

sweet

a play by Harrison David Rivers

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“me and you be sisters/we be the same/me and you/coming from the same place/me and you/be greasing our legs/touching up our edges/me and you/be scared of rats/be stepping on roaches/me and you/come running high down purdy street one time/and mama laugh and shake her head at/me and you/me and you/got babies/got thirty-five/got black/let our hair go back/be loving ourselves/be loving ourselves/be sisters/only where you sing, I poet.”

-Lucille Clifton, *sisters*

“To my thinkin’ mourning oughtn’t tuh last no longer’n grief”

-Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

dramatis personae.

{2W, 1M}

RETHA BAKER	20, female, black, the older sister
NINA BAKER	17, female, black, the younger sister
GEORGE ROBINSON	21, male, black, the boy next door

setting.

The dusty front yard and porch of a weathered farmhouse
Just outside of Junervy, Kansas.

time.

The summers of nineteen sixty-eight & sixty-nine.
It is stinkin hot.

1.

(Dark.
“Fly Me to the Moon” as sung by Sarah Vaughn plays
on a radio
And then we see the fireflies
Ten
Then twenty...
They multiply like stars.
There are so many that it is impossible to count them
all.
RETHA appears on the porch, dressed in black.
After a while, she hears something.
She turns off the radio and listens.)

RETHA

Mama?

(RETHA crosses down to the yard.)

Mama, is that you?

(beat)

I dreamed it snowed last night/Big wet flakes/The kind that linger on yr nose/On yr
eyelashes/Yr tongue

(beat)

It was like...

(beat)

It was like the inside of a snow globe/Like the ones in Mister Josiah’s shop/You know,
the ones for show not for sale

(beat)

I dreamed it snowed/And it was like God tipped us upside down/Gave us a shake/And
stirred everything up

(beat)

I remember you useta say/“Dreaming of snow in the middle of summer?/Baby girl,
that’s a sign”/You were always talking about signs/A sudden change in the wind/An
unexpected pain in yr knee/An animal cry in the night/Signs/All of them.../I wonder...

(beat)

The house is all right/Everything in its place/I finally had Mister Nathan by to fix the
banister/And that squeaky spot on the floor in the dining room/The spot you always
said drove you crazy, but never had fixed

(beat)

I almost can’t believe it’s still standing without you here to hold it up

(beat)

I need to strip the beds soon/Strip the beds and flip the mattresses/What was it you
useta say/“Care for it and it’ll care for you...”

(beat)

I’ll have to get Nina to help me...

(RETHA smiles.)

Or George...

(beat)

He's back you know/George/Got here yesterday.../“Georgie Porgie...”

(beat)

Nina says he probably brought some girl with him/She says, “He's probably engaged”/She says, “You know how those big city girls are...”/But I *don't* know.../I've never been to the city/I've never met a big city girl...

(beat)

It seems to me that if George had gone and fallen inlove he'd've said something

(beat)

I've thought on it a little/On love, I mean/Just a little/Everyone makes such a fuss over it/Gloria down at the shop for one/And Nina/Lord Nina/Chasing after this boy, then that boy/“Did you see his eyes/Did you see his mouth/Did you see his...?”

(beat)

“Such a big world,” she says/“So many pretty boys”/I say to her, yeah, but you only need one/And she says, “What do you know, Retha?/What do you know...?”

(beat)

What I know/Is that love is best in winter/When it's snowy and cold/Cause that's when you want another body around/That's when you want a body around for warmth

(beat)

It's too hot now/Only June and already much too hot/Seems like the sun's already up and burning no matter what time you get outta bed.../No matter what you do you can't never seem to beat the heat

(NINA appears on the porch also dressed in black.)

Summer, mama/Summer ain't no time for love

NINA

Retha?/Retha, what you doing out here?

RETHA

Nothing/I ain't doing nothing

NINA

Talking to the sky like always/Always talking to the sky

(NINA crosses down to the yard.)

RETHA

I thought you were asleep

NINA

It's too early for sleep/And too hot/It's too darn hot

RETHA

There's some lemonade in the icebox/Made it fresh earlier this afternoon

NINA

You and I both know the only way that lemonade's gonna do any good is if we pour it all over ourselves

(THE SISTAHS smile.)

RETHA

Can you imagine?

NINA

So sweet

RETHA

So sweet?/So sticky is more like it

NINA

Ain't nothing a bath wouldn't fix/Or a dip in the creek

(An idea.)

Ooo we should go swimming/Pull out our suits and go wade in the water/Retha, you hear me?

(beat)

Retha--!

RETHA

--You remember how we useta run around the yard catching fireflies?

NINA

Fireflies?/What you talking about, fireflies--?

RETHA

--I was just thinking--

NINA

--Yeah and I was just talking about swimming--

RETHA

--Remember how in the evenings we useta catch them in our hands?/In jars?/Put them on the windowsill in our bedroom?/Remember how you useta scream whenever one of them would light on yr arm

NINA

I didn't scream

RETHA

Yeah you did/Like a girl--

--I *am* a girl/And so are you--

NINA

--You were like--

RETHA

(RETHA demonstrates.)

I never did that!

NINA

Yeah you did so/Useta scream like a crazy person

RETHA

*(RETHA continues to demonstrate.
NINA attempts to quiet her.)*

Retha!
Retha!
RETHA--!

NINA

(NINA pinches RETHA.)

--OW! What--?

RETHA

--I didn't scream like that/So stop!

NINA

(NINA sulks.)

Oh come on/I'm just playing with you.../And yeah you did--

RETHA

--Yr always playing/Always teasing/You think yr so funny

NINA

I do not

RETHA

Yeah/You do

NINA

(NINA sulks some more.)

RETHA
Oh come on, Nina/Don't be such a baby--

NINA
--Just cause yr the oldest--

RETHA
(*mocking*) "--Just cause yr the oldest--"

NINA
"--Doesn't make me a baby
And it doesn't mean you get to make fun

RETHA
I don't make fun

NINA
Yeah you do/All the time
(*RETHA scoffs.*)
See there?

(*A moment and then...*)

RETHA
Fine/I'm sorry, ok?
(*beat*)
Nina.../What?/Now yr not gonna talk to me?
(*beat*)
I remember you always useta catch more fireflies than me

(*NINA perks up.*)

NINA
I did?

RETHA
You know you did

(*NINA turns, smiling.*)

NINA
Yeah, I know/I just wanted to hear you say it/Mama useta say it was because I was so sweet

RETHA
That was bees, Nina/Mama useta say you were sweet and that's how come you got stung all the time--

NINA
--No/That's not what she said--

RETHA

--You got stung cause you were sweet/You caught more fireflies cause.../Well, who knows why you caught more fireflies/You were eager--

NINA

--That is *not* the reason--!

RETHA

--If yr not going to tell the story right, Nina, then you shouldn't be telling it at all--

NINA

--I *am* telling it right--

RETHA

--No, yr not--

NINA

--*Yes I am*--!

RETHA

--Yr remembering it wrong/It was bees/Not fireflies/*Bees*--!

NINA

--*Anyway!*

(*THE SISTAHS breathe.*)

I don't see why you always gotta be such a perfectionist about everything/It's just a story

RETHA

It ain't just a story...

(*beat*)

NINA

Remember how mama useta sit up on the porch/We'd be running around with our jars and she'd be laughing/Remember Retha?/Remember that?

RETHA

With her sweet tea

NINA

Yeah/I don't think I ever saw her drink nothing but sweet tea

RETHA

That's cause she never drank nothing but sweet tea/We musta looked ridiculous in our dresses and bare feet/Chasing bugs in the dark/"Watch it girls/Watch where yr running"

NINA

“If y’all run into each other I don’t wanna hear no crying”

RETHA

“Not a sniffle”

THE SISTAHS

“Not a one”

(A shared smile and then...)

NINA

I thought I heard her snoring/I’d drifted off to sleep upstairs/And I thought I heard her/Woke me up, the thought.../God, mama could snore

RETHA

Like a tractor--

NINA

--Like ten tractors!

(beat)

I miss her snore/Why is it when people die we miss the things about them that useta annoy us the most?

RETHA

I dunno...

(beat)

We’re expecting another load of laundry tomorrow/I’m gonna need help

NINA

George is home/Can you believe it?

RETHA

Nina, did you hear what I said/Mister Berry’s bringing his laundry by in the morning--

NINA

--Four years away and now he’s sleeping right over there--

RETHA

--He said, yr sure it’s ok to bring laundry on the day of yr mama’s funeral--?

NINA

--“Georgie Porgie”/Home at last--

RETHA

--And I said, of course its ok/Mama would’ve wanted it that way...

NINA
That's a nice thought at least/Don't you think, Retha?
(beat)

Retha?

RETHA
Huh?

NINA
I said isn't that a nice thought?/About George being home...

RETHA
Oh.../Yeah
(RETHA looks out.
They both look out.)
Yeah, it is...

(The lights fade on THE SISTAHS.
Somewhere a radio announcement plays.)

FRANK REYNOLDS
"So I want to ask you really kind of an impossible question, but yr
the man who can give us the answers... What do you think this
mission will tell us about man?"

NEIL ARMSTRONG
"If we are successfully able to execute touchdown and return it's
going to give us an un-measurable amount of confidence... And uh
given that confidence uh we will then be in a much better position
to accurately judge what we can tackle in the future. It won't be
marred by a lack of understanding of what can and can't be done.
It can be judged on its value... We're a great country and we have
a lot of abilities and when we direct our efforts toward an
understood goal we usually solve the problem."

2.

(The next morning.
A truck door slams.
GEORGE appears in the yard, dressed in a near-
fitting white dress shirt, dark slacks and dress shoes.
He lingers, shuffling his feet in the dirt.
After a while he takes a few steps toward the porch,
then changes his mind.
He exits.
Soon another slammed door
And then

*A car horn.
GEORGE returns to the yard.
He strikes a soft pose.
A moment and then...
RETHA appears on the porch, a laundry basket
propped on her hip.)*

I thought I heard something

RETHA

Yeah, I honked the horn.

GEORGE

Is that what that was?/A horn?/I was wondering...

RETHA

I see you got funny while I was gone.

GEORGE

Yeah, and I see you got tall

RETHA

(They take each other in.)

Hey, Retha.

GEORGE

Hey yrself/...Well don't just stand there rubbing yr toes in the dirt/Get on over here and give me a hug

RETHA

(GEORGE crosses to RETHA and they hug.)

It sure is good to see you

You too, Retha. Real good.

GEORGE

(beat)

I was sorry to hear about yr mama. How you doing?

Fine/I'm fine/Both of us are doing just fine

RETHA

You know, it's ok if yr not. I mean, if yr not doing fine. Folks would understand--

GEORGE

RETHA

--Folks need clean things, George/Regardless of whatever's going on in the world people need white whites/That's what they need/That's what they understand/People understand clean--

GEORGE

--All I meant was--

RETHA

--I know what you meant, George/I know

(beat)

Did yr mama tell you I took over mama's shift at K & D?/Thirty hours a week in the shop selling collared shirts and suits/Then as many here as it takes to get the laundry done/Practically the whole town brings their dirty things by the house now/That washing maching sure was a good investment/Mama was nothing if not intrepid

GEORGE

She was that.

RETHA

I called out today and tomorrow/Just so you know/I doubt Gloria would've let me work anyway/Even if I'd wanted to--

GEORGE

--Well that's good. You shouldn't go back til yr ready.

