

THE DIVA CLUB

A Play in Two Acts

by

J. E. Robinson

As the daughters of Lessie and Aply Freeman meet to help their nephew prepare for a new life in Cincinnati in 1948 Memphis, their sister “Mother Susie” makes an announcement about her plans that disturbs everyone.

THE DIVA CLUB

Cast of Characters

“The Freeman Sisters”

Mrs. (Marilyn) Jacques

Mrs. (Thelma) Jones

Mrs. (Rebecca) Huey

Mother Susie, a/k/a, Mrs. Susie Malone

These are women of a certain age, generally mature. The actors, however, needn't be.

THE DIVA CLUB

Act One

Scene I

SETTING: South Memphis, circa. 1948, inside the kitchen of Mrs. Stone. At curtain, her sister MRS. JACQUES sorts through a basket of laundry, socks for a high school baseball team, separating them into piles based upon colors. Her sister MRS. JONES ENTERS, carrying a box of “laundry flakes.”

MRS. JONES

Spit on them, and you’ll get them clean. I tell you, spit, maybe with a bit baking soda in it—that will break up anything! And do nothing to the color or the cloth! Try it. You’ll see, Mrs. Jacques, you see.

MRS. JACQUES

Best let Mrs. Stone take care of that. Them’s her grass and dirt stains. Hers to do. She can worry about the spit if she wants to, Mrs. Jones. I just agreed to sort.

MRS. JONES

Suit yourself to sort and not spit, Mrs. Jacques—

MRS. JACQUES

(busying herself with sorting)

I suit to sort. I suit to sort.

MRS. JONES

(exasperated)

Haven’t changed since we were girls...Miss Lessie’s right! Like doing things the long way—

MRS. JACQUES

Miss Lessie And Mister Ably right: you like telling how to do! Just like we were girls!

MRS. JONES

Definitely! When we were girls!

MRS. JACQUES

(her turn for exasperation)

Well, don’t take there gaping, Mrs. Jones, with them laundry flakes in hand. Help me help Mrs. Stone before her boy arrives! Put that box of flakes down, and get to sorting. They ain’t going to sort, at least with you looking.

MRS. JONES

(beginning to sort socks as well)

Well, you put it like that, Mrs. Jacques, and I show you a thing or two about sorting—

MRS. JACQUES

Yes, ma'am, Mrs. Jones, like Miss Lessie said, "Say call me a Missouri mule. Please show me!"

(Furiously competing, the sisters proceed through the laundry, sorting by colors. Occasionally, Mrs. Jones spits on the grass and dirty stains, rubbing her spit in, as Mrs. Jacques reacts negatively. Mrs. Jones ignores her sister's reaction. Eventually, though, Mrs. Jacques also spits on the stains as she sorts. Together, they race through the laundry. Their sister MRS. HUEY ENTERS, carrying a sack of additional laundry.)

MRS. JACQUES

(perturbed by the new laundry)

Your numbers hit again this afternoon, Mrs. Huey?

MRS. HUEY

(measuring laundry flakes)

Mrs. Jacques, you know I don't do the numbers but on Tuesday, and only at a new moon. Bad, bad, real bad luck, otherwise—

MRS. JONES

Told you, Mrs. Jacques: Mrs. Huey, she got a page marked in her book for that!

MRS. JACQUES

And you know Mrs. Huey got a mink for that from last time, marked!

MRS. JONES

"Page turner, page turner!"

MRS. JACQUES

Mrs. Huey's numbers, they know a thing or two about turning page. Mrs. Huey, hit them horses, too?

MRS. HUEY

I know nothing about no horse. And I know nothing about a page—

MRS. JACQUES

(mockingly)

And, what was that, what was that, from Butterfly McQueen? "I don't know nothing about birthing no babies!" Hear her, Mrs. Jones, like "Gone with the Wind!"

(Mrs. Jacques and Mrs. Jones mock Mrs. Huey. Taking her ribbing in good humor, Mrs. Huey sweeps up a pile of sorted baseball socks and, measured laundry flakes in hand, MRS. HUEY EXITS.)

MRS. JONES

(singing after Mrs. Huey)

"Gone, with the Wind!" Swwoooooosshhhh!!!

MRS. JACQUES

Mrs. Huey might say she don't do numbers, but on Tuesdays, only at a new moon, and she claim "I don't know nothing about no horses," but the way that woman sashays with laundry, I am telling you, Miss Lessie and Mister Ably my witness, that woman moves with that boy's laundry like she's making them horses ride! Mark my word, Mrs. Jones: Mrs. Huey filled her purse this afternoon, if I ever seen it! What now?

MRS. JONES

(looking in the laundry sack)

Team jerseys.

MRS. JACQUES

(stunned)

Jerseys?! Are we helping our nephew Norris Stone get a bonus from his school? Or what?--Norris Stone planning to drop his aunts in the grave? With baseball laundry?

MRS. JONES

Miss Lessie and Mister Ably still alive, they tell Norris "cut me your switch!" Least they do for him making his aunts clean them boys' baseball laundry. That boy don't need no job in the post office to call him to Cincinnati. This pile, I will chase him there!

MRS. JACQUES

I beat you to him, Mrs. Jones.

MRS. JONES

I beat me to him! The things kin don't talk into kin! Heavenly Father from Up Above, Miss Lessie and Mister Ably could only see!

MRS. JACQUES

Mrs. Huey lug in another laundry sack from the front porch, and Norris can't hop a train to Cincinnati fast enough for me! I give him a sleeping car ticket for that! Tell these ol' so-and-so's "spit on your socks yourselves!" "Gone, with the Wind!" Ssswwwwoooooosssshhhhh!!!

(Mrs. Jones stands at the kitchen sink, looking out of the window, as if at Mrs. Huey.)

MRS. JACQUES

Mrs. Huey at her business yet?

MRS. JONES

Not even near. I hear her, but don't see her. Not even near. Watching them durn birds, probably.

MRS. JACQUES

(also at the kitchen sink, looking out of the window)

"Just like we was girls?"Hm. There she go over there, looking at birds. Conjuring Tuesday's number, probably.

MRS. JONES

Only for a “new moon,” now.

MRS. JACQUES

Mrs. Huey...book reading, page turning, bird watching—

MRS. JONES

That’s how she stay lucky—

MRS. JACQUES

Must be. Buy her a hat and a vicuna coat, with that! Shut up Mister Crump when he comes through, looking for votes!

MRS. JONES

I would like that. Find some way shutting up Crump, since before the Depression, when Young Robert was around—

MRS. JACQUES

Don’t wish for that Young Robert! Young Robert Church is done, just like his bank. He’s high, high on that hog in Chicago, and left Memphis, Tennessee, to them Democrats like Crump. But, Mrs. Huey wins big from that page turning and bird watching Tuesday—

MRS. JONES

Only for a “new moon,” now—

MRS. JACQUES

“New moon Tuesday”...”vicuna coat Wednesday!”

MRS. JONES

I say!

MRS. JACQUES

Crump got that “shut up Thursday!”

(referring to Mrs. Huey, “outside”)

There. She took to agitating!

(Quickly, Mrs. Jacques and Mrs. Jones try to look busy preparing to sort the new laundry sack. MRS. HUEY ENTERS again, empty measuring cup in hand. Mrs. Huey takes work gloves from the cupboard.)

MRS. JONES

(noticing her hands!)

There that Norris Stone go! I broke a nail! And I just did these, the other day! That moon full, or what?

MRS. JACQUES

(correcting Mrs. Jones)

“New moon.”

MRS. HUEY

Tuesday night. New moon, Tuesday.

MRS. JONES
(mockingly)

You shopping Wednesday, Mrs. Huey?

MRS. HUEY
(matter-of-fact)

The thought occurred. But I got to see my numbers right. Mrs. Stone got her chicory here?

MRS. JACQUES

Help yourself. She still like Mama Lessie: she let it sit in the icebox after brewing. (Taking a coffee pot from the refrigerator, Mrs. Huey pours a cup or two of chicory into a tin pan, setting the pan on the stove to warm. Mrs. Jacques and Mrs. Jones sort the laundry sack.)

MRS. JACQUES
(Nudging Mrs. Jones, slyly)

“Manicure Friday.”

(Mrs. Jacques and Mrs. Jones share a laugh, sly and suppressed, at Mrs. Huey’s expense.)

MRS. HUEY
(oblivious, sort of)

I didn’t catch that, Mrs. Jacques.

MRS. JONES

She asked whether I thought Norris would head to Cincinnati Friday. Mrs. Stone didn’t say when the post office expecting him for work. We were wondering about that. I don’t know.

MRS. JACQUES

I don’t, either.

