

## ACT I

SCENE: Inside of a one room shack  
in Tupelo, Mississippi.

TIME: Spring, 1930

AT RISE: ROSE has just finished  
cooking dinner for her husband.

(ROSE, is setting the dinner table, places cornbread and sweet potatoes on table, and hums a spiritual hymn. She's nine-months pregnant and very ready to have her baby. She picks up a patch quilt that she's been working on for her unborn child, and sits at the table stitching more patches on it. TOMMY walks in carrying pieces of wood in his arms, no smile and in deep thought. Life is eating him up inside. He's frustrated and irritable and ROSE can tell. She looks at him and doesn't speak right away, she just observes. He walks over to a table and lays the pieces of wood on top of it. He takes off his hat, and stands there in deep thought, not taking his eyes off the wood.)

ROSE

(Sewing) Mr. Wallace come by.

TOMMY

(Curtly) What for? I paid him what I owe.

ROSE

He ain't come by for no rent. Say, you ain't been to work in two days.

(TOMMY rubs the wood softly and doesn't respond. ROSE puts the quilt down.)

ROSE

You been going somewhere.

TOMMY

(Talking to her with his back turned) Look Rose, I ain't lyin' if that's what you thinkin'.

ROSE

(Pours lemonade in his glass) I never said you was lyin' . . . Where you been?

(TOMMY lays his hat on the table. He sits at the dinner table. ROSE sits at table.)

TOMMY

I went to work . . . But when I looked over in Wallace's field . . . I kept walkin'.

ROSE

Tommy, you can't afford missing work. The baby be here soon. (Puts one baked sweet potato on each of their plate.)

TOMMY

I been taking care of business with Cleveland. Me and him been doing some talkin'—

ROSE

Cleveland? That no good city slicker from Chicago? (Puts cornbread on their plates.)

TOMMY

Cleveland got more sense than these fools in Mississippi.

ROSE

Sense? He ain't nothin' but a crook. My brother say, Cleveland been in every juke joint down here and he don't leave 'til they put him out!

TOMMY

Yo' drunk brother get put out with him.

ROSE

My sister say, 'he chase after every skirt that swings his way.'

TOMMY

And she swingin' hers wide open for him.

ROSE

Well, everybody got faults. But seem like you can't see his.

TOMMY

He smart. He know business.

ROSE

Business? Only business he know is cheatin' folks out'a money.

TOMMY

He ain't cheatin' nobody out'a nothin'. He showing us how to get money.

ROSE

By gambling?

TOMMY

We ain't gamblin'.

ROSE

He got y'all making bets and he taking all your money! Just a bunch of fools!

TOMMY

We betting on Bronze-Ville-Gold!

ROSE

What the devil is that?

TOMMY

That's what he call his number wheel. You pick three lucky numbers, 1 to 78. They spin that wheel and if your numbers match, (Slaps down on the table) BAAM! You hit!

ROSE

Sounds like a bunch of foolishness to me.

(TOMMY pulls money from his pocket and puts it on the table)

TOMMY

(Pointing to money) Fifteen dollars. That's real. That's ours. We ain't seen this much money in four years! Cleveland and his uncle making big money in Chicago, and he said I can too.

ROSE

What kind of work his uncle do?

TOMMY

He the Policy King and he rich!

ROSE

Policy King? So, he the number man! He ain't nothing but a crook hisself!

TOMMY

That man do a lot for black folk up there. Said, if I come up there he'll give me all the money I need to open up my carpentry business. I'll have a group of mens working for me, storefront with my name on it, 'Tommy Jenkins'. And yo' tailor shop be right next to it.

ROSE

Oh, please! Ain't nobody gon' pay for the little mending and sewing I do.

TOMMY

Folks up in Chicago will! They love dressing fancy.

ROSE

How you know? You ain't been there.

TOMMY

Baby, I'm tellin' you! Black folk got businesses up there. They living like kings and queens. Living in mansions. Wearing furs, three-piece suits and Fedora hats. Baby, they driving brand new cars! They even got a black man up there with his own bank, name Binga, and all the black folk put they money in there. And we can too.

ROSE

Tommy, you stand here an' tell that lie?

TOMMY

Cleveland promised me a good job up there . . . 'Til I get my carpenter business going—

ROSE

Doing what?

TOMMY

(Hesitates) I'm be his number runner.

