

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

SETTING: The living room of a modest Harlem apartment. September, 1926. A neat, orderly room with few knickknacks. A Victrola and a stack of record albums are given pride of place. So are a small upright piano and a portrait of Jesus on the cross. Adjacent to the living room is a small kitchen, partly visible. Off the living room are a door to the outside, up center, and a hallway leading to bedrooms.

AT RISE: RUBY MAE enters from the kitchen. She is 60-something and originally from Louisiana. She has a no-nonsense air. She crosses to the hallway and calls out.

RUBY MAE

Phoebe! You get out here now, child!

PHOEBE

Comin', Nana!

RUBY MAE

You gonna be late!

PHOEBE

Okay!

(PHOEBE enters from the hall. She is eleven, and light-skinned. She will be very beautiful one day but right now she is tall for her age and a bit gawky.)

I'm ready. What do you think?

RUBY MAE

You look nice, child! Real nice. My, you're gettin' so big! I'm proud of you, skippin' a whole year like this.

PHOEBE

Seventh grade, Nana! Imagine, I'll be a teenager soon!

RUBY MAE

Don't you rush that! We still got over a year afore that comes up. Now, Phoebe, don't forget your lunch 'cause you got your nose in some book. It's on the kitchen counter.

PHOEBE

I won't.

RUBY MAE

Do you want some toast? It's made.

PHOEBE

No thanks, Nana. I don't feel hungry.

RUBY MAE

You sure? It's a long time till lunch.

PHOEBE

I'm okay.

RUBY MAE

I wish your Mama could see you now. She'd be right proud. (begins to cross towards the hall)

PHOEBE (stopping her)

Don't wake her, Nana. She didn't get home till after five.

RUBY MAE

And just what was you doin' up at that hour of the morning?

PHOEBE

I woke up early. I was too excited to sleep.

RUBY MAE

Most children your age ain't so excited about the first day of school. You an odd child, Phoebe Jane.

PHOEBE

I s'pose. Anyway, I'll see Mama when I get home. She's takin' me to dinner at the Harlem Hotel while you go to your church meeting.

RUBY MAE

If your Mama would learn to cook, she wouldn't always have to be eatin' out. I could fix you a couple of plates.

PHOEBE

It's OK, Nana. It'll be a treat for both of us. You ought to relax when you get home. You don't have much time in between work and church, do you?

RUBY MAE

I don't and that's a fact. You a good girl, Phoebe. I wish your mama was more like you.

PHOEBE

Nana, don't start. I better go.

(PHOEBE grabs her backpack off the floor next to the sofa.)

RUBY MAE

You *sure* you ain't hungry?

PHOEBE

I'm fine, Nana!

RUBY MAE (dubiously)

All right, then.

PHOEBE

Have a good day at work!

(PHOEBE kisses RUBY MAE and dashes out)

RUBY MAE

A good day at work. Sure, honey, ain't nothin' like gettin' on your hands and knees cleanin' up other folks' houses. Then I come home and do the same thing here. Well, Lord, thank heavens some people is too grand...or too lazy...to do their own housework. Helps us eat.

(she peers into the kitchen)

Near eight o'clock already. Dang if that girl didn't forget her lunch after all that! Well, I reckon she can bring it tomorrow.

(she picks up a jacket which is strewn across the sofa)

And this one. Mm, mm, mm, would you look at that. Always leavin' stuff around for me to pick up after her. I declare, she's worse than her own baby. 'Bout time that gal got her self out of bed. Coming home at all hours of the morning. It ain't decent, I says. (raises her voice) Clary! Clarice Hazelton!

(No answer. Angrily, RUBY MAE sticks the jacket into the closet and exits to the bedroom. PHOEBE enters from the outside and looks around.)

PHOEBE

Nana! I *did* forget my lunch!

(She heads into kitchen as her mother, CLARICE, a beautiful woman in her late 20s, clad in a bathrobe, stumbles sleepily into the room, pursued by RUBY MAE)

CLARICE

Mama, what you wake me for? I only been asleep a little...what time is it?