MRS. HUEY

I sure don’t. Mrs. Stone didn’t tell me, but she doesn’t tell me much of nothing, except “come help Norris with that baseball team’s laundry! He needs his bonus to get to Cincinnati to work at the post office—”

MRS. JONES

That’s about the size of what she told us, too!

MRS. HUEY

Got to be early Friday! Get up there before the train station closes Saturday, ready for work, first thing Monday. The school got his notice; that is all I know.

MRS. JONES

Most likely, they picked up a porter to replace him, already. I haven’t seen its posting. Crump must have already sent somebody.

MRS. JACQUES

That sounds like Crump: chair not cold, and, already, he got a butt in it! No wonder jobs go so fast!

MRS. HUEY

(checking the pan of chicory)

If so, Monday got no job for Norris Stone here! Monday, post office got a job in Cincinnati?---Norris Stone, get to Cincinnati by Monday. You know you can hear Mrs. Stone saying that. And, Norris Stone, listen to your mama! He needs to.

MRS. JONES

(referring to the pan on the stove)

Mrs. Huey, like Miss Lessie said, “watched pot don’t boil.”

MRS. JACQUES

Miss Lessie right about that. Mrs. Huey, if you need to watch, watch that washing machine agitating. You know full well that get nasty, so fast.

MRS. JONES

Yes, it does. Mrs. Stone says that is one contrary machine!

MRS. JACQUES

Yes, ma’am! It certainly is! I had to watch it fill, before I got here to sort—

MRS. JONES

Wasn’t that the same one Norris got his hand caught in, when he was a little boy?

MRS. JACQUES

Sure was. No more than just looking the other way, and it went south on her. I tell you, Mrs. Huey, you got to attend that washing machine, or it won’t agitate right. Not like a laundromat! Take my word for it, Mrs. Huey, my word!

MRS. JONES

Mine, too. Mister Ably, he would have a time keeping up with that thing, tinkering with it forever! Mister Ably would end up talking to himself about that one, from all the tinkering he’d do!

MRS. JACQUES

He sure would!

(After consideration, MRS. HUEY EXITS to the laundry. Quietly, Mrs. Jacques and Mrs. Jones peek at her. Together, they study her.)

MRS. JACQUES

(to Mrs. Jones, after studying Mrs. Huey)

She got herself a new number.

MRS. JONES

(sighing)

Going to them birds again! Yes, ma’am, set them dogs down and let them birds tell you what to do.

MRS. JACQUES

(referring to the pan)

It's commenced to steam. It's in the cupboard. You know Mrs. Huey's like Mister Aply. They like Kentucky along with their chicory.

(Mrs. Jones removes a bottle of Kentucky bourbon from the cupboard, adding a shot to the steaming chicory before claiming a shot for herself. Still watching Mrs. Huey, Mrs. Jacques also takes a shot of the bourbon. Mrs. Jones returns the bourbon to the cupboard and returns to Mrs. Jacques' side, watching Mrs. Huey at the washing machine.)

MRS. JACQUES

(in conspiracy)

Not a word in class meeting. Or at quarterly meeting.

MRS. JONES

(in agreement)

Mum. Even if the Presiding Elder shows up!

MRS. JACQUES

Especially, if the Presiding Elder shows up. No need to let him know we know the best.

MRS. JONES

No need, letting him give us some competition. Mister Crump won't like that!

MRS. JACQUES

Sure he won't. Crump say, "Reverend Presiding Elder, let me get some for your own!" Mrs. Presiding Elder would be ready for Conference, if that happens. (to Mrs. Huey) Keep sitting, dearie!

MRS. JONES

(straining to see)

What she do?

MRS. JACQUES

Acting like she ready to come in. She can't come in yet! The agitation isn't over.

(Mrs. Jones removes the pan from the burner, turning the burner off.) That's it!

Sit, Mrs. Huey, sit! Act like you still in that teachers' workroom at the schoolhouse!

She sits like she don't know what to do with herself.

MRS. JONES

Mrs. Huey needs some problems to correct, that's what she needs.

MRS. JACQUES

Yes, ma'am. Or more birds to watch. That number in her head, vicuna coat Wednesday, and pillbox hat, besides.

MRS. JONES

I told Mrs. Huey to try a pillbox. Much better looking than those Paris hats she wears. She got the face for it.

MRS. JACQUES

Don't she, though. Gone?

MRS. JONES
(sniffing the pan)

Gone!

MRS. JACQUES

Hit her. I'll take it out.

(Mrs. Jones prepares a cafe au lait, first pouring cold milk in a coffee cup, then adding the warmed chicory, set on a saucer. MRS. JACQUES EXITS, drink in hand. Taking this time for herself, Mrs. Jones pushes aside the piles of laundry and sits at the kitchen table with a glass of cold milk. Mrs. Jones rubs her knees—she has arthritis—and sighs wearily.)

MRS. JONES
(to herself)

I love me some of my dear sisters to death, but running their lives, that just tries the patience of Job! More glad to get them out of my hair, so I can hear myself—

(Mrs. Jones belches loudly) Thank goodness, none of them hear to hear—(Mrs. Jones belches loudly again. Modestly, she covers her mouth.) Miss Lessie and Mister Aibly! Bless me! Maybe...I could get these nails done Tuesday. New moon is good for doing nails, they say. Nobody gets their nails done on a new moon Tuesday—they all out and about, playing the numbers, I guess...

(still seated, Mrs. Jones scoots her chair to the telephone on the wall. Listening for the dial tone through the receiver, she dials [this is a rotary telephone] five numbers [sign of the times...exchanges weren't used] and waits for the other end to pick up. She speaks to her manicurist). "Manicure?...yes, ma'am, I need a manicure!...Mrs. Jones...first initial, "T"...yes, m'am, I was just in there, but they just don't make them socks like they used to...broke a nail...yes, ma'am, nail repair...squeeze me in?... 'Wednesday?' Why not Tuesday?...yeah, yeah, new moon Tuesday—'numbers!'"--- I forgot—Wednesday's fine...thank you very much, for fitting me in, yes, ma'am: nail repair. See you then. Please, have a good day. Good-bye."

(Mrs. Jones hangs up the phone, signified by the sound effect of a light bell tinkling. Mrs. Jones removes the Kentucky bourbon from the cupboard, pouring a shot into her milk.)

"Arthritis," hell! That's that ol' rheumatism, if Miss Lessie and Mister Aibly had a shot a day! (Mrs. Jones pours an additional shot into the milk, then returns the bourbon to the cupboard. She and her spiked cold milk sit amid the sorted laundry at the kitchen table.) This will take care of my body. Them joints, they may creak, but, look out, pappy!--they be happy!

(Mrs. Jones enjoys her spiked milk, no matter how her knees feel! MRS. JACQUES and MRS. HUEY ENTER.)

MRS. HUEY

(setting the cup and saucer in the sink)

Them knees stiff on you again, Mrs. Jones? You should try that turpentine liniment. Help the milk take that stiffness out. I swear by it, for my knees. Ben Franklin's got it on sale. I can pick you up some, if you want.

MRS. JONES

Much obliged, Mrs. Huey. Much obliged.

MRS. HUEY

Least I can do, for those buffalo collars you brought Friday.

MRS. JACQUES

Them collars was good fish!

MRS. JONES

Sure was. With spaghetti and cole slaw. Good eats!

MRS. HUEY

Turpentine liniment at Ben Franklin's, what, twelve cents—

MRS. JACQUES

If that.

MRS. HUEY

If that. Get two, costs a quarter. Amazing. Some of these yazzaboos from Mississippi, just slipped into town at dusk, after they got themselves shoes, and they sit there at the counter at Ben Franklin's, counting out them pennies, trying to get to twelve cents! Sorry suckers! Can't get a buffalo sandwich; got to settle for that carp, and no bread! Miss Lessie and Mister Ably love them! Miss Lessie and Mister Ably love them, good!

MRS. JONES

Next time you go to Ben Franklin's, Mrs. Huey, pick me up two. I got a quarter here. Somewhere.

MRS. HUEY

I got you, Mrs. Jones. I will go Wednesday. New moon Tuesday.

MRS. JACQUES

Shopping day Wednesday?

MRS. JONES

(sarcastically)

Ben Franklin's got vicuna coats?

MRS. HUEY

(oblivious to the sarcasm)

Upstairs, most likely. Ben Franklin's got everything.

MRS. JONES

For me, two will do. Not the vicuna; the turpentine liniment, I mean. My knees can wait until Wednesday. I'm good for the quarter then.

(Mrs. Huey rinses the cup and saucer in the sink, as Mrs. Jacques and Mrs. Jones salute

her back. Please flicker the stage lights, which catches the sisters' attention, a note of concern, as a fuse must be going out. Mrs. Jones rises to the occasion.)

MRS. JONES

(exiting)

Let me get that.