ROSE

I knew it had to be the Devil's work!

TOMMY

Rose, all I gotta do is write down the numbers and turn them in. I'll be making thirty-five dollars a week. You know what we can do with that kinda money?

ROSE

The Devil's work come with a high price. You'll owe him more than he give.

TOMMY

I'll get my own land, build you a house and get rid of these worn out shoes we wearing.

ROSE

I'm fine with the house we got and I ain't never been fond of fancy shoes.

TOMMY

Now who lying? You don't wanna keep living like this. Nobody in their right mind do. That's why I'm taking Cleveland's offer. This our only way out.

ROSE

Get yo' head out the clouds and let Cleveland gon' back North where he come from.

TOMMY

When he leave, we going with him.

ROSE

I ain't 'bout to leave my family and go somewhere I don't know nothing about!

TOMMY

Can't you see I'm trying to get us a better life?

ROSE

By losing your job and coming home late??

TOMMY  
He's trying to help us and you call that—

ROSE  
Selfish!

TOMMY  
How is that selfish??

ROSE  
You just thinking about you! What about my Mama and Daddy? I can't just up and leave! You know my daddy's sick!

TOMMY  
You ain't even trying to understand what I'm saying!

ROSE  
Tommy, I don't want our baby to be born among no strangers!

TOMMY  
If I could convince all our family to follow us I would.

ROSE  
Us? What you mean, us? I ain't said I was going nowhere!

TOMMY  
(Holds hands in front of her) Rose, look at these hands. These carpenters' hands. These ain't for no field.

ROSE  
Eat your supper before it gets cold.

TOMMY  
I don't want this kind of life for you, for me, or my child.

ROSE  
Tommy, I can't go.

TOMMY  
You think I'd lead you wrong?

ROSE  
You trusting in this man like he God!

TOMMY  
Cleveland giving us a new life!

ROSE

Well, I don't wanna live in a big city I don't know nothin' about.

TOMMY

And I don't wanna stay in the country where I ain't allowed to prosper!

ROSE

You got a good job with Mr. Wallace. Plenty men wish they had it good as you do.

TOMMY

Good? You think I like taking orders from a man who calls me, Boy?

ROSE

You can't mind Mr. Wallace's tongue. Least he pay you on time.

TOMMY

It ain't about the money, it's about respect.

ROSE

Well, at least you ain't doing shameful work that'll land you on some chain gang.

TOMMY

I'm a carpenter! A damn good one! Not some durn field hand.

ROSE

Be thankful the Lord is providing.

TOMMY

If the Lord cared about me he'd burn up all these fields we slaving on! All our family know is the field! You wanna die in the field?

ROSE

Tommy, I ain't making light of how you feel . . . but now ain't the time to be walking away from steady work.

TOMMY

Steady? Ain't nothing steady down here! We in a Depression! A Great Depression—

ROSE

But we live a quiet, peaceful life down here. Can't you see we doing good?

TOMMY

Good?

ROSE

Yes. The air is warm and sweet. The sky is full of stars at night. The autumn leaves turn bright orange like roasted sweet potatoes. And we got plenty of love from our family and friends. It's the simple things in life that give us joy.

TOMMY

Joy? Open yo' eyes! Our family been working on Wallace's land four generations and our baby make it five! And this land still ain't ours?? I ought'a own this land! We living in Wallace's house! Eating Wallace's food! And shucking and jiving to Wallace's music! Ain't no pride in that!

ROSE

Tommy, stop upsetting yourself. Drink your lemonade.

TOMMY

It's 'cause of my sweat and blistered hands his wife and kids, and they kid's-kids got mansions! They snuggled in warm rooms me and my daddy built with our hands! (Holds up hands) THESE hands blessed his fields and made him rich! But me and my family crowded up in this lil' shack?? And we still ain't got nothing to show for??

ROSE

Tommy, the Good Book say, in due time the meek will possess the land. God ain't forgot his promises to us.

TOMMY

Twenty-two years of meekness and I still ain't got my own land??

ROSE

What the Preacher say on Sunday? 'God ain't blind to the struggles of his servants.'

TOMMY

You think that preacher got ALL the answers! His words ain't doing us a bit of good.

ROSE

Tommy that ain't necessary!

TOMMY

We sit there every Sunday listening to that man say, (Mocks with a deep voice) 'Thangs gon' get better!' But when that day coming? Bunch of hogwash!

