

EARLINE

ACT I

Scene 1

The small living/dining room of Earline and Edgar Pitts. The overall appearance is old-fashioned and cluttered; lots of knickknacks, pillows, little pictures, etc. Numerous photographs of children and grandchildren. The front door to the house is at stage right; a door leading to the kitchen at stage left. The stage right area is the living room — overstuffed sofa and chairs. Stage right is a dining area. Upstage is a staircase leading upstairs. Built into the base of the staircase is a telephone niche with telephone. A window facing the side yard and Earline's sister's house next door is on the upstage wall. When the play opens, the family is returning from church. A mantel clock on the dining room sideboard reads 12:45. It is summertime and pleasantly hot in the small town of Hemby Springs. In the real world, a breeze would be gently ruffling the window curtains and the scent of new-mown grass and gardenias would be coming in on the breeze.

Earline Pitts is a large woman, with carefully coifed blue-grey hair. Her dress is a large white floral pattern on a navy blue ground. She is wearing a hat (small straw hat with tiny white flowers) and patent leather pumps. She carries a small patent leather handbag. She also wears a triple-strand pearl choker and large pearl-cluster clip-on earrings.

Edgar Pitts is a large man — not fat, necessarily, but leaning toward it. At the least, he has a belly. He is wearing a medium brown suit — no vest — and a white short-sleeved shirt. He looks out of place in a suit; would be better suited to overalls. He carries the Sunday paper with him.

Loma Purdue, Earline and Edgar's 32 year old daughter, is of medium height, beginning to appear a little matronly, but not fat. A little sloppy in appearance and carriage. Her hair is short with both style and perm

growing out. She wears a short sleeved girlish dress of a pale, flimsy fabric; she wears no hat, her shoes are white medium-heeled sandals, and her purse is an old winter bag of maroon leather. She walks and moves as though she carries much more weight than she actually does.

Mary Earl Purdue, Loma's daughter, is thirteen but looks younger. She is tall, gangly, awkward. She wears a navy-blue skirt and a white blouse. Around her neck is an add-a-bead necklace with two or three beads. Her shoes are white with tiny heels (her first grown-up shoes) and she isn't entirely proficient in walking in them. Her hair is in a little top-knot, coming down around the edges. She carries a white bible.

The four enter by the front door with Earline in the lead, then Mary Earl, then Loma, and finally, a few seconds later, Edgar. Earline comes directly to the sofa and flops down, Loma perches on the edge of a chair and takes off her shoes, Mary Earl stands in the doorway waiting for Edgar. When he comes in, he hands Mary Earl his newspaper, takes off his jacket, takes back the paper, hangs his jacket on a nearby chair, goes to sit in the armchair and immediately begins to read the paper. Mary Earl follows him and reads the paper over his shoulder once he's seated. Earline starts talking the minute she enters the door, or before.

EARLINE

Well! That is without a doubt the long-windedest man I have ever heard in my life. He just don't know when to quit, does he, Edgar? I thought when he said "and finally" he was about to bring it to a close. But, no! He had about five different points to make in his "finally" section and then he got to the "in closing" part. Well, I just don't see why he can't cut it off at twelve o'clock like anybody else. Over at Good Shepherd, Reverend Blackwelder don't go on and on like that. 'Course they are Presbyterians, but they get out at twelve-o'clock on the dot ever Sunday that comes. We drive right past the Good Shepherd and there ain't a soul around, not one single soul. Have you noticed that, Edgar? It's 12:45 right now. We should have been home thirty minutes ago and here we are dragging in at 12:45. Oh, Lord have mercy! I got to get dinner on! (*Getting up and bustling toward the kitchen.*) It'll be midnight before we get finished eating at this rate of speed. Mary Earl, go get your Aunt Velva. Tell her to come on. We'll be eating as quick as I can get it on the table.

MARY EARL

Okay.

EARLINE

And watch your good shoes on them rocks.

MARY EARL

Okay, Grammaw. *(She starts toward the door.)*

EARLINE

And ya'll come on. Don't get to playing in makeup or trying on Velva's shoes and keep dinner waiting longer than Reverend Snipes has already.

(Mary Earl exits out the front door.)

That is the long-windedest man. I've never seen the beat. Loma! Get my beige tablecloth out of the sideboard over there and put it on. Then you can set the table. Oh, Sweet Jesus! I got to get the rice on. I forgot all about the rice. *(Earline rushes into the kitchen. She shouts back from off.)* Loma! Come help me get this rice on. I'm about to starve to death and I can't get dinner ready to save my life. Loma! You coming?

LOMA

Good goshamighty, Mama! I only got two hands. I wish to hell you'd give me a minute.

EARLINE

Reentering) Mary Loma Pitts Purdue! You will not use language like that on the Sabbath Day! Do you hear me? Did you hear her, Edgar? That's your daughter talking like a heathen on the Sabbath Day. I've never seen the beat.

LOMA

(Amused, sharing it with Edgar, hiding it from Earline.)

Well, now, Mama, I figured if Reverend Snipes could cuss on Sunday, I could too. Didn't you hear him? Talking about all us sinners busting *(Whispering 'Hell')* "Hell" wide open?

EARLINE

Edgar, would you please speak to your daughter. I did not raise her to talk to me like that.

(Starts setting the table.)

LOMA

Mama, I was just joking with you. Can't you take a joke?

EARLINE

Filthy talk is not funny. I know lots of people think it is — like these people that call themselves comedians — but it's not. You remember, Edgar, last fall when we was at your cousin Ward's house — you know, it was when Virgil Crenshaw died and we went up to Charlotte for the funeral. We was at Ward's and he had that TV thing, that BHO. Well! I have never been so embarrassed in my life. Weren't you embarrassed, Edgar? Well, I was. He had that TV on and there was one of them comedians, George Carter or somebody, just coming out with the filthiest language I ever heard in my life. And him a grown man! I'll bet he's got children. What must they think of their own daddy going on television and using words I wouldn't say to the cow.

(She changes gears without pausing.)

Loma, what are you doing? I thought you were going to set the table.

LOMA

Looks to me like you already set it.

EARLINE

Well, rest assured there's plenty of other things to do. Go in the kitchen and peel some of them tomatoes.

(Loma exits to kitchen.)

Edgar? Where did you say you got them tomatoes? *(Pause)* Edgar. *(Pause)* Edgar.

EDGAR

Hmmmm?

EARLINE

Them tomatoes, Edgar. Who'd you get 'em from?

EDGAR

Uh... ol' uh... whatchamacallit... uh... Clyde.

EARLINE

Whatchamacallit! Now how on earth am I supposed to know who ol' whatchamacallit is? Clyde McAteer? Is that who you got 'em from? They won't be fit to eat. Hybrids. That's all he knows. That's all you can get nowadays. I remember when my Daddy used to plant tomatoes. What was it they was called — not Big Boys. I can't remember. Anyway, they was good. Read sharp and acidy. Not them tasteless, pithy things like you get now. I don't know how Clyde McAteer's got any tomatoes now anyway. Them I planted out back are still green as grass. Little knobs is all they are — hard as a brickbat.

LOMA

(Shouting from kitchen.) Mama, haven't you got a decent knife? This ol' thing won't cut hot butter.

EARLINE

Well, which one have you got? *(Going to the kitchen door, looking in.)* Honey, that's not my good knife. Get my good knife. Well, where is it? Edgar, where did you put my good little butcher knife? That man drives me to distraction. He never puts anything back where he finds it. Never. *(Turning back to dining area.)* Edgar, where did you put... oh, here it is. What's it doing on the table? That child cannot do a thing for herself, Edgar. I don't know how she's managed to bring five children into the world much less raise 'em. Hutch Purdue must be a better man than I ever give him credit for.

LOMA

(Coming into dining area.) Is that the knife? Well, give it to me. I can't peel tomatoes if you're going to stand out here waving the knife around all day complaining to Daddy about what a good-for-nothing I am.

EARLINE

I did not say you were a good-for-nothing...

LOMA

And don't start taking up for Hutch Purdue at this late date 'cause I'm not going to listen to it...

EARLINE

I'm not taking up for Hutch. I just said...

(She follows Loma to the kitchen. We can hear them talking but they are both talking at the same time so we can't understand what they're saying. Generally, they are pointlessly arguing: "I'm not taking up for Hutch." "You are too." "I am not." "Why you want to start that now?" "I'm not." After a few moments, Earline changes gears and returns to the dining room with a bowl of green beans.)

EARLINE

These snap beans just did not turn out a bit good this year and I didn't have one ounce of fat-back to put in 'em. I used some bacon grease. Probably won't be fit to eat. Speaking of fat back, did you get a look at Reba McWhirter today? I think she's put on fifty pounds since Christmas. Edgar? Edgar?

EDGAR

Hmmmm?

EARLINE

Edgar, am I as fat as Reba McWhirter?

EDGAR

Good God, Er. You'd make three of Reba McWhirter.

EARLINE

(Not even hearing him.) It's just not healthy to be that fat. Oh, Sweet Jesus, something's burning.

(Rushing back toward the kitchen, she flings open the door and talks from the dining room.)

Loma, are you just going to stand there and let my chicken burn to a crisp?

LOMA

(From kitchen.) Your chicken is not burning, Mama. I dropped some grease on the eye is all.

EARLINE

Well, how on earth did you do that? Were you taking it up? Was it done? Are you sure it was done? If there's one thing that turns my stomach, it's pink chicken.

LOMA

Yes, ma'am. The chicken is done. I've only been married for eighteen years. I reckon I've cooked one or two chickens in my time.

EARLINE

Well, go on. Put it on the table and then you can take up the squash.

(Loma comes to the door and hands Earline the chicken, then goes back for the squash.)

I declare that squash smells good. I put about a stick of butter in it. You think that'll be enough.

(Loma comes in.)

I just never know how much butter to add to squash. You have to put cream in it too and I'm always afraid it'll be too runny after I add the butter. Does it look alright to you?

LOMA

Oh, yeah. It'll probably do real nice things for Daddy's blood pressure too.

EARLINE

I know it. That's why I like squash. It's a real healthy food and it's not fattening either.

LOMA

Ummhmm.

(They go back and forth from the kitchen putting food on the table, Earline babbling away as they work.)

EARLINE

I think all this looks pretty good. It ought to hold us for a while anyway. I always worry that I won't have enough food. 'Cause there's you and me and your Daddy and Mary Earl and Velva. Then I have to have a plate to take out to Doralee. I guess it'll be enough. I always try to have enough in case Earl comes by.

LOMA

Is Earl coming today?

EARLINE

I don't know if he is or not. Edgar? Edgar?

EDGAR

Hmmmmmm?

EARLINE

When you saw Earl yesterday did he say anything about coming to dinner today?

EDGAR

Earl?

EARLINE

Yes, Earl. Earl Pitts, your son. Did he say he was coming to eat with us today?

EDGAR

He didn't say nothing to me. Didn't you see him at church?

EARLINE

Well, yes, I saw him, but after that big to-do about moving Bible Society from the fourth Saturday to the third Saturday and then the preacher running on and on and on, I didn't have nothing on my mind but getting away from there and getting home.

EDGAR

That must have been what you and Ethel Childers talked about for twenty minutes in the church yard.

EARLINE

What? What did me and Ethel Childers talk about?

EDGAR

(Grinning at Loma.) Getting away from there and getting home.

EARLINE

Ethel looks bad, don't she? Did you see her, Loma? She doesn't look good, does she? That operation of hers didn't do her one bit of good.

LOMA

What kind of operation did she have?

EARLINE

Shaking her head at Loma and lowering her voice.) It's not something we'd want to discuss in front of your Daddy, Loma.

EDGAR

She had her female parts removed.

LOMA

A hysterectomy? Is that what she had?

EARLINE

(Whispering) Yes.

LOMA

What's the big secret about a hysterectomy? I thought about having one myself after Jimmy was born.

EARLINE

LOMA!!!

LOMA

Well, if the truth be known, Mama, I thought about having one after Tommy was born and that was a long time before my other four young'uns was even thought about.

EARLINE

Well!!! I never thought I'd live to see the day when a child of mine would talk like that. Those are the five most wonderful children in the world. How on earth could you even think of such a thing?

LOMA

They're wonderful now that they're here, Mama. I didn't even know 'em before they was born. *(Pause.)* If somebody had wanted you to have another baby right after I was born, I'll bet you wouldn't have been too excited about it. What was that about "I went down into the valley of death to bring you into this world...?"

EARLINE

I did. And it was worth it. I'd have done it again the very next day.

LOMA

Mama, you crazy. Daddy, tell her she's crazy.

EDGAR

Can't nobody tell your Mama nothin', Loma. Don't you know that yet?

EARLINE

Don't you miss those little young'uns, Loma? I wish every one of 'em was here right now, don't you, Edgar? I do. I wish you'd have just piled 'em all in the car and brought 'em with you.

LOMA

I couldn't bring 'em all with me. They're all working but Jimmy and he's got Little League every day this week.

EARLINE

Working!!! What on earth are they working at? They're just little boys. What are they working at, Loma?

LOMA

Tommy works at Hardee's. L.C. and Wilson are bag boys at the A&P.

EARLINE

Well, I just think it's disgraceful. Little boys like that working at jobs. They ought to be out playing, enjoying their childhood. Can't Hutch make enough money to support his family. What's the matter with that man?

LOMA

Mama, Tommy is 18 years old. L.C. and Wilson are 15 and 16. Boys that age need some spending money of their own. Tell her, Daddy.

EDGAR

You can't tell your Mama nothing, Loma

LOMA

(Pause) So. Do you think Earl's coming or not?

EARLINE

To tell you the truth, I doubt it. Ever since he took up with Mary Frances Plyler, he don't know us anymore.

LOMA

Who's Mary Frances Pyler? Don't tell me Earl's got a girlfriend. I can't believe it.

EARLINE

Earl's had lots of girlfriends for your information. Any girl would be lucky to have Earl.

LOMA

Mama, Earl has never had girlfriends. If he's had a date in his life, I sure don't know about it.

EDGAR

He's sure enough sweet on that little Plyler girl.

EARLINE

Now, you just hush, Edgar. What do you know about it? Mary Frances Plyler is just one of many girls that Earl has been out with.