MRS. JACQUES

Need matches?

MRS. JONES

Mrs. Stone just like Miss Lessie and Mister Ably: box of matches and box of fuses, by the fuse box. Not a thing to it.

(MRS. JONES EXITS, heading to the cellar. Stage lights dim to almost dark. Mrs. Huey searches for the box of kitchen matches over the stove, without success.)

MRS. HUEY

Mrs. Jacques, Mrs. Stone must have a box of matches in here, somewhere!

MRS. JACQUES

Unless she let Norris take it to school. She might have let Norris take it.

MRS. HUEY

If a boy can sweet-talk his mama out of matches, it is Norris. Take her candle, too!

MRS. JACQUES

Knowing him—

MRS. HUEY

(frustrated by futile search)

Yes, ma'am! Knowing him!

(Mrs. Jacques joins the search for matches and for a candle. Amid the commotion, their sister MOTHER SUSIE ENTERS, using a simple flashlight. Mrs. Jacques finds a candle above the icebox.)

MOTHER SUSIE

(cracking a funny!)

Like I quoted Mamma and Daddy to Pat last time I was here: you got to pay Mister Crump his power bill! That man is serious about leaving you in the dark, if you don't!

MRS. HUEY

(to Mother Susie)

Oh, that's just you, Mrs. Malone.

MOTHER SUSIE

(to Mrs. Huey)

Yeah, Miss Rebecca, just plain Susie, here for the floor. Norris left yet?

MRS. JACQUES

He leaving today?

MOTHER SUSIE

Norris leaving remains a mystery, as far as his mama's concerned. Who knows? Us aunts will know when he gets to Cincinnati and remember to send us an Easter card. That is, if Norris still sends Easter cards. No telling what white-shoes Norris will give, when he finds himself in Cincinnati. Good luck to him.

MRS. HUEY

Mrs. Malone, knowing Norris Stone, he's waiting on the money to buy the ticket!

MOTHER SUSIE

Who knows, Miss Rebecca. Who knows.

(The stage lights return to full, as Mrs. Jones has changed the fuse. Mother Susie turns off her flashlight. Mother Susie claps her hands.)

Light! Bless me! Now I can see. Let me get to this floor. That floor looks worst than the last time I was here. Like Norris tracked in some mud, and Pat couldn't begin to stop him. And, my, my!--that boy's feet! Them feet belong some place!

(Removing her coat and hat, Mother Susie begins to sweep the floor with Mrs. Stone's straw broom. Mrs. Jacques and Mrs. Huey take turns staying out of Mother Susie's way. Mother Susie hums softly to herself as she sweeps. When she gets to the door, Mrs. Jacques holds the door open for Mother Susie to scuttle the dust out. MRS. JONES ENTERS as Mrs. Jacques clothes the door.)

MRS. JONES

Knew you'd make it, Mrs. Malone!

MOTHER SUSIE

Help Pat get Norris on his train? Thelma, I wouldn't miss that for the world! Did Pat leave that bucket and mop where I left it, still out back?

MRS. HUEY

I saw it out there, a while ago. You might need to rinse it first.

MRS. JACQUES

Remember that rain Saturday morning was something. Cats, dogs, and everything else!

MRS. JONES

Yes, ma'am, almost like it was in nineteen-hundred-and-twenty-and-eight!

MOTHER SUSIE

Just like Pat: tell her something, she does opposite! Just like a caterer! I told her, "never leave that mop in the rain!" Gets the mud in, starts to mildew, and, next she knows, the smell—

MRS. JACQUES

You know you can't make grown folks do! They do what they want, when they want, the way they want! Now, you do know that about Pat—I mean, Mrs. Stone—

MRS. JONES
(to Mrs. Jacques)

How many times we tried telling her how to do Norris? Mrs. Stone never listens to us.

MRS. JACQUES
(agreeing)

Not one blessed bit! So, of course, Mrs. Stone set a fresh mop on the back porch, out in the rain, where—of course!--it ends up soiled and stanky, and expect you, Mrs. Malone, to clean with it!

MOTHER SUSIE
(resigned, shrugging)

Still a mop. Rinse it again, do bleach and baking soda in the water, and the dirt on the floor from Norris' feet, just won't know the difference. Five minutes, and that ol' Bess Truman can see herself in it. Time me! Do what you can do, do it gladly, when you do what you serve. Between us!

MRS. HUEY

“Us between!”

(Applauding, MOTHER SUSIE EXITS. Mrs. Huey dries the cup and saucer with a dish towel.)

MRS. JACQUES
(to Mrs. Jones, in conspiracy)

No way, Mrs. Presiding Elder going to find out about that, neither.

MRS. JONES
(poo-pooing)

Oh, shush!

MRS. HUEY
(oblivious, still)

What was that?

MRS. JONES

Like Miss Lessie and Mister Ably say, “nothing, Sister! Just a cat!”

MRS. JACQUES

“Meow!”

MRS. HUEY
(laughing)

Carry on, like Norris Stone let him in again!

MRS. JACQUES

Must have! Like Mister Louis Jordan's song go, “nobody here but us—”

(Mrs. Jones silences Mrs. Jacques with a pinch of her arm. Mrs. Jacques reacts loudly.)

MRS. JONES

Mrs. Stone needs a fresh box of fuses. She's all out—

MRS. JACQUES

You didn't use a penny, did you?

MRS. JONES

Of course not. I didn't want to burn the house down. But, she's out. No telling when she'd need one again. The fuses, I mean. Not the house. Can't run a household without fuses. Doing without them worse than a headache. Mrs. Stone knows that. I'd tell her, but who am I?---she never listens to me.

MRS. HUEY

I'll put fuses on my list for Wednesday.

MRS. JACQUES

(slyly sarcastic)

Ben Franklin's got a sale on fuses?

MRS. HUEY

Must have. Ben Franklin's got a sale on everything. If not now, then by Wednesday. New moon Tuesday.

(Mrs. Jones washes and dries her hands at the kitchen sink.)

MRS. JONES

(looking at the washing machine outside)

That thing still agitating? Mrs. Stone got that ol' slow washing machine...some ol' slow!

MRS. JACQUES

You telling me! Norris Stone needs to show he loves his mama, and get her a washing machine that isn't all decrepit, like that ol' dead Roosevelt, with his first post office paycheck, when he gets up in Cincinnati!

MRS. JONES

I'm telling you, that boy sure should! Miss Lessie and Mister Aibly still here, they'd keep him from sleeping a wink until he did! I tell you, they'd tell him! That boy never hear the end of it from them!

MRS. HUEY

That washing machine Miss Lessie had way back when.

MRS. JACQUES

Used to do my diapers in that washing machine, when she had it!

MRS. JONES

Me, too.

MRS. JACQUES

And run bleach through it after!

MRS. JONES

Baking soda, too. Took its time back then, when it was new. Mister Aibly, he'd dig a new trench in the time that machine took, then whittle himself a stirring stick! Some kind of ol' some kind of slow!

(Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Huey begin sorting the soiled baseball jerseys by color, setting them on the kitchen table as they go, careful about their nails, also spitting on the dirt. Playfully, Mrs. Jones throws a clean jersey at Mrs. Huey, and the sisters share a sisterly laugh.)

MRS. JACQUES

(teasingly)

Now, now, girls! Like Miss Lessie said: “don’t play laundry!”

(As they sort, Mrs. Jacques produces a clothesline and a bucket of clothespins from the cupboard. From outside comes the sound of splashing water.)

MRS. JACQUES

(startled, excited)

That darn washing machine!

(Suddenly, the sisters rush outside, for the washing machine has agitated itself over; ALL EXIT. The door closes. MRS. HUEY ENTERS. She picks up the work gloves, taking them.)

MRS. HUEY

(reading work gloves label)

“Ben Franklin’s.”

(MRS. HUEY EXITS.)

END OF SCENE I

ACT ONE

SCENE II

SETTING: An hour has passed, the first load of baseball socks done, washing machine spill notwithstanding, and now ready for drying. The stage lights feel cool, as dusk has begun, casting shadows on the kitchen stage. At first, the light and shadows occupy the stage alone. What’s that in the background? Cicadae?

A heavy sigh, and MOTHER SUSIE ENTERS, carrying a full laundry basket of baseball socks. Quietly, she hums a spiritual to herself (“Jacob’s Ladder,” most likely...pick!). Setting the laundry basket aside, Mother Susie attempts to attach the clothesline across the stage, with difficulty. Her joints and back would appreciate a second pair of hands helping.

A failed attempt, and Mother Susie attacks raising the line with greater resolve. She needs more light; she lifts the kitchen shade—stage lights brighten when she does—and she raises the line more successfully.

Line up, Mother Susie kicks the laundry basket into place and begins pinning baseball socks on the line to dry.