RETHA

--Mama useta say, no rest for the weary--

GEORGE

--I'm pretty sure this would qualify as a special circumstance--

RETHA

--Idle hands, she useta say--

GEORGE

--Retha?

RETHA

Huh?

GEORGE

I can't imagine anyone faulting you for being idle at a time like this.

RETHA

Yeah well, I think it's probably best for me to stay busy all the same/Keep my hands occupied

GEORGE

Yeah, well I get that.

(beat)

RETHA

So how's it feel to be back?

GEORGE

Retha...

RETHA

I'm fine, George/Just answer the question/How's it feel?

GEORGE

I dunno. Good, I guess. Kinda strange. You know, it's funny. I didn't realize how much I'd missed the place till I was on the train on the way here. I got kinda nervous actually.

RETHA

Nervous?

GEORGE

A little, yeah. I wasn't sure what it was at first. The feeling, you know? There was like this tightness in my chest. And a sort of fluttering feeling in my stomach.

RETHA

Sounds like motion sickness to me--

GEORGE

--Nah, it wasn't that. It was like... It was like all of a sudden the idea of Junervy... it just like... smacked me in the face, you know? Like the reality of being here after being away for so long just... Sorry, I'm not making much sense....

RETHA

Yr fine, George

GEORGE

I just couldn't help thinking... What if no one recognizes me? What if I don't recognize them?

RETHA

Well, yr mama practically told the whole town you were coming home so if they didn't know who you were before then they surely do now

(beat)

Here/Help me with this sheet...

*(RETHA hands GEORGE a sheet corner.
They fold together.)*

GEORGE

All the same. I wasn't quite sure what I'd find. You know, mama. The town.
(beat)

You.

RETHA

Me?

GEORGE

Yeah, you. You look good, by the way. Not that you didn't always look good before. You did. It's just... Well, it's just I haven't seen you in a minute, you know? And I wasn't sure how you were gonna look exactly. You know, how you might have changed. And well... You haven't changed.

RETHA

You look good, too, George

GEORGE

You think?

RETHA

Yeah/All grewed up

GEORGE

Yeah well I guess that's what we are now. Growed up.
(beat)

I'm real happy my mama volunteered me to drive you and Nina to the church this morning. It gave me an excuse to come over.

RETHA

You know you don't need an excuse, George

GEORGE

Yeah I know, but...

(RETHA notices something.)

Oh, I know, the shirt's a disaster.

RETHA

It's not that bad--

GEORGE

--No, it's awful. And don't worry yr not hurting my feelings by saying it. Mama bought it for me. She called and asked my size and I didn't know what to say. You know, what to tell her. Medium? I said. Large? It doesn't really fit.

RETHA

It fits all right...

(RETHA moves to GEORGE. She runs her hands along the contours of the shirt, assessing the fit.)

A little loose here/A little snug there--

GEORGE

--It's cause my arms keep growing. Nothing else grows, mind you. I don't get any taller. And I don't gain weight no matter what I eat. It's just my arms. They get longer by the day. Did you know they're a full six inches longer than I am tall? I measured them. Is that normal, do you think?

RETHA

For folks to measure their arms?

GEORGE

No, not... You know you need to stop.

RETHA

Honestly, you can barely tell/Just stop tugging on the cuffs

GEORGE

That's easier said than done.

RETHA

Well, a little self-control never hurt anyone/Not in my experience anyway

GEORGE

Yeah, I guess...

RETHA

We've probably got something here you can wear/All this laundry/Sure to have something that'll fit/I think Jesse Tyler's about yr size--

GEORGE

--Nah, Retha. I can't be wearing someone else's clothes.

RETHA

Why not?

GEORGE

Why not? Cause it ain't right, that's why not.

RETHA

Please, George/We're the only one's gonna know/And besides, we can't have you tugging on yr shirtsleeves during the whole service/It'll be distracting/If not to you, then it will be to me--

GEORGE

--Retha--

RETHA

--Not another word

(beat)

GEORGE

You sure did get bossy while I was gone...

RETHA

(*with a smile*) Shut up

(*RETHA sorts through the laundry basket.
GEORGE pulls on his shirt cuffs.
After a while, RETHA pulls out a shirt.*)

This should do

GEORGE

Honestly, Retha--

(*RETHA tosses the shirt to GEORGE.*)

RETHA

Well, don't just stand there/Put it on

GEORGE

What? Out here?

RETHA

Where else you gonna change?

GEORGE

I--

RETHA

--Don't tell me you ran off to the big city and got all self-conscious/You useta run around here half-naked all the time

GEORGE

Yeah well that was a long time ago, Retha. I was a kid.

RETHA

What, you got hair on yr chest now?/Is that it?/You acting all shy on account of a little chest hair?

GEORGE

No, that ain't it--

RETHA
--How many you got, huh?/One?/Three?

GEORGE
Retha Baker, you better stop teasing me.

RETHA
Oh is that right?

GEORGE
Yes ma'am. I ain't gonna just sit idly by and let you pick on me like you useta--

RETHA
--Like I useta--?

GEORGE
--Yr mama's not up there on the porch no more. Ain't nobody to stop me from defending myself--

(The words escape before he can stop them.)

Shoot.

(beat)
God, Retha. I'm sorry.

RETHA
I'll turn around if it'll make you feel more comfortable

GEORGE
Retha--

RETHA
--I'm turning around now--

GEORGE
--Listen--

RETHA
--Put on the shirt, George--

GEORGE
--But--

RETHA
--Boy, I said, put it on!

(A moment and then GEORGE removes his shirt and slips into the new one.)

It don't make no sense for a grown man with an Ivy League education to be wearing an ill-fitting shirt anyway/Don't make no sense at all

(GEORGE finishes buttoning.)

GEORGE

All done. How do I look?

RETHA

Real nice/Like a New Yorker

GEORGE

I didn't before?

RETHA

It's all in the cuffs, George/It's all in the cuffs

(RETHA begins to button GEORGE'S cuffs.)

GEORGE

Retha, about before--

RETHA

--Water under the bridge, George/Water under the bridge
You need a tie...

GEORGE

Oh, I have one. It's right um...

(GEORGE searches, finally locating the tie in a pocket.)

I just couldn't tie it.

RETHA

You couldn't tie--?

GEORGE

--One of the things my father was too busy to teach me. Been wearing clip-ons since I was five. I thought you knew...

RETHA

Give it here

(GEORGE hands RETHA the tie and she loops it around his neck, manipulating it with speed and skill.)

GEORGE

I'm sorry.

RETHA

You better stop with yr sorries/Can't do nothing with sorry/You'd be amazed how many

men don't know how to tie their own ties/Grown men/Tie wearing Church-going men/Older than you/They come into the shop/Slip into these beautiful shirts and don't know how to tie a tie/I mean, a beautiful shirt is a beautiful shirt, but a tie.../That's what draws attention to the shirt/Without the tie, it's just.../Well, without the tie it's just a shirt plain and simple

GEORGE

Maybe they just prefer that *you* tie their ties for them.

RETHA

Excuse me?

GEORGE

I've known men to do far worse things to get close to a woman.

RETHA

Don't be fresh, George--

GEORGE

--What? I'm just saying--

RETHA

--And I'm just saying that a man should know how to tie his own tie/Not knowing.../Well, there's just no good excuse for not knowing

*(RETHA cinches up the knot.
They are close.
Anything could happen.
NINA appears on the porch.)*

NINA

Georgie Porgie!

GEORGE

Hey, Nina!

(NINA runs to GEORGE and hugs him.)

NINA

Yr mama said you were coming by/But I thought for sure she was telling stories Retha, why didn't you tell me George was here?/Trying to keep him all to yrself like always--

RETHA

--I wasn't keeping him to myself--

GEORGE

--I just pulled up, Nina, honest--

NINA

--Uh huh/Now don't you go making excuses for her, George--

RETHA

--Excuses--!

GEORGE

--I'm not making excuses for anyone--

RETHA

--Nina, you heard the horn same as me--

NINA

--Honestly Retha, I don't know what yr talking about--

RETHA

--Don't know what I'm talking about--!

NINA

--George Robinson, you look positively grown up/Doesn't he look grown up, Retha?

(RETHA takes a breath.)

RETHA

Yeah, he does

NINA

What were they feeding you in New York?

GEORGE

Nothing special. Same things as here mostly...

NINA

Well, I just don't believe it

RETHA

Nina...

NINA

There is something... different about you/But what is it?

GEORGE

Honestly I don't think I've changed that much

NINA
You certainly have.../I can't put my finger on it, but...
(beat)
Oh, of course/The shirt/It must be the shirt
(NINA runs her hands over the fabric.)
It fits beautifully--

RETHA
--Nina--!

NINA
--What?/It does!
(beat)
You know, George, I'm grown now too/I'm all done with school

GEORGE
Yeah, my mama told me. Apparently we graduated on the same day. Congratulations.

NINA
Thank you/I wish you coulda seen me at graduation/I wore a sky blue dress for the ceremony/Mama ordered it special from Kansas City/And I wore my hair down/And everybody said I looked just like I stepped out of the pages of *Ebony* magazine

GEORGE
That sounds real nice, Nina.

NINA
It was/We have loads of pictures/A whole album full/You'll have to let me show you sometime

GEORGE
Well, I'd like that.

NINA
So would I

GEORGE
It's a date then.

NINA
It's a date
(beat)
You know what else I'd like, George?

RETHA
Now don't go getting greedy, Nina

GEORGE
No, what--?

NINA

--I want to hear absolutely everything you have to tell about New York/What you did there/What you saw/Who you met

RETHA

Nina, he just got back

NINA

So?

(beat)

The thing is George/Everybody here says that's where I belong/In New York/Junervy's just too small/I mean, there's nothing here but dirt and sky and well I'm not fixing to wash other people's clothes for the rest of my life/I'm just not/So it's just essential that I go/I mean, just imagine/Me in New York City/Can't you just see it?

(NINA hugs GEORGE.)

GEORGE

Uh Nina...

RETHA

Nina, let go of George/Yr hurting him

(beat)

Nina--

NINA

--Retha, George is a grown man/If he wants me off he can tell me himself

GEORGE

Actually, Nina--

RETHA

--Nina, that's enough!

(RETHA attempts to pull NINA off of GEORGE.)

NINA

Retha!

RETHA

Nina, I said--!

(THE SISTAHS struggle. RETHA emerges victorious.)

NINA

--All right all right, I'm off!/God, Retha!/You don't have to be so mean about it
(beat)

George?

GEORGE

Um... Yeah, Nina?

NINA

Our mother is dead

(NINA begins to cry. She hugs GEORGE again.)

GEORGE

Yeah, um... I know.

RETHA

Jesus, Nina!

(RETHA reaches for NINA.)

NINA

Don't you touch me!

(beat)

GEORGE

Nina?

(beat)

Um... Nina--?

RETHA

--Nina, we're gonna miss mama's service if you don't stop this foolishness--

NINA

--Yr just saying that so I'll let go--

RETHA

--Don't be silly/*I am* not--!

NINA

--Yeah you are too--!

RETHA

--George, tell her--!

NINA

--George!

(THE SISTAHS turn to GEORGE.)

GEORGE

Um. Well actually... It is almost ten so...

RETHA

See there?

(beat)

NINA

Really?/I didn't realize it was so late

RETHA

Yeah well it is/So let's get on...

NINA

But I'm not ready yet

RETHA

You look ready enough to me--

NINA

--Yeah well, I'm not!