RUBY MAE

Time you got up, that's what time it is! When you gonna take some interest in your own child?

CLARICE

Is Phoebe gone to school already?

RUBY MAE

That's right, she gone.

CLARICE

Damn.

RUBY MAE

First day of seventh grade, and you ain't even up to see her off!

CLARICE

Please, Mama, leave me be.

RUBY MAE

Don't tell me what to say and not say in my own house! Clary, you better start wisin' up. Your own daughter knows what you are. What you done. This morning she say to me, "Don't wake Mama. She didn't get home till after five." And why? You too busy stayin' out till all hours, partyin' and drinkin' with them friends of yours. Too busy to look to your own child!

CLARICE

That ain't true, Mama! I was workin' a party after the show came down. That's an extra twenty in my pocket!

RUBY MAE

Dirty money.

CLARICE

Till you need some groceries, or help with the rent, then it get real clean all of a sudden, don't it?

RUBY MAE

Don't you give me backtalk. Clary, what went wrong? You was such a good, God-fearin' child. Then came the blues, and you ain't set foot in a church since you first heard that no-count noise. Then you come home with a baby in your belly, but still you was struttin' 'round the place like you some kind of angel.

CLARICE

You still talkin' like it was yesterday!

RUBY MAE

Sinnin' is sinnin', it ain't got no time limit.

CLARICE

The Bible say that somewhere?

RUBY MAE

You'd know if you ever read it, Clary! And of course, the daddy ain't nowhere in sight. If that ain't bad enough, turns out he wasn't no God-fearin' colored man. No, not my Clary, that ain't enough trouble for her. She got to get mixed up with a white man. Lord, help me.

CLARICE

The Lord ain't gonna care! You're damn right, he was white. No God-fearin' man woulda gone near me, Mama! Nor won't neither.

RUBY MAE

Then you just keep 'long your merry way, like nothin' changed. Can't nobody tell you nothing. You ain't never paid that child no mind less'n she gets underfoot. Clary, listen, she gettin' bigger. She need more than I can give her. It's time you give her some attention, hear me?

CLARICE

Phoebe is fine. What she needs is to know the truth.

RUBY MAE

What truth? What you talkin', girl?

CLARICE

Know what I think? I think the Lord don't care about the color of someone's skin, Mama. He cares 'bout what you look like inside. Ain't you learned nothin' in sixty years of church-goin'?

RUBY MAE

What you know about what the Lord cares about? Oh, girl, you gonna be damned, sure enough.

CLARICE

That's right, Mama. I'm damned. But if you're right, then Phoebe is damned too. Damned from the minute she was born. 'Cause yeah, her daddy was white. And you know what else? He wasn't no Baptist neither.

RUBY MAE

Protestant? Lordy, Lordy, tell me he wasn't no Catholic. Clary, what you done got yourself into? I can take anything, but tell me he wasn't no Catholic.

CLARICE

No, he wasn't no Catholic.

RUBY MAE

Thank you, Jesus.

CLARICE

Phoebe's Daddy was Jewish, Mama!

RUBY MAE

Now, Clary, what you say a thing like that for?

CLARICE

'Cause it's the truth! He was a Jew! One of them real religious ones. Wore black all the time. Had that long hair goin' down the sides of his face. Wore one of them little hats. You know, you've seen that kind!

RUBY MAE (horrified)

Heathens! Every one of 'em.

CLARICE

They ain't heathens, neither. They're real devout. Just like you!

RUBY MAE

You quit talkin' that nonsense, girl. Anyone don't believe Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior is a heathen if you ask me!

CLARICE

I don't see nobody askin' you! So what you got to say for yourself now? You think she damned? What you gonna say when she asks you if you ashamed of her?

RUBY MAE

What you mean, Clary? You wouldn't dare tell her. Would you?

CLARICE

Like you say, she gettin' bigger. She ought to know.

RUBY MAE

That child gonna be crushed.