LOMA

We all know that Earl has spent his whole life just about hanging around with Mildred Cato. From the day he was born nearly. Her and Dwayne Privette probably figured they'd have him with 'em on their honeymoon. Now, tell me about Mary Frances. What's she like?

EDGAR

She's pretty. She's a real pretty girl.

EARLINE

Oh, hush, Edgar. You don't even know her. She's Wade and Addie Mae Plyler's girl and she's got her nose stuck up in the air as high as Addie Mae ever did. Them Plyler's have always thought they was better than anybody else. Ever since Wade got to be a little bossman down at the Elvira plant, they have lorded it over everybody.

EDGAR

Now, I never thought Wade and Addie Mae was like that.

EARLINE

Well, you don't know 'em like I do. Addie Mae? She used to get her hair fixed right after me every Thursday afternoon at Mildred's. And then Wade got his little promotion and you know what? She started going to LaRue McManus. Up at the Chez LaRue. I'm telling you, that job went right to their heads.

LOMA

Maybe she just wanted a change, Mama. Or maybe she didn't like the way Mildred was doing her hair.

EARLINE

It wasn't that. What could have been wrong with the way Mildred was doing her hair?

EDGAR

You sure complain enough about the way she does yours.

EARLINE

Edgar, you don't know anything about it so just hush. And besides, Mildred just can't get my color quite right but there is absolutely nothing wrong with the style whatsoever. *(Change gears, no pause.)* Oh, Sweet Jesus, I'm about to faint and fall in it. Loma, let's get this food on the table right this minute.

(They rush back and forth from the kitchen with the rest of the food.)

Edgar! Edgar! Edgar Pitts, I'm talking to you.

EDGAR

Hmmmm? Did you say something, Er?

EARLINE

Oh, no. I didn't say a word to you. I was just standing here gabbing away to the walls. Is your name Edgar Pitts? We're about to starve to death. Now, get your head out of that paper and get yourself washed up and ready to eat. How you can bury your head in that ol' paper all Sunday afternoon is beyond me. There's not a word in it that matters if you read it or not. If anything happens in the world worth knowing, you'll find out about it.

EDGAR

Are you planning to eat without Mary Earl and Velva?

EARLINE

(With a snort-like sigh.) Loma, get on the telephone and see what's keeping those two.

(Loma goes to the phone and dials Velva's number.)

A thirteen year old child and a sixty year old child. You know what they're doing, don't you? Playing baby dolls or dress-up or something. I know what Velva's like. I never should have sent Mary Earl to get her.

LOMA

There's no answer, Mama.

EARLINE

(Rushing to the window.) Where on earth are they? I can't see a sign of 'em.
(Rushes to the front door. She holds the screen door open and speaks to Velva and Mary Earl on the porch.) Well, for heaven's sake. Here you two are just sitting on the front porch like ladies of leisure. We been slaving away getting dinner on the table and here ya'll set with your feet up.

MARY EARL

(Coming into the house.) I'm sorry, Grammaw. We was just swinging for a minute. I can't sit in the swing after we eat 'cause I get motion sickness. Tell her, Mama. Tell her how I throw up if I swing or ride in the car or anything after I eat.

(Velva enters right behind Mary Earl. She is Earline's sister but a much smaller woman and only slightly plump. She is a soft, pretty, prissy little woman with fluttery hands which she uses constantly to fiddle with jewelry or her clothing or to pat her hair. She is perfectly coordinated — she wears a soft pink dress with ruffles at the neck and cuffs. Her earrings and beads are the same shade of pink as are her shoes. She tries very hard to be correct and polite and her accent is a slower and softer Southern than anybody else's.)

EARLINE

Mary Earl, don't be talking about stuff like that when we're fixing to have dinner. Velva, you know how the slightest little thing will just ruin my appetite. I won't be able to eat a bite.

EDGAR

(With a twinkle in his eye toward Mary Earl.) That's right, little lady. Your Grandma has to be real careful. She's always been kind of puny.

MARY EARL

(Grinning at Edgar.) Grampaw, that's mean.

EARLINE

For your information, Edgar Pitts, I am not "fat" fat. I happen to have a slight gland problem.

LOMA

Could we please eat?

EARLINE

That's what I been trying to do for the last hour. Now, everybody sit down.

(Everybody comes to the table and sits except for Earline who is looking over the food as a last minute check.)

Have we got everything? Yeah. Oh. No salt and pepper. Mary Earl, jump up, honey, and get 'em for me, would you please?

(Mary Earl gets up and starts toward the kitchen.)

And while you're up, why don't you get us some mayonnaise for these tomatoes.

(They wait while Mary Earl goes to the kitchen and returns.)

That's good, Sweetie. Now, say the blessing for us.

MARY EARL

Yes, ma'am. *(Pause.)* God is great. God is good. Let us thank Him for our food. By His hands we all are fed. Give us, Lord, our daily bread. Amen.

EARLINE

That was real sweet, Mary Earl. Wasn't that nice, Edgar?

VELVA

That *was* sweet, Mary Earl. But you know what I think? I think you might enjoy having a more grown up blessing to say sometimes. I'm pretty sure I've got a little book of blessings tucked away somewhere over at my house. When I go home after dinner, I'll see if I can't find it for you.

EARLINE

There wasn't a thing in the world wrong with that blessing, Mary Earl. What's the matter with you, Velva? What would she want a more grown-up blessing for? She's just a little girl.

MARY EARL

I'm thirteen, Grammaw.

VELVA

That's right, Earline. And thirteen is old enough to start thinking about more grown up things. Mary Earl will soon be wearing makeup and going on dates and things like that. Why, what if she went to a boy's house sometime and they asked her to say the blessing and she said a little child's verse like that? Now, wouldn't that be something?

EARLINE

Now, don't you worry, Mary Earl. You're your grandma's little baby girl. You ain't going to have to think about going to any boy's house for a long, long time.

MARY EARL

Back home, my friend Tammy Huffstettler's fifteen and she's been going on dates for over a year.

EARLINE

Fifteen! Dating for a year? Well, I never heard of such a thing. Fifteen! All I can say is, that don't say much for her mama. Does it, Edgar? Letting a little girl go out on dates at that age. Her people must not be much. Loma, what do you mean letting this child associate with that kind?

MARY EARL

She's a friend from church, Grammaw.

EARLINE

Well, it looks to me like your preacher would have something to say to her Mama about it.

MARY EARL

(Giggling.) He talked to her mama about it a lot when it first got started.

EARLINE

I should certainly hope so.

MARY EARL

Tammy is Reverend Huffstettler's daughter, Gramma.

EARLINE

Well, I don't care if she belongs to Jimmy Swaggert. Fifteen is too young to be dating.

LOMA

Aw, Mama, let her alone. I think your memory's shot anyway.

EARLINE

There's nothing wrong with my memory.

LOMA

Okay. Okay. You remember where I was at fifteen? I'll tell you. Laying flat of my back in the hospital giving birth to Tommy Purdue, that's where.

EARLINE

That was different.

LOMA

It was different alright.

EARLINE

And didn't I tell you you'd live to regret it? Didn't I tell her, Edgar? But no, you knew too much. You wouldn't listen to me. I was only...

LOMA

In the first place, I don't regret it. In the second, I was gone and married with Tommy on the way before you got a chance to tell me anything.

EARLINE

I'd been telling you all your life, hadn't I? I didn't...

LOMA

Mama, it was eighteen years ago. Let's not drag it all up again.

EARLINE

I'm not dragging anything up. I'm just trying to tell you that Mary Earl is a little girl and if you have your way, she'll end up just like you. Married at fourteen and five half-grown children at thirty-two. Hutch Purdue setting in that little dinky house in Wadesboro with the boys and you here with Mary Earl.

EDGAR

Our Loma didn't turn out so bad, Earline. I wouldn't trade her or them young'uns for nothing.

LOMA

Thank you, Daddy.

EARLINE

Nobody's talking about trading the young'uns, Edgar. For heaven's sake, all I was saying...

EDGAR

We all know what you was saying, Er...

VELVA

My goodness gracious. All this to-do because I said Mary Earl might like a grown-up blessing. I declare, I'll just learn to keep silent in the future.

(Long awkward silence in which they eat.)

VELVA

Didn't the Reverend Snipes deliver a fine sermon this morning?

EARLINE

Ohhhhh, Sweet Jesus...

LOMA

Change the subject, Aunt Velva. Change the subject.

VELVA

Why?

EDGAR

Earline thinks the Reverend is a little too long-winded, Velva.

VELVA

Well, of course she does. Earline, didn't Mama always say that if you'd pay more attention to the content of the sermon and less to the length, your immortal soul would be far better off?

EARLINE

My immortal soul is just fine, Velva. It's my earthly fanny that I worry about when Reverend Snipes gets on one of his high horses. My Lord, when he got through this morning, I felt like I was paralyzed from the waist down.

VELVA

Well, I, personally, was inspired.

EARLINE

Oh?

VELVA

Yes. In fact, this morning in church, I made a very important personal decision.

MARY EARL

Were you saved, Aunt Velva?

VELVA

Oh, goodness no, Mary Earl. I did that a long, long time ago.

LOMA

Then what happened to you?

VELVA

Well... you will recall the Reverend Snipes spoke of "calling" as in being "called" to the ministry. His text was, I believe, The Gospel of Mark, Chapter 9, Verse 23. "Jesus said unto him, if thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth."

EDGAR

So, you going to be a preacher, Velva?

VELVA

(Amused.) Oh, certainly not, Edgar. But I do believe that people can be called to many careers, not only the ministry. And, I believe that I have found my calling. And I made a decision in church to pursue my career. “If thou canst believe, all things are possible...”

EARLINE

Velva, he was talking about if you was sinful, or sick, or in trouble, things would work out if you believed in the Lord. He wasn’t talking about going out and getting a job in a beauty parlor or a dime store or something.

VELVA

All things are possible, Earline. That’s what he said. Not *some* things. *All* things.

MARY EARL

So, are you going to get a job down at Woolworth’s, Aunt Velva?

VELVA

No. Before Floyd died, I realized that I had a special gift and since he passed on, I have also come to realize that my gift is to be shared, not selfishly kept to myself. With a little more training, I could become quite expert at it. So I made a decision in church this morning. I am going to school to polish my skills, then I’m going to pursue my career.

MARY EARL

Doing what, Aunt Velva?

EARLINE

Yes, just what is this special gift that you have got and have been called by the Lord in heaven to share.

VELVA

I am going to become a professional ventriloquist.

(Utter silence. Everyone stops eating and looks at Velva, then at each other, then back at Velva. Everybody except Earline ad libs amazed and congratulatory remarks such as: “What?” “Are you serious?” “That’s wonderful, Aunt Velva!” “That’s wild!”)

EARLINE

Are you crazy, Velva! What is the matter with you? Mama is spinning in her grave. You know that, don’t you? She is spinning in her grave.

VELVA

It’s something I have to do, Earline. Floyd would want me to.

EARLINE

If he hadn’t done it already, Velva, Floyd would drop dead from embarrassment.

VELVA

Floyd would be very proud of me, Earline. He always urged me to pursue my interests.

LOMA

Good for you, Aunt Velva! I’m proud of you too.

MARY EARL

I think it’s wonderful. Where are you going to school?

VELVA

Miami.

EARLINE

Miami, Florida? Oh, Lord have mercy...

EDGAR

What kind of school is it, Velva. I mean, is it like a college or something?

VELVA

Well, no. It's only a six month course. But it's the best ventriloquism school in the United States. I've been thinking about it for quite a long time and then this morning, the Reverend Snipes just inspired me to do it.

EARLINE

I'll never be able to hold up my head in Hemby Springs again. Velva, you can't do this. Mama would never forgive me if I didn't stop you from doing this foolish thing.

EDGAR

You can't stop her, Er. It's none of your business so just leave her alone.

EARLINE

It's every bit my business...

LOMA

Well, this is a lot of fun but I've got to go.... Good luck, Aunt Velva.

EARLINE

A sixty year old woman... *(To Loma.)* Where are you going?

LOMA

Out to the dragstrip...

(Velva starts to fix a spare plate with food.)

EARLINE

No, you are not. Who are you going with?

LOMA

Mickey Crenshaw.

EARLINE

Mickey Crenshaw!!! He's nineteen years old.

LOMA

So?

EARLINE

You are a thirty-two year old woman with five children. You can't be running off to the dragstrip with some boy young enough to be your son.

LOMA

Yeah, but he's not my son.... and he's damn cute.

EARLINE

LOMA!!!

LOMA

Aw, Mama, don't worry about it. It's nothing.

EARLINE

Nothing! Oh, Sweet Jesus...

LOMA

See you. (*Loma exits.*)

EDGAR

(*Edgar gets up from the table.*) Wait a minute, Loma. Let me check the water in that ol' car before you go way off out there to the dragstrip. (*He exits.*)

EARLINE

That's right, Edgar. You take up for her. Acting like trash and you don't have a word to say about it.

VELVA

Now, Earline, Loma's not trash.

EARLINE

Well, you should know. An old woman running off to Miami, Florida to be a ventriloquist.

VELVA

Earline, I'm not going to let you insult me or deter me. I'm doing what I have been inspired to do. Now. I've fixed a plate. If you want me to, I'll take it out to Doralee. Do you want me to do that?

EARLINE

Yes.

(Velva goes into the kitchen. We hear the back door slam. Earline looks around, toward the kitchen and toward the front door)

EARLINE

What is this family coming to, Mary Earl? Has everybody lost their minds?

MARY EARL

Don't worry about it, Grammaw. It'll be alright. *(Pause.)* How's Aunt Doralee?

EARLINE

She's a real old woman, honey. I guess she's doing as well as could be expected under the circumstances.

MARY EARL

What do you reckon makes her scream like she does?

EARLINE

Well, I don't know, sugar. *(Putting her head in her hands.)* But, oh, Sweet Jesus, I think I'm begging to figure it out...

END OF SCENE 1

ACT I, Scene 2

It is late Sunday afternoon. Velva, Earline and Mary Earl are in the living room. Earline repeatedly gets up and goes to look out the window and door for Loma. Velva holds a large doll (a very fussy, prissy doll) which she uses as a ventriloquist's doll. Velva is not very good.