(beat)

You remember Zoe Samuels, right George?/ Well she says that her aunt and uncle met at a funeral/They didn't plan for it/They didn't mean to fall in love, but they did/She said that he was tall and shy and that they fell in love over fried okra at the reception after the service/And I couldn't help but think that maybe/Maybe that could happen to somebody else/Like maybe to me--

RETHA

--Nina--

NINA

--And I don't say it to be inappropriate or disrespectful or nothing/It's just that mama's dead and I never knew my daddy and slowly the world is changing/And I'm tired of being alone/And maybe... if I think of today as the beginning of something/The potential beginning of something/Then I won't feel so much like it's the end/So I've got to look my best/Cause you never know who might be at the service/I could meet my forever today/Cause I want a forever/And I'm not ashamed to admit it/I want a forever/And I don't see why I should have to wait forever for forever to start

(NINA exits.)

RETHA

I'm sorry about that

GEORGE

No, it's okay. She's sad. I get it.

RETHA

She likes attention is more like it...

(beat)

And she's sad/Mostly she's sad

(A moment and then...)

GEORGE

I had to put gas in the truck before I came over and I drove past the church. There were already a lot of cars. Yr mama knew everybody.

RETHA

Yeah well Junervy is a small town

GEORGE

It is, yeah, but... Well, that ain't it. Yr mama was a good woman, Retha. Word travels fast about the passing of a good woman.

RETHA

Thank you, George

GEORGE

Sure.

(beat)

So um... Did my mama tell you I was offered a job?

RETHA

You know she did/Told everyone/"My baby's gonna be a reporter"
She's so proud of you/We all are

GEORGE

It's just a tiny paper outside of Chicago/Local news mostly/Nothing to celebrate really--

RETHA

--Of course it's something to celebrate/It's a job doing what you want to be doing/A job
doing what you went away to school to do/"My baby's gonna be a reporter"

(A shared smile.)

It's a good thing, George

GEORGE

Yeah, I guess.

RETHA

You guess?

(GEORGE wants to say more, but can't find the words fast enough.)

Well, I should probably go check on Nina...

GEORGE

You know, I thought about you. While I was in New York. I mean, it's not like I intended to. It's just... Well, I mean... It's like I'd see something, you know? At a museum maybe. A painting or a sculpture. Or I'd be at the theater and the first thing I'd think would be, I wonder what Retha'd say about this. I remember I always liked hearing what you had to say about things.

(beat)

Or I'd think about... oh I don't know... silly things... Like the time you punched me.

RETHA

It wasn't really a punch...

GEORGE

Tell that to my nose.

(beat)

You've always been so strong.
Fearless.

RETHA

I'm not fearless

GEORGE

Yeah well... you sure fooled me.
It would've been nice to explore New York together.

RETHA

Yeah well in my experience things don't always work out the way we want them to

GEORGE

No/I guess not...

(beat)

Listen, Retha--

*(--NINA appears on the porch.
She is crying.)*

RETHA

Nina, what is it?

NINA

I couldn't remember where I put my gloves/You know the black ones with the little bit of lace on the back?/Well, I looked everywhere/The front hall table/The kitchen counter.../These are all I could find

(She holds up a pair of gloves.)
They're mamas/They were in her sock drawer

(RETHA comforts her sister.)

RETHA
Come on now/Come on...

NINA
She had such little hands

(A moment and then...)

GEORGE
I'll go start the truck.

RETHA
We'll be right there
(GEORGE exits.)
Come on now/Stop yr crying/Mama wouldn't want us to cry any more than necessary

NINA
I can't help it/I'm not like you, Retha/I can't hold it inside/I cry when I'm sad

RETHA
I don't hold it inside all the time

NINA
Oh yeah? When's the last time you cried?

RETHA
Nina, that's not.../Crying doesn't have nothing to do with--

NINA
--You can't even remember, can you?/You can't remember the last time you cried because you haven't

RETHA
Just because you haven't seen me cry doesn't mean I'm not sad/She was both our mamas, Nina/Yours and mine/How could I not be sad?

NINA
I dunno/I dunno how/But I know what sad looks like/I know what it looks like and you don't look it/Not at all

(A moment and then...)

RETHA

Better put yr hat on/George is waiting

*(RETHA and NINA put on their hats and gloves.
A deep breath and then...)*

Ok...

3.

*(Later that night, after the post-funeral gathering.
Lights reveal GEORGE and NINA on the porch.)*

GEORGE

Ms. Sullivan! Oh my God! I can't believe I forgot about Ms. Sullivan!

NINA

How is that even possible, George?

GEORGE

Seriously, I don't know. As big as she was, I honestly do not know.

(They laugh harder.)

Oh! Remember how at church it would take three men to get her up out of the pew after the sermon? Two to pull from the front--

GEORGE/NINA

--And one to push from the back--

GEORGE

--Right--!

NINA

--Yeah I remember--

GEORGE

--And the guys in the front would be like, "You got her? And the guy in the back would be like, "Yeah, I got her. You sure *you* got her?"

NINA

How much do you think she weighed?

GEORGE

I don't know. Surely enough to crush a man.

NINA

George--!

GEORGE

--What? It's true! I'm telling you I feared for my life every Sunday morning.

NINA

Yr awful

GEORGE

Me? Nah. A little tipsy, yes. But that's all.

(beat)

She was actually a really nice lady.

Real nice.

NINA

Yeah...

(A moment and then...

A smile spreads across GEORGE'S face.)

GEORGE

She *was* big though!

(NINA smiles too.)

NINA

Biggest lady I've ever seen!

(GEORGE puffs out his cheeks and rounds his arms, indicating Ms. Sullivan's size.

NINA laughs harder.)

GEORGE

Ok, now we're both being bad.

NINA

Well, I won't tell if you won't

GEORGE

Cross my heart

NINA

Yeah/Mine too

(Their laughter subsides.

A moment and then...)

GEORGE

Hot day

NINA

Mmhm...

GEORGE

The sanctuary was cooler than I ever remember it being before.

NINA

Yeah/Pastor Wilkins had them put in a unit a while ago/One of two in town/Said there was no reason why we had to experience hell on earth in the House of the Lord

GEORGE

Well I for one wholeheartedly agree

NINA

Apparently some folks didn't like the idea/Said church wasn't supposed to be comfortable/They said, "How you gonna know the Lord is working on yr heart if you can't feel the heat?"/Pastor Wilkins said there wasn't nothing in the Bible against having a seventy-two degree sanctuary on a hundred and three degree Sunday morning/That shut them up

GEORGE

I've always liked Pastor Wilkins

NINA

Yeah/Me too

(beat)

Hey/Thanks for sitting with me

GEORGE

Sure, Nina. Yr good company.

NINA

Yeah?

GEORGE

You know you are.

(beat)

NINA

You know people talk about you all the time

GEORGE

People? What people?

NINA

What people?/Everybody George/Don't tell me you don't remember how it is in a small town/People always speculating about the ones who got away/They can't help but make up stories/Honestly, it probably wouldn't matter to anyone around here if you never did nothing else yr whole life/You left/That was enough

GEORGE

It wasn't exactly my idea. You know that. I mean, I only applied because Retha said she was going to and... Well then when she didn't--

NINA

--You went anyway

GEORGE

Yeah. Well. My dad had just died and school out east, I don't know... At the time it seemed like a good escape--

NINA

--I'm not faulting you for going, George/I'm not saying you shoulda chosen something different.../I mean, if I could go somewhere else, I would

GEORGE

You can.

NINA

I don't know.../I mean, I thought about school/But then Mama got sick and now she's dead and I didn't apply so...

GEORGE

Well, there's always next year.

NINA

You sound like my sister

(beat)

You know, we sure did lose something when you went away/Yr the best man to come out of this town in a long time

GEORGE

Well, thanks Nina. Though I'm not sure that's altogether true.

NINA

Course it is/I mean, you were a star around here/Captain of the football team/The baseball team/Student body president--

GEORGE

--Nina--

NINA
--Valedictorian--

GEORGE
--Ok now, stop--

NINA
--What?/Ain't no sense in being shy about it, George/Everybody around here knows/Everybody around here'd say the same exact things I'm saying

GEORGE
Still...

NINA
Oh my God!/George Robinson, are you blushing?

GEORGE
No!

NINA
Yes, you are!/Look at yr face!

GEORGE
Nina—

NINA
--And modest to boot--!

GEORGE
--Can we please change the subject--?

NINA
--But George--

GEORGE
--Please! Just... please.

NINA
Well, all right/If you don't want to revel in yr glory days/And they *were* glory days, George Robinson/I guess I have to respect that

GEORGE
Thank you.

(NINA scoots closer to GEORGE.)

NINA

You know, sometimes I would wonder what you were doing in New York/Like I'd be sitting in my room and I'd think, I wonder what George Robinson is up to this very minute--

GEORGE

--Probably homework--

NINA

--I'd wonder if you were seeing a show or riding in a taxi cab/I'd wonder if you were out with some girl...

GEORGE

Some girl...?

NINA

Yeah, you know/Just silly thoughts/A way to pass the time here in the middle of nowhere

GEORGE

I guess it's nice to be on people's minds...

(beat)

NINA

You know what else I'd wonder, George?/I'd wonder if you'd kissed anybody/And where you kissed them/On the cheek/The mouth--

GEORGE

--That's an awful particular thing to be wondering about, Nina--

NINA

--Is it?/I didn't mean it in any particular way

(They both look out and then...)

You know, I went with Lucas Brown for awhile/You remember Lucas, don't you?/Yeah well he asked me to go with him/And he'd always been nice and sorta sweet/And I'd always liked his eyes/So... I said yes/But it turned out he was only interested in.../Well, he was only interested in the only thing that boys seem to be interested in/I said to him, Lucas Brown, you can hold my hand, but no more/He's going with Molly Bradshaw now/She puts out

(beat)

I ain't kissed nobody else though/Just you...

GEORGE

Now Nina--

NINA

--George, can I ask you a question?

GEORGE

I think, Nina that that might depend very much on the question--

NINA

--Do you think I'm pretty?

GEORGE

Do I think yr--?

NINA

--It's just that Retha'll laugh at me if I ask/She'll say it doesn't matter one way or the other and that I'm just being vain/And I can't ask a boy, cause boys'll say anything to butter you up/But yr different, George/I trust you/I know you'll tell me the truth/Do you think I'm pretty?

GEORGE

Well sure you are, Nina. You know you are.

NINA

What part do you think is the prettiest?

GEORGE

Oh God, I don't know--

NINA

--Is it my hair?/Cause lots of boys say they like my hair

GEORGE

You do have nice hair.

NINA

Yeah?

GEORGE

Well sure, if people are telling you--

NINA

--No, not people, George/You/What do *you* think?

GEORGE

Honestly, Nina--

NINA

--Cause I think yr handsome/I think yr probably the most handsome boy in town/Even when yr not here/It's like even the idea of you is handsomer than the reality of everybody else/And I'm not ashamed to say it either

GEORGE

Now that's the alcohol talking--

NINA

--I'm not too young, you know/I'm not too young to know things/To know how it works I know about the world of men and women and politics

GEORGE

Well, you've got me beat then.

NINA

I could teach you...

(NINA moves in. GEORGE shifts away.)

GEORGE

You know, I think maybe one of us should go and check on Retha.

NINA

Retha's perfectly content washing dishes and sweeping floors/You stay right here with me

(NINA takes hold of one of GEORGE'S hands.)

You've got big hands

GEORGE

Do I?

(GEORGE'S voice breaks, he clears his throat and tries again)

I mean... Do I?

NINA

Uh huh/Good for all sorts of things...