MRS. HUEY ENTERS, carrying an empty measuring cup and humming “Ain’t Nobody Here But Us Chickens.” She dances to her tune.

MOTHER SUSIE

(amid her pinning)

There you go, Miss Rebecca, in that jitterbug. You know you too old to jitterbug. You got yourself a fish?

MRS. HUEY

I got myself a fish, Mrs. Malone! I got myself a fish!

MOTHER SUSIE

(pausing pinning...her back!)

That so? Got to be a full net, full of catfish and buffalo, if there ever was one, to get you dancing in shoes like that! What type of fish you say you caught for yourself?

MRS. HUEY

Goldfish!

MOTHER SUSIE

(incredulous)

“Goldfish?”

MRS. HUEY

Yes, ma’am, Mrs. Malone! Goldfish! A hundred-K gold, goldfish!

MOTHER SUSIE

Eating that will get you to heaven.

MRS. HUEY

(rejoicing)

Yes, ma’am!

MOTHER SUSIE

(returning to pinning)

Cat would turn my head. That, or buffalo. Two of them—good-sized!---and a loaf of Wonderbread feed a multitude. No miracle about that. Do yourself an old fashioned Love Feast Richard Allen would really love. Hand me them socks, Miss Rebecca.

(Mrs. Huey takes a fist full of baseball socks, feeding them to Mother Susie one at a time.)

MRS. HUEY

(amid the socks)

I thought you gave up on Love Feasts and Richard Allen when you got holy roller and turned Sanctified. You sound like you still attend conference. Some I know would toss you from Mason Temple if you still said “boo” about Richard Allen.

MOTHER SUSIE

Now, now. They toss me if they want to; I find me my place to go.

(Mother Susie’s joints have her dropping socks; like a good sister, Mrs. Huey retrieves them for her, doing some pinning on her own.)

MOTHER SUSIE

You got yourself a good number?

MRS. HUEY

(confident about success)

I got me the best number!

MOTHER SUSIE

That a fact? New moon Tuesday—best moon for playing. Be sure to put your dollar in; it just might mean something. Daddy liked playing his on the new moon.

Remember: he got his Model A that way.

MRS. HUEY

Yes, ma’am, Mother Susie. I remember. Model A was a good automobile for the money.

MOTHER SUSIE

Good, and good enough. Load up a whole household, and get out of the state before dawn with it. Good automobile! Best new moon buy his numbers got! And Daddy kept up with those numbers, seeing if lightning struck twice in a bottle, and it hit for him a couple times! Daddy Aibly, he swore by them new moon Tuesday numbers!

(Aches and pains lead Mother Susie to stop pinning socks. Mother Susie sits at the kitchen table. Mrs. Huey takes to pinning alone in her stead. Mother Susie begins feeding her clothespins.)

MRS. HUEY

(anticipating a thought, perhaps)

What is it?

MOTHER SUSIE

How you mean?

MRS. HUEY

That sigh says something is on my big sister’s mind. How now?

MOTHER SUSIE

(deflecting, evading...)

You know any good sales Wednesday, Miss Rebecca?

MRS. HUEY

Aside from Ben Franklin's?

MOTHER SUSIE

Might could.

MRS. HUEY

(busy with pinning socks, sort of...)

What was that dream about this time?

MOTHER SUSIE

Birds, flying south in summer.

MRS. HUEY

I don't like your dreams. Dreams fool a people who need to remain awake. Say nothing to Pat. She's under enough, with Norris heading north. Fat birds?

MOTHER SUSIE

Hungry blackbirds. At flood.

MRS. HUEY

Not much for a blackbird to go hungry flying south in summer. They find buckshot to feed on. They make sure of that.

MOTHER SUSIE

(sighing, perhaps...perhaps her sugar is low)

And what of them blackbird that remain? Should buckshot feed them alone?

(Opening the icebox, Mrs. Huey serves Mother Susie a cup of milk. Mother Susie sets it aside, untouched. Suddenly, MRS. JACQUES and MRS. JONES ENTER, carrying a basket of laundered baseball jerseys.)

MRS. JACQUES

(continuing a conversation from outside)

Yes, ma'am! Saw it, with my own---these two!---eyes, plain as day! There, he was, porter at the barbershop in the Peabody!---look at him cross-eyed, and he takes to whimpering, like Massa Charlie say he's fixing to sell him and his children down the river! Just blubbering a regular ol' storm! Carrying on, like you wouldn't believe!

MRS. JONES

(indignant)

Shame on him! His mother see him, carrying on like that, she'd give him a reason to cry!

MRS. JACQUES

I wanted to! I couldn't believe it, until I saw it myself! Embarrassing! They all looking at him in that barbershop wondering "what's this fool crying about now?" They swore that boy lost his fool mind, along with his nerve! If Norris gets away from that, he leaves not a moment too soon!

MRS. JONES

Yes, ma'am!

(surprised at the lack of progress with the socks)

From the looks of it, Norris will be up in Cleveland, and his aunts still studying on hanging his baseball socks. His aunts studying hard!

(Mother Susie drinks from the cup of milk.)

MRS. JACQUES

(interceding)

Now, now, Thelma. Let's step back, and see the world a different way. Your manicurist got any more time Wednesday?

MRS. JONES

Wednesday after new moon Tuesday?

MRS. JACQUES

She might could. Let's see.

(Mrs. Jones listens for the dial tone on the kitchen telephone.)

MRS. JACQUES

Now, now. Let's use the extension in the bedroom. Big sister and little sister, busy jackdawing. Let them two jackdaw together. All that hot air, might get them socks to dry.

(Mrs. Jacques coaxes Mrs. Jones by the arm. MRS. JACQUES AND MRS. JONES EXIT through the house, leaving their laundry. Mrs. Huey pours herself a cup of cold milk, adding a shot of Kentucky bourbon to it in full view of Mother Susie, who doesn't like it but says nothing.)

MOTHER SUSIE

(prompting)

"And?..."

MRS. HUEY

(returning the drinks to storage)

"And?..." It's not for me. Blackbirds grown; blackbirds gone! If it was ever my place, not mine now. Now, is it?

MOTHER SUSIE

Bless them blackbirds; don't bless them out.

MRS. HUEY

After all else that transpired, Susie, I just don't have it in me to bless out. Them blackbirds, they just got to try to finally learn on their own. Maybe they will, eventually. Maybe they will, before some cotton picker find them in his field, dead.

MOTHER SUSIE

(dismissive)

That isn't going to happen.

MRS. HUEY

Last time, it didn't happen. One time, it is all it needs to happen.

(Mrs. Huey salutes Mother Susie with her milk, drinking. Mother Susie returns the salute, drinking as well. A second drink proceeds in mutual silence. Mother Susie looks in the ice box, finally.)

MOTHER SUSIE

(from the refrigerator)

Pat got herself some chicory brewed in here?

MRS. HUEY

Chicory? This late? That will keep you up, Mrs. Malone.

MOTHER SUSIE

I need to keep myself up, Miss Rebecca. Keeps me from seeing blackbirds...yes! Chicory! She got it fresh?

MRS. HUEY

You know how Mrs. Stone likes her chicory: fresh and mild.

MOTHER SUSIE

"Fresh and mild!" Yes, ma'am! I like that, too! Yes, ma'am! I like that!

(Pouring the chicory into a pan, Mother Susie lights the pan on the stove.)

MOTHER SUSIE

Care for it, Miss Rebecca? Or you taken care of?

(Mrs. Huey answers by raising her cup of milk. Mother Susie attends to the pan on the stove.)

MOTHER SUSIE

(occupied, in a way)

I heard Reverend H. T. Primm from New Orleans preach once. Yes, ma'am! He can preach!

MRS. HUEY

Something tells me you would have liked him!

MOTHER SUSIE

Tennessee boy!

MRS. HUEY

Some here want to see him make bishop.

MOTHER SUSIE

I can see that. Preaches like he could. Where's next general conference?

MRS. HUEY

Saint Louis' turn, I think.

MOTHER SUSIE

Saint Louis—home crowded for a Tennessee boy from New Orleans. Down home stampede. Yes, ma'am, Mrs. Huey! I like that! Give me a preacher in that pulpit, any old day! Get me talking, when they get going! No signifying, though. Can do without that.

MRS. HUEY

Pulpit's no place to bless out.

MOTHER SUSIE

Like Daddy used today, "plenty barrels do that." This chicory steaming yet?

MRS. HUEY

(examining at the pan)

Eventually.

MOTHER SUSIE

"Eventually." Spoken like a schoolteacher. Let me get my milk. My chicory evaporates, and it be gone before too long. You sure?

MRS. HUEY

(referring to her spiked milk)

No, ma'am, I'm fine.