ROSE

How dare you let Satan ride your tongue!

TOMMY

He filling our head with lies!

ROSE

Well, I'll take HIS words over that weasel, Cleveland!

TOMMY

Well, if Cleveland's a weasel, your PREACHER'S A SNAKE!

ROSE

(Accusatory) That's a man of God you blaspheming!

TOMMY

(Accusatory) Cleveland's a man of Gold you blaspheming!

ROSE

You think North is Heaven?

TOMMY

You think South ain't Hell??

ROSE

Can't you see this whole thing you wanting to do with Cleveland is crooked??

TOMMY

Sometimes you gotta do things crooked 'til things get straight!

ROSE

(Wagging her head) Everything about you is changing . . . and I don't like it.

TOMMY

I want somethin' from life and I can't get it here building birdhouses! I can do so much more with these hands, Rose, so much more . . . (Looks at birdhouse) You know, I envy them birds. They the freest creatures alive. They can fly high as they wanna. Come and go as they please. They don't worry 'bout no food, where they gon' stay or, or, clothes and shoes . . . But what about us, Rose? Why God forget about us?

ROSE

He ain't forgot, Tommy. And them birdhouses you make reminds us that he ain't forgot. (Points to birdhouse) Don't matter what that bird done been through, don't matter what storm it had to ride, it can go inside that little hole knowing peace waiting inside . . . and nothing, I mean nothing outside of that hole gon' take his peace away . . . We them birds, Tommy. Me, you (Takes his hands and places them on her belly) and this here baby.

TOMMY

We'll never be like them birds, if we keep living in Miss'sippi. (Removes his hands)

ROSE

(Shaking her head) You'll be a fool to walk off that job.



TOMMY

Well, I'm walkin'. And I'll tell you why. One of the field hands was caught eatin' a tomato. Dang on thang was so small you could hide it in the palm of yo' hand. He got beat like a dog for eatin' a tomato . . . The boy couldn't been no more'n thirteen, fo'teen-years-old. Field full of red tomatoes and Ol'man Wallaces fretting over just one?? (He stops to reflect)

That child howled like I don't know what. Screaming I still can't get out'a my head. It took everything I had inside of me not to jump all over Mr. Wallace. I wanted to pull that stick from his hand and beat the living breath out of him!!

The menfolk, we just stood there like helpless field mice watching that boy get beat senseless. And you know what Ol'man Wallace did? He looks at all of us and says, (mocking his voice) 'from now on all of you will be wearing muzzles! Won't nary one of you BLACK BASTARDS steal from me again!'

So, couple days ago, I go to work and what do I see? Sixteen field hands working with muzzles covering their mouths! Ol' Wallace and his sons mocking and laughing, it's all sport and fun to them . . . AND THIS SON-OF-A . . . THIS SON-OF-A GUN tells me, if I wanna get paid, I got to cover MY MOUTH with that thang! The dogs on his farm walk 'round without a muzzle over they mouth and here I am a MAN and I ain't got no more respect than a dog?

ROSE

(Softly, hurt) I'm sorry, Tommy. I didn't know.

TOMMY

I went over there this morning to kill Wallace (punches hand in fist) Then, I thought about you and our child . . . If I stay here . . . If I go back to that field, I swear I'LL KILL THAT BASTARD!

ROSE

Tommy?

TOMMY

(Kisses her tenderly on the forehead, then connects with her eyes) You carrying my baby . . . My flesh and blood . . . and I'll be damned if I let my child suffer the way I saw that boy suffer over a red tomato. (Puts hat on) Cleveland bought us two one-way tickets to Chicago. Train leaves tonight.

ROSE

We ain't even packed.

TOMMY

Ain't nothin' we got worth takin'.

ROSE

How we gon' tell everybody goodbye?

TOMMY

Ain't got time for goodbyes.

(TOMMY takes the money on the table, puts it into his pocket and exits. ROSE goes to the door, attempts to open it, but refrains. She rubs her stomach and speaks to her unborn child.)

ROSE

Guess we gotta go . . . We can't live here without yo' daddy.

(ROSE quickly scans for things to take. She stops and looks at a WOODEN BIRDHOUSE that hangs on a pole in the house. She takes it down and looks at it admiringly. She wraps it up in the quilt she was working on for the baby, and exits.)

(End of Scene)