CLARICE

I been thinkin' 'bout it a lot, Mama. It's wrong to keep this from her. I don't want no more lies or secrets between us.

RUBY MAE

So you gonna tell her she ain't one of God's children?

CLARICE

Of course she is. We all God's children, not just Baptists. Did you know the Jews believe they're the Chosen People, Mama?

RUBY MAE

Nonsense. Where you hear a thing like that? (pause) That boy been sniffin' round here again?

CLARICE

Who, Mama?

RUBY MAE

Phoebe's Daddy. He come back to make trouble? That why you're talkin' like this?

CLARICE

*What?!* (laughing) No, of course not! He don't know nothin' 'bout Phoebe, don't even know she exists. Anyways, he couldn't find me if he wanted. Didn't even know his whole name, and he sure didn't know mine. I was already singin' under the name The Duchess that summer, don't you remember nothin'?

RUBY MAE

The Duchess! (snorts derisively) Some Duchess. You left home a nice young girl, you come home a full-bore sinner!

CLARICE

Yup, that's right. A sinner from head to toe, Mama. And I ain't never looked back since!

RUBY MAE

Clary, I declare, you gonna be the death of me yet.

CLARICE

Ain't nothin' gonna kill you, Mama. You'll prob'ly outlive Phoebe. Now, will you let me get some sleep in peace?

RUBY MAE

Just don't get so caught up you forget you promised to take her to dinner. (pause)

CLARICE (muttered)

Damn.

RUBY MAE

You forgot, ain't you?

CLARICE

I got an audition. At six tonight.

RUBY MAE

What kind of audition can be more important than your own child?

CLARICE

A big one, Mama. The Savoy. That new club. It's a grand place, real dicty. All the ofays go there.

RUBY MAE

Who cares 'bout that? Least you could do is sing in a colored club.

CLARICE

These places pay better. I'm gonna meet more swells, too. Maybe get me a recordin' contract, like Mamie and Bessie.

RUBY MAE

Low-class women, they is. I done raised you better than that.

CLARICE

Please, Mama, back me up on this. I'll make it up to Phoebe. And to you.

RUBY MAE

What you want me to tell her?

CLARICE

The truth. No, I'll tell her myself. I'll meet her after school.

RUBY MAE

Ain't you got to practice for this big audition of yours?

CLARICE

Don't you worry 'bout that. I been singin' the blues so long I could do it in my sleep.

RUBY MAE

You know where it is?

CLARICE (pause)

One Thirty-Third?

RUBY MAE

Corner of Seventh. Three o'clock sharp, Clary!

CLARICE

Three o'clock.

RUBY MAE

Maybe get her some sweets at the drug store, she likes that.

CLARICE

I know what! We'll have some ice cream. And I'll take you both out to dinner, real soon. OK?

RUBY MAE

Never mind dinner. Promise me you ain't gonna bring this up out of the blue?

CLARICE

I don't want to upset Phoebe either, Mama. But she got a right to know. And the only thing I can promise you is, I ain't gonna keep my mouth shut much longer.

RUBY MAE

Clary, you know what you gettin' into?

CLARICE

Some. I went to see this Rabbi.

RUBY MAE

A Rabbi? You mean like a Jew preacher-man?

CLARICE

Mm hmm. Willie introduced me to him. You know, my friend, Willie the Lion? He got to be a Jew too.

RUBY MAE

How come Willie knows this Rabbi?

CLARICE

He been a Jew himself, since he was little. Useta deliver clean laundry to these Jewish neighbors when they was havin' lessons. They let him sit in, and he got to like it. He even had some kind of ceremony when he was thirteen. Bar, somethin'. So he's Jewish, Willie that is.

RUBY MAE

Ain't no such thing as a black Jew.

CLARICE

Sure there is, Mama. And Willie thought this Rabbi could help me. So I been talkin' to him.

RUBY MAE

What you mean, you been talkin' to him? About what? Clary, ain't you got no sense? You got in a heap of trouble once, mixin' with them people. Stay away, hear me?