(Mother Susie combines the milk and the chicory in the pan, stirring with a spoon.)

MOTHER SUSIE

(still stirring)

"Are we there yet?" Hm. "Eventually." Like Daddy used today, "events happen Eventually"..."plenty barrels do that." Come on, pan! Steam!

MRS. HUEY

That's just like you, Mrs. Malone. Never patient. You would have been a professional quality baker, and good at it—

MOTHER SUSIE

(indignant, sort of)

"Would have been?" I was good enough—

MRS. HUEY

Don't give me that. You know you would have been better.

MOTHER SUSIE

Look at this here. No bones on my bones; this is good meat, flesh. My baking skills kept me fed and raised me mine...your nieces and nephews Malone got meat on their bones, too—

MRS. HUEY

You know what I mean. You could have done anything you wanted to, with your baking. Gone anywhere, fed anybody. Could still hear Crump bragging about your lemon meringue to the Governor. That would have brought you anyplace. Talk to me: why didn't you follow where it could take you? Why here?

MOTHER SUSIE

(sitting at the table)

“Why here?” Booker T. said “cast your bucket where you stand.” Remember? Good Lord say, Good Lord say “You! Here!” You go, there. How about you, Mrs. Huey? You could go anywhere, and you stayed in Memphis. You heard, “You! Here!” Here, you stayed. Mrs. Susie Freeman Malone, too, Mrs. Huey. Mrs. Susie Freeman Malone, too. “You! Here!” Me, there!

MRS. HUEY

(about the pan)

It's steaming.

MOTHER SUSIE

Cut it off, will you?

(Mrs. Huey turns off the stove, placing the pan on a cold burner.)

MOTHER SUSIE

Is that a smell?

MRS. HUEY

Just the chicory getting hot, probably.

MOTHER SUSIE

Probably.

(Mrs. Huey prepares a cup and saucer for the warmed chicory. Mrs. Huey looks outside.)

MRS. HUEY

Blackbirds! Feeding on them doggone locusts! “Plague upon plague.”

MOTHER SUSIE

Mama or daddy used to say that?

MRS. HUEY

Now, that's one we can't toss at Mister Aibly Freeman. Miss Lessie came up with that. Nanny Dorcas might have handed down that one, but no telling.

MOTHER SUSIE

No telling.

(Mrs. Huey serves Mother Susie warmed chicory and milk.)

MOTHER SUSIE
(very appreciative)

Thank you, kindly, ma'am.

MRS. HUEY

Blessings.

(Mrs. Huey places a teaspoon before Mother Susie as well. Mother Susie stirs the cup before drinking.)

MRS. HUEY

Gently, Mother Susie. Gently.

(inhaling, sniffing)

I smell a smell, too.

MOTHER SUSIE

Isn't it, though?

MRS. HUEY

Let me check that—

(SOUND EFFECT: Kitchen telephone rings. In this day and age, the 1940s, please allow telephone to ring five times. Mrs. Huey answers.)

MRS. HUEY

(through telephone)

“Stone Residence?” ...oh, you got it, Mrs. Jacques!...Marilyn, you smell something up there? Susie and I smell something here...yes, I'm heading downstairs, to check the fuse box, right now.”

(Hanging up the telephone, MRS. HUEY EXITS outside, heading for the basement. Stopping time and action, the STAGE MANAGER ENTERS to address the audience.)

STAGE MANAGER

(to audience)

“Ladies and gentlemen: please remember this is a play. The actors refer to action in the play, THE DIVA CLUB, written by J. E. Robinson. This play stars [actor] as Mother Susie and [actor] as Mrs. Huey, with [actor] featured as Mrs. Jacques and [actor] featured as Mrs. Jones. They are NOT referring to anything actually in the theater. I am [name], the stage manager. This is written in the play by the playwright. Please stay in your seats! Thank you!”

MOTHER SUSIE

(to Stage Manager)

My sister Pat brews herself some good chicory. Funny tasting milk, though. Real kick! Want some?

(Keeping with his role, the Stage Manager declines. STAGE MANAGER EXITS. Action resumes, as Mother Susie continues enjoying the chicory. Mother Susie begins “His Eye

Is Upon The Sparrow,” unconcerned, calmed. Excited by the fear of a fire, MRS. JONES AND MRS. JACQUES ENTER, running.)

MRS. JONES

(grabbing the laundry line, whole)

Let’s get this out of here! If it smell like smoke, that school, they won’t give Norris Stone not one red cent!

(Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Jacques grab the laundry, hastily, preparing to exit.)

MRS. JONES

(excited)

This is a fire, Mrs. Malone! A fire! Come on, we got to get out of here!

MRS. JACQUES

(excited)

We got to vacate, Susie! We got to vacate!

(Mother Susie remains unperturbed, drinking chicory. Laundry in hand, MRS. JONES AND MRS. JACQUES EXIT, hurriedly. Mother Susie continues humming “His Eye Is Upon The Sparrow.” Finally, cup and saucer in hand, MOTHER SUSIE EXITS.)

MOTHER SUSIE

(EXITING)

Let me see what He got them blackbirds out here doing now...

END OF ACT ONE

THE DIVA CLUB

Act Two

Scene I

SETTING: Again, the kitchen of Mrs. Stone, South Memphis, 1948, but the Wednesday following. The lighting should insinuate slight smoke damage from the recent electrical fire. Instead of laundry, a coffee service sits on the kitchen table (this family knows how to entertain!), waiting to be washed after use.

Dressed for entertaining, MRS. JACQUES ENTERS, carrying a cup and saucer that she places in the sink before doing dishes. She runs water. Taking a white bar of soap, Mrs. Jacques peels off shavings to use in her dishwasher. The dishwasher lathers.

Please, after Mrs. Jacques loads the dishwasher with the coffee service, allow her to flail, as if struck by thought, alone. Then, sound effect: the telephone rings. Allow it to ring three to four times.

MRS. JACQUES

(calling out, calling off someone)

I got it in here!

(answering the telephone)

“Stone residence!”...This is...yes!...yes! Just a minute, let me write it down.

(Mrs. Jacques sets the receiver aside as she searches the utility drawer for pencil and paper. As she searches, MRS. JONES ENTERS, carrying a bundled tablecloth. MRS. JONES EXITS into the yard, just as Mrs. Jacques locates paper. Mrs. Jacques returns to the telephone.)...ma’am?---alright, ma’am, I am ready. (Mrs. Jacques listens to the message, writing it down. MRS. JONES ENTERS, having shaken out the tablecloth. As she passes the dishwasher, Mrs. Jones sprinkles baking soda into it, unbeknownst to Mrs. Jacques.) Yes, ma’am! I got it! Thank you! Thank you very much for telling me!...if you could, please tell Mrs. Stone that the Reverend Alston and the class leader made their visit, and just left...yes, ma’am!...that is fine!...mighty obliged!...thank you, very, very much!...good day!

(Mrs. Jacques hangs up the telephone receiver.)

MRS. JONES

(curious)

She made it?

MRS. JACQUES

She made it, fine. Staying with a member of the Missionaries while Norris works. So, Mrs. Stone is fine! Fine, and dandy Andy!

MRS. JONES

(pleased)

Alrighty! She'll help Norris get settled in Cincinnati.

MRS. JACQUES

Mrs. Stone will help Norris, soon enough.

(Mrs. Jacques returns to the dishwater. She notices its odd fizz. Mrs. Jones reacts as though the very picture of innocence. The sisters smile at each other. Mrs. Jacques peels additional soap shavings into the dishwater. Mrs. Jones collects the tablecloth and other table linen for the wash.)

MRS. JACQUES

(teasing)

Put a little spit with some baking soda on them stains.

MRS. JONES

(serious, but not inured to the teasing)

As sloppy as the Reverend Alston was, cooling his coffee in the saucer before drinking it, better believe it in me!

(From the cupboard, Mrs. Jacques produces the laundry flakes and the baking soda. Mrs. Jones takes the laundry flakes, nodding a thank you.)

MRS. JACQUES

(teasing)

Much obliged.

MRS. JONES

“Believe it in me?”...count on it in me! Report me to my class leader, if you want! I will guarantee Mrs. Stone coffee stain-free table linens! Count on it in me! Not one blessed soul can say that over me! I'll get her linens clean enough to wear at a cross burning, but they'll be clean!

MRS. JACQUES

(still teasing, but not really)

Yes, Thelma: Mama and Daddy told Nanny Dorcas eventually you'll be good for something.

