for nothin' to worry my sleep. Alright, then. As young as you is I reckon you been in the world long enough to know there's times when it ain't fit for nothin' but the devils comfort.

SERENA

This – coming from a whore?

MISS DARCY

Honey, there's things even a whore can't stomach.

SERENA

What do you know?

MISS DARCY

She ought to have killed him. When I put everything together and look at it good, the po' child should have croaked him. Like the dog that he was. Didn't matter if he was her own blood. He won't fit to live.

SERENA

Her child's father . . . ?

MISS DARCY

Matter fact, split. Before you get hurt. Or worse.

SERENA

The story's not done, though, is it, big mama?

MISS DARCY

Honey, go on with your life. Forget Mertie. Turn your back on all this shit. Run! Or, before you know it, you'll make good on your promise to kill that no 'count nigger.

SERENA

Sam?

MISS DARCY

He told me what you said.

SERENA

But that was a joke. Why would I want to kill –

(Silence as Serena realizes)

MISS DARCY

Mertie'd come to me and said she wanted it tore out. My mama'd been one who saw to that kind of thing in the town where I was raised. And was paid quite well for what she knew. She passed the same knowledge to me. I told Mertie, yes – I'd see to getting her free of it. I just won't gon do it for nothin'. She gave me part of the money she took from you. The rest of it she used to leave town and hole up in Texas. Seems she was tight with a lady out there who offered to set 'er up.

Now listen: you ought to know I love Sam, just the same. And won't nothin' change that.

(Miss Darcy exits. Mertie enters. She's in the dressing room of the strip joint. She is dressed and is preparing to leave for the night when Sam appears suddenly. Serena stands in the shadows, watching the action)

Going someplace?
SWEET SAM

I'm going home.
MERTIE

Oh?
SWEET SAM

MERTIE
With all the scratch I turned over . . . the owner . . . he said I could go ahead and call it a night. He said I did good.

SWEET SAM
And he sho hit the spot on that. I just saw you out there, girl. And I'll be damned twice over if I ain't seen moves that'd heat the blood in a snake!

MERTIE
Sam, what do you want?

SWEET SAM
You got to ask?

MERTIE
They tell me you here putting together another house.

SWEET SAM
My business is expanding, yeah. That's right.

MERTIE
Then wha' chu lookin' lean and hungry at me for?

SWEET SAM
Mertie, you know better than that. What kinda man is gon look to whore his own blood?

MERTIE
That's the thing – you can't put nothing past the devil.

SWEET SAM

Like you'd know that devil if you saw 'im.

MERTIE

Let me be, Sam. Gon to your house of whores and rot with 'em. What happened between us is dead. You hear me? Dead! It took some doing, but I killed it. And it's as dead as them long gone years.

SWEET SAM

You wrong, sweet thing. Those years yet live. Like fire and anger . . . they yet live.

(He motions to kiss her. She turns away and pulls a gun)

MERTIE

And right here is where they die.

SWEET SAM

Don't you make me mad, now, girl.

MERTIE

T' hell which you. Split! Or I swear, I'll plug you like a hog.

SWEET SAM

Woman, you need to think about what you doin' . . .

MERTIE

Don't worry. I won't allow the satisfaction.

SWEET SAM

Meaning, to even it all up, you'll cap yourself, too?

MERTIE

That's right. You'll pull up a losing hand whichever way it's turned over.

SWEET SAM

You can't run from me.

MERTIE

Sam, I swear to the living God, I'll settle this thing right here if you don't get in the wind –

(He quickly grabs the gun from Mertie, then smiles)

SWEET SAM

A man can't help himself when something gets in his head . . . and stays there –

(Sam touches her face with tenderness)

MERTIE

Sam, please . . .

SWEET SAM

Mertie, you started this . . .

(He kisses her)

. . . Now I'm here to finish it.

(He motions for another kiss. Mertie vacillates, then – against her will – reciprocates. After a moment Sam breaks the kiss and sends Mertie on her way. Serena emerges from the shadows as Sam places the gun on the table)

Quit lookin' at me that-a way. Like I said – *she started it*. A long time ago, or did Miss Darcy tell you that much of it?

(Soft music is heard. Mertie emerges as a young teenaged girl, wearing a very pretty summer dress)

MERTIE

Look at this dress mama passed down to me, Sam. You like it? I feel just like a grown woman with it on. Don't it look good?

(She goes to Sam. Music is heard and they dance)

Dance with me, Sam. You ain't got t' be scared. Gon and hold me real close . . . That's the way. Close. Like them women I see you with at that joint up the road. I look at you through the window, Sam . . . dancing so close. Looking so sweet. It does somethin' to me. It moves something way down.