VELVA

Delilah, this young lady is Mary Earl Purdue. Say "How do you do?" to Mary Earl, Delilah. *(As Delilah.)* Hello, Mary Earl. Will you be my friend?

MARY EARL

Sure. Why not?

VELVA

(As Delilah.) Do you like my dress, Mary Earl? Miss Velva made it for me.

MARY EARL

Yes, it's very pretty.

VELVA

Delilah, tell Miss Earline to stop fretting about Loma and come sit down and talk to us. *(As Delilah.)* Miss Earline, why don't you...

EARLINE

(Leaving the window.) Oh, Good Lord in Heaven, Velva. I'm not about to be having a conversation with a durn doll. Foolishness is what it is and, Mary Earl, you're just encouraging it by egging her on.

MARY EARL

Oh, Grammaw, it's fun.

EARLINE

Fun, my eye. It's foolishness.

MARY EARL

But, Grammaw....

VELVA

(Putting the doll aside.) It's alright, Mary Earl. This is your grandmother's house and if she doesn't want me to talk with Delilah here, then I won't.

EARLINE

Thank you very much. *(Pause.)* I declare, that Loma has just got me worried to death. Why she would want to go off to the dragstrip, of all places, with that Mickey Crenshaw is more than I will ever understand.

VELVA

Oh, Earline, there's nothing in that. She simply needed a male companion to go out there. A young lady certainly could not go to a place like a dragstrip unescorted.

EARLINE

In the first place, Loma is more'n thirty years old. That is not exactly young. In the second, as much as I hate to say it about my own daughter, she is not exactly a lady. A married woman with children has no business at such a place.

VELVA

Thirty-two isn't so old.

MARY EARL

What's wrong with the dragstrip? It's just boys racing their silly cars.

EARLINE

It's just that kind of thinking that'll get you into trouble someday, Mary Earl. And what on earth is your poor Daddy doing trying to look after those four little boys all by hisself. It's just like her though. It's just like Loma to do something like this. Eighteen years ago? Eighteen years ago, I stood in this very same spot waiting for her to come home from a date with Hutch. And where was she while I was standing here worrying my heart out? Down in South Carolina at the Justice of the Peace. Getting married! Fourteen years old and getting married.

MARY EARL

Grammaw, this isn't the same thing. Don't worry. Mama'll be home soon. And Daddy and the boys are doing fine, too.

EARLINE

Doing fine? Doing fine? What on this earth does Hutch Purdue know about raising little boys.

VELVA

My goodness gracious, Sister, they're already raised. Didn't Loma sit right there at the dinner table and say they were all working except for little Jimmy?

EARLINE

My poor baby Jimmy.

MARY EARL

Grammaw, believe me, Jimmy can look out for himself. He can cook and clean better than Mama can right now.

EARLINE

I don't doubt that... Cooking! What do you mean, cooking? What's Jimmy doing cooking?

MARY EARL

He likes to cook.

EARLINE

Why!!! What's the matter with him?

MARY EARL

Nothing's the matter with him.

VELVA

I declare, Earline, you're getting into a state. Come and sit down right now.

EARLINE

(Sitting.) Well, somebody has to be in a state. Edgar's certainly not going to be. Nothing fazes him. You think he'd say a word to her? Oh, no. He didn't say a

word to her the last time. Mary Earl's just a little girl and you're in your second childhood running off to be a ventriloquist. Maybe Doralee'll get in a state about it. Heaven knows, she's in a state about everything else — setting out there in that little house in a stupor one day and screaming her head off the next — her TV blasting the news to wake the dead.

VELVA

She seemed alright when I took her dinner.

EARLINE

Well, thank the good Lord for that.

MARY EARL

How old is Aunt Doralee, Grammaw?

EARLINE

Well, let me think...

VELVA

Eighty-five, isn't she, Earline?

EARLINE

No, she's not eighty-five. Let's see. She's Edgar's aunt, his mother's sister, and Eula Mae told me one time...

MARY EARL

Who's Eula Mae?

EARLINE

Edgar's mother. Eula Mae told me *she* was born in 1890 and Doralee... now Edgar's sixty five, he was born in 1920. Eula Mae was thirty years old when he was born... and Doralee was ten years younger than Eula Mae... now Edgar and me got married in 1943 and Doralee was... now how old was Doralee when Edgar and me got married...

VELVA

Earline, if Eula Mae was born in 1890 and Doralee was ten years younger, she was born in 1900. That makes her eighty-five.

EARLINE

No. No, now I'm trying to figure this out.

VELVA

Well, just subtract 1900 from 1985...

EARLINE

Now, Doralee was forty-three when we got married. I remember because they had a big birthday party for her the Sunday after our wedding. Let's see. We been married forty-two years so forty-two plus forty three is... figure that out, Mary Earl.

MARY EARL

Eighty-five.

EARLINE

Right.

VELVA

That's what I said.

EARLINE

Velva, you did not. You was talking about Eula Mae being born in 1890.

VELVA

That's right and I said that Doralee was ten years younger so she...

MARY EARL

(Louder.) So, what's the matter with her?

EARLINE

She's got old timer's disease.

VELVA

It's Alzheimer's disease, Earline, and Doralee doesn't have it.

EARLINE

She most certainly does.

MARY EARL

What's Alzheimer's disease.

EARLINE

It's a disease that old people get that gets in there and takes their mind away.

VELVA

You don't have to be old to get it.

EARLINE

Herschel Stikeleather's got it.

VELVA

Herschel Stikeleather's not old.

EARLINE

Who said he was?

VELVA

You said that old people...

MARY EARL

(Louder.) When did Aunt Doralee get like she is?

EARLINE

Oh, I don't know, honey. It just sort of crept up on her.

VELVA

Ten years ago at least.

EARLINE

No, it hadn't been ten years. Let's see. She moved into that little house back there to help me after one of the children was born. I didn't have no trouble with Carlton. That was in 1944, no, 1945. Then Earl come in 19... that's it. That's

when she moved in. In 1947. After I had Earl, I was just sick as a dog and, Velva, you and Floyd hadn't built your house then.

VELVA

We built our house in 1949.

EARLINE

That's what I said. Ya'll weren't living next door then and Doralee moved into that little house so she could help me with Earl. I declare, I was sick. Couldn't hardly lift my head off my pillow for months. Practically an invalid is what I was. Edgar thought I wasn't going to live.

VELVA

Oh, Earline. Nobody had any doubt that you were going to live. You were setting out azaleas before Earl was two months old.

EARLINE

You and Floyd was living in New Jersey when Earl was two months old. Floyd wasn't even out of the Army.

VELVA

Floyd got out of the Army in 1946 right after the war was over. We was living with Mama.

EARLINE

That's right and that's why Doralee had to move in over here. Mama couldn't help me 'cause she was busy taking care of you and Floyd.

VELVA

Mama was not taking care of me and Floyd. We were quite capable of taking care of ourselves...

EARLINE

Just because somebody's capable don't mean...

MARY EARL

(Louder.) So, how about Mama, Grammaw? Did you have a hard time when she was born?

EARLINE

What?

MARY EARL

You said when Uncle Earl was born you was real sick. Did you get sick with Mama too?

EARLINE

Oh, Sweet Jesus, child. It was like nothing I could ever describe.

VELVA

Don't you listen to her, Mary Earl. Loma was the sweetest, quietest baby that has ever been born...

EARLINE

Velva, you do not know what you are talking about. I went down into...

VELVA

... the Valley of the Shadow
of Death for Loma...

EARLINE

... the Valley of the Shadow
of Death for Loma...

EARLINE

Make fun of me if you want to, Velva, but I know whereof I speak. Loma has brought me many trials not the least of which I'm going through right now. You know, I'm about to starve to death. I think I'll have a little piece of that cake. You want some, Velva? Mary Earl?

VELVA

No, I don't believe so.

MARY EARL

Okay.

EARLINE

Ya'll want some Pepsi? Come on, Velva. Come help me fix it.

(They start to the kitchen but stop when they hear the sound of a car in the driveway.)

That must be Edgar. His Deacon's meetings usually get out about this time. Mary Earl, stick your head out the door and see if he wants some cake and Pepsi.

(Mary Earl gets up and goes to the door, Velva goes on into the kitchen.)

MARY EARL

It's not Grampaw, Grammaw. It's Mama.

EARLINE

Loma?

MARY EARL

Yes, ma'am.

EARLINE

(Rushing toward the door.) Well, it's about time.

LOMA

(Entering.) Hey.

EARLINE

Where on earth have you been?

LOMA

At the dragstrip. I told you.

EARLINE

Well, I have been worried sick. Just worried sick.

LOMA

What for? You knew where I was. I was just *looking* at the cars, Mama. I wasn't *racing* 'em.

EARLINE

You know what I mean.

LOMA

No. I don't.

EARLINE

Out at the dragstrip where no decent woman has any right to be and a married woman at that. With that Crenshaw boy. And I had no reason to be worried?

LOMA

What did you think I was doing? "Strip" means strip of road for cars to race on, not strip off your clothes and go wild.

EARLINE

Loma Pitts Purdue, your child is standing right here in this room.

LOMA

I didn't say anything! (*Pause.*) Alright, Mama, if it'll make you feel any better, I'll tell you. I left the house, then picked up Mickey at his house. We drove to the dragstrip — five miles away, by the way, in case you wanted to come out and check up on me — we talked to some people...

EARLINE

What people?

LOMA

I don't know, Mama. I don't live around here anymore. Friends of Mickey's. (*Pause.*) Then we watched a couple of races, we got some Cocolas, we drank 'em, we watched Chester and Lester Wilson pull Tee Mangum's Plymouth out of the stands, we got in the car, went to Mickey's house, he got out, I came here.

EARLINE

Well, you don't have to...

LOMA

Oh, oh, oh... there was one other thing. When Mickey got out of the car at his house, you know what I did? I said bye. I did. Bye. Just like that. I got to tell you, it got him pretty excited.

EARLINE

You have an attitude, young lady. An attitude that's going to get you into trouble someday. As if it hasn't already ...

LOMA

Mama. Stop. I've heard it a million times before and I'm not going to listen to it right now. I haven't got the time.

EARLINE

Why? What have you got to do?

LOMA

I'm going out.

EARLINE

Where?

LOMA

To a restaurant. To eat supper.

EARLINE

With who? Not that Crenshaw boy. No, I won't have it. I will not have it, Loma. I have to hold up my head in Hemby Springs. The dragstrip's one thing but going out to supper? No, no, no, no, no.

LOMA

Mama, this was okay when I was fourteen. I don't like it now.

EARLINE

You're acting like you're fourteen. No, not even that. Mary Earl acts older than you.

LOMA

Mary Earl hasn't lived as long as I have. She doesn't know any better.

EARLINE

You're not going. You're not going.

(Earline goes to the small table at the door where Loma has put down her car keys. Earline picks up the keys and holds on to them.)

See, you're not going.

LOMA

(Very angry, but in a low, calm voice.) I didn't come home to be treated like this. You do not understand. I cannot explain it to you. But this is the thing. I'm going out. You can't stop me. If I don't go out one way, I'll go out another.

EARLINE

You're not going.

LOMA

(Very loud) Just watch me!!! *(She storms off upstairs.)*

(Earline looks around the room, finally deciding to hide Loma's car keys in a vase of flowers. Mary Earl has seen the whole thing.)

EARLINE

Velva! You finding everything alright? Mary Earl, did you say you wanted some cake or not?

MARY EARL

No, thank you.

(Earline exits to the kitchen. Mary Earl looks up the stairs, starts to go up, then changes her mind. She goes to the vase where Earline threw the keys and looks in, then starts toward the kitchen, then changes her mind. Finally, she sits at the dining room table.)

LOMA

(Whispering.) Mary Earl! Mary Earl!

MARY EARL

(Looking around.) Huh!

LOMA

(Still whispering.) Mary Earl! Come here. Go in the kitchen. See what your Gramma's doing. Go on.

(Mary Earl runs to the kitchen door, then very casually opens it and goes in. She quickly comes back out.)

MARY EARL

She's not in there.

LOMA

Where is she? Go find out! Quick!

(Mary Earl repeats the kitchen search process.)

MARY EARL

I found her.

LOMA

Where is she?

MARY EARL

I saw her out the kitchen window. She and Aunt Velva are taking some cake back to Aunt Doralee.

LOMA

Come here.

(Mary Earl crosses to Loma.)

Listen. I want you to do something for me. I got to get out of here so I'm going to call over to Mickey's and have him come pick me up. You keep watch out the window so you can tell me when Mama comes back.

MARY EARL

I don't understand.

LOMA

Just watch for Mama to come back so she won't catch me calling.

MARY EARL

No, I mean, I don't understand what's going on. Why are you and Grammaw fighting? Why'd she take your keys?

LOMA

Your Grandma and me have always been fighting. Ever since I was a lot younger'n you. Mama's and daughters always fight.

MARY EARL

We don't.

LOMA

Well, that's true. We don't. Maybe we will someday. Hey, it'll be something to look forward to...

MARY EARL

(Amused.) Yeah.

LOMA

You been around your Grammaw for a while. You know her. She's got to run everybody's life no matter what and it just about drives me crazy. And I guess I'm not grown up enough to ignore it. I get just as mule-headed as I can be. *(Quickly.)* Don't you ever act that way with me.

(Mary Earl laughs. So does Loma.)

Anyway, she thinks something nasty's going on with Mickey Crenshaw and she's bound and determined to put a stop to it.

MARY EARL

What you want to go out with him for anyway?

LOMA

Oh, Sweetpie... it's...

MARY EARL

You're married, Mama. To Daddy.

LOMA

Now, wait just a minute here. Nothing that's got anything to do with being married is going on with me and Mickey Crenshaw. *(Pause)* Mary Earl... can you imagine being married right now? When I was your age, I was one year away from being married. Never had a date in my life before I met your Daddy. And that never bothered me, at least not 'til lately when it hit me that I was thirty-two years old with five just about grown up children. And that crazy Tommy could make me a grammaw any day. *(They chuckle.)* It really bothered me, Mary Earl. Well, you been around me and your Daddy. You know we haven't been getting along too well lately. See, I tried to tell him how old I felt and how it seemed like things were just going too fast... He didn't understand. Just got his feelings hurt, like I thought it was his fault. Aw, Mary Earl, you're too young to understand all this. I shouldn't even be telling you about it.