(NINA plays with GEORGE'S hand.)

GEORGE

Um, Nina. I don't think that--?

NINA

--A lot of boys say they like my breasts

(NINA guides GEORGE'S hand to her chest.)

Do you like my breasts, George?

Um...

GEORGE

Yes?

NINA

I...

Uh...

I mean, they're--

(NINA interrupts him with a kiss.
A moment and then GEORGE pulls away.)

Okay. I've... definitely had too much to drink.

NINA

Yeah, me too...

(NINA moves in for another kiss.)

Nina, wait.

GEORGE

What is it, George?

NINA

I... Well, it's just that... What I'm trying to say is--

GEORGE

--Here, let me help you...

NINA

(NINA moves in again.)

No, Nina. Stop.

GEORGE

Why?/There ain't no one around--

NINA

--It's not that. It's just... Look, Nina. Yr a good girl.

GEORGE

A good girl?

NINA

GEORGE

Yeah. Yr like a sister to me. And brothers and sisters they don't... Well, yr old enough to know what brothers and sisters don't do.

NINA

But George--

GEORGE

--I'm sorry, Nina. I really am, but I should be going.

NINA

Going?/What you mean you should be going--?

(GEORGE moves to exit.)

GEORGE

--I'm real sorry about yr mama--

NINA

--George Robinson, don't you leave me here on the porch all alone--

GEORGE

--Thank you for a lovely evening

(GEORGE exits.)

NINA

--You better get yrself back over here!

(beat)

George!

(NINA is left all alone on the porch.)

4.

*(RETHA hangs sheets on a clothesline.
NINA fiddles with a radio.
Static.
Static.)*

RETHA

Nina, come on now

NINA

Hold yr horses

(She fiddles some more.)

RETHA continues to hang laundry.)

RETHA

You've been fiddling with that thing for ten minutes/There ain't nothing on the radio
but static

NINA

Just
Wait

*(NINA continues to fiddle
RETHA continues to hang laundry.
After a while, she stops
And stares at her sister.)*

RETHA

NINA!

*(A song comes on the radio, "Day Dreaming" by
Aretha Franklin.
NINA looks up triumphant.)*

NINA

That sound like static to you?/Told you I'd find something

RETHA

Well, now that you found it/You might as well turn it up
*(NINA turns up the volume.
THE SISTAHS dance with the laundry, using men's
shirts as dance partners.
Their dance begins innocently enough
With both SISTAHS leaving plenty of space for the
Holy Spirit
But as the song progresses
NINA transgresses
Loosening her hips
Allowing her "partner's" hands to explore and then to
kiss her on the mouth.
RETHA snatches away the shirt.)*

Nina! Stop that! Somebody might see you

NINA

Who/Who's gonna see?

RETHA

I don't know/Somebody

NINA

“Somebody”

RETHA

Yeah, somebody/And besides/That’s not how a lady is supposed to act anyway

NINA

Well, maybe I don’t want to *be* a lady

(RETHA turns off the radio.)

RETHA

Nina Baker, I’m gonna pretend I didn’t hear you say that/And hold up yr end of the sheet/It’s dragging in the dirt

(NINA retrieves the sheet she let drop.)

Acting like you ain’t got no sense/Like you ain’t got no home training/What would mama say?

(They fold laundry.)

NINA

You know, he kissed me once

RETHA

Excuse me?

(beat)

Nina Baker WHO’D you let kiss you?

NINA

Nevermind...

RETHA

Never mind yr never mind/You better unbutton those lips of yrs and tell me

(NINA ignores her sister.)

Nina!

(NINA continues to ignore her sister.)

NINA!

(RETHA pinches her sister.)

NINA

OW! God, Retha!

RETHA

WHO’D YOU LET KISS ON YOU?

WHO DO YOU THINK? NINA

(beat)

RETHA
You mean, George...

(A long moment and then...)
Well, when Nina?/When did you...?

NINA
Before he left for school.../He came by the house one day/I don't know where you were/
And he asked me if I wanted to go splorin/Splorin? I said/Splorin where?/And he said,
down by the creek/And I told him, I'm not going down there and ruining my dress over
some stupid frogs/Cause I thought he wanted to catch frogs.../But he had this look on
his face like his asking me to go down to the creek didn't have nothing to do with
frogs/So I went/And it didn't/And he kissed me...

(NINA returns to folding.)

RETHA
But you never said anything--

NINA
--He made me promise not to tell anyone/Said it was between us/Between him and
me/He's very... discreet

(NINA continues to fold.)

RETHA
You told mama for sure though.../I bet she laid into you real good--

NINA
--Mama can't be bothered with things that Mama don't know

RETHA
You.../You mean you didn't tell her?

NINA
I promised, George...

RETHA
But mama--

NINA
--But mama nothing, Retha/Mama didn't have all the answers

RETHA

I know/I know that, Nina/I just... /I just thought we told her things.../I thought we told her everything

NINA

Maybe *you* did

(beat)

RETHA

Nina...?

NINA

Retha! The sheet!

(RETHA retrieves the sheet she's let drop.)

Telling *me* to focus...

*(They continue to fold in silence
And then....)*

RETHA

Nina...?

NINA

What?

(beat)

I said, *what*--?

RETHA

--What'd it feel like?

NINA

What'd *what* feel like?

RETHA

Kissing somebody... /Kissing, George.../Cause, you know, I've thought on it/Not a lot, but some/On how it'd be/How it'd feel.../...I've brushed my lips against the back of my hand/I've held them there against my skin/And felt wetness and warmth/I've licked and sucked and tasted soap and salt/I think my lips are soft.../But a hand can't kiss back...

(beat)

What does it feel like to kiss someone?

(NINA thinks and then...)

NINA

You can't explain something like a kiss, Retha/You just have to feel it for yrself

(NINA exits with the basket of clothes.)

5.

*(GEORGE appears with a metal bucket.
He speaks to Gladys, a cow.)*

GEORGE

Hey Gladys. Remember me?

(beat)

It's George.
"George Porgie"

(beat)

Well I don't know if you heard, but... I've been away.
School.
East coast.
Just graduated last week.

(beat)

I can tell yr impressed.

*(GEORGE sits on a stool.
He places the bucket below the cow.)*

Mama says you never forget how to milk
She says it's like riding a bicycle

(beat)

I'd like to see her ride a bicycle

*(GEORGE begins to milk Gladys.
The liquid hits the metal bucket at a metered pace.
The bucket sings.)*

"Gentle"

"Gentle, but firm"

That's what she says

"Remember George, Gladys wants that milk outta her just as much as you do"

(beat)

You know, I think Freud had it wrong.
Yr familiar with Freud right, Gladys?
Boys don't want to sleep with their mothers.
They want to kill them.
Not all the time, no.
But sometimes
Sometimes they dream of hitting them over the head with blunt objects.
A tuba.
Some garden tool.
Sometimes they wish...

(beat)

See, boys find themselves pondering the inappropriate because mothers never shut up.
Because mothers always have something to say.
Mama says, "I wanna hold my grandbaby before I die."
Mama says, "Find a nice girl and bring her home so I can meet her."
Mama says, "Don't you want to get married?"

(beat)

And mama is disappointed to find that I have returned empty handed.
As if that was the point of going away
To find something.
To find that thing you had to leave to find.
When the truth is...
The truth is that the thing you wanted was here all the time.
And the truth is that you've been thinking about it
About her
Since before you left.
And you've only come back to... well... you haven't quite figured that part out yet.

(beat)

The thing is, Gladys
You want something so badly for so long that you don't know what kinda person you'd
be without the ache.
It's like, if you ever got what you wanted, you'd lose yrself entirely.

(GEORGE returns to milking.

The bucket sings.)

Funny how yr fingers remember what to do.
Four years away and still... they remember.

(beat)

Like falling off a bicycle...

6.

(THE SISTAHS sit on the porch.
They fan themselves with vigor.)

NINA

God, it's hot

RETHA

Don't you go blaming God for the warmth of the day

NINA

I didn't say warm/I said hot/It's nigger hot out here

RETHA

Nina!

NINA

What?/You know I'm not saying nothing that ain't true

RETHA

Well, you don't have to say it like that

NINA

Honestly, I don't know why you insist on getting so worked up about things/There's no one here but us, Retha/No one else can hear what I say

RETHA

All the same

NINA

"All the same"

(They fan themselves.)

Mama useta say nigger hot

RETHA

Yeah, well, mama is mama is different

*(They fan themselves.
NINA gives up.)*

NINA

This fan is doing absolutely nothing

RETHA

There's lemonade--

NINA

--In the icebox, yeah I know/There's always lemonade in the icebox

RETHA

Well--

NINA

--Well, I don't want lemonade!

(beat)

RETHA

Maybe it'll snow later...

NINA

Yeah and maybe all the Robinson's cows'll sprout wings and fly away

RETHA

You know you don't have to be mean/Just cause yr hot doesn't mean you have to be mean--

NINA

--Yeah well the more you talk the hotter it gets so...

*(A moment and then RETHA stands.
She moves to the basket of clothes and begins to fold.)*

Oh come on, Retha/You don't have to move...
(beat)

Retha?
(beat)

Retha?
(beat)

God, I didn't mean it, ok?/Talk all you want/Talk til yr hoarse for all I care

RETHA

Don't got nothing to say
(beat)

NINA

Fine

*(A moment and then NINA stands and moves toward
the porch.)*

RETHA

Where you going?

NINA

Why?/You wanna come?

RETHA

You gonna tell me where to?

NINA

Down to the creek/Gonna swim

RETHA

Is there even any water down there?

NINA

Yeah there's water down there/It's a creek, ain't it?
(beat)

So?/You coming?

RETHA

I dunno/This laundry needs folding/And there's chores inside the house need doing

NINA

Boring

RETHA
It'll go faster if you help

NINA
No thank you

(NINA reaches the door. RETHA calls out.)

RETHA
I'd have to dig for my suit

NINA
What you talking about yr suit?/We don't need suits

RETHA
What do you mean, don't need suits?/Nina, how we gonna swim without suits?

NINA
How do you think?

RETHA
Nina, we can't go down there with no clothes on/Someone might see

NINA
Who?/Who's gonna see?

RETHA
I dunno, Nina/Someone

NINA
"Someone/Someone"/Always someone

RETHA
People go down by the creek

NINA
What people?

RETHA
People people!

NINA
Well, I ain't scared of no people

RETHA
Nina!

NINA
What?/What are you so worried about?

RETHA
I dunno.../George could be down there

NINA
So?

RETHA
So what if he saw us...?

NINA
So what if he did?

RETHA
Stop that, Nina/It's indecent thinking that way/Mama would never approve

NINA
Yeah well, mama don't make the rules around here no more/And anyway... *I* don't think
it'd be such a bad thing to be seen by a boy/In a suit or otherwise

RETHA
NINA!

NINA
Oh stop! We're not old maids, Retha/We're young/And healthy/And it's hot/Stinkin
hot/Nigger hot/Just think how nice it'll feel in the water/How much fun it'll be to splash
around.../You could use a good splashing

RETHA
Excuse me?

NINA
You could and you know it!
(beat)
Come on, Retha/Let's go!

(GEORGE appears.)

GEORGE
Y'all headed somewhere?

NINA
Well look who it is.../George Robinson/What do you want?

RETHA

Nina

NINA

Oh calm down, Retha/I'm just playing.../Hey George

GEORGE

Nina.

(beat)

Hey, Retha.

NINA

We were just talking about going down to the creek for a swim/You wanna come?