CLARICE

Not like that, Mama. This Rabbi, he's a good man. Maybe he can help me.

RUBY MAE

What you need help from him for? We always managed fine by ourselves, ain't we?

CLARICE

I bet you'd have no problem if it was the Reverend I wanted to talk to Phoebe.

RUBY MAE

That's a good idea! Why not? Let her own people handle this, not some stranger. If you must talk with her about it.

CLARICE

You're forgetting one thing, Mama. This Rabbi is her people, too. Just as much as the Reverend is. Like it or not, Phoebe is part Jewish, and part white. You got to stop turning a blind eye to that, if you really love her.

RUBY MAE

You got no call to be sayin' that! You know that child is the sugar in my coffee!

CLARICE

So you keep sayin'. But you want her to deny half of who she is.

RUBY MAE

Look at her, Clary! Phoebe ain't no kind of white gal. She ain't no kind of Jew. She a beautiful, colored, God-fearin' Baptist, and you ain't gonna change that!

CLARICE

It ain't up to me to change it, Mama. But it's only half the truth.

RUBY MAE

Lord help us all.

CLARICE

What's a matter, Mama? You ashamed your grandbaby ain't no Baptist? If it makes you feel any better, she won't be considered a Jew neither.

RUBY MAE

What you mean?

CLARICE

Jewish folks believe a child has the religion of the mother.

RUBY MAE

How you know that?

CLARICE

I been askin'.

RUBY MAE

All right! So she ain't no Jew, then there ain't no need to tell her nothin' 'bout it.

CLARICE

I don't agree. She needs to know the truth! Listen, Mama, I got to decide what's best for her, and I think she's old enough to know about her father! Jewish blood and all. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to take a long, cool soak, since you ain't gonna let me get no more sleep.

RUBY MAE

Clary...

CLARICE

And ain't it time you left for work?

RUBY MAE

Lord, it sure enough is!

(RUBY MAE grabs her jacket out of the closet and pins a hat to her head)

CLARICE (softer)

Need some money?

RUBY MAE (stiff)

A quarter'll do it.

(CLARICE hands her some change)

CLARICE

Here's a dollar, Mama. Don't eat them leftovers Miz Hawkins leaves for you today. Get yourself a nice lunch. And could you pick me up some cigarettes on your way home tonight? I'm just about out.

RUBY MAE

Cigarettes. How you keep singin' in that club with all them cigarettes you smoke?

CLARICE

How you keep singin' in choir with all them cigarettes you bum off me?

RUBY MAE (amused)

Fair 'nough. (pause) You ain't gonna say nothin' just yet, is you?

CLARICE

I can't promise you that, Mama.

RUBY MAE

Listen to me, Clarice. I got to draw the line somewhere. I don't want them people near Phoebe.

CLARICE

I don't need your *permission*, Mama! She my daughter, she ain't yours.

RUBY MAE

It's just gonna upset her, Clary, can't you see that?

CLARICE

You got to accept all of who she is, can't *you* see *that*?

RUBY MAE

Mm mm mm, how you made such a mess of your life?

CLARICE

I'm gonna go take that soak now. (yawns widely) Got any coffee made?

(RUBY MAE shakes her head and exits, slamming the door. CLARICE smiles to herself, plops onto the sofa, and lights a cigarette. She lifts the phone and dials.)

Hello? Yeah, this is Clary Hayes. The Duchess, yeah. Is Jerry there? (pause) What about Pod? (pause) Sure. I'll call back later. Don't ask ~~them~~ to call me, I'm goin' back to bed for awhile. (pause; she chuckles) No, thanks, honey. I'm fine.

(She hangs up and exits to the bathroom. PHOEBE emerges from the kitchen, looking stunned. She stands a minute, her backpack in one hand and her lunch in the other. Offstage, CLARICE begins to sing. This jolts PHOEBE out of her reverie. She edges towards the front door and exits, closing it quietly behind her.)

LIGHTS FADE

END SCENE ONE