MARY EARL

I understand... I think.

LOMA

You probably do. Born grown up, just like your Daddy. *(Pause.)* Anyway. *(Pause.)* I saw Mickey at church and he said a bunch of people were going to the dragstrip and I remembered going out there when I was young, how much fun it used to be. I just...

MARY EARL

Do you still love Daddy?

LOMA

Baby, I have always loved your Daddy. This really don't have anything to do with your Daddy.

MARY EARL

Are we going back home... sometime?

LOMA

Sooner or later, Sweetpie. Soon as I get myself sorted out and give your Daddy a chance to get over how mean and hateful I been to him lately.

MARY EARL

Mama, everything'll be okay.

LOMA

I might be crazy. Maybe you can't be fourteen again, even if you want to...

MARY EARL

You can try.

LOMA

Probably shouldn't have tried here. Next thing I know, Mama's going to be sending me to the woods for a hickory switch. Speaking of Mama, I got to make that phone call quick. Look out the kitchen window. See if you see her. Quick. Go on.

MARY EARL

Wait a minute. I got a better idea.

LOMA

What?

(Mary Earl crosses to the vase and fishes down inside for Loma's keys. They are dripping wet. She give them to Loma.)

Oh, Lord, you are something else. Look at these things. I hope I don't get electrocuted when I stick `em in the ignition. *(Kisses Mary Earl.)* Bye, Sugar. I'll see you later.

(Loma dashes to the door. Mary Earl stands at the door looking out.)

MARY EARL

Have a good time. And be good.

LOMA

(Shouting from outside as she runs to the car.) Make up your mind, Honey.
Make up your mind!

(We hear the sound of the car starting, tires on gravel, and the car driving off down the street. Velva and Earline enter from the kitchen.)

EARLINE

Did I hear a car?

(Mary Earl pretends not to hear.)

I could have swore I heard a car out there. Cars go by this house so fast, they just about set the road afire sometimes. And dust! Lord have mercy, the dust they stir up. You can't keep a clean house! Well, I can't. There's no end to it. *(Pause.)* Where's Loma? Is she still upstairs? I don't know what's the matter with that girl. Oh, my goodness... it's almost six o'clock. Doralee'll have that TV going full blast. Mary Earl, run upstairs and see what your mama's doing.

(Mary Earl hesitates, then goes.)

VELVA

Poor old Doralee...

EARLINE

Poor old Doralee? Poor old Earline, you mean. Poor old anybody that happens to be in earshot of that television at six o'clock. I guess I ought to thank the Dear Lord that she don't feel bound to know what's going on in the world at six o'clock in the morning. You can hear it at your house, can't you? I'm surprised they can't hear it in Kentucky. It's one thing to get old and foggy but Doralee's crazy as a loon.

VELVA

Now, Earline. Doralee can't help it.

EARLINE

Did I say she could help it? Of course, she can't help it. But I swear, she's getting harder and harder to handle. One of these days...

VELVA

Well, if it's six o'clock, I better be getting along home. Edgar'll be here any minute wanting his supper.

EARLINE

Noooo, there's plenty left from dinner. You want to stay? Why don't you stay.

VELVA

Oh, no. I have lots of things to do tonight and a big day tomorrow.

EARLINE

What are you doing tomorrow?

VELVA

Well, I have to call my school and make sure just when I can get in down there. And I have to start thinking about what clothes I'll need to take. It's hot in Miami, you know. Just about any time of year, it's pretty hot.

EARLINE

Velva Kathleen Dobson. What are you talking about? You are not going off to Miami, Florida. You are not going to some silly school to learn how to talk through a baby doll. I've always said you was a child but this is just too much. Why, they'll laugh you out of Hemby Springs. You'll never be able to set foot in this town again.

VELVA

Earline, I wish you'd listen to me for a minute.

EARLINE

I *have* listened to you and every word you've said is verging on lunacy. Just verging on lunacy.

VELVA

Earline...

EARLINE

"Called" to be a ventriloquist. I never heard of such a thing. that's what people do to the Bible nowadays. Take it and twist it around and make it say anything they want it to say. Well, you can read every last word in it, Velva Dobson, and you won't find one thing. You won't find one single mention of being a ventriloquist.

VELVA

Earline...

EARLINE

It's probably some kind of sin, if you want to get right down to it. That's what it is, some kind of sin. I've never seen the beat. In all my born days...

VELVA

(Loud.) Earline!!! *(Softer when she gets her attention.)* Earline, as your sister, I'm asking you... please listen to me. Please just give me a chance to explain what I'm doing and why I'm doing it.

EARLINE

You can talk all day long and I'll never understand...

VELVA

Earline, just listen to me.

EARLINE

(With a sigh.) I'm listening.

VELVA

Floyd and me... you know we never had any children... I know you thought that was wrong but you didn't know everything then... anyway, it never really

bothered us much. Some people who can't have 'em never really get over it but we were alright. Seemed like we were enough for each other. I loved Floyd, Earline, and I liked taking care of him. But, it wasn't like he was some kind of king that I slaved after all the time. He took care of me, too. Anyway, we were real happy all our married life. We'd do things together and go places and buy each other things. Floyd bought me that baby doll and I named her Delilah 'cause she had such pretty hair...

EARLINE

Delilah wasn't the one...

VELVA

I know Delilah wasn't the one with the hair, Earline. I just named her that because she reminded me of the Bible story... Anyway, the reason Floyd bought Delilah for me was... well, you know me, Earline. I have just always loved pretty things and baby things... baby things, I'd just stop and drool over. So sweet and bitsy. So, Floyd bought Delilah and said, "Here, Velva, this'll give you an excuse to buy those baby clothes you like so much." Then, one night, I was just being silly, and I started to talk and pretend it was Delilah talking. Floyd thought it was funny and he started to talk back.

EARLINE

Ya'll were a real silly pair, Velva. Can you imagine me and Edgar Pitts doing such a thing.

VELVA

No, Sister. I sure can't. Anyway, one night Floyd was watching television in the den — I was in the kitchen — and he said, "Come in here, Velva. I want you to see something." So, I went in and there was this lady ventriloquist with a lady doll just talking away. Floyd said, "Looks like you and Delilah." So, after that, I tried to make Delilah talk without moving my mouth... it was just a silly thing... just a thing I did to make Floyd laugh. (*Long pause.*) Then he died and Delilah didn't have anybody to talk to anymore... and neither did I.

EARLINE

What's all that got to do with going off to ventriloquist school? Why you want to do something so silly. You're sixty years old. Why don't you settle down and act like a normal person.

VELVA

Earline... you've got Edgar and children and grandchildren. The things you do at the church are important to you. And you can sew and cook — you're the best cook in the world — but I don't have any gifts. I don't have any talents that I can do and enjoy and make other people enjoy. I can pick out clothes to match but nobody cares about that. Who at Tabernacle Church, or Hemby Springs for that matter, would care if I looked tacky?

EARLINE

Nobody. And nobody would mind if you didn't run off to Florida with a baby doll either.

VELVA

I would mind, Earline! Don't you understand, it's important to me.

EARLINE

Well, it's embarrassing to me!

VELVA

It isn't you doing it!

EARLINE

You can say that again!

VELVA

Why can't you even try to understand?

EARLINE

You may be an old woman but you are still my sister and I owe it to our mother's precious memory to do everything I can to stop you from making a fool of yourself and me and our family. You are going to put this foolishness out of your head right here and now.

VELVA

I am not.

EARLINE

Then you're no sister of mine!

VELVA

If you're going to be this way, I don't care.

EARLINE

I'll stop you. If I have to stand in front of the bus to Miami...

VELVA

That's a good idea! I hope you do!

EARLINE

I will!

VELVA

(Grabbing Delilah and heading for the door.) Fine! Maybe it'll help you with your "gland" problem!! *(She exits.)*

MARY EARL

(Coming downstairs.) Grammaw? What's going on...

(The six o'clock news blasts out from Doralee's.)

TV NEWS ANNOUNCER: *(Off stage.)* Treaty negotiations continue in Paris, Abercrombie throws his hat in the ring for the gubernatorial race and the Mayor gets a new assistant... I'm Bob Reynolds. These stories and more when the evening news continues. But first, this...

EARLINE

(Earline's line should start before the announcer is finished but should be completed alone.)

Ohhhhhh, Sweet Jesus! Nothing's going on, Mary Earl! The whole world's gone crazy and your Aunt Velva's at the head of the line!!!

END OF SCENE 2

ACT I, Scene 3

It is Sunday evening. Edgar is sitting at the dining room table going over the church financial records. Mary Earl comes downstairs.

MARY EARL

Grampaw! *(Pause.)* Grampaw!

EDGAR

Hey, Little Lady... come on over here.

MARY EARL

Whatcha doing?

EDGAR

Tryin' to balance these church books.

MARY EARL

Why?

EDGAR

I'm the treasurer.

MARY EARL

You take care of the money?

EDGAR

That's right. And if I don't get these books straight pretty soon they're going to think I'm getting ready to hightail it out of town with the church money.

MARY EARL

(Looking over his shoulder.) Ya'll sure don't have much. Wouldn't get very far on that.

EDGAR

(He chuckles.) Just about enough to pay the preacher and keep the lights on.

MARY EARL

Maybe the heat...

EDGAR

Well, the preacher usually takes care of that.

(Mary Earl smiles at Edgar's joke, then silently watches him work for a moment.)

MARY EARL

Where's Grammaw?

EDGAR

I believe she went out to get Doralee's supper dishes.

MARY EARL

Oh.

EDGAR

You need her for something? She'll be back in a minute.

MARY EARL

No! No, I want to talk to you.

EDGAR

I'd like that a lot. Sit right down there and tell me what's on your mind.

MARY EARL

(Hesitates.) Grampaw?

EDGAR

Umhum?

MARY EARL

Uh...

EDGAR

Well, spit it out, Little Lady. What's so hard to say to your old Grampaw?

MARY EARL

Nothing. It's just...

EDGAR

Hmmm?

MARY EARL

Mama's not in her room.

(Edgar just looks at her. Nothing unusual about that to him.)

Grammaw thinks she is but she's not.

EDGAR

Oh.

MARY EARL

See, Mama came home from the dragstrip and she said she was going out to eat with Mickey and Grammaw got real mad at her and they hollered at each other and Grammaw grabbed Mama's car keys and threw 'em in that vase over there.

EDGAR

Oh, don't worry about that, honey. Those two been yelling at each other for thirty years or more.

MARY EARL

Oh, I know. See, Mama was already upstairs when Grammaw hid the keys in the vase so she didn't know where they were. Then Grammaw and Aunt Velva went outside and Mama slipped downstairs and I gave her the keys. Did I do something bad?

EDGAR

No! Your Mama's a grown woman. She ought to be able to come and go as she pleases.

MARY EARL

But I sort of lied to Grammaw.

EDGAR

How's that?

MARY EARL

I mean, I didn't *tell* a lie but I let Grammaw think Mama was upstairs when she wasn't. That's just about the same thing.

EDGAR

Don't you worry about it. Whatever goes on between your Mama and Grammaw, they got no business putting you in the middle of it.

MARY EARL

I just don't want Grammaw to be mad at me.

EDGAR

Oh, she's always up in the air about something. Don't pay her no attention. *(Pause.)* Here, read out these figures to me. I 'bout can't read my own writing anymore.

(He gives Mary Earl one of the church books. She reads and he uses his calculator.)

MARY EARL

Okay. Uhhhh, Benevolences... three hundred fifty dollars and ninety-one cents. *(Pause.)* Disbursements... uh, wait a minute... okay... uh, you got a bunch of things under disbursements.

EDGAR

Just give me the total... down there at the bottom.

MARY EARL

Okay... two hundred ninety-seven dollars and fifty-three cents.

(Earline enters from the kitchen.)

EARLINE

I declare, that house of Doralee's is a pigpen. I don't know how she lives in it. I'd go crazy having all that stuff laying around. 'Course, she don't know where she is half the time... Edgar, you're going to have to get her out of there for a little while so I can go clean it up.

EDGAR

Hmmm?

EARLINE

I said, you're going to have to get Doralee out of her house for a while so I can clean it up.

EDGAR

Tonight?

EARLINE

Well, of course not tonight. Why on earth would I want to go clean up Doralee's house tonight? It's after eight o'clock. I got enough on my mind tonight without worrying about that filthy place.

EDGAR

Er, you go out there two or three times a week to clean it up.

EARLINE

Two or three times a week! Cleaning house is a twenty-four hour a day job. You can't just... well, I wouldn't expect you to know anything about that... you can't just pick up a little bit two or three times a week and expect a place to be clean.

EDGAR

What you got on your mind?

EARLINE

What?

EDGAR

I said what you got on your mind?

EARLINE

I got Doralee's house on my mind. Don't you listen? Well, of course you don't...

EDGAR

You said you had too much on your mind tonight without thinking about Doralee's house. I listened to that much. So, I asked you what you had on your mind.

EARLINE

Oh... Oh! Edgar, you have got to help me. You have got to talk some sense into that daughter of yours. Do you know what she wanted to do? She spent all afternoon out at that trashy dragstrip with that boy and then she come in here wanting to go out to supper with him. Well, I told her. I put my foot right down and said you are not going another place with that boy. She's been pouting in her room ever since.

(Mary Earl and Edgar look at each other.)

EDGAR

She's not in her room.

EARLINE

What!!!!

EDGAR

Guess you didn't put your foot down hard enough.

EARLINE

What are you talking about? LOMA! LOMA! You get down here right this minute, do you hear me? Loma Pitts Purdue, I'm talking to you.

EDGAR

(Motions for Mary Earl not to say anything) You're talking to the walls, Er.

EARLINE

Would you just be quiet, Edgar. LOMA! Loma, come down here!!

EDGAR

She ain't up there, Earline.

EARLINE

What do you mean she ain't up there? Where would she be? She can't be anywhere else because I hid her car keys.