RETHA

Nina

NINA

What?/It's hot/And George needs to cool off same as us

GEORGE

You going, Retha--?

NINA

--It was my idea/My sister is being a stick in the mud--

RETHA

--I am not being a stick in the mud--

NINA

--Apparently it's not hot enough for her

RETHA

That wasn't my objection and you know it

NINA

George, maybe if you come she'll change her mind

RETHA

Nina, please...

GEORGE

It is awful hot...

NINA

See there, Retha/George is hot too

(beat)

It's settled then/We're going/Ima grab towels/It'll be better with three people anyway/We can play a game!/Maybe Marco Polo!

(NINA exits.)

RETHA

You know how Nina is/Once she gets her mind set on something there ain't no stopping her

GEORGE

Yeah I remember.
So you really don't want to go?

RETHA

No, it's not that/It's just...

GEORGE

It's just what?

RETHA

Nothing.../It's just there's a lot to do, is all/You know.../House things

GEORGE

They can't wait?

RETHA

Mama always said, "Why do tomorrow what you can do today"

GEORGE

Yeah well surely she wouldn't have objected to yr having a little bit of fun--

RETHA

--How you gonna swim anyway?/You got on trunks under yr pants?

GEORGE

Don't need trunks to go down to the creek. Ain't never more than a trickle of water down there anyway. Barely enough to splash in. Everybody knows that.

RETHA

I guess...

(A moment and then...)

RETHA

George...

GEORGE

Listen Retha, I...

GEORGE

Oh, I'm sorry/You first

RETHA

It's all right/Nah, you go ahead really...

GEORGE

Ok.
Well I um...
I just wanted to...

(beat)

The thing is I have until the end of the month to decide if I want that reporting job.
Gotta let em know by the thirty first and... well... I was thinking maybe...
That maybe...

RETHA

Maybe what, George?

(beat)

GEORGE

Retha, you ever been to Chicago?

(NINA appears on the porch.)

NINA

Marco

(RETHA and GEORGE do not reply.)

I said, Marco!

(beat)

Retha--!

RETHA

--Sorry. What'd you say Nina?

NINA

What I said was Marco/And what y'all are supposed to say back is Polo
(RETHA and GEORGE do not reply.)
NINA moves on.)

Anyway/George did you convince my sister to join us?

GEORGE

Um... I dunno. Did I?

(RETHA takes a breath.)

RETHA

What we gonna play?

(GEORGE is about to speak, but NINA interjects first.)

I dunno/Hide and Seek? NINA

Hide and Seek? RETHA

Yeah/Everybody loves Hide and Seek NINA

I haven't played Hide and Seek in a minute. GEORGE

Then you don't know what you've been missing... NINA

You gonna play fair, Nina? RETHA

Uh excuse me? NINA

You know what I'm talking about RETHA

No, Retha/As a matter of fact, I don't/How am I gonna cheat at Hide and Seek? NINA

You don't remember when we were kids?/Me and George would be hiding/And you'd be seeking/And you'd count to ten or whatever and turn around to look/And if you couldn't find us after like a minute you'd start to cry and scream/You'd just stand there in the yard crying and screaming about how we weren't playing fair/And so then mama'd have to come down off the porch and help you look/But of course, she'd had her eyes open the whole time so it didn't really matter if we'd hidden cause mama already knew exactly where we were/You cheater RETHA

Well, I don't remember that NINA

Course you don't/You only remember winning RETHA

I needed extra help/Y'all were older than me NINA

Yeah, by three years RETHA

NINA

Three years is a long time, Retha--

RETHA

--It was Hide and Seek, Nina/It's not a particularly complicated game--!

NINA

--You don't have to school me on Hide and Seek/I know how to play Hide and Seek

RETHA

Now maybe/Now you know how/But then?/Huh/Forget it/You couldn't do nothing without help/I remember I hated playing games with you!

(THE SISTAHs breathe.)

GEORGE

So my mama wanted me to invite y'all to dinner tonight... That's why I'm here actually. To invite you. Both of you. I'm supposed to come right back and let her know what you say. All I know is that she's making potato salad. And my mama makes a real good potato salad.

RETHA

We'd love to come, George/Tell yr mama thank you for the invitation--

(NINA explodes.)

NINA

--What do you know, Retha?/What do you know about anything?/Hide and Seek or potato salad or anything--?

RETHA

--Nina--

NINA

--You ain't never even been kissed by nobody/*Never*/You ain't never been kissed by nothing but the back of yr hand

(NINA kisses the back of her own hand, mocking her sister. A long moment and then...)

RETHA

I think I.../Um.../Excuse me

(RETHA exits.)

GEORGE

You didn't have to do that.

NINA

People who don't know what they're talking about shouldn't say nothing at all

GEORGE

Nina, she's yr sister.

NINA

I know she's my sister, George/Just because we're from the same mother, doesn't mean we're the same person

(GEORGE absentmindedly begins to fold a shirt.)

I see the way you look at her

GEORGE

I look at her the same way I look at everybody.

NINA

No/You don't

(beat)

But that's all right/I can live with that, George/I can

(NINA touches GEORGE'S hand.)

She doesn't want to get married, George/Did you know that?/She told me so herself/She's completely uninterested in marriage

(beat)

Me on the other hand...

GEORGE

Nina, I told you--

NINA

--I'm not yr sister, George/I'm telling you I don't never want to be yr sister

(NINA kisses GEORGE.

A moment and then GEORGE kisses her back.)

Those city girls can't make you happy/They don't know you like I do/They don't know what you need/Not like I do...

(NINA moves in for another kiss.

GEORGE stops her.)

GEORGE

I'm gonna go see about, Retha.

NINA

Why?/Why you wanna to go see about her?/I already told you--!

GEORGE

--I just want to make sure she's okay, is all.

NINA

YOU KISSED ME, remember?/Down by the creek before you left/ME/You kissed me on the mouth!

GEORGE

Nina, that was like four years ago. We were kids.

NINA

Do I look like a kid to you, George?/Look at me/I'm all grown up/Don't you like what you see?

(A long moment and then...)

GEORGE

Nina...

(beat)

NINA

You know, you can tell a lot from the way a boy says yr name/What he wants/What he feels/What he doesn't want/What he doesn't feel.../You always say my name like.../Like how I imagine a brother would say it.../Nina...

GEORGE

Nina--

NINA

--See?/There it is again

(beat)

Mama always said men were trouble/She always said, "Do without, girls, do without/Cause there ain't no kinda trouble like the trouble a man'll bring on ya/No kinda trouble"/She knew, my mama/She knew about men/And she knew about you/I didn't know it then but she was talking about YOU

(beat)

I shoulda listened

(NINA exits at a run.)

GEORGE

Nina! Nina wait! NINA! Goddammit. GODDAMMIT!

*(GEORGE tosses the shirt to the ground.
RETHA enters.)*

RETHA

I hope that wasn't clean...

GEORGE

Oh. I'm sorry. I was just... Why is it I always end up doing chores every time I come over here?

(RETHA retrieves the shirt.)

RETHA

Mama useta say there were only two reasons why a person couldn't fold clothes properly/Either they were thinking too much/Or they weren't thinking at all/Which one are you, George?

GEORGE

I dunno. Both maybe.

RETHA

Give me yr hands

(RETHA begins to show GEORGE how to fold. She doesn't need words.)

Nina hates laundry/She always has/But me... I can't think of anything more relaxing than folding/I have all my best ideas while I'm folding shirts into rectangles and underwear into little squares/The thing is... You do it long enough and you develop a sense, a kind of natural rhythm/Yr hands just know what to do/And yr mind is free to wander wherever

(beat)

You know, I think--

(GEORGE kisses RETHA.

A moment and then RETHA goes back to folding.)

Mama taught me how to fold/Me and Nina both/She worked at the K & D Clothiers in town for twenty years/Everything in our house gets folded up just like in the shop--

GEORGE

--Retha.

RETHA

Uh huh

GEORGE

I just kissed you.

RETHA

Yeah, I know

GEORGE

And?

RETHA

And what, George?

GEORGE

Well, don't you have anything to say about that?

(RETHA'S face spreads in a slow smile.)

RETHA

You could do it again if you wanted to

(They kiss again.)

GEORGE

I remember once... I came over to ask if you wanted to catch frogs down by the river. Only you were busy doing chores and your mama wouldn't let you go anywhere til you were done. I remember I had my heart set on catching frogs with you cause you were the only girl that didn't scream when they squirmed in your hands or jumped up your dress. So I said I'd help so you could finish faster. You tried to show me how to fold then too. But I couldn't concentrate. All I wanted to do was kiss you.

RETHA

Why didn't you?

GEORGE

I dunno. I guess I was afraid you wouldn't kiss me back.

RETHA

You shouldn't have been so worried about that

GEORGE

Well I was.

(beat)

Everyone assumes that boys... well you know, that we know things. What we want and how to go about getting what we want. People think there's like this big plan, but there's not. Boys get scared the same as girls.

(beat)

Plus, yr mama would have killed me.

RETHA

George, no--

GEORGE

--Yeah, she would've. She could be scary, yr mama.

RETHA

George--!

GEORGE

--You didn't see the way she looked at me sometimes. Like... like I can't even describe. I'm seven years old and she's looking at me, looking right through me. Like she's seeing straight into my heart.

RETHA

That's just what mama's do/They see things we don't see/Things we can't see

GEORGE

It's like she knew how I felt before I did. Like she knew someday I'd grow up and...

RETHA

And what, George?

(beat)

George/And what....?

GEORGE

Take you away.

RETHA

To Chicago, you mean?

GEORGE

Or wherever.

Yr mama knew. She knew. And she didn't like it. That's why we had to stop playing. That's why as soon as I turned thirteen yr mama was like, "Get on outta here." I'd come by and she'd say, "Don't you have other friends to play with? Other boys?" And I'd say, "Sure, Ms. Baker, but Retha and Nina are my best ones." And she'd say, "They can't play now."

They can't play now.

You never could play.

RETHA

Mama's have to be protective, George/It's their job/But they don't mean no harm/Mama's just want their children to be happy--

GEORGE

--Nah Retha. That ain't it at all. Mama's intrude. They forget that we're growing. Forget that we're grown. Forget to let us make our own decisions. Mama's don't let us live our own lives.

RETHA

I would've kissed you that day/I know I would've if you'd only asked--

GEORGE

--Not if yr mama hadn't given you her blessing, you wouldn't've. And she wouldn't've. We're better off without them.

(A long moment and then...)

RETHA

You know my sister likes you/She's liked you for a long time

GEORGE

I like *you*.

RETHA

You kissed her

GEORGE

I kissed *you*. I'm here with *you*, Retha. I want *you*.

(RETHA gives GEORGE a look.)

It was four years ago. It didn't mean anything.

RETHA

A kiss always means something to somebody

GEORGE

Retha, how was I supposed to know--?

RETHA

--Mama says nothin should come between sisters--

GEORGE

--Your mama's not here. It's just us. You and me.

RETHA

Not a kiss/Not a man...

GEORGE

Retha, it doesn't matter what she said.

(RETHA gathers up the laundry.)

RETHA

I need to fold the rest of these clothes--

GEORGE

--Retha--

RETHA

--Change the sheets on the beds/Flip the mattresses--

GEORGE

--Retha, please don't--

RETHA

--I need to do the little everyday things people forget to do/Mama useta say we'd forget to breathe if it was left up to us

GEORGE

When I close my eyes at night I see you.