(She takes his hand and places it between her legs)

All those pretty woman . . . dancing for you . . . working themselves crazy for you.

(She kisses him deeply)

I always knowed you had it in you to be a pimp.

SWEET SAM

If this thing with her and me had kept on, I might not be the man I am now. Sweet Sam'd be her chump.

MERTIE

You can't run from me.

SWEET SAM

Damn if I didn't know it. Like a man who can't run from himself.

(She releases him and exits back into the darkness)

It only got sweeter as time went on. Until she got knocked up. After that, it went sour. I don't know why, but all of a sudden, Mertie went plumb out of her head. Even went as far as to leave home.

SERENA

Your own . . . y – your own . . .

SWEET SAM

Yes, but it didn't mean she won't a fine woman to me, too. And, just to show that even a pimp's got a heart, when she came to me for money, I offered instead to take care of her and that baby. She won't having it. In fact, that spooked her even more'n totin' my seed.

(He laughs. Silence)

Oh, come on, now. It could've always been worse. Right?

(He kisses Serena)

She's gone now. She done split. My whores are doing their thing. And right here, there's you and me.

(Another kiss)

I'm coming to hear you sing tomorrow night. Don't worry. I'll sit in the back. I know they ain't used to too many niggers in Santa Monica. I'll be hiding at the bar. Out of sight, out the way. Alright?

When you're finished, I'll take you to this haunt to hear a singer goes by the name of Ruby Gleason – big woman, with a set of pipes that can knock over a wall. We'll see her and treat ourselves to chicken dinner, Cajun style. Oh, yeah! The folks doing the cooking are from Lou'sana, just like me. And by the way, I'm known in this joint, dig? Which means, when they see me with my fine gray prize nobody's gon get rattled. I might be from S.D. by way of New Orleans, but my name's been heard out here. Loud and hard. All up and down this West coast.

(Yet another kiss)

SERENA

Don't forget the fact that you're a pimp. And I could ruin you. I could very easily take down everything. You're playing a ragged game, daddy. Which tells me you either like to live dangerously, or you're stupid.

SWEET SAM

And ain't a stupid nerve under my skin. I know what I'm doing.

(Serena suddenly takes up the gun on the table and points it at Sam)

SERENA

Are you sure?

SWEET SAM

What's this?

SERENA

Like you said – you're not stupid. Figure it out.

SWEET SAM

Well, I'll be damned! It makes sense now, don't it? *She got to you, too!* That hot nigger bitch went straight to your head, then right down to your cooch. Where she stayed. And yet lives. Now ain't that right?

(Serena aims. Sam holds a steely gaze. She struggles mightily with her emotions as she attempts futilely to steady the gun. She finally relents and weeps)

Come to think of it, blow! I done got tired of your ofay ass. You wanted advanced warning – there it is. Now get out my sight while I yet remain a gentleman. Or I'll forget myself and kick your ass out the door.

(Serena acknowledges, sets down the gun, pulls herself together and exits.
Lights fade)

(Lights rise on the backyard garden of a large home outside of Dallas, Texas. It is 1965. Serena is waiting, dressed smartly in a summer dress, hat, gloves and matching purse. After a moment, Mertie enters in a maids uniform. The two women take a moment and observe one another. They finally hug and cry in each other's arms)

MERTIE

Girl . . . I pulled a gun on you –

SERENA

I've forgotten about it . . .

MERTIE

I ain't –

SERENA

Not another word! We're done with it. Besides, it's been over three years. Now, how long do we have?

MERTIE

The Missus gave me the rest of the day off. I can run upstairs and change, and we'll be on our way.

SERENA

Oh, Mertie!

MERTIE

Honey, you look good enough to prop up in somebody's living room.

SERENA

And you . . .

MERTIE

Gon and say it! I look like Sad Sack warmed over.

SERENA

Oh, stop it!

MERTIE

It won't hurt my feelings.

SERENA

And it makes no difference to me how you look. And you still look great!

(They take in one another and hug again)

Listen – I just signed with Capitol Records. I go into the studio next month to cut an album –

MERTIE

I hear you gon make a picture!

SERENA

Yeah! I'm singing in two scenes. I've even got some dialogue. It's a start.

MERTIE

Who's in it with you?

SERENA

Well . . .

MERTIE

C'mon, girl. You fixin' to be a star! And I ain't letting you off easy.

SERENA

Mertie, it's a small role. It's not that big. Not really.

MERTIE

What is the matter with you? Honey, you gon be in a picture! Even if it ain't but two seconds, that's something.

SERENA

You're right.

MERTIE

Thank you. Now, who's in it with you?