EDGAR

Where'd you hide 'em?

EARLINE

In this vase right over here. They're right here in this vase. *(Reaches into the vase.)* They're gone. How'd she know they were in here?

EDGAR

Probably heard the splash!

EARLINE

Mary Earl, did your Mama take the keys out of this vase? Did you see her?

EDGAR

Mary Earl is a little girl. She ain't got time to be worrying about what you and Loma are doing. It's been a long time since supper, Little Lady. Why don't you go out on the porch and swing.

MARY EARL

Okay. *(She goes.)*

EARLINE

I have never seen the beat. I have never known it to fail. Loma can do anything in the world and it don't faze you. She run off with Hutch Purdue. "Let her alone, Earline." She gets in a family way. "Let her alone, Earline." Now, she runs off with some boy young enough to be her own child and it's still "Let her alone, Earline." Where would she be if I let her alone? You'd certainly never do anything to straighten her out.

EDGAR

It hasn't helped has it?

EARLINE

What?

EDGAR

You been hollering at her all her life and it hasn't changed a thing.

EARLINE

Oh, hush, Edgar. What do you know about it?

EDGAR

All I know is, if you left people alone, they'd all be a whole lot better off, especially you.

EARLINE

Who have I ever bothered? Loma is my daughter, Edgar Pitts. If I can't tell her the right thing to do, who can?

EDGAR

Alright, Er. Whatever you say.

(Edgar turns away and starts to go back to his church books but before he can get settled, Earline walks over to the window and looks out.)

EARLINE

Just look over there, Edgar. I wish you'd just come look.

EDGAR

What is it?

EARLINE

Velva! Every light in the house is on. She's just running around like a chicken with its head cut off getting ready to go to Miami. She's lost her mind. Well! If she thinks I'm just going to stand here with my hands folded while she makes a fool out of all of us, she's got another think coming.

EDGAR

You're doing it again.

EARLINE

What? What am I doing again? I'm not doing a thing. What am I supposed to do? Just stand here and let my only sister run off on some wild goose chase? That's what you'd do. You'd just let her do it. Well, I'm not. I'm going to stop her. That's all there is to it. I'm just going to stop her.

EDGAR

Oh, Er. If she wants to go, she'll go. What can you do to stop her?

EARLINE

I'll call the school. I'll call the school and tell 'em they can't let her in.

EDGAR

That school don't know you from Adam's house cat. They wouldn't pay any attention to you.

EARLINE

I'll tell 'em she's an old crazy woman. They won't want somebody like that coming down there.

EDGAR

They won't be interested in a telephone call from somebody like that either.

EARLINE

Velva's not calling.

EDGAR

I'm not talking about Velva.

EARLINE

I'm going to call them.

(She starts for the phone)

EDGAR

Who?

EARLINE

The school!

EDGAR

What are you gonna call it?

EARLINE

Edgar, make sense. What are you talking about?

EDGAR

What's the name of the school?

EARLINE

I don't know.

EDGAR

Then how you gonna call 'em.

EARLINE

(Stops, thinks.) I've got a better idea. I'll call Reverend Snipes. He'll talk to her. He'll tell her he didn't mean what she thought he meant by his sermon this morning. That's what I'll do. That's the best thing I can do.

EDGAR

The best thing you can do is leave her alone. She's a grown up woman. If she wants to go to ventriloquist school, what's the matter with that?

EARLINE

Well, that sounds like something you'd say.

EDGAR

Earline, you can't run everybody's life. They have to do what they want to do. Even if you don't like it.

EARLINE

Even if it's crazy? I'm supposed to let people alone to get into whatever kind of foolishness they want to? Well, I'm just not made that way. I can't do it.

EDGAR

I'm telling you, Earline. Leave Loma and Velva alone.

EARLINE

You can't tell me...

EDGAR

I know, Er. I sure do know.

(Mary Earl comes in.)

EARLINE

Hey, darlin', you want a piece of that cake I made for dinner? You hungry?

MARY EARL

No. No, I think I'll just go to bed.

EARLINE

Well, that's a good idea. Get a good night's sleep and we'll do something real nice tomorrow. I'm going to go down to Simpson's and pick some blackberry's. You want to do that? Wouldn't that be nice?

MARY EARL

Yes, ma'am. That'd be fine. *(Goes to Earline, kisses her on the cheek.)* G'night, Grammaw.

EARLINE

Night-night, baby. Sweet dreams.

MARY EARL

(Goes to Edgar, kisses him on the cheek.) 'Night, Grampaw. Thanks.

EDGAR

'Night, Little Lady and you're very welcome.

(Mary Earl starts up the stairs.)

EARLINE

What are ya'll talking about? What's Mary Earl thanking you for? There's always something...

(Phone rings)

Well, who on earth could that be? *(Answers the phone.)* Hello... hey, Margie... how you... what? You don't mean it! Are you sure?... Well, I've never... *(Long pause.)* Alright... you'll let us know if you hear anything?... Bye... *(Hangs up the phone, she's stunned.)*

EDGAR

Well?

MARY EARL

Grammaw?

EARLINE

That was Margie Crenshaw.

EDGAR

Yeah...

EARLINE

They just got a call from Mickey.

EDGAR

And?

EARLINE

He was calling from Myrtle Beach...

EDGAR

Yeah?

EARLINE

He wasn't alone. He's with Loma. Edgar, Loma's run off with a nineteen year old boy! Ohhhhh, Sweet Jesus, what on earth are we going to do?

DORALEE

(From off.) Oooooohhhhh great day in the morning... oooooohhhhh heavenly days... oooooohhhhh Lord have mercy...

EDGAR

You can say that again, Doralee. You can sure say that again...

END OF ACT I

ACT II, Scene 1

It's a weekday afternoon, a few days later. Earline is on the phone talking to Mildred, her hairdresser.

EARLINE

It looks funny, Mildred. That rinse you give me was just not right at all. It's too purple, that's what. It looks like you rinsed me in grape juice. Now, I got to go out in public, Mildred. I got my things to do at the church. Why, you know what Ethel Abernathy said to me down at Training Union the other night? She said, "Earline, I see you got you a new purple hat." She said she goes to the Chez LaRue and she never comes out like this. Now, her hair looks real good. Have you seen her hair?

(Edgar enters.)

(Pause.) Oh! Oh, that'd cost a lot of money, wouldn't it? I don't believe I want to switch to the Chez LaRue. *(Pause.)* Would you mind if we just left it like it is? Would it hurt your feelings? *(Pause.)* You're sure? Well, alright. That'll be fine. See you Thursday then. Bye. *(She hangs up the phone.)*

EDGAR

Who was that?

EARLINE

Mildred Privette. I didn't like the way she done my hair last time and you better believe I told her about it. You know what I told her? I told her if she couldn't get it right, I'd just go up to the Chez LaRue from now on.

EDGAR

I thought that place was too expensive.

EARLINE

It's the principle of the thing, Edgar.

EDGAR

Your hair always looks fine, Er. Every time you come back from Mildred's you're always fretting about your hair and it always looks just fine.

EARLINE

Oh, hush, Edgar, you don't know anything about it. You could stand a haircut yourself. I can't understand it. You go down to Wexler Bigham's and get a haircut for three dollars. Hair's hair. Same on men as it is on women. Why does it cost so much for women?

EDGAR

For one thing, Wexler don't put that purple stuff on my hair.

EARLINE

My hair is not purple.

EDGAR

And I don't believe Mildred charges you anything anyway. If I was getting my hairdos free, I don't believe I'd be complaining about 'em.

EARLINE

You wouldn't complain about anything, Edgar. Besides, like I told you, it's the principle of the thing. Where have you been? I'd like to get dinner on the table if I can ever round up you and Mary Earl.

EDGAR

I was down at the filling station talking to Earl.

EARLINE

What'd he have to say?

EDGAR

About what?

EARLINE

Anything.

EDGAR

Nothing.

EARLINE

Well, what were you doing down there then?

EDGAR

Have you heard anything from Loma?

EARLINE

Mary Earl got a postcard from her.

EDGAR

What'd it say?

EARLINE

Nothing that made a lick of sense. There it is on the coffee table. Read it yourself.

EDGAR

(Reading.) "Fourteen is great. But only for a while. Don't worry." What does that mean? Has Mary Earl seen it? Did she understand it.

EARLINE

If she did, she didn't explain it to me. *(Pause.)* I know what it is! I'll just bet I know. That business about fourteen is great. I'll bet she's holed up in some tacky motel room and her room number is fourteen. That sounds like her. That's embarrassing! That is shameful! Writing to her own daughter about being in some motel. And only for a while means they'll be moving to some other motel pretty soon. Trash! As much as I hate to admit it, Edgar, we have raised trash.

EDGAR

Now, Er. You're just guessing. And Loma is not trash.

EARLINE

Well, just what do you call it? No decent person would act like that girl acts. I'd never go to a motel with some nineteen year old boy.

EDGAR

Even if you would, not too many nineteen year old boys would go along with it.

EARLINE

I know it. It don't say much for the Crenshaws does it?

EDGAR

Have they heard anything else from Mickey?

EARLINE

They haven't told me if they have. Their other boy, Buddy, and Carley Anne Ridenour rode down there the other day but they didn't see anything of 'em.

EDGAR

Well, I think we ought to just not worry about it. Loma'll get whatever it is out of her system and then she'll come on home. We ought to just leave her alone.

EARLINE

There you go again, Edgar! Leave her alone. Leave her alone. Well, I'm not going to leave her alone. If I had any idea where she was, I'd be in that car on my way to Myrtle Beach right now. Leave her alone! The very idea! I left Velva alone and you see where she is. And then Reverend Snipes, in church Sunday: "Be sure to remember Velva Dobson in your prayers. With the Lord's guidance she is pursuing a dream and with His help, she will find success in it." Praying! Praying for the woman to make a fool of herself as if she hasn't done that already.

EDGAR

Er...

EARLINE

And them silly women in my Ladies Bible Class. "Ooooooh, isn't that exciting about Velva," "Ohhhh, I'd never be brave enough to do something like that," "I can't wait till she gets home so we can hear all about it," "Do you think she'll be famous?" Hmmmpphhh!

EDGAR

Maybe she will.

EARLINE

Will what?

EDGAR

Be famous.

EARLINE

The very idea!

EDGAR

Have you heard from her since she went down there?

EARLINE

She wrote me a letter.

EDGAR

What'd it say?

EARLINE

I don't know.

EDGAR

You haven't read it?

EARLINE

No.

EDGAR

Well, when did it come?

EARLINE

I don't know. A couple of days ago.

EDGAR

Why haven't you read it?

EARLINE

I know what it says.

EDGAR

What do you mean?

EARLINE

I mean, I know every word that's in it.

EDGAR

How can you know what's in it? You haven't read it.

EARLINE

I don't have to read it. I know Velva.

EDGAR

I'd read it if I were you.

EARLINE

I know she has gone down there to Miami and realizes she has made a big mistake and wants me to tell her not to worry about it and come on home.

EDGAR

You don't know that.

EARLINE

I do. And she can just stew in her own juice for a while.

EDGAR

What if she's not stewing? Did you ever think of that?

EARLINE

What do you mean?

EDGAR

Maybe she's having a good time. Maybe she's glad she went. Just think, Er. If you read the letter and found out Velva was happy, you could be even more vexed with her than you are already.

EARLINE

Oh, Edgar, what do you... (*Flounces to table near door. Takes letter out of drawer.*) Alright, have it your way. (*Reads it through silently.*) Well! All I can say is *well!*

EDGAR

What's it say?

EARLINE

Nothing.

EDGAR

Nothing? Velva spent twenty-two cents to say nothing?

EARLINE

Nothing worth saying.

EDGAR

Read it, Er. I'd like to hear what nothing sounds like.

EARLINE

Well, alright. If you want to hear the letter, you can hear the letter. You're so proud of her for running off and shaming us all. Just like Loma. I used to wonder where Loma got her mule-headed wild streak and now I know. From Velva, that's where! Where she got it, I don't know. My dearly departed Mama and Daddy would have never acted like that.

EDGAR

Read the letter, Er.

EARLINE

I will, Edgar, if you will just give me a chance.

EDGAR

No hurry, Er. Just take your time.

EARLINE

(With a heavy sigh.) “Dear Earline: Just a quick note before bed. I’ve been here for a week now and have so much to tell you. Too much for a letter certainly, so hope I’ll be home for a visit soon. I have rented a small apartment just off Biscayne Boulevard” — an apartment, wouldn’t you know it, how trashy! — “and it is very pleasant. Miami is so big. I have been lost a dozen times. But I love it. There are so many kinds of people here — Jewish people and Cuban people and Northern people — people I’ve never had a chance to meet before. And my school! My school is just wonderful. I’m learning so much. My instructor is a wonderful older Cuban gentleman named Ricardo (*Earline pronounces it “Ricker-dough”.*) Ricardo? Oh, Oh, (*Getting it right.*) Ricardo. And he has taught me a lot — about ventriloquism and about myself” — I’ll just bet — “Well, I’ll be home before long and I’ll tell you all the details. Just know that I am happy as can be and don’t regret my decision for a minute. Love, your sister, Velva.” — That’s it.

EDGAR

Poor old Velva.

EARLINE

What are you talking about?

EDGAR

Just like you said — she’s miserable.

EARLINE

I don’t want to talk about Velva. We got more important things to worry us than my silly sister. Now, this afternoon, I want you to get Earl and Carlton over here and see if we can’t figure out something to do about Loma.

EDGAR

Earl has to work and Carlton is in Monroe, Earline. Besides, there’s nothing we can do about Loma anyway.

EARLINE

Nothing we can do! We can call the sheriff. We can put up posters...

EDGAR

It's not like she's been kidnaped, woman. She went off of her own accord.

EARLINE

Leaving her helpless baby daughter all alone. She needs to be brought back to face her responsibilities.

EDGAR

Mary Earl is not a baby, she's not helpless and she's not alone. Besides, I figure facing responsibilities since she was a baby herself is what's got Loma going off right now.

EARLINE

She's made her bed. She can just lie in it.

EDGAR

Earline, can you not ever see anybody else's side. People can't always follow the rules just like you make 'em up.