RETHA

When I close my eyes I don't see nothing but the backs of my eyelids/It's awful dark when I close my eyes

GEORGE

I imagine what it would be like to touch you. To taste you.

RETHA

I ain't made of chocolate, George

GEORGE

I don't believe you.

(He moves to her.)

RETHA

No, George...
I can't
I'm sorry

*(RETHA moves past GEORGE.
He catches her from behind and holds her.
His hands travel the length of her body -- her neck,
breasts, belly, up her dress.
RETHA responds to his touch.
They move to the ground.
GEORGE works to unbutton his pants.
Seduction turns to adolescent frenzy.
RETHA panics.)*

"Georgie Porgie puddin and pie..."

GEORGE

Retha...

RETHA

"...Kissed the girls and made them cry..."

(RETHA scoots away from GEORGE.)

GEORGE

Retha, I'm...

(beat)

I'm sorry.

(beat)

Please...

RETHA

Better pull up yr pants, George/Yr mama's right next-door/She's liable to see

(RETHA exits.

GEORGE pulls up his pants.

A long moment

And then GEORGE moves toward the porch

Then changes his mind and moves to exit.

He almost runs into NINA.

She is dripping wet.)

NINA

Oh/It's you...

GEORGE

Nina...

NINA

I thought you'd be gone by now/I thought by the time I counted to a thousand forwards
and backwards/By the time I cooled off in the creek you'd've left/Gone home/Back to
New York or wherever/But no/Boys just don't know when to get gone

(NINA moves past GEORGE.)

GEORGE

Nina...

(She does not stop.)

NINA!

(NINA turns back to GEORGE.)

NINA

WHAT George?/What you got to say?

(GEORGE takes a deep breath.)

GEORGE

Wanna go splorin?

(A moment and then...

*GEORGE offers NINA his hand.
They move behind the hanging sheets as the lights
fade.
Somewhere a radio announcement plays.)*

ANNOUNCER

*“It was interesting...
We heard and were listening to the maneuvers going on up there.
They were looking for a little better place to land.
They were translating and hovering and using up a great deal of
that propellant...
And that’s why touchdown came a little later than the optimum
really planned.
Neil Armstrong was simply looking for what looked to him to be a
good place to sit down...
Now they’re telling Mike Collins what happened, but of course he
was listing.
And Mike Collins says fantastic.
Fantastic.
That favorite word of astronauts...”*

7.

*(Time passes.
One year later.
RETHA is pulling down clothes from the line.
A baby cries inside the house.
RETHA pauses for a moment.
She looks toward the porch then returns to her task.
The baby continues to cry.
RETHA pauses once again, her hands finding her
hips.
She takes a step toward the porch then stops herself.)*

RETHA

No

(RETHA resumes her work.)

Not yr tears to dry

(The crying continues.)

Not yr tears...

(The crying continues.)

Lord...

Nina!

(beat)

Nina, the baby!

(A moment and then...

*RETHA sighs and tosses whatever article of clothing
is in her hands into the nearby basket.
She moves to the door.)*

Nina, what are you doing in there?

NINA

(*off*) Nothing

RETHA

Yeah, I hear!/Why is he still crying?

*(NINA emerges from the house with the baby in her
arms.)*

NINA

I don't know/He won't stop/No matter what I do/I try to feed him/He's not hungry/I try
to change him/There ain't nothing to change/I don't know what else to do/Shhhhh,
baby/Hush now/Ain't nothing to cry about

RETHA

He's just not useta yr touch/That's all/Just ain't useta yr touch

NINA

Yeah well he ain't the only one

RETHA

Watch it now/Careful how you hold him
(*beat*)

Nina, you have to support him here

(RETHA attempts to reposition NINA'S arms.)

NINA

Why don't you just hold him?

RETHA

Cause he's yrs/And you have to learn to quiet him yrself
Gently, Nina/Gently
Nina, you've gotta be gentle--

NINA

--I AM!

(The baby cries harder.)

RETHA

Nina--

NINA

--Oh just take him!

(NINA thrusts the baby into RETHA'S arms.)

RETHA

Nina--!

NINA

--He doesn't want me anyway!

(NINA moves away from RETHA.)

RETHA

He's just a little fussy is all

NINA

He's screaming like he's hurt/Like he's sick/Like something ain't right

RETHA

There ain't nothing wrong with this baby/This little boy is perfect/Aren't you?/Come on now/Come on/Quiet down for Auntie

(RETHA shushes the baby)

Yes little mister/Yes little man/I'm talking to you/I'm talking to you, you loud thing/You sweet loud thing/What are you crying about anyway, huh?/Seems to me you ain't got no reason to cry like that/To scrunch up yr little face and curl yr little fingers/What you got to be so unhappy about?/Huh?/Seems to me you got the best of everything/That's right/You got yrself a warm bed/And a whole room to yrself/And a roof over yr head/And a mama who loves you/And a daddy who loves you/And an Auntie who adores you/That's right/You have so so much

(beat)

You know, Nina/You were a fussy baby/Cried all the time/Never seemed to stop crying/I remember I useta say to mama, Why's she always gotta scream like that?/And mama'd say, "She's just talking, baby/Yr baby sister's just got a lot to say"/Mama had to sing to get you to sleep/You remember that?

(RETHA sings a line or two from "Little Girl Blue" by Nina Simone.

The baby quiets.)

See, there we go/All better now

(beat)

You just have to hold him more/And talk to him/He likes to be talked to/About anything really/The weather/Yr day/Any kind of thought at all/He's a great listener/And sometimes if he's feeling real good/He may even talk back to you

(beat)

Nina, you hear me?

NINA

Just look how he is with you/ So peaceful/It's like he belongs in yr arms

RETHA
He don't look like no such thing/Here/Take him--
(*RETHA offers the baby. NINA refuses.*)
Nina--

NINA
--He bites me/He gnaws at my nipple like he's trying to eat me up--

RETHA
--He doesn't even have teeth yet--

NINA
--I have marks/My breasts are covered with marks/And I bleed/I do/I bleed/And I don't want to do it anymore--

RETHA
--Come on now, Nina/That's just--

NINA
--He thinks yr his mama

(*RETHA is taken aback.*)

RETHA
What?/Nina, no--

NINA
--It's like even though he came from me/Even though he came from my body/He belongs to you--

RETHA
--Nina--

NINA
--It's like he was meant for you

RETHA
I don't.../Nina, I don't know how you can even say that--

NINA
--He doesn't want me, Retha/He don't never want me

RETHA
That's not true
(*NINA gives RETHA a look*)
It's not!/Of course he wants you/Yr his mama/He knows yr his mama

Here/Take him

*(RETHA offers NINA the baby.
She refuses.)*

Nina, take yr child

NINA

No

RETHA

Nina--

NINA

--I said, no!

RETHA

Nina, you better hold out yr arms and take this baby
Nina!

*(NINA crosses her arms.
A moment and then RETHA moves to her SISTAH.
She forces the baby into her arms.)*

Hold him/I said hold him!

*(The baby cries.
Neither SISTAH comforts the child.
He cries and cries and cries until...)*

Oh Christ/Give him here

(RETHA takes back the baby.)

Hush now/Hush for Auntie Retha

(beat)

NINA

I've been thinking.../I might wear blue tomorrow/It don't make no sense to be wearing black in August/It's too hot/It's too darn hot for black and.../And well it's been over a year/A whole year of black and.../And anyway who decided that black was the color of sadness anyway?/Cause I mean, the thing is if yr sad, yr sad/It doesn't matter what color yr wearing/ Blue/Red/Purple/Doesn't matter

(beat)

I don't think mama would mind

(beat)

Retha, what do you--?

RETHA

--Wear what you want, Nina/I don't care one way or the other

(beat)

I'm going inside the house/Bring in the clothes when you come.

(RETHA exits with the baby.)

NINA

I'm gonna wear blue tomorrow/I don't care what anybody thinks/I'm gonna wear blue/And I'm gonna fold up this dress and tuck it away somewhere and forget about it/And then in ten years I'll come across it on accident/And I'll laugh/I won't even cry/I'll just laugh/Like it's a joke/Like it's a real funny joke/And I'll just laugh and laugh and laugh...

(Lights fade on NINA.)

8.

*(RETHA and NINA on the porch playing cards.
NINA is wearing blue.
There is a third stack of cards.
NINA stealthily lifts them.)*

RETHA

Nina!

NINA

What?

RETHA

You know what/Peeking at George's cards

NINA

Oh/Are these George's cards?

RETHA

You know they are

NINA

How do you know what I know?

(A moment and then NINA peeks again.)

RETHA

Nina--!

NINA

--What?/It's not like he's putting them to good use/The man can't play spades to save his life

RETHA

Good thing that's not a requirement for living then

NINA
Retha, George won't even know the difference

RETHA
That's not the point

NINA
I didn't say it was the point/I just said he can't play/And besides someone should benefit from knowing that he's holding the *ace of spades*--

RETHA
--Nina, shhhhh/I don't want to hear it

(beat)

NINA
(mumbling) Goody two shoes--

RETHA
--What was that--?

NINA
--Nothing/I didn't say nothing

RETHA
Uh huh...

(A moment and then NINA sighs.)

NINA
God, how long does it take to make lemonade anyway?
(NINA calls into the house.)
George!

RETHA
Nina, leave that man alone--

NINA
--What?/He's been in there for nearly twenty minutes--

RETHA
--Cause *you* said you were thirsty--

NINA
--Yeah well I *was* thirsty twenty minutes ago--

RETHA

--You know you need to hush--

NINA

--What?/I *was*!

(RETHA gives NINA a look.)

Why do you keep looking at me like that?

RETHA

No reason

NINA

"No reason"/Looking at me like I got some kind of third eye in the middle of my forehead--

RETHA

--I was not looking at you like that--

NINA

--You don't know/You can't see yr face--

RETHA

--Anyway

NINA

"Anyway"

(beat)

RETHA

I just.../I just think that maybe you could be a little more grateful

NINA

Grateful?/Excuse me--?

RETHA

--Yeah, you know, toward George/I mean, he's a good man, Nina/He tries real hard and.../And well sometimes you treat him like/I dunno/Like you don't even care/Like he could be anyone/Anyone at all and.../And I don't think yr husband should have to wonder if he...

NINA

If he what?/You don't think my husband should have to wonder if he what, Retha?

(beat)

Retha--!

RETHA

--Nevermind/Just.../It's just that he loves you and...

(NINA looks at RETHA.)

I'm sorry/I shouldn't've.../Nevermind

(beat)

NINA

You have no idea what yr talking about, you know that?

(RETHA begins to speak but thinks better of it.)

God, it's hot/I just want to rip all my clothes off and...

(GEORGE appears.)

GEORGE

Ok... Here we go. Two glasses of fresh squeezed lemonade.

RETHA

Thank you, George

GEORGE

You are very welcome, Retha

NINA

George/We've been waiting/It's yr turn

GEORGE

And I will play just as soon as I set these down. Thank you for being so patient.

NINA

(looking at RETHA) Of course

GEORGE

I hope it's not too sweet. I know how you like to taste the lemons.

(NINA takes a sip.)

Well?

NINA

It's all right

RETHA

Nina--

NINA

--What?

GEORGE
Just all right--?

NINA
--Yeah, just all right--

RETHA
--Don't mind her George/I think the suns gone to her head

NINA
I'm just being honest

RETHA
You mean rude

GEORGE
It's all right, Retha. I can try again.

RETHA
George Robinson, you better not make any more lemonade--

NINA
--Retha!

RETHA
Sometimes you are just too much, you know that?