SERENA

I'm not supposed to tell. In fact, one of the other lead is still in negotiation. Y' know, contract stuff.

MERTIE

Which means, whoever it is, they holding out for more money.

SERENA

Jesus, you know more about the business than I do.

MERTIE

Oh, hush up!

(They laugh. Silence)

I'm glad for you, baby.

SERENA

I missed you.

MERTIE

It's hard . . . it's hard to think about you.

SERENA

That won't be a problem. Not anymore. Mertie – I want you to come back with me. To Los Angeles.

(Silence)

MERTIE

I got a good life here in Texas. These folks I work for, the Missus and her husband, they treat me like I'm somebody. I'm almost raising their two boys. There's times when I don't feel like a maid matter fact. I reckon this must be what having a family is like.

SERENA

And do they know everything? About your life?

MERTIE

I reckon Sam spilled the beans.

SERENA

All of them. Well?

(Silence)

Then this can never be a real family. Not for you.

MERTIE

How come it can't? And who says they got to know anything but the Christian name of who serves them in their house? Beside that, Serena . . . *these folks are good to me*. Yes, I work hard, but I live good. I ain't got to watch my back every time the sun go down. I ain't shaking my naked tail to a bunch of two legged dogs all night for shit money. I go to church on Sunday. And I know decent folks now. On top of that . . . I'm not lonely no more.

SERENA

What about me? Were lonely with me? *I loved you*.

MERTIE

Serena . . . girl, I swear, you still as naïve as a kewpie doll.

SERENA

I still love you. Nothing will change that.

MERTIE

Well, guess what? The world ain't having it.

SERENA

Mertie . . .

MERTIE

No – Stop – STOP! I can't go back. I'm through with Los Angeles. What's in that town is dead to me. And ain't no need for me to rouse them evil dead spirits. It's dead, Serena. Dead!

SERENA

And what we had . . . is that dead?

(Silence)

I heard about everything from Sam. Why couldn't I have gotten it from you?

MERTIE

Folks can't reveal all their nakedness.

SERENA

But I would have helped you. In spite of everything, I would have helped, Mertie.

MERTIE

And to think I'd come to plant myself on that far shore to get out from under Sam. But when the devil wants a soul in hell, he's gon find you. He's gon run you down and, like some ol' dog, sniff you out the cracks like a possum. And when Sam came at me this second time, Serena . . . I didn't know how much I needed Gods hand. I had to find Him.

SERENA

A place to hide, in other words.

By the way . . . one of Sam's whores cut him to death.

(Mertie is surprised)

MERTIE

Sam could be smart when it suited him. I reckon over time, though, he just got too big for his underpants.

SERENA

And with that, he became reckless.

MERTIE

And stupid.

SERENA

Do you still get sick?

MERTIE

'Course.

SERENA

Can't you get help for . . .

(Mertie shakes her head)

I don't understand.

(Silence)

MERTIE

Everything'd been as sugar with me and Sam when we won't but kids. When I got pregnant, though, it all got serious, as if I'd come to be aware of what sin was. I went to a old woman blinded in one eye and paid her to abort that sin. She would stand over me one night at the start of spring. The moons back had been turned, and the stars were snuffed out as if God

Himself could not bear to look at me or the evil that was being taken out of my body.

Since then, on the first night at the beginning of spring, the sickness rears its wicked head. The Missus is kind enough to let me rest till it passes.

Curse Sam for what he brought over me! Curse him! And curse me for falling for the bargain!

(Serena comforts her. Silence)

You know . . . you can always stay here.

SERENA

In Texas?

MERTIE

Sure. Stay in Dallas. It can be a jumping ol' town when it wants to.

SERENA

Mertie, I can't live in Texas.

MERTIE

I'll be here.

SERENA

I can't stay in Texas.

MERTIE

And I ain't about to plant my foot back in no Los Angeles. Listen, do yourself a favor: forget me. Scratch this out of your life. Okay?

SERENA

You're killing me.

MERTIE

I know.

SERENA

It doesn't have to come to this.

MERTIE

It's gone, Serena. And it will do us both a heap of good if we let it die. Right here.

SERENA

Mertie, please . . .

MERTIE

It's dead. Now gon. Just . . . just go. Please.

(Silence. Serena starts to exit)

Best of luck with your record. And your new picture.

SERENA

Best of luck to you . . . and your new family –

(Serena breaks down. Her sobs are uncontrollable)

Goodbye, Mertie.

(She exits, leaving Mertie alone. We hear the faint sound of Serena singing the final bars of "*You Go To My Head.*" Mertie then succumbs and weeps bitterly. Lights fade)

(End of play)