(Insulted, in no small way, and in a huff, MRS. JONES EXITS to the porch, laundry and laundry flakes in hand. Mrs. Jacques turns to the dishes, washing a cup. MRS. JONES ENTERS again, taking the baking soda. MRS. JONES EXITS to the porch in a huff. Having had the last word, Mrs. Jacques smiles. The dishwashing proceeds. A slow rhythm and blues comes into Mrs. Jacques' head; humming, she begins a slow dance, lost somewhere, a memory, perhaps, captivating her. Let the stage lights dim, focusing upon her. A sepia glow would work, for this memory stems from the past. MRS. JONES ENTERS, spying her sister from the door, undiscovered. Mrs. Jacques wipes a tear from her eye. Mrs. Jones clears her throat, discreetly. The stage lights return to their former

presentation.)

MRS. JACQUES

(recovering composure)

Mrs. Stone's washing machine needs to act right this time. Mrs. Huey might have to stop by Ben Franklin's during a sale and buy a replacement.

MRS. JONES

Yes, ma'am, Mrs. Jacques, report me to my class leader! Mrs. Stone's old washing machine liked to make me lose my religion!

MRS. JACQUES

(laughing)

Mine, too! Mine, too! Mine, too!

MRS. JONES

Our pastors are going to be busy, writing down everything our class leaders go to say. Going to need that old baking soda to wash clean that!

(The sisters share an ironic laugh, perhaps as a senseless, girlish giggle that dies.)

MRS. JACQUES

(thoughtful, finally)

Mrs. Jacques asks, "can Thelma tell Marilyn a secret?"

MRS. JONES

(likewise...)

Mrs. Jones doesn't see why Thelma can't.

MRS. JACQUES

"Is it wrong to regret staying?"

MRS. JONES

(still thoughtful)

"Thelma doesn't think it is, since it was Thelma's choice." Mrs. Jones would say that is Thelma's secret. Would Mrs. Jacques let Marilyn tell Thelma her secret?

MRS. JACQUES

(after thought)

Surely.

(Mrs. Jacques busies herself with drying the dishes, steadily wiping her eyes in the process. Taking her answer, Mrs. Jones takes a vacuum sweeper from the closet. MRS. JONES EXITS into the house. SOUND EFFECT, a vacuum sweeper running, follows.)

MRS. JACQUES

(exasperated, to herself)

Mrs. Stone and her old, hand-me-down machines! Washing machine and canister vacuum sweeper! Canister vacuum sweeper and washing machine! If not one, it's done! If not done, it's one! Talk about a "goddamn!" Talk about some "goddamn!" Got to sit with both, because both, they're fit to be tied! Norris Stone, you need that post office pay to buy Mrs. Stone some new appliances! That's all I know! Talk "Goddamn!"

(Having run the vacuum sweeper, MRS. JONES ENTERS. Mrs. Jacques regains composure.)

MRS. JONES

Finished.

MRS. JACQUES

Me, too.

MRS. JONES

That washing machine agitating?

MRS. JACQUES

Agitating? Agitating.

MRS. JONES

We agitating about that washing machine agitating. Susie talk to you?

MRS. JACQUES

About what? What would Susie have to talk to me about?

MRS. JONES

About her idea to go back South? U-hm. I thought she did. Mrs. Malone never was one to keep her dreams to herself, as Miss Lessie and Mister Ably used to say. Good thing they're not here to hear them—that would worry them into a stroke, for sure.

MRS. JACQUES

Susie and her dreams, and Miss Lessie and Mister Ably would not be alone. She'd give entire South Memphis a stroke, complete, spreading the word she's going back South! South Memphis say "woman, you done lost your mind?" and fall over, dead.

MRS. JONES

That's for sure.

MRS. JACQUES

South Memphis end up calling her out her name, all kinds of "fool," in the process—

MRS. JONES

Yes, ma'am.

MRS. JACQUES

Turn around and ask us if Nanny Dorcas dropped her when she came out of Miss Lessie, in the first place—

MRS. JONES

Yes, ma'am! If that.

MRS. JACQUES

And that's not all, South Memphis just getting started with her!

MRS. JONES

That's why I was thinking about going back South with her.

MRS. JACQUES

Me, too.

MRS. JONES

South Memphis have to say Nanny Dorcas dropped us, too.

MRS. JACQUES

And left us plum foolish. They knew all that cotton picking during slavery did not leave our grandmother good hands.

(Sound effect: the telephone rings. MRS. JONES EXITS to check the washing machine. Mrs. Jacques allows the telephone to ring five times before answering.)

MRS. JACQUES

“Stone residence?...This is...the Reverend Alston?---no, ma'am! No, ma'am, he left us some time ago. His coffee stains, they aren't long for this world, either...I don't know, because he didn't say...making his rounds before prayer meeting at Payne Chapel, I suppose...yes, ma'am: it's Payne's turn, this Wednesday—I suppose yesterday's new moon got something or another to do with that, but you got to ask the Presiding Elder, if his number didn't come in, that is...yes, ma'am...yes, ma'am. That so! What you never heard of anybody doing!...that ol' Ben Franklin's, it got everything!...that so!...I see...Uh-hm...wait a minute, let me write this down...that so!...yes, ma'am, I see! Well, you know he's old when salad for lunch gives him a real woody, and salad for lunch is about the only thing that gives him a woody, but please don't quote me to the Reverend Alston, I'd have to deny my name!---just a minute: this girl must have something for me to write this down, for I am bound to forget.” (Setting the receiver down, Mrs. Jacques searches a utility drawer for a pencil and paper, but to no avail. She returns to the receiver.) “You still there?...keep holding, she's got nothing worth nothing in this kitchen, so I will have to check in the parlor, so keep on holding, I'll be a minute.”

(Setting the receiver in a utility drawer, MRS. JACQUES EXITS into the house. Vacant, the stage sits quietly in its lights, anticipating. MRS. JONES ENTERS and claims the receiver from the utility drawer.)

MRS. JONES

“Stone residence, Mrs. Jones speaking... Yeah!---how you?...the Reverend?---Mrs. Jacques tell you?...Oh, yes!---no!...well, when salad for lunch gives him a hard on, you know he's old, and when it's the only thing that gives him a hard on, you know he's too old!---time to call the Undertaker Mister Ford on him! He got business to do.”

(MRS. JACQUES ENTERS, pencil and paper in hand. Mrs. Jacques stands ready to speak on the telephone.)

MRS. JONES

“We will hold him up in prayer!...yes, yes, ma’am!...keep holding on dear, Mrs. Jacques is here!...good day to you, dear!”

(Mrs. Jones hands the telephone receiver to Mrs. Jacques.)

MRS. JACQUES

“Mrs. Jacques here...yes, ma’am—it’s a number, not much lead to it, but it will have to do; I can still—let me see!---yes, ma’am, dark enough to meet daddy! Can’t deal with nothing that light, let me tell you, Mister Aibly have a fit, if we brought home a boy like that!, you know what I mean?...yours, too?---name me somebody’s daddy worth his salt who wouldn’t!” (Mrs. Jacques and Mrs. Jones share a laugh.) “...that boy, that boy need to snag a comb and supply the First Infantry with buckshot with that head to please them!” (Again, the women laugh). “Now, now...now, now, hit me!” (the conversation dictates to Mrs. Jacques, whose arthritis interferes with her writing. The shadows vex her as well.)

MRS. JACQUES

More light, more light, Mister Lighting Director. [Actor] needs six eyes, got four, and these arms’ too short to box with this Playwright!

(On command, the lights brighten.)

MRS. JACQUES

(to lighting director)

Thank you. For a minute there, I thought I had to call Equity. (Returning to character.) “Now, wait...repeat that, if you could please?...okay...yes, ma’am, that part...alright...alright. In Homer G. Phillips, you say?---uh-huh. Shame they couldn’t get him into Meharry in Nashville, Saint Louis is a long way; hope he can make the trip...yes, ma’am: the Freeman sisters, we get the Prayer Wheel turning...yes, ma’am. Likewise.”

(Mrs. Jacques hangs up the receiver.)

MRS. JACQUES

(to Mrs. Jones)

Poor codger! He’ll be lucky to make Poplar Bluff.

MRS. JONES

She said the only specialist with beds is at Homer G. Phillips in Saint Louis.

MRS. JACQUES

Yes, ma’am. And here’s Mrs. Malone, wanting to go down from here! Alone?

MRS. JONES

Foolish!

MRS. JACQUES
(in agreement)

Foolish! Foolish foolishness!

MRS. JONES

Yes, ma'am!

MRS. JACQUES

Doggone foolery!

MRS. JONES

Yes, ma'am!

MRS. JACQUES

That's why I'm going down South with her!

MRS. JONES

Me, too!

MRS. JACQUES

Someone got to bear the shotgun this time!

MRS. JONES

And leadfoot it down them country roads.

MRS. JACQUES

Exactly!

MRS. JONES

Exactly! Blood gets thick!

([Actor] and [actor] do a fist-bump. SOUND EFFECT: the front door shutting.)