GEORGE
It's all right, really. If she doesn't like it--

RETHA
--Then she doesn't have to drink it/Plain and simple/I don't know why you've got to be so difficult, Nina--

NINA
--I'm not being difficult--

RETHA
--Yes, you most certainly are--!

GEORGE
--Hey. Ladies. Come on. It's just lemonade.

NINA
Yeah, Retha/It's just lemonade

RETHA

Nina, you and I both know it's not just...

(RETHA stands.)

I have work to do inside the house

(beat)

Excuse me

*(RETHA exits. GEORGE looks after her.
NINA begins to gather the playing cards.)*

NINA

Don't pay her no mind/She's just being sensitive

GEORGE

I've never known her to fly off the handle like that...

NINA

Yeah well that's cause you haven't lived with her yr whole life/She'll be fine/She'll clean something and calm right down

Help me with these cards?

George--

GEORGE

--Oh. Yeah. Sure.

(GEORGE gathers cards.)

You know, we could keep playing if you want.

NINA

You can't play spades with two people, George/Everybody knows that

(A moment and then...)

GEORGE

So I talked with mama yesterday

NINA

Oh yeah?/What'd she have to say?

GEORGE

Well you know mama. A lot of the same. I mean, at first she was complaining about her knees. Like always. And I told her, like I always tell her, you should go and see the doctor. Get a new prescription. Get some relief--

NINA

--Mmhm--

GEORGE

--And she was like, no, no doctors. I don't need a doctor. I'll be fine. And then she started talking about how she's been having trouble breathing. How like sometimes there just won't be enough air in the room and she'll, I dunno, sort of black out and then not remember where she was or what happened when she came to. And that's when I started getting real worried, you know?

(beat)

You hearing me, Nina?

NINA

--Yeah, George/I hear you/Go on and get to the point

GEORGE

She's thinking about going to live in Nicodemus.

NINA

Nicodemus?

GEORGE

Yeah.

NINA

She's gonna move?

GEORGE

She's thinking about it. And if she does then... Well then she said we could have the house. Now I know you weren't too keen on the idea of living there with my mama, but... Well, it's a good house. Sturdy foundation. Lots of room. And you could decorate it any way you wanted.

(beat)

I just thought... it might be nice to have our own place. Grow our little family...

(beat)

I kind of thought you'd have more to say...

(beat)

That maybe you'd be happy.

NINA

About yr mama being sick?

GEORGE

No, not... Not about that. About the house. I thought you'd be happy about the house.

(beat)

Nina--

NINA

--I didn't say I wasn't happy, George

GEORGE

You didn't *say* anything.

(GEORGE takes a breath.)

Look, I'm doing my best here. With you. And I know that it's... That we...

But I'm trying to do right. I'm trying to do the right thing and I just...

I just need you to... to do right with me.

You hear me, Nina?

I need yr help to--

NINA

(on the defensive) Cause I'm not doing enough?

GEORGE

No, that's... That's not what I'm saying--

NINA

(on the offensive) I came splorin with you

GEORGE

Yes, Nina. I know--

NINA

--I said yes when you asked me to marry you--

GEORGE

--Yeah, I know--

NINA

--I gave you a baby--!

(GEORGE grabs NINA'S shoulders, sudden and violent.)

GEORGE

--And I'm giving you a house!

(The baby begins to cry.

A moment and then...

GEORGE releases NINA.)

I'm giving you a house.

(beat)

God, Nina

You just...

You just get me so--

NINA

--Yeah, I know/You get me so too

(They breathe.)

GEORGE

It's a nice house. It's got everything. Three bedrooms. A dining room...

(beat)

What do you say, Nina?

(beat)

Nina?

(beat)

NINA

We ain't never leaving this place, are we?

(GEORGE doesn't reply.

A moment and then...

NINA turns to the still crying baby.)

Oh just shut up will you?

Just shut up!

(NINA exits into the house.)

9.

(RETHA hanging laundry on the line.

A truck door slams.

GEORGE enters in boots and work clothes.)

RETHA

Hey

GEORGE

Hey.

RETHA

Is it lunchtime already?

GEORGE

Yup. You doing laundry?

RETHA

Always

(GEORGE crosses to the porch and sits.)

How're things out on the farm?

GEORGE

They're all right. Mister Berry's had us watering the cows all morning. It's so damn hot and they don't sweat, you know? Well, not like we do anyway. You should see us. All us

farm hands tossing bucket after bucket of water on backsides and hindquarters. It's a sight.

RETHA

Yeah, I bet

GEORGE

It got me thinking actually. About how things would've been if I hadn't left. You know, with the farm and the cows. And the land.

When my daddy died it would have all been mine.

(beat)

Now the prodigal son returned is just a guy like every other guy on the place.

A grunt. Sweating through my clothes. Kicking up dirt just like...

(He gets a whiff of himself.)

God! I smell like wet cow!

RETHA

Well I suppose that's to be expected/You'll have to have Nina run you a bath tonight

GEORGE

Nah, I can do that myself. No need troubling Nina about it.

Is she inside?

RETHA

She's at the shop/Working every day this week, I think

(GEORGE removes his boots.)

GEORGE

Mm that feels good.

(beat)

Did I ever tell you that I wore loafers in New York? That's right. Loafers. And not just on Sundays. Every day. To class. To the library. To wherever. I had two pairs. One black and one brown. And slacks. Two pair. Blue and brown. And dress socks. And a dress coat. And a dress hat even. I gave most of it away after graduation. Before I came back here. It was too expensive to ship and too heavy to carry. Kept a few things. You know just in case I decided to take that job in Chicago, but... Well... We both know how that turned out so...

(beat)

The truth is there's no need for them here anyway. Here it's a good pair of jeans and a sturdy pair of boots and a handkerchief to wipe yr face with.

(beat)

I don't miss the clothes. Not really. I don't even really miss the city much. It's just... Well sometimes... Sometimes I miss the thinking, you know? I mean in New York work was putting pencil to paper. It was organizing ideas and laying them out in a persuasive manner. It was exertion of the mind instead of the body. And I'm not complaining. Honest. I don't mind the work. I mean, it's what my daddy raised me to do. What he

raised me to be. A farmer. Leaving was just... Well it was something I could do cause there was money from the sale of the farm and he wasn't around to say no. Cause if he'd been around he would've said no. He would have taken a rod to my backside for even suggesting...

(beat)

And I got four years. Four years, Retha. Which is... Well it's more than I ever thought I'd get so...

(beat)

Listen to me. Just running my mouth...

RETHA

It's all right, George/Sometimes we just need to talk

GEORGE

Yeah, I guess.

(beat)

Hey. You eaten?

RETHA

Have I...?

GEORGE

You must be hungry running all over this house sun up to sun down. Here. Have half my sandwich.

RETHA

What? No

GEORGE

Nina insists on making me such big sandwiches. It's more than I can eat on my own.

RETHA

I'm not gonna eat yr sandwich, George

GEORGE

Well technically it's only half. And I *did* offer.

(beat)

Come on. I insist.

(RETHA begins to protest.)

You should try just saying yes sometimes, you know? Save all of us a lot of time and a whole lot of effort trying to convince you to do things you *know* you already want to do. Come on and take a little break with me.

(A moment and then RETHA moves to the porch
She sits next to GEORGE.

He hands her half of his sandwich.

They eat.)

This is nice, isn't it? We don't get to sit and talk much anymore.

RETHA

No/We don't

GEORGE

I miss it.

(A moment and then...)

How do you like the sandwich?

RETHA

It's all right

GEORGE

Sandwiches are about the only thing Nina can make on her own. I know you know I'm right.

RETHA

You better hush/That's my sister yr talking bad about--

GEORGE

--I wasn't talking bad about her. Not really.

RETHA

Uh huh

GEORGE

I wasn't! And anyway, I happen to love sandwiches.

(A moment and then they both begin to laugh.)

So I guess Nina told you about my mama?

RETHA

Yr mama?

GEORGE

Yeah. About her not doing so well health-wise? I mean, I suppose I should've seen it coming. She is getting up there in years, you know, and... well I haven't really been around to monitor. But I guess that's the way it is. I mean, we get all wrapped up in our own lives and we forget to... I dunno... look around. To look outside ourselves. To check in. I think it's for the best though. The move. I mean, my aunt's a nurse so mama'll get really good care--

RETHA

--Wait/Sorry/The move?

GEORGE

Yeah. To Nicodemus. Didn't Nina say--?

(RETHA has a look on her face.)

My mama's moving to Nicodemus. She has a sister there. And her sister has a room.

And she's a nurse so...
And it's only thirty miles away which
Well it's practically right next door and...

(beat)

She really didn't say anything?

RETHA

No/She didn't

GEORGE

Huh.
That's...

(beat)

So then... you don't know about...?

RETHA

About what, George?

(beat)

George/What is it--?

GEORGE

--Retha, I really think... I *really* think that Nina should be the one to tell you about--

RETHA

--Nina's not here/She's at the shop and she won't be home for hours/Just... tell me
(beat)

George--

GEORGE

--Mama's leaving us the house. Me and Nina and the baby. We're moving out.

RETHA

Yr...?

(beat)

Oh

GEORGE

Yeah. I'm sorry I... I thought you knew. I mean, I never would have brought it up if... If it's any consolation we'll be less than a mile away if you take the shortcut down by the creek. And yr welcome any time, of course. Absolutely any time. You know that.

(beat)

Retha?

(beat)

Retha, please say something--

RETHA

--When?

Um...
When are you moving?

GEORGE
I dunno exactly. We haven't set a... specific date. But soon. Mama wants to leave Junervy as soon as possible.

RETHA
I see
(beat)
Well
(RETHA breathes.)
I should get back to work--

GEORGE
--Retha--

RETHA
--I'm fine, George/Just gotta hang these clothes/Gotta hang em cause they damn well ain't gonna hang themselves

(RETHA crosses to the line.
After a long moment GEORGE moves toward
RETHA.)

GEORGE
I'm sorry Nina didn't tell you--

RETHA
--It's not yr fault/You know it and I know it so let's just be done with it and move on/I just want to... move on

GEORGE
Yeah, ok.
Whatever you want, Retha.
I'm...
(beat)
I'll do whatever you want.

RETHA
Thank you, George
(A long moment and then...)

GEORGE
Retha?

RETHA

What is it, George?

GEORGE

I want to say something to you. I want to say something but you have to let me say it all the way through before you say anything back, ok?

RETHA

George--

GEORGE

--Just... say you will, all right? Just... say it... please.
Retha--

RETHA

--All right/Say what you gotta say

(beat)

GEORGE

The thing is... I wasn't sure how I was gonna do it at first. Live in the same house as you. Sleep down the hall from you. But Nina insisted, you know? She said, I can't be without my sister. And she refused to live with my mama so--

RETHA

--George, I--

GEORGE

--Retha just... Just let me finish.

(beat)

I literally couldn't sleep. Lying awake at night trying to figure out how I ended up married to the sister of the girl... Of the woman I was inlove with.

(beat)

Retha...

*(GEORGE pulls back the laundry.
RETHA and GEORGE look at each other
And then...
She slaps him.
And then...
They kiss.
And then...
RETHA pulls away.
A moment and then...)*

I guess it's true what they say. God really does have a funny sense of humor. Cause I don't know any other way to explain this.

RETHA

You don't have any reason not to be happy

GEORGE

Don't I?

(beat)

Is Nina?

RETHA

Is she what?

GEORGE

Happy?

Yr her sister.