EARLINE

I don't make up rules. The Lord sets the standards of human decency and behavior. Thou shalt not commit adultery and thou shalt honor thy father and mother.

EDGAR

Earline, you don't know that Loma's committing adultery.

EARLINE

Pppphhhttt!

EDGAR

And she might not be honoring you but she ain't bothering me one little bit.

EARLINE

Well, what about Velva? What do you think our Mama and Daddy are thinking about her right now.

EDGAR

They're dead, Earline. They're not thinking nothing.

EARLINE

You don't know that.

EDGAR

That's right. I don't know nothing about it.

EARLINE

No, you don't.

EDGAR

I have read a few words from the Bible though and I remember one part in particular — judge not lest ye be judged.

EARLINE

Don't you be quoting the Bible to me, Edgar Pitts. I've done forgot more about the Bible than you'll ever know.

EDGAR

I'd agree with that.

EARLINE

Good!

EDGAR

You've remembered all the rules and forgot all the rest.

EARLINE

The rules are important!

EDGAR

(Picking up his newspaper.) I didn't say they weren't.

EARLINE

Put that paper down. We are right in the middle of a conversation. We have got to decide what to do about Loma right this minute. We can't just sit here and let her ...

DORALEE: (*From off.*) Oooooohhhhhh heavenly days... Oooohhhhhh great day in the morning!

EARLINE

Well, there *she* goes again.

DORALEE: (*From off.*) Oooooohhhhhh Lord have mercy ...

EARLINE

Edgar, I'm telling you right now, we've got to do something about Doralee.

EDGAR

She ain't hurting anybody.

EARLINE

She's driving me to distraction.

EDGAR

She just hollers a little bit, that's all.

EARLINE

A little bit! She's lost her mind, Edgar.

EDGAR

What does she do besides holler?

EARLINE

Blasts out the TV twice a day.

EDGAR

And what else?

EARLINE

She hollers just like she's doing now.

EDGAR

Is that hurting anybody? Is she going to hurt herself?

EARLINE

Well, I don't know. Maybe.

EDGAR

No. She's just a poor old soul that gets mixed up sometimes. She doesn't make any kind of a mess. She doesn't wander off. She just stays out there in that little house and watches TV sometimes and hollers once in a while.

EARLINE

Well, she shouldn't be hollering. We got neighbors, Edgar.

EDGAR

Who'd be lucky to be half as sane as Doralee.

EARLINE

She needs to be put away.

EDGAR

What do you mean?

EARLINE

I mean she needs to be in a home — an old folk's home or a nursing home — someplace where she can be looked after...

EDGAR

And where the neighbors can't hear her?

EARLINE

Yes.

EDGAR

Earline, as far as I'm concerned, that Bible business about honoring thy father and mother don't mean just them — it means honor anybody that loved you and took care of you and that is exactly what Doralee has done. She is my aunt, my mama's sister, and she's staying right where she is.

EARLINE

She needs to be looked after...

EDGAR

Earline.

EARLINE

Then it'll just have to be her or me.

EDGAR

Don't ask me to decide something like that.

EARLINE

What do you mean?

EDGAR

You know what I mean.

EARLINE

Edgar Pitts...

EDGAR

I'm not going to stand here and watch you run over that poor old soul.

EARLINE

That'd be just like you, Edgar. Walk out and leave me with all this mess on my hands — Velva and Loma run off, a poor little motherless granddaughter, and Doralee screaming her head off. Well, I maybe can't make Velva come to her senses and I don't know where to find Loma but I can sure do something about Doralee and I'm going to do it right now.

EDGAR

Suit yourself, Earline. Just suit yourself.

DORALEE

(From off.) Oooohhhhhh my heavens. What am I gonna do? Oooohhh great day in the morning...

EARLINE

Listen to that.

(Earline goes to the phone, picks it up dials.)

Hello. Could I speak to Reverend Snipes, please.

(Edgar starts toward the door.)

You come back here, Edgar Pitts. Don't you take one more step toward that door... Reverend Snipes? This is Earline Pitts. *(Pause.)* Well, I'm just fine. How are you? *(Pause.)* Oh, yes, we're real proud of Velva. She's doing real well. *(Pause.)* Reverend Snipes, I called to ask you a question. Could you give me the name of that nursing home Mrs. Snipes mother is in?

(Edgar looks at Earline, walks out letting the door slam behind him.)

Well, yes, it is a difficult decision to make but...

END OF SCENE 1

ACT II, Scene 2

When the scene opens, it's the following day, about 5:30 in the afternoon.

Earline is sitting at the dining room table. Mary Earl is going back and forth from the kitchen bringing food, drink, etc. Though Earline says she can't eat, she is doing so.

MARY EARL

Grammaw, you want anything else?

EARLINE

No, no, this is fine.

MARY EARL

Your head still hurt? You want some aspirin?

EARLINE

I couldn't keep it down. I'm just as sick as a dog, Mary Earl.

MARY EARL

I'm sorry, Grammaw. I wish I could make it better.

EARLINE

It's better just having you around, darlin.'

MARY EARL

(Pause.) Grampaw's mad, isn't he?

EARLINE

Oh, you don't know the half of it. Everybody's mad at Grammaw right now.

MARY EARL

(Going to Earline and hugging her.) I'm not.

EARLINE

You might as well take all this food back out to the kitchen. I just can't eat a bite.

MARY EARL

You might want something in a little bit.

EARLINE

No, I can't stand the sight of food.

(Mary Earl starts to take the food away.)

Well... just leave it, honey. Your grampaw might come in and want something.

MARY EARL

When is Grampaw coming back?

EARLINE

I have no earthly idea. I told him we ought to find a nice hospital for Doralee and he got mad as a hornet and flew out of here. He ain't never been gone overnight before.

MARY EARL

Is Aunt Doralee sick?

EARLINE

Well, not like you mean. She doesn't have pneumonia or heart trouble or anything.

MARY EARL

Then why does she need to go to the hospital?

EARLINE

She doesn't need to be in a "hospital" hospital. She's just not right, honey, and she needs to be in a nursing home or someplace where they can watch after her.

MARY EARL

She seems alright to me. Sometimes when I go out to see her, she talks to me... and she gives me things.

EARLINE

What does she give you? Oh, Lord have mercy, if I don't watch her, she'll give away the whole house.

MARY EARL

Mostly she gives me pictures. Of her, when she was a girl. And she gave me a little necklace one time.

EARLINE

Well, you be careful when you go out there, Mary Earl... and you let me know if she starts acting funny.

MARY EARL

But she...

(Telephone rings, Earline starts to get up.)

I'll get it, Grammaw. Just keep your seat. *(Goes to phone.)* Hello? *(Pause.)* Oh, hey, Miz Crenshaw. *(Pause.)* No, Grammaw's not feeling good right now. *(Pause.)* I'm Loma's daughter, Mary Earl. You can tell me... *(Pause.)* Oh, really? *(Pause.)* That's good. *(Pause.)* Yes, ma'am, I'll be sure to tell her. Thank you. Bye.

EARLINE

Margie Crenshaw? Is that who it was? Has she heard from Mickey? Where are they? Was it Margie?

MARY EARL

Yes, ma'am.

EARLINE

What'd she say? Do they know where Mickey and Loma are? Are they going to get 'em?

MARY EARL

She said one of Mickey's friend's brother saw 'em in a restaurant in Calabash. He went over and talked to 'em and they said they was staying at a place in Cherry Grove.

EARLINE

Cherry Grove? Where? Where in Cherry Grove? Who saw 'em? Mickey's brother saw 'em? Buddy? Is that who it was? I thought Buddy went down there and couldn't find 'em? Where are they staying?

MARY EARL

Wait just a minute, Grammaw. I'm going to tell you. No, Mickey's brother didn't see 'em. The brother of one of Mickey's friends saw 'em. They're at the Grand Strand motel...

EARLINE

A motel!!! I knew it. I knew they'd be staying in some den of iniquity. We got to go get 'em. We got to go right now. Where is Edgar? It's just like him to be gone when you need him. We need to be on the road right this very minute. Mary Earl, you're going to have to go see if you can find him. Never mind, we'll just leave him a note. Look over there in that drawer and get me a little piece of paper. We'll write him a note and then we'll go. Who was it you said saw 'em?

MARY EARL

I don't know. Benny somebody.

EARLINE

Benny Hargett? Is that who it was? Benny Hargett? What was he doing down there?

MARY EARL

I guess. I don't know.

EARLINE

People running around all over creation. Why don't people stay at home like they're supposed to...

MARY EARL

At least he saw Mama and Mickey. We know they're alright.

EARLINE

Oooohhh, we got to go. Are you ready. You better get a sweater. Hurry, now.

MARY EARL

Grammaw.

EARLINE

What? Never mind. You can tell me in the car.

MARY EARL

Grammaw? I have to tell you now.

EARLINE

What?

MARY EARL

I'm not going.

EARLINE

Well, of course you're going. I can't leave a little girl like you all alone in the house. I don't know when your Grampaw will be back. If your Aunt Velva was home you could go over and stay with her but, no, she's got to be off on a wild goose chase herself. Oh, Lord have mercy, I can't leave Doralee all by herself out there. Who knows what might happen? Where in heaven's name is Edgar Pitts? That man drives me straight to distraction.

MARY EARL

Grammaw! Please, stop a minute. We can't go...

EARLINE

Mary Earl, you're just a little girl. You're not the one to decide what's best.

MARY EARL

Grammaw, you're all upset right now. You shouldn't drive a car when you're upset. And Grampaw's not back and we can't leave Aunt Doralee. So, just come

on and sit down. We can have something to eat and maybe by then Grampaw will be home.

EARLINE

(Sitting at the table.) Oh, I can't eat right now.

MARY EARL

Try. It'll make you feel better.

EARLINE

(Eating.) I'm not a bit hungry. I'm just worried about Loma is all. I don't know what's the matter with that girl. She won't listen to a word I say. She never has.

MARY EARL

Mama's alright, Grammaw. And she'll be back. When she's ready.

EARLINE

How you can take up for her like you do is more than I will ever understand. She runs off from here like a brazen huzzy...

MARY EARL

Grammaw, can I tell you something... without hurting your feelings?

EARLINE

Nobody else minds if they hurt my feelings. Why should you?

MARY EARL

Oh, Grammaw. *(Pause.)* You know what Daddy calls Mama? *(Pauses, smiles.)* Little Earline. He calls her Little Earline.

EARLINE

What? Well, I don't know why he'd call her that. Me and her are as different as night and day. When she was little I used to think they give me the wrong baby at the hospital. She's her daddy's young'un, up one side and down the other. Why on earth would Hutch call her Little Earline?

MARY EARL

Sometimes she fusses at him... like you do at Grampaw...

EARLINE

I don't fuss at Grampaw.

MARY EARL

(Laughs.) Well, anyway, she'll fuss. She'll say something like, "Hutch Purdue, am I just talking to the walls," or "You don't listen to a word I say," or "Speak to your son, Hutch," and then he'll laugh and call her Little Earline.

EARLINE

Hmmphh!

MARY EARL

Then you know what she says? She says, "You're paying me a compliment, Hutch Purdue, 'cause the worst of my mama is better than the best of anybody else." *(Long pause.)* And that's why I take up for her... 'cause the worst of *my* mama is better than the best of anybody else.

EARLINE

(Getting teary-eyed, wanting to hide it.) Mary Earl, would you get me some more tea.

MARY EARL

Yes, ma'am.

(Mary Earl goes to the kitchen. Earline regains her composure, blows her nose. Mary Earl comes back. Earline wipes her face with a hankie.)

Here you go. What's the matter. Are you okay?

EARLINE

It's hot in here is all. Don't you think it's awful hot in here. Run over there and open that window a little bit more. See if we can stir up more of a breeze.

(Mary Earl crosses to the window, opens it further, looks out.)

MARY EARL

(Excited.) Grammaw! Grammaw! Look!

EARLINE

What?

MARY EARL

There's a light on at Aunt Velva's! And her car is there! She's home!

EARLINE

Oh, Lord have mercy.

MARY EARL

You reckon she's home for good? No, probably just a visit. Let's go over there. Come on, Grammaw. Let's go see her and find out all about Miami. Come on.

EARLINE

I wouldn't be caught dead in that house. I will never cross her threshold again and I told her so. I wrote her a letter last week and I told her that if she wouldn't come to her senses, she could not expect to see me in her home and she would not be welcome in mine.

MARY EARL

You told her she couldn't come here anymore!

EARLINE

That is exactly what I told her. Making a silly fool of us all like she done. Ventriloquist school! Miami, Florida! Cuban instructor! I never in my life!!!

MARY EARL

But, Grammaw, I just don't understand what's wrong with it. It's kind of different. But everybody likes to do something different once in a while. Didn't you ever do anything kind of wild?

EARLINE

I most certainly did not.

MARY EARL

She must have not believed you.

EARLINE

What?

MARY EARL

When you said she couldn't come over here. 'Cause she's comin'. And she's got Delilah with her.

EARLINE

(Getting up and rushing toward the window.) Who? Who's she got with her?

MARY EARL

Delilah. Her doll.

EARLINE

Delilah!!! Well, there'll be a snowfall in July before I sit in my own house and listen to what that doll has to say. Who does she think she is. She's senile is what she is! Goes crazy, goes to Florida and then makes a beeline over here to rub it in. I'm hiding. That's it. I'm hiding and I'm not coming out until she goes home. You just get rid of her, Mary Earl. Tell her I'm at the church. No, don't lie about church. Tell her I've gone to bed with a splitting headache. That'll be the gospel truth.

MARY EARL

But Grammaw...

EARLINE

(Starting for the stairs.) Tell her. I'm not going to listen to her. I'm not even going to look at her.

MARY EARL

You will if you don't hurry. She's in the front yard now.

EARLINE

(Rushing upstairs.) Lord have mercy... it's a fine day when you have to hide in your own house from your own sister.

(There is a quick tap on the door and Velva comes in.)

VELVA

Mary Earl!

MARY EARL

(Rushing to Velva for a hug.) Aunt Velva! You're home!

VELVA

Just for a little while. Not long.

MARY EARL

You have to go back to school?

VELVA

In a day or two... where's Earline?