MRS. HUEY
(off-stage)

Yoo-hoo!

MRS. JONES
(in conspiracy)

Not a word!

MRS. JACQUES
(in agreement)

No, no!

(MRS. HUEY ENTERS, breathless, carrying shopping bags and wearing a new, fashionable hat.)

MRS. JACQUES
(to Mrs. Huey)

Let me guess: Ben Franklin's?

MRS. HUEY
(searching the hat for the sale tag)

Didn't I take that tag off? Shoot! I didn't! Oh, well..."free advertising." How I look?

MRS. JONES

Divine!

MRS. HUEY

As in Father Divine?---I don't want to look like some old man—

MRS. JACQUES

“Mrs. Divine.”

MRS. HUEY

(shocked)

From Father Divine to Mrs. Divine?---Talk about going from bad to worse!

MRS. JONES

Alright, alright: you got style, Mrs. Huey, style like, like—

MRS. JACQUES

Like Bishop Baber's wife!

MRS. JONES

Yes, absolutely!

MRS. JACQUES

(searching...)

And, and—

MRS. JONES

And you are en route to tea with Mrs. Tom Dewey, the first lady of New York State!

MRS. JACQUES

(recovering)

Thank you, Mrs. Jones, you took the words right out of my mouth!

MRS. JONES

Yes, indeed!

MRS. HUEY

Mrs. Baber, you say? Now, Elvira Baber got style! At the Colored Women's Clubs convention in Birmingham, she had that C. J. Walker style going, and even Mrs. Church Terrell was green with envy—and you never hear one of those Churches envious about anything! “Like Mrs. Baber,” you say?---I'll take that. Don't need this tag no more, then.

(Mrs. Huey throws the hat tag into the kitchen utility drawer. She reads the note for prayer. The stage lights illuminate her, specifically, perhaps by dimming in general.)

MRS. JONES

(into the utility drawer)

“Tag no more!”

MRS. JACQUES

(into the utility drawer)

“Be gone!”

(Again, (actor) and (actor) exchange fist pump, then return to character.)

MRS. HUEY

I take it, Mrs. Stone's class leader and the Reverend Alston just visited? I could smell his pipe and that cherry blend when I got to the porch.

MRS. JACQUES

(to Mrs. Jones)

Why didn't I think of that before? We can offer him a tin of that for Conference!

MRS. JONES

(in agreement)

The Presiding Elder would like that. He's well-disposed to cherry blend.

MRS. JACQUES

Might get the Reverend Alston back, if we do. I like him; he's good!

MRS. JONES

Me, too. But, you never know where a call will take somebody: Cincinnati, Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit. Even a woman—she can be called, too. End up anywhere on this planet, as far as we know. We can only send them in good cheer and prayer. But, cherry blend?---that might convince the Presiding Elder that the Reverend Alston has been called here. South Memphis needs to keep him.

MRS. JACQUES

That may be, but South Memphis in sore need for more colored beds in the hospital, if you ask me.

MRS. JONES

Good Lord knows, I do not dispute that! Maybe, with the Reverend Alston, Crump will see to it we get more colored beds at the hospital, and not always end up at Homer G. Phillips in Saint Louis when we sick. The Reverend Alston, he got a way of worrying Crump!

(Mrs. Huey sets the note down, after a silent prayer. Stage lights resume normal illumination.)

MRS. HUEY

Then, cherry blend helps a good pastor stay. Did Mrs. Malone get a chance to speak to him?

MRS. JACQUES

Not then, but, we never know. You know them Sanctified folk: they speak to everybody. Anybody. Just like speaking to people was going out of style. That's her point, her way. They might visit as they cross paths along the way. He won't refuse her at all. He might think an angel sent her to him to share some wisdom, the way Mrs. Malone talks.

MRS. HUEY

That's our sister Susie. Let her say "hey" to somebody, and she would plant an idea in Crump's ear, and Crump would hear her. There will be another day. There will be another day. She'll say the spirit moved her to speak.

MRS. JACQUES

Indeed, she will. She's still around, though.

MRS. JONES

She would have told us, anything different.

MRS. JACQUES

She most certainly would have.

MRS. JONES

Yes, ma'am.

MRS. HUEY

(concerned: "might they know, too?")

Mrs. Malone said something about moving? As far as we know, she might take wing and fly, before she say anything definitive to any one of us. She's so secret about her movements and whereabouts.

MRS. JONES

(feigning denial)

Remember, Mrs. Malone, she learned the hard way. Before she got Sanctified, she went down to Mississippi, came back, and knew better than tell Miss Lessie and Mister Ably, then, she stripped off her shirt! That's all they had to see. Mister Ably, he took his strap, and he shined her butt but good! Mrs. Malone, she had to roll on her stomach better part of two weeks, before both that whip stripe on her back and those strap blisters on her butt healed enough to let her sleep through the night!

MRS. JACQUES

That should teach her to stay far away from Mississippi, but that's our sister: she hardheaded, if there ever was one.

MRS. JONES

Yes, ma'am! Hardheaded, hardheaded!

MRS. JACQUES

Hardheaded, if there ever was one!

MRS. JONES

Yes, ma'am, yes, ma'am!

MRS. HUEY

("drop those beads, Becky!")

Mrs. Malone is going to Mississippi.

MRS. JONES

She heard a call.

MRS. JACQUES

We're going with her.

MRS. JONES

We need to get our nails and hair done first. If Mississippi going to be our funeral, we might as well give the undertaker Ford something to work with.

MRS. JACQUES

That's a fact.

(MRS. JONES EXITS to the porch to check the washing machine as MRS. JACQUES EXITS into the living room, leaving Mrs. Huey in the kitchen alone. Mrs. Huey sits at the table, catching her breath.)

MRS. HUEY

(to herself, almost)

Miss Lessie, Mister Aibly: so glad you didn't live to see, your daughters so anxious to get to Mississippi! Heavenly Father from Up Above! Have mercy!

(Alone, Mrs. Huey mimes removing wallpaper rolls from her shopping bags, setting them on the table.)

MRS. HUEY

Good value, Ben Franklin's kitchen wallpaper. Modern, post-war look of nineteen hundred and forty-eight! That old trash Truman got nothing like this in his lowdown mother-in-law's house, I tell you! Her kitchen not even attached to the house, most likely. And no indoor toilet to speak of... Democrat! Enough of that teeth-gnash!

"Can't think this now!" Better angels need to speak, right now!

(Mrs. Huey proceeds to mime measuring wall space for wallpaper application, in silence. She coaxes her hands along the way—she has arthritis as well, you know—as she first Measures, then applies the new wallpaper. The light above her should brighten, signifying the change from smoke damage to more impressionable color. MOTHER SUSIE ENTERS from outside, dressed in white, carrying a bouquet of flowers. An Intense stagelight should illuminate her. Mrs. Huey, though, focuses upon her work. After completing part of a wall, Mrs. Huey admires her handiwork.)

MOTHER SUSIE

Better, angel?

MRS. HUEY

(agreeing)

Better.

MOTHER SUSIE

"Breathe."

MRS. HUEY

(inhaling, joyously)

Oh, yes!

MOTHER SUSIE

Remember, we are nothing without—

MRS. HUEY

“I would be so moved, if I were as you.”

MOTHER SUSIE

You can be.

MRS. HUEY

Someday, perhaps, but—

MOTHER SUSIE

As Doctor Bethune says, “this is our day!”

MRS. HUEY

(skeptical, cynical)

Is it now? So far, this century seems from Hell.

(Emotional at the word, Mother Susie shrieks, covering her ears, dropping the flowers.)

MOTHER SUSIE

Is this why you summoned me here, at this moment?

MRS. HUEY

As we will say soon, “a moment with you is better than a thousand elsewhere.” A moment is all it takes, all anyone needs. I called for you this moment, and this moment you came. You taught me wallpapering, after Mister Aibly wore you out for getting whipped in Mississippi. Daddy said, “that should learn you,” but you learned me. I think of you, whenever I hang wallpaper. Wallpaper, not women, should be hung.

MOTHER SUSIE

Women can hang as readily as men. He got a mind to hang?---she can, too. Here, there, anywhere—that’s for them to hear. All they need us to do is say, “Heavenly Father be with you!” Not our place to argue with Him.

MRS. HUEY

If He’s the One you’re hearing, that is.

MOTHER SUSIE

(conceding)

“If...” “if...” If not, it is still my decision to heed. I heed. That is what matters to me.

“If...” when the call is issued, no one can wait for “if.” No call works that way. Hear!

No call! Hear?

MRS. HUEY

I hear. I wish I didn’t. Sure wish I didn’t. But I got ears.

(Mother Susie retrieves the flowers, offering them to Mrs. Huey as a sign of peace. Mrs. Huey declines.)