You would know, right?

Does she seem happy to you?

Happy with me?

With our baby?

Here?

Cause if you tell me she's happy

If you tell me that my wife yr sister is happy then...

(beat)

Well, then I'll be happy too.

(beat)

RETHA

I think.../I think she's as happy as she *can* be

(beat)

GEORGE

I guess that's the best any of us can hope for...

RETHA

Yeah/I guess so...

(beat)

GEORGE

Well... I should be getting back.

(GEORGE stands.)

Thanks for...

(A moment and then he moves to exit.)

RETHA

George?

(He turns back, hopeful.)

GEORGE

Yes?

RETHA

Um.../Have you told Nina about.../Well about wearing loafers/And dress socks/In New York, I mean?/It's just I was thinking.../She might like to hear about those things

(A moment and then GEORGE nods.

He exits.

RETHA touches her lips with her fingers.)

10.

*(GEORGE, RETHA and NINA carry furniture
And suitcases from the house to the yard.
And then...)*

GEORGE

I'm gonna take this load over.

(GEORGE kisses NINA. Not a forehead kiss.)

I'll be back soon.

NINA

Ok

RETHA

Bye, George

GEORGE

Retha.

(GEORGE exits.

The sound of a truck starting and driving away.

THE SISTAHs look after him.)

NINA

He's been so attentive lately/So... I don't know/Different/Like something's gotten into him/Maybe it's the move

RETHA

We should start cleaning up inside

(RETHA moves to the porch.)

NINA

Retha--

RETHA

--The house is a mess, Nina/And I don't want to leave things a mess--

NINA

--The house ain't going nowhere/Come back and sit with me
(beat)

Come on/Don't be stubborn

(RETHA returns.)

That's right/Come sit with yr sister

(RETHA sits.)

Yr not still mad are you?/I said I was sorry for not telling you about the move/I swear I
was just waiting for the right time

(beat)

I never intended you to hear it from George

RETHA

Yeah well I did

(beat)

NINA

You know, I've been thinking about what you should do with the house

RETHA

What do you mean, do with it?

NINA

Just what I said

(beat)

You want to know what I think?/I think you should sell it

RETHA

Sell it?/Nina, are you crazy--?

NINA

--I think you should sell the house and move someplace far away/Someplace cold like
you always say/Somewhere you could drink hot chocolate in the summertime/And
make snow angels in August/That's what you should do

RETHA

That's.../I couldn't do that, Nina

NINA

Why not?/What you got keeping you here?/Holding you to this place?/To Junervy--?

RETHA
--We were born here

NINA
So?

RETHA
So mama was born here/This is mama's house

NINA
Mama's dead, Retha/She's been dead for over a year/It's yr house

RETHA
It's *our* house/Mine and yrs

NINA
Yeah well I don't want it.../And I think you should sell/I think you should sell the house
and go off and have yrself an adventure
(*beat*)
You almost did before, remember?/Cause I do
(*RETHA looks at NINA.*)
I remember the day you got yr acceptance letter/You were so excited/And the day you
found out you got that scholarship--

RETHA
--Nina, stop--

NINA
--George still thinks you didn't apply at all/Did you know that?/He still doesn't know
that the real reason you didn't go to New York was cause you got scared--

RETHA
--Nina I said, be quiet!/You know I had my reasons for staying

NINA
Yeah, like what?

RETHA
Like what?/Like mama/Like she needed me

NINA
Mama was fine/Mama wanted you to go

RETHA
Is that what she told *you*?

NINA

Listen to me.../There's a whole world out there, Retha/Mountains with snowy tops/And forests with trees as big around as elephants/And lakes so big they look like oceans/There's cities and people and excitement and it's all out there--

RETHA

--Thank you, Nina/Thank you for that trumpet call/But I'm fine where I am

(beat)

NINA

You know George came by here almost every day when we were kids

RETHA

I know he came by/I was here, remember--?

NINA

--Yeah, but mostly you were in the house helping mama/He always asked for you/I'd be playing with dolls or something in the yard and he'd say, "Is Retha here?"/And I'd say, Yeah she in the house/And he'd say, "Well can she come out?"/And I'd say, Lemme see/And then I'd go inside/Just a little ways inside the door/And I'd wait a little while/Just long enough so he'd think I asked you/And then I'd go back out on the porch/And he'd say, "So? What'd she say"/And I'd say, Nah, she's busy/But I'll play with you...

(beat)

RETHA

You gonna help me clean up inside or not?/We should go clean up the house--

NINA

--You don't get nothing if you can't say what you want, Retha/If the universe don't know then it ain't never gonna come to you

(beat)

Mama said that--

RETHA

--Mama never said that--

NINA

--Yeah she did/You just didn't hear it/You didn't hear a lot of things

RETHA

I heard plenty/*You* were the one never heard nothing/Never paid attention/Always doing things yr own way/Getting yrself into trouble--

NINA

--You may be older than me, Retha/But that doesn't mean you know more/That yr smarter than I am--

RETHA

--I don't wanna argue with you, Nina/It's yr last night in the house and I don't want to argue/Let's just go inside and--

NINA

--Mama let me do what I wanted/She let me play outside instead of helping in the kitchen/She bought me pretty things from catalogues/And straightened my hair whenever I asked/She let me go out with boys/What'd she let you do?/Huh?/What'd she let you do?/Nothing/Except chores

(beat)

You get what you ask for, Retha

(beat)

Course if that's all you wanted.../Well then good for you

(NINA moves toward the porch.)

RETHA

I said no to George

(beat)

The same night you came in here talking about I'm inlove/I'm inlove/Yr hair every which way/Face all crazy/Yr dress pulled up to yr thigh/I said no

(beat)

I said no for *you*--

NINA

--Nah Retha/You didn't say it for me/You said it for mama/You said it cause all you heard her say was, "Stay together/Want together/Need together--"

RETHA

--She said don't let nothing come between ya!/Not a man/Not anything--!

NINA

--Unless yr inlove!

That's the part you didn't hear/Don't let nothing come between ya unless yr inlove/And you were

(beat)

You still are

(RETHA looks at NINA.)

God, Retha/Yr face.../Gives you away every time

(beat)

You really think I didn't know?

RETHA

I...

(beat)

But you never...?/You never said anything/You knew and you...

(beat)

But I mean, if you knew then...

(RETHA looks at NINA.)

Nina, if you knew then why did you...?

(beat)

You married him/You married George and you knew that I...

(beat)

How could you do that?

NINA

I don't know/Cause I could, I guess/Cause I thought I knew what I wanted

RETHA

You *thought* you knew--?

NINA

--The thing is, Retha/You want something so badly for so long that you don't know what kinda person you'd be without the ache/It's like, if you ever got what you wanted, you'd lose yrself entirely/But if you lose yrself/What are you then?

RETHA

A sister/And a wife/And a mama/*That's* what you are

(beat)

You want more than that?

*(THE SISTAHS look at each other
Then NINA exits into the house.)*

11.

*(One week later.
RETHA removes laundry from the clothesline.
The radio plays.)*

ANNOUNCER

*"Well The Eagle has landed on the surface of the moon and has reported back. This powered descent has succeeded and filled in the last twelve minutes of time that the Apollo program had always lacked
And that mankind in his own time continuum had lacked up until now. The flight of Apollo 11
Now the lunar landing of Apollo 11.
Coverage will continue in a minute..."*

(GEORGE appears in the yard, holding a crying baby.)

GEORGE

Retha...?

(RETHA emerges from behind the sheets.)

RETHA

George...

(beat)

I thought I heard crying

(RETHA moves to the radio and turns it off.)

GEORGE

I can't get him to stop
No matter what I do
I try to feed him
He's not hungry
I try to change him
There ain't nothing to change
I think maybe there's something wrong

RETHA

There ain't nothing wrong with this baby

(RETHA takes the baby from GEORGE)

Where's Nina?/She at the shop?

(GEORGE does not reply.)

RETHA turns her attention to the baby in her arms.)

He just needs to be talked to is all/Isn't that right, little man?/Yr just craving a little conversation is all/Just a little conversation

(beat)

Shhh... Ok now/Hush/Yr screaming is drowning out all the night sounds/You've scared away the crickets/And the cicadas/Even the wind ran away/And it's hot out here without the wind.../So hot.../Nigger hot

(She allows herself a little smile.)

I bet he'll come back if you stop though/If you stop.../If you stop maybe it'll snow

(The baby makes a sound.)

Oh you like that, do you?/You like that idea?/Yeah well... so do I

(beat)

Honestly, I don't understand why yr crying anyway/We just landed on the moon/Did you know that?/Heard it on the radio just now/We sent a rocket up into the sky/Way up there, see?/Way up there with the stars/You can't be crying when.../When such miracles are happening all around you

(The baby is quiet.)

See there, George?

(RETHA turns to GEORGE)

All better

GEORGE

Yeah, I see that.

RETHA

You just gotta talk to him/You just gotta let him hear yr voice

GEORGE

Yes, ma'am. I'll remember that.

(GEORGE breathes.)

Retha--?

RETHA

--How is she, George?/Nina, I mean?/We haven't spoken since.../It's just that the other day we.../Well, we both said some things that.../We didn't exactly not mean them, but.../I think we'd take them back, you know?/Even though they might have been just the tiniest bit true I think.../I think we'd both take them back if we...

(beat)

She doing ok?

GEORGE

She's gone, Retha.

RETHA

She...

(beat)

What?

GEORGE

I came home tonight. I walked through the door. And the baby was crying. He was just in his bed crying. And I called her name. I said, Nina. Nina, where you at? And she didn't say nothing. So I went upstairs and...

She took her clothes.

Her things.

It's all gone--

RETHA

--I'm sorry, I don't.../I don't understand what yr.../George, where is my sister?

GEORGE

--She took everything. Everything but the ring.

(beat)

Retha--

RETHA

--No/No, I.../I don't know why you came over here.../I just don't know why you came over here telling stories/Showing up announced/Talking about Nina's gone/Telling me stories about my sister--

GEORGE

--Retha, I'm not telling you a story--

RETHA

--Cause she wouldn't, George/Nina wouldn't just...

(beat)

I mean...

(beat)

She wouldn't just *leave*

(RETHA breaks.)

GEORGE

Retha.

(beat)

Hey.

Come on now.

(beat)

Retha--

*(GEORGE reaches for RETHA.
She cries out for her SISTAH from someplace deep
deep inside of herself.)*

RETHA

NINA!

(GEORGE attempts to comfort her.)

GEORGE

Retha...

RETHA

NINA!

GEORGE

Retha, please...

RETHA

George you gotta take him--

GEORGE

--What? Retha, no--

RETHA

--GEORGE JUST TAKE THE BABY PLEASE--!

GEORGE

--RETHA--!

(RETHA thrusts the baby into GEORGE'S arms and tries to run, but GEORGE holds her.)

RETHA

--LET ME GO, GEORGE/LET ME GO/I GOTTA GO FIND MY SISTER/I GOTTA FIND HER/YOU GOTTA LET ME GO!

(RETHA struggles, but GEORGE holds her. Somehow he holds her.)

GEORGE

I won't.
I won't let you go.
I'm not letting you go.

*(After a while
RETHA quiets.
GEORGE, RETHA and the baby are quiet.
They breathe together.
And then slowly
And without ceremony
It begins to snow.
As the lights begin to fade
A radio announcement plays.)*

ANNOUNCER

*"Well, there he is.
Neil Armstrong is on the moon.
He's done it.
'One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind'"*

(BLACK)

end of play.