MARY EARL

She's upstairs. Said she had a headache.

VELVA

I guess she saw me coming. Well, never mind. I'm the happiest I've been since Floyd died and Earline is not going to spoil it for me.

MARY EARL

So, you're having a good time?

VELVA

Oooooohh, I'm having a wonderful time. Miami is a beautiful place. Oh, Mary Earl, you just don't know. You must travel when you get a little older. But not too old. Don't wait until you're as old as I am to start seeing the world.

MARY EARL

Are you learning anything at school?

VELVA

(As Delilah.) Oh, si. I am learning *so* much. Eet ees so exciting and my eenstructor, he ees exciting too. Ees muy simpatico. *(As herself.)* That's "very attractive," Mary Earl. *(As Delilah.)* See. Meece Velva, she ees yust barely moving her leeps now.

MARY EARL

Leeps?

VELVA

(Laughing.) Lips. Oh, Mary Earl, it's so funny. Delilah has started to speak with a Cuban accent like Ricardo.

MARY EARL

That is funny, Aunt Velva. Ricardo? Is that your teacher?

VELVA

And so much more. He's just the finest man. He's taken such an interest in my progress... and he says I've led a sheltered life so he's taken me out to eat and we've sailed on Biscayne Bay and one night, we went to one of those famous hotels in Miami Beach and heard Sammy Davis, Jr. It is so exciting!

MARY EARL

Aunt Velva, is something going on with this Ricardo? Do you like him?

VELVA

(Blushing.) Well, of course I like him

MARY EARL

But do you *like* him?

VELVA

Well, let's just say I find him very appealing.

EARLINE

(Rushing down the stairs.) Nooooo! You don't mean it! Velva, you can't mean it. Do you mean to tell me you have gone down there to Miami and gotten hooked up with some foreigner!

VELVA

Hello, Earline.

EARLINE

Is that what you're saying? You're hooked up with a Cuban?

VELVA

Yes, it's nice to see you too.

EARLINE

Hello, Velva. How have you been? What is this about this foreigner?

VELVA

Ricardo is not a foreigner. He is an American of Cuban descent. He looks like Desi Arnaz without hair and he is very sweet.

EARLINE

Well, I can just imagine! Floyd is spinning in his grave!

VELVA

Earline. Floyd — if he can see me at all — is very happy. Floyd, unlike some people I know, cared more about how I felt than about what I did. What other people think was of very little concern to Floyd and it's of even less concern to me.

EARLINE

Well, that is plain to see.

VELVA

Nothing is plain to see, Earline. Not to you anyway. You see what you want to see. Why do you have to try to run everybody's life? Why do you have to make all the rules? I know right from wrong. I know what's decent and what's not. I have gone to school and learned things so I can do something that makes me happy. That's all I expected to get out of it and that would have been enough. But I was extra lucky, Earline. I found a nice, sweet, romantic person who cares about me and who can share something with me. And if Floyd can see me as

you seem to think, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he didn't show me the way to Miami himself.

EARLINE

That's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard!

VELVA

No! You're the one that's always worried about what the dead think. Mama and Daddy and Floyd and anybody else you can think of. Well, Earline, anybody that cared about me, dead or alive, would know I've been lonely for a long time and would be glad it's not that way anymore.

EARLINE

I care about you, Velva. That's why I try to tell you what's right.

VELVA

But who says you know what's right? Who says you're the authority on...

MARY EARL

Grammaw! Aunt Velva! Listen...

EARLINE

What?

MARY EARL

What time is it?

EARLINE

Six twenty-five...

MARY EARL

You're sure?

VELVA

Six twenty-five. That's right. What is it, honey?

MARY EARL

The news.

VELVA

What?

MARY EARL

The news. It's way after six o'clock and we didn't hear the news.

VELVA

Doralee!

EARLINE

Doralee!

EARLINE

Something's wrong.

MARY EARL

I'll go check.

EARLINE

No, no. You can't go out there by yourself.

VELVA

I'll go.

(Velva and Mary Earl rush out through the kitchen. Earline remains behind sitting very still and looking very frightened. In a few moments, they come back.)

EARLINE

What?

VELVA

I'm sorry, Sister.

EARLINE

What?

VELVA

She's gone.

EARLINE

Gone? What do you mean, gone? Where'd she go?

VELVA

She's passed away, Earline.

EARLINE

Passed away?

MARY EARL

She's dead, Grammaw.

VELVA

It must have been her heart, Earline. Or maybe a stroke...

EARLINE

(Starting to cry.) Oooohhhhh!

MARY EARL

Come on, Grammaw. Sit down. It'll be alright. It'll be alright.

(Earline sits on the sofa. Mary Earl puts her arms around her, Velva takes her hand and pats it.)

EARLINE

Oooohhhh, Sweet Jesus. Oh, Sweet Jesus. What am I gonna tell your granddaddy.

END OF ACT II Scene 2

ACT III, Scene 1

It is a few hours later. Velva, Earline and Mary Earl are together in the living room. Earline is distraught but the other two have themselves under control.

EARLINE

Now, did you talk to Earl? And Carlton? I just can't think who to tell. Reverend Snipes. Did you talk to him? Is he coming over here? Loma! We're you able to get ahold of Loma?

VELVA

Earline, honey, everything's under control. Everybody knows that needs to know.

EARLINE

Mildred! Mildred Cato... Mildred Privette.

VELVA

What about her?

EARLINE

I got to call her.

VELVA

Earline, I'm sure she's heard by now.

EARLINE

No! No, I got to make an appointment. I can't go to a funeral and have people calling in here with my hair all a mess. *(Starts to get up.)* I got to call her...

VELVA

Earline, now sit down. Mary Earl'll call her, won't you, Mary Earl?

MARY EARL

Yes. Where's her number?

EARLINE

In the front of the phone book there. Mildred's Beauty Shop. No, she'll be at home now. Well, her home number's there too. *(Pause, Earline is quiet for a moment, thinking.)* I feel like I killed her. Like she knew I was going to put her away so she died to get out of it. Edgar thinks I killed her, I know it.

VELVA

Earline, no. He does not. Now, come on in the kitchen with me. Let's wash your face and we'll put on a pot of coffee and everything'll be alright.

EARLINE

Why don't Edgar come home? You found him didn't you? Didn't you say you found him.

VELVA

Earl found him, Sister. He'll be along directly.

(They exit to kitchen.)

MARY EARL

(On phone.) Hello? Is this Miss Mildred?... This is Mary Earl Purdue. Loma and Hutch Purdue's... *(Pause.)* Oh, yes, ma'am. Gramma's pretty upset. *(Pause.)* Well, see, that's why I'm calling.

(Loma enters through the front door. Mary Earl doesn't see her.)

(Pause.) Yes, ma'am. Eight o'clock will be real good. Thank you. *(Pause.)* Yes, ma'am, I'll be sure to tell her. *(Pause.)* Thank you again. Bye, bye.

(Mary Earl hangs up the phone, looks up and sees her mother. She goes to her, starting to cry.)

Mama.

LOMA

Hey, Sweetpie. Hey now, hey now, it's alright. It's alright.

MARY EARL

Everything's so bad, Mama. After you left Grammaw had a big fight with Aunt Velva and told her not to come here anymore and then she wanted to put Aunt Doralee in a nursing home and Grampaw got real mad and he left and he knows Aunt Doralee died but he hasn't come back yet and Aunt Velva come back and Grammaw's crying and saying she killed her...

LOMA

Wait a minute, now. Who killed who?

MARY EARL

Grammaw killed Aunt Doralee.

LOMA

How could Grammaw have killed her?

MARY EARL

By trying to put her away...

LOMA

Where's Grammaw now?

MARY EARL

In the kitchen with Aunt Velva.

LOMA

Now, listen. Just stop crying now.

MARY EARL

But everything's all messed up. Grampaw... he...

LOMA

Now, Aunt Velva come back, didn't she? And I'm home now, right? So, Grampaw'll be home soon too.

MARY EARL

I'm glad you're home.

LOMA

Me too, Sweetpie.

MARY EARL

Why'd you run off like that?

LOMA

I didn't mean to. While we was having supper that night, Mickey said, "Hey, let's drive down to Myrtle Beach. We can take a midnight dip in the ocean and drive right back." It was such a crazy teenagery thing to do, we left supper on the table, got in my car and lit out. Then after we got there, I just didn't want to come back so fast.

MARY EARL

Did you have fun?

LOMA

(Laughs.) Well, I tell you what, Mary Earl. I want you to get all you can out of being fourteen the first time around 'cause it's not that easy to go back and pick it up again later.

MARY EARL

(Cautiously.) Did you have fun with Mickey?

LOMA

(Laughs.) You know how they say looks aren't everything? They are for Mickey. Yeah, ol' Mickey started to get on my nerves 'bout halfway between here and Kershaw. Thank the good Lord he run up on some people he knew down there and pretty much left me to myself.

MARY EARL

So, what'd you do?

LOMA

Nothing. Absolutely nothing but think, sleep, eat and stare at the ocean.

MARY EARL

That sounds boring.

LOMA

Of course it does to you. You're only thirteen years old.

(Loma puts her arms around Mary Earl and hugs her close. Velva and Earline come in from the kitchen.)

Mama.

EARLINE

Loma? Loma, is that you? You're home. I been worried to death. Poor old Aunt Doralee. She's gone. She's gone home to the Lord.

LOMA

(Putting her arms around Earline.) I know.

EARLINE

I killed her, Loma. Just as sure as if I'd put a bullet to her head. I killed her.

LOMA

You didn't kill her, Mama.

EARLINE

I was going to put her away. Your Daddy didn't want me to. He said I couldn't but I didn't listen to him. I called Reverend Snipes and found out where his mother-in-law was and I was going to put Doralee there, too.

LOMA

Did you tell that to Aunt Doralee?

EARLINE

No, but she knew. She knew or why did she die.

LOMA

She died 'cause she was old. It was her time.

EARLINE

I was just trying to do what was best for her.

LOMA

I know, Mama. I know you were.

EARLINE

But your Daddy got mad at me and left. Just walked out is what he did. Just got mad and walked out.

LOMA

He'll be back. And everything'll be fine.

EARLINE

I don't know what I'd do without you, Loma...

LOMA

(Settling Earline on the sofa.) Now, just sit here and get yourself together. I'm going to talk to Aunt Velva for a minute. Mary Earl, come over here and sit with your Grammaw for a while.

(Mary Earl comes to Earline and sits with her on the sofa. Loma crosses to Velva at the dining room table.)

VELVA

She's been going on like that ever since it happened. I've tried to make her see reason but she won't.

LOMA

She thinks she's responsible.

VELVA

But she's not. Not in any way.

LOMA

What'd the doctor say?

VELVA

It was a... a... now let me think, what did he call it? A... well, I can't think of the name but it was a little bubble in a blood vessel in there somewhere. Doctor White said it was like a little bomb that could go off at anytime.

LOMA

Is the funeral set?

VELVA

Friday afternoon at Tabernacle Baptist. Three o'clock.

LOMA

What about Daddy?

VELVA

Well, I was in Florida when he left, so I don't know exactly what happened but I think he got real mad at Earline and just up and walked out. It's strange. I've never known Edgar to do anything like that before.

LOMA

He's only been mad at her two or three times in his life. Can you believe that? I've spent 'bout my whole life mad at her.

VELVA

Me too.

LOMA

I guess she just finally pushed too far. *(Pause.)* Was that a car?

VELVA

I think so.

LOMA

(She gets up and goes to the door, looks out.) Mama. Mama, it's Daddy.

(Earline stands up. Edgar comes in.)

Hey, Daddy.

EDGAR

Hey. I see you got home alright.

LOMA

Yeah.

EDGAR

That's good. *(Looks at Mary Earl.)* Hey, Little Lady.

MARY EARL

(Going to Edgar and hugging him.) Hey, Grampaw.

EDGAR

Velva. How was Miami?

VELVA

Real nice, Edgar. I'm sure sorry about Doralee. Just as sorry as I can be.

EDGAR

Thank you, Velva. *(Looks at Earline.)* I believe I'll go on up to bed now. Tomorrow'll be a hard day. *(He goes upstairs.)*

EARLINE

Edgar. Edgar... *(Pause.)* He barely even looked at me...

VELVA

Now, Earline. It's late. Edgar's had a shock and you have. We all have. I think it's time to go to bed. I'm gonna run on home now and Loma and Mary Earl will see you upstairs. We'll get the funeral over with and then you and Edgar can start to get things back to normal.

EARLINE

Thank you, Velva.

VELVA

'Night, now. Ya'll leave that porch light on for me till I get across the yard, alright?

LOMA

We will, Aunt Velva. Night. *(Pause.)* Mary Earl, can you make sure your Aunt Velva gets home and then turn out the lights down here? I'm going to help your Grammaw get up to bed.

MARY EARL

Yes, ma'am.

LOMA

Thank you, Sweetpie. Come on, Mama.

(Loma and Earline go upstairs. Mary Earl stands looking out the window. After a moment she waves, responding to Velva's signal that she's home. Mary Earl turns off the porch light, then all the room light's except for a small wall lamp on the stairs. She goes to the sofa and curls up in a corner of it covering herself with an Afghan. It is very quiet except for the night sounds from outside — crickets, tree frogs, etc. After a few moments, Edgar comes downstairs in pajamas and bathrobe. He goes into the kitchen and comes back out with a glass of milk. He sits at the dining room table, then spots Mary Earl.)

EDGAR

I thought you'd gone to bed.

MARY EARL

No.

EDGAR

Well, you ought to get along up there. Need some sleep.

MARY EARL

I've not very sleepy.

EDGAR

Me neither.

MARY EARL

Can I stay up with you for a while?

EDGAR

If you want to...

MARY EARL

Will you come sit next to me?

(Edgar doesn't say anything. Just pauses for a moment then gets up and goes to the sofa. They sit quietly for a moment.)

Tell me about Aunt Doralee.

EDGAR

Not much to tell. What do you want to know?

MARY EARL

What was she like? I mean, when she was young.

EDGAR

You mean before she went crazy.

MARY EARL

No... well, I didn't think she *was* crazy.

EDGAR

No?