MOTHER SUSIE

(redirecting)

I commend your selection of wallpaper. It complements Pat’s style.

MRS. HUEY

Mrs. Stone's color. I saw that on the bargains table at Ben Franklin's. I said to myself, "Mrs. Stone's kitchen needs that wallpaper, instead of smoke." Get it up before she returns from Cincinnati, and she wouldn't know a fire was here to begin with.

MOTHER SUSIE

I like that idea. Give Pat something to smile about.

MRS. HUEY

I'll say.

MOTHER SUSIE

Sounds like, you touched with calls, too, Miss Rebecca.

(Mrs. Huey accepts the flowers finally, stroking them.)

MRS. HUEY

(matter-of-factly, so gently and calm)

I don't hear calls, Mother Susie. And I am not touched by dreams.

(The stage lights resume their normal illumination. MRS. JONES ENTERS from outside, as MRS. JACQUES ENTERS from the house. Neither acknowledges Mother Susie, for she stands as an apparition. Mrs. Huey returns the flowers to Mother Susie. The passage of flowers fail to attract attention, and neither did the new wallpaper, as all that exists solely in the minds of their sisters. Mrs. Jacques resumes washing the coffee service, as Mrs. Jones helps herself to the baking soda.)

MRS. JACQUES

(referring to the baking soda)

What you think you going to do with that, Mrs. Jones?

MRS. JONES

You'll see, soon enough, Mrs. Jacques. You'll see.

(to Mrs. Huey)

You didn't say how that new moon treat you.

MRS. HUEY

Treat me?---that new moon was good to me! So good, in fact, I shopped until I dropped!

MRS. JACQUES

Yes, Ben Franklin's got everything. Even a vicuna coat!

(Near the exit to the porch, Mother Susie stomps her feet, symbolizing her arrival, in flesh. At her notice, Mrs. Jones sprinkles baking soda into the dishwasher, behind Mrs. Jacques' back.)

MRS. JACQUES

And here comes Mrs. Malone, all in her white dress! Baptism Night at Mason Temple tonight?

MOTHER SUSIE

The Saints always got baptism at Mason Temple Wednesday night. Wednesday night, good time for baptism and prayer. You should fellowship with us again.

MRS. JACQUES

(grasping for the baking soda, unsuccessfully)

Mrs. Jones and I might have to take you up on that offer again, and visit. Although, like Miss Lessie and Mister Ably said, “we never visitors in God’s House, anywhere.”

MRS. JONES

(fighting over the baking soda)

Fellowshipping is always nice, Mrs. Malone—

MRS. JACQUES

(still grasping...)

Always is!

MRS. JONES

(and still...)

Yes, indeed!

MRS. JACQUES

(exasperated)

Thelma, would you leave this baking soda alone!

MRS. JONES

(equally exasperated)

You think you’re Armand Hammer, running Occidental Petroleum, Marilyn?
(The sisters spill baking soda all over them, to their frustration. Mother Susie and Mrs. Huey laugh. Neither Mrs. Jacques nor Mrs. Jones is amused.)

MOTHER SUSIE

You two owe Mrs. Stone a box of baking soda.

MRS. HUEY

You know where they got baking soda on sale?

MRS. JACQUES AND MRS. JONES

(simultaneously)

Ben Franklin’s! They got a sale on everything!

(Setting the baking soda down, Mrs. Jacques retrieves the vacuum sweeper as Mrs. Jones dusts herself off.)

MRS. JONES

Appreciative, the Reverend Alston didn’t see this display.

MRS. JACQUES

Let’s get this mess cleaned up, so Mrs. Stone can’t see a trace. She’d think we did more than just smoke her house, if we don’t. Then, that Mrs. Stone would have herself an old Patricia Stone fit!

(MRS. JONES EXITS onto the porch, dusting herself off. Mother Susie uses a broom to sweep. Mrs. Jacques looks for an available outlet for the sweeper. Mrs. Huey points at the outlet in the ceiling light socket.)

MRS. HUEY

(slyly)

Remember, this is an add-on kitchen. Just over her storm cellar.

MRS. JACQUES

There you go, Mrs. Huey, reminding me!

MOTHER SUSIE

(sweeping)

Somebody got to say something.

MRS. JACQUES

That old Mrs. Stone would put a good outlet in her ceiling light socket above the kitchen table! Just to work a climb! There she go!

MRS. HUEY

(teasing her, this time)

“Mrs. Stone...Mrs. Stone...Mrs. Stone—”

MOTHER SUSIE

(piling on...)

Please, allow me no more “Mrs. Stone!”

MRS. HUEY

Mrs. Jacques, you carry on like “Mrs. Stone” ready to give you a fit!

MOTHER SUSIE

Yes, indeed, Marilyn! Miss Rebecca’s right!

MRS. HUEY

Sure, I’m right, Mrs. Malone! They carry on about “Mrs. Stone” all the time.

MRS. JACQUES

Shush, you two! Should I use the table or the chair?

MOTHER SUSIE

You need to get your feet out of my way, so I can sweep. The broom is better than the vacuum against this floor. Put the vacuum sweeper away; it won’t work as well here. (Mrs. Jacques returns the vacuum sweeper to storage. Mother Susie sweeps the floor. Mrs. Huey uses a dustpan to help Mother Susie pick up the baking soda. Mother Susie holds the back door open for Mrs. Huey to pitch the baking soda and MRS. JONES ENTERS, still dusting herself off.)

MRS. JONES

Thank you, kindly, Mrs. Malone.

MOTHER SUSIE

Don’t mention it.

(Mrs. Huey pitches the baking soda outside.)

MRS. HUEY

Those blackbirds should have a go at that! Go ahead, blackbirds! I need another decent number!

MRS. JONES

First quarter Tuesday.

MOTHER SUSIE

So?

MRS. JACQUES

First quarter can't use the same number as the new moon. Remember?

MRS. HUEY

Shucks! You're right! What was I thinking?

(The other Freeman sisters shrug.)

MRS. JONES

(clapping dust off herself)

How I look?

MOTHER SUSIE

(sweeping the floor again, to be sure)

Less of a mess.

MRS. HUEY

As always.

MRS. JACQUES

Serves you right, playing with that baking soda, like it was some old baseball and you some kind of kid.

MRS. JONES

"Baseball?" Please don't remind me. Still got the taste of Norris Stone's team's baseball socks and jerseys on my tongue. Dusty!

MRS. HUEY

"Dusty," musty!

MRS. JACQUES

Yes, ma'am! Tell me about it, "Mrs. Branch Rickey." Talk about a "rickety mickey."
(The sisters giggle girlishly, as if sharing a coy, inside joke.)

MOTHER SUSIE

(opening the door and scuttling dust outside)

You girls shush! Your class leaders end up telling the Reverend Alston on you!

"Rickety mickeys," indeed!

(Mother Susie scans outside, to see if the class leaders or the pastor were there.)

MOTHER SUSIE

(closing door)

Coast clearer than Normandy! Neither class leader, nor the Reverend Alston to see.
Just the postman around the block, doing afternoon deliveries. One of Crump's boys.

MRS. HUEY

"Postman?" ...on his afternoon deliveries?---on a Wednesday?

MRS. JONES

Good sign?

MRS. HUEY

Have to see. I bought a new book, so I will have to see what number it says to use.

MRS. JONES

(nudging Mrs. Jacques, who ignores her)

Go ahead and ask her from where. Go ahead.

(to the sisters)

I just cannot go to prayer meeting like this. This baking soda ruined me. I need to change. I look like I just came up, in the middle of the night, from some place so deep down, I was just a hayseed in a sack.

MRS. JACQUES

Come on. Let's get you changed. Mrs. Stone has something upstairs that would suit you.

MRS. JONES

I just hope they're not Norris Stone's teams' baseball jerseys and socks! Not wanting more of them. No how, no way!

(MRS. JACQUES AND MRS. JONES EXIT INTO THE HOUSE. With Mrs. Huey and Mother Susie alone, the stage lights soften, almost dimming, as if accompanying two phantoms from bygone times interacting.)

MRS. HUEY

"Why?"

(Mother Susie shrugs.)

MOTHER SUSIE

Ask Him, when it is time.

(Shopping bag in hand, MRS. HUEY EXITS into the house as well, preparing to help Mrs. Jones change. Now alone on the stage, Mother Susie puts away the broom and dust pan. She turns out the kitchen light, and the stage lights dim a bit. She picks up Mrs. Huey's new hat, to take it to her. SOUND EFFECT: the telephone rings.

Please allow it to ring five times, before Mother Susie answers.)

MOTHER SUSIE

(over the telephone)

I got it. "Stone residence, Mrs. Malone speaking..."

CURTAIN