MARY EARL

I went out to talk to her sometimes. She was sort of confused but she didn't seem crazy.

EDGAR

That's what happens to people sometimes. The world's not what they want it to be so they make up one they like better. *(Pause.)* Doralee was... well, people used to say, "Poor Doralee, poor old maid, sacrificed her life for her sister's

children.” She didn’t, though. She lived her life pretty much like she wanted to... with her books and her little flower garden.

MARY EARL

She didn’t ever get married?

EDGAR

No. Didn’t want to. One time I asked her why and she said, “Edgar, I’m not one to suffer fools gladly.”

MARY EARL

She didn’t like men?

EDGAR

Oh, she liked ’em well enough. At her own convenience. She didn’t much want one underfoot. Same way about children. That’s why she moved into that little house. She could have her own little place and get as much of Earl and Carlton and Loma as she wanted and then send ’em home when she got tired of ’em. She was one of the few people in the world that could enjoy their own company. *(Pause.)* Earline couldn’t stand it.

MARY EARL

Why not?

EDGAR

Well, you know your Grammaw. Back years ago, she used to try to get Doralee to come to church with us. Doralee’d say, “Earline, I believe what I believe. I don’t expect you to believe it too or even approve of it, but I do expect you to leave me alone with it.” And, finally, Earline had to leave her alone, ’cause Doralee could cut off a conversation like cutting off the water at the spigot.

(Earline comes silently partway down the stairs. She hears Edgar’s and Mary Earl’s voices and stops.)

MARY EARL

Bet that ’bout drove Grammaw crazy.

EDGAR

Yeah, Doralee was a woman that wouldn't let herself be run over. And I think she knew she was about to get run over real good and she wasn't having any part of it.

MARY EARL

You think she knew what Grammaw wanted to do?

EDGAR

Yeah, maybe without really knowing what she knew. Most folks thought Doralee was crazy when she hollered. I believe the hollering came when she was in her right mind the most.

MARY EARL

She gave me this. *(Shows Edgar her necklace.)*

EDGAR

(He looks at it for a long time.) Did she tell you where she got it?

MARY EARL

No.

EDGAR

From me. I give it to her.

MARY EARL

You did?

EDGAR

Yeah.

MARY EARL

For a birthday... or Christmas?

EDGAR

No. It was a wedding present.

MARY EARL

But you said...

EDGAR

Not her wedding. Mine.

MARY EARL

What?

EDGAR

As a kind of thank you. My Mama didn't like Earline. Didn't want me to marry her. Told me right out, "Edgar, you are not to marry Earline Wilson."

MARY EARL

Why not?

EDGAR

No good reason. She said "Them Wilson's are not our kind of people." But Doralee stood up for us. She told Mama that it didn't matter what kind of people the Wilson's were, that Earline was a good girl and good for me and I was lucky to get her. Then she rounded up this fella that'd been calling on her and the four of us, her and him and Earline and me, all run down to South Carolina and me and Er got married. Just like that.

MARY EARL

What'd your Mama say?

EDGAR

She was fit to be tied.

(Earline has heard enough. She goes back Upstairs.)

MARY EARL

Sounds like your mama and Grammaw were a lot alike...

EDGAR

(Laughs.) Oh, to be sure. *(Pause.)* Mama, when she was living, and Earline could drive a person crazy but they're good people, Mary Earl.

MARY EARL

Did your Mama and Grammaw ever get along?

EDGAR

Oh, yeah. It didn't take 'em no time. It wasn't long before Mama loved Earline as much as she did her own children. Sometimes more, I think. The two of 'em used to gang up on me all the time. *(Pause.)* Family connections are crazy, Mary Earl. Everybody gets all stubborn and think they know what's best for everybody else, and they get mad, and they run off... and sometimes things don't work out when you want 'em to... but you forget about it when you have to... I guess once you're connected, you just can't quite get... *(Smiles, amused at his own play on words.)* ...disconnected...

(Edgar and Mary Earl sit quietly for a moment.)

MARY EARL

Are you still mad at Grammaw?

(Edgar thinks a moment then shakes his head "No.")

Good.

(Mary Earl is getting sleepy, starting to nod off. Edgar looks at her.)

EDGAR

Hadn't you better get up to bed?

(Stretching out and putting her head on his lap.)

MARY EARL

No... I love you, Grampaw...

(She drifts off to sleep and Edgar sits for a while patting her shoulder.)

EDGAR

Sweet dreams, Little Lady.

END OF ACT III Scene 1

ACT III, Scene 2

After the funeral, Earline and Velva stand at the front door waving good-bye to visitors.

EARLINE

Bye now. Thank ya'll so much.

VELVA

Bye Ruby, Reba...

EARLINE

Bye, Reverend Snipes, and thank you again. It was just a lovely service. Just lovely. *(Velva and Earline turn away from the door.)* Long-windedest man I've ever seen in my life. Isn't he long-winded, Velva. And what'd I tell you about Reba McWhirter? Big as the broad side of a barn and getting bigger, isn't she? It's a "don't care" attitude is what it is. I guess when Herman run off with that secretary down at the mill, she just give up on herself. It was a nice service though, wasn't it? Long, but nice. I guess the Reverend just gets to talking and loses track of the time. Has Earl gone? Well, yeah, I guess he has. Had that sweet little Mary Francis with him. She's sweet, isn't she, Velva? Wrote Edgar and me the nicest note about Doralee. I'm gonna miss Doralee.

VELVA

She was a lovely person.

EARLINE

Didn't she look good...

VELVA

Yeah... It was probably for the best.

EARLINE

Yes, she's in a better place now. *(Pause.)* Are you hungry? You got to help us eat up some of this food. Wonder where Edgar is? Edgar, are you in the kitchen?

VELVA

How's he doing? Did he talk to you this morning?

EARLINE

He was civil. That's about it. Velva, I don't think he'll ever forgive me. I don't think things'll ever be the same again.

VELVA

Oh, now, Sister... I believe he... Oh, here he is.

(Edgar enters from upstairs.)

Edgar, you doing okay?

EDGAR

Just fine, thank you, Velva. You going back to Miami?

VELVA

Yeah. I'll be flying back after the weekend...

EARLINE

Fly!!!! You've never been in an airplane in your life...

VELVA

I know it and that's why I'm doing it.

(Edgar, half-smiling, exits to kitchen.)

EARLINE

Now, Velva, you're too...

VELVA

You're *never* too old, Sister... for anything. Oh, that reminds me, I have to call Ricardo and tell him what time to meet me at the airport.

EARLINE

Velva, are you... are you and this Ricardo...?

VELVA

(With a lilt.) Yes, we are...

EARLINE

Velva!!!

VELVA

Earline!!!

(Earline opens her mouth to speak, then closes it, then gives a couple of her snort-like sighs.)

VELVA

What are you doing, Earline?

EARLINE

Biting my tongue, Velva, that's all... just biting my tongue.

VELVA

I know, I know. I'm gon' bust hell wide open. *(Laughs.)* I guess that's the price you pay for a little heaven on earth.

EARLINE

Now, Floyd...

VELVA

And don't you start on Floyd.

EARLINE

Well. *(Pause.)* Well. *(Pause.)* Well, I guess if there's something going on down here that Floyd don't want to see, he oughta have sense enough to turn his head.

(Velva embraces Earline, they laugh together, Edgar returns from the kitchen.)

EDGAR

Looks like everything's 'bout settled down here.

EARLINE

I'm sure glad to get all those people out of this house. I'm near wore to a frazzle. I don't mean to seem ungrateful 'cause they *are* paying their respects and all but...

(Loma and Mary Earl come downstairs bearing suitcases.)

Now, just where do ya'll think you're going? You can't be thinking about leaving! Well, we just won't let you, will we, Edgar?

LOMA

Yeah, I got to go.

VELVA

Let me have those suitcases, Loma. I'll take 'em out for you as I go.

EARLINE

You're not leaving, Velva?

VELVA

Yeah, but I'll see you before I leave on Monday. *(She goes to Loma and hugs her.)* Now, you take good care of yourself, Darlin.' Maybe you and Hutch could take a little vacation in Miami while I'm down there. Ricardo and I could show you around. We'd have a real nice time.

LOMA

We just might do that, Aunt Velva. Thanks.

(Velva takes a suitcase, Mary Earl takes another one and they go out amid a chorus of ad-libbed "goodbyes.")

EARLINE

I wish you wouldn't go.

LOMA

I got to, Mama...

EARLINE

I feel like I haven't even seen you...you running off to Cherry Grove like you done. Why you wanted to go off and do a fool thing like that, I'll never know. I've never seen the beat...

LOMA

Mama. Mama. I'll come back. I promise.

EARLINE

Will you bring those little boys with you next time?

LOMA

Yes, ma'am. I'll bring the boys. *(Pause.)* Daddy, I'm sure sorry about Aunt Doralee. *(She hugs him, then hugs Earline.)* Thanks for letting us visit...

EARLINE

Oh, I'm gon' miss ya'll.

LOMA

I'll miss you too but I'll tell you what. If you don't mind, I'd like to leave Mary Earl with you a little while longer. I... I talked to Hutch last night and... well, I'm just going to send the boys over to the neighbors and... see, Hutch and me... I think we can work things out with a little time to ourselves.

EDGAR

Mary Earl can stay here as long as she wants to.

LOMA

Thanks. *(Loma gathers up the rest of her belongings and starts toward the door.)* Bye, Mama. Bye, Daddy. I'll call you when I get to Wadesboro.

EARLINE

Bye, Darlin'. Give Hutch our love.

(Loma hesitates, looks at Earline, then at Edgar, grins at them.)

LOMA

I will. *(She exits.)*

EDGAR

I'm going to miss that young'un.

EARLINE

She's a good girl, Edgar. *(Pause.)* I'm going to miss Doralee too.

EDGAR

Yeah.

EARLINE

Edgar. I never knew your Mama didn't like me. Why didn't you ever tell me?

EDGAR

What makes you think she didn't like you?

EARLINE

The night Doralee died, I come part way downstairs and heard you and Mary Earl talking... Why didn't you ever tell me, Edgar?

EDGAR

Wouldn't have done anybody no good, Er.

EARLINE

But, I... you... things mighta been different...

EDGAR

I didn't want things to be different.

EARLINE

But Eula Mae...

EDGAR

I was marrying you, Earline, Mama wasn't.

(Earline just looks at Edgar for a moment. She's getting a little teary.)

EARLINE

And you've never regretted it?

EDGAR

Marrying you?

EARLINE

Yeah...

EDGAR

Er, listen to me. When I was sixteen years old, I was buddies with this boy — his name don't come to mind right now — but we was good friends. Went to school together, played together. The only thing we didn't do was go to church together. But one day, him and his folks invited me to go with 'em to church and I did.

EARLINE

What church? Here in Hemby Springs?

EDGAR

That don't matter. The point is, we was sitting there in church and the service started and the choir come out. There was this girl in the choir. I looked at that girl and I said to myself, "Edgar Pitts, you shoulda stayed with the Methodists 'cause that's the one that's gonna get you."

EARLINE

It was me? At Tabernacle Baptist?

EDGAR

It was you. (*Pause.*) We didn't meet that day but I knew we would sometime and it didn't matter what anybody thought about it.

EARLINE

Edgar, you didn't know me. We met on a blind date.

EDGAR

Mighta been blind for you. I knew exactly who I was getting.

EARLINE

Well, I knew you popped the question awful fast.

EDGAR

Yeah...

EARLINE

And you're sure you've never been sorry?

EDGAR

Well, I'll tell you, Er, no. But the closest I ever come to it was the other night when you wanted to put Doralee in a home.

EARLINE

I've never seen you like that, Edgar. You've never walked out like that before.

EDGAR

If there's one thing I learned from Doralee, it was that most things don't matter. There ain't no point in fussin' about things that go on everyday. But when it comes to big things like who you're going to spend your life with or how you're going to treat somebody that's been good to you, you better have some gumption about it.

EARLINE

I loved Doralee, Edgar. I was only trying to do what was best for her. That's all I ever wanted to do for anybody. But I guess Velva's right, you don't always know what's best for somebody else, do you?

EDGAR

My Mama sure didn't.

EARLINE

I'm real glad you didn't pay her no attention.

EDGAR

(Embracing Earline.) Me too, Er. Me too.

(The door bursts open and Mary Earl dashes into the room.)

MARY EARL

Grammaw! Grampaw! Aunt Velva asked me to come stay with her till she goes to Miami. It's just a couple of days. Can I? Please? Can I?

EDGAR

(Teasing her.) Now what would you want to do that for?

MARY EARL

She said she'd help me with my hair and show me how to use makeup and teach me a prayer and everything...

EARLINE

Well, now, you're just a little...

MARY EARL

Grammaw!!

EARLINE

Let me finish. *(Pause.)* You're just a little girl *right now* but you're growing up so I guess it'll be alright.

MARY EARL

Grampaw? Is it alright with you?

EDGAR

Oh, I expect me and your Grammaw could use a little time to ourselves right now.

MARY EARL

(Hugging both of them.) Oooooohhhh! I love you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. *(Running out.)* Aunt Velva! It's okay. They said I could come.

(Edgar and Earline sit on the sofa quietly for a moment.)

EDGAR

Well, now that we're by ourselves, what do you think we ought to do?

EARLINE

Oh, I don't know.

EDGAR

Want to watch a little TV?

EARLINE

That'd be fine.

(Edgar gets up, turns on the television, sits back down.)

What is that? That doesn't look like anything I ever saw before. Well, I sure hope it's something decent. I can't stand some of the filthy stuff they put on TV these days. Oh, it's black and white... some *old* show. It's probably okay. Well, I can't hardly hear it, can you, Edgar? You think it's loud enough? Why don't you turn it up a little bit.

(Edgar gets up, turns up the volume, comes back and sits down.)

That's better. 'Course, you know how these silly TV stations are. Just fine during the show and then they blast out your eardrums when the commercial comes on. Have you ever noticed that, Edgar? I have. Just blast your eardrums out with the commercials.

(Edgar takes her hand, looks at her and smiles, then looks back to the television, still half-smiling.)

Edgar. Edgar.

EDGAR

Hmmmmmm?

THE END