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SF PERUSALS

The Amen Corner

A Drama In Three Acts

by James Baldwin

A Samuel French Acting Edition



New York Hollywood London Toronto

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For
Nina, Ray, Miles, Bird
and
Billie

NOTES FOR THE AMEN CORNER

Writing *The Amen Corner* I remember as a desperate and even rather irresponsible act—it was certainly considered irresponsible by my agent at that time. She did not wish to discourage me, but it was her duty to let me know that the American theatre was not exactly clamoring for plays on obscure aspects of Negro life, especially one written by a virtually unknown author whose principal effort until that time had been one novel. She may sincerely have believed that I had gotten my signals mixed and earnestly explained to me that, with one novel under my belt, it was the *magazine* world that was open to me, *not* the world of the theatre; I sensibly ought to be pursuing the avenue that was open, especially since I had no money at all. I couldn't explain to her or to myself why I wasted so much time on a play. I knew, for one thing, that very few novelists are able to write plays and I really had no reason to suppose that I could be an exception to this age-old, iron rule. I was perfectly aware that it would probably never be produced, and, furthermore, I didn't even have any ambition to conquer the theatre. To this last point we shall return, for I was being very dishonest, or perhaps merely very cunning, with myself concerning the extent of my ambition.

I had written one novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and it had taken me a long time, nearly ten years, to do it. Those ten years had taken me from Harlem, through the horrors of being a civilian employee (unskilled) of the Army in New Jersey, to being an unskilled employee, period. There is no point in trying to describe the sheer physical terror which was my life in those days, for I was simply grotesquely out of my setting and

everyone around me knew it, and made me pay for it. I say "everyone" for the sake of convenience, for there were, indeed, exceptions, thank God, and these exceptions helped to save my life and also taught me what I then most bitterly needed to know—*i.e.*, that love and compassion, which always arrive in such unexpected packages, have nothing to do with the color of anybody's skin. For I was simply another black boy; there were millions like me at the mercy of the labor market, to say nothing of the labor unions, and it was very clear to me that in the jungle in which I found myself I had no future at all: my going under was simply a matter of time.

But, on the other hand, I had a family—a mother and eight younger brothers and sisters—and something in me knew that if I were to betray them and the love we bore each other, I would be destroying myself. Yet there was no possibility that I would ever be of any use to them, or anyone else, if I continued my life in factories. I was, unfortunately, not equipped, for anything but hard labor. No one would ever look at me and offer me anything more than a menial job, and yet people very frequently hesitated to offer me the only jobs open to me because they obscurely felt that I was unreliable, probably inflammatory, and far more trouble than I could possibly be worth. Well, to tell the truth, I can't say very much about those years; I suppose I've blotted it out. What I did, finally, was allow myself to drop to the very bottom of the labor market, became a busboy and short-order cook in places like Riker's—and wrote all the time. And when I was twenty-four, I took the last of a Rosenwald Fellowship grant and bought a plane ticket to Paris. I bought a plane ticket because I was afraid I would lose my nerve if I waited for a boat. I got to Paris with forty dollars and no French. I slid

downhill with impressive speed, which wasn't difficult considering the slightness of my eminence, ended up, successively, in one French hospital and one French jail, and then took stock. I was twenty-five and didn't have much to show for it. I started again. By 1952, I finished *Mountain*, borrowed money from Marlon Brando, one of the great and beautiful exceptions referred to above, and came home to try to sell it. I came home in the summertime, and it may have been the emotional climate and the events of that summer which caused me to write *The Amen Corner.*

I had been away for four years—four very crucial and definitive years. I myself have described my exile as a self-exile, but it was really far more complex and bitter than that. No one really wishes to leave his homeland. I left because I was driven out, because my homeland would not allow me to grow in the only direction in which I could grow. This is but another way of saying that all my countrymen had been able to offer me during the twenty-four years that I tried to live here was death—and death, moreover, on their terms. I had been lucky enough to defeat their intention, and, physically, I had escaped. But I had not escaped myself, I had not escaped my antecedents, not even France could compensate for some of the things I knew and felt that I was losing; no Frenchman or Frenchwoman could meet me with the speed and fire of some black boys and girls whom I remembered and whom I missed; they did not know enough about me to be able to correct me. It is true that they met me with something else—themselves, in fact—and taught me things I did not know (how to take a deep breath, for example) and corrected me in unexpected and rather painful ways. But it was not really my home. I might live there forever and it would

never be my home. No matter how immensely I might become reconciled to my condition, it was, nevertheless, the specialness of my condition which had driven me to France. And I had to know this; I could not, on pain of death, forget it—or, rather, to forget it would mean that my high pretensions were nothing but a fraud, that the anguish of my forebears meant nothing to me, and that I had never really intended to become a writer but had only been trying to be safe.

In New York that summer all this became very vivid to me—as vivid as a wound; and it was I, it seemed to me, who had become a kind of ambulating anguish. Not only had New York not changed—as far as I could see, it had become worse; and my hope of ever being able to live in New York diminished with every hour. And this distress was inconceivably aggravated by the one circumstance which would have seemed to be able to alleviate it: the fact that I was a young writer, with a small reputation and a possible future, whose first novel was about to be published. But, to tell the truth, I was really a young *Negro* writer, and the world into which I was moving quite helplessly, and quite without malice, had its own expectations of me, expectations which I was determined to defeat.

The editor assigned to me and my book asked me, when I entered his office for the first time and after the book had been accepted, "What about all that come-to-Jesus stuff? Don't you think you ought to take it out?" *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is the study of a Negro evangelist and his family. They do, indeed, talk in a "come-to Jesus" idiom, but to "take it out" could only mean that my editor was suggesting that I burn the book. I gagged, literally, and began to sweat, ran to the water cooler, tried to pull myself together, and returned

to the office to explain the intention of my novel. I learned a great deal that afternoon; learned, to put it far too briefly, what I was up against; took the check and went back to Paris.

I went back to Paris, as I then thought, for good, and my reasons this time seemed very different from the reasons which had driven me there in the first place. My original reasons were that I had been forced, most reluctantly, to recognize that thought was also action; what one saw, the point of view from which one viewed the world, dictated what one did; and this meant, in my situation, that I was in danger, most literally, of *thinking* myself out of existence. I was not expected to know the things I knew, or to say the things I said, to make the kind of jokes I made, or to do the things I did. I knew that I was a black street-boy, and that knowledge was all I had. I could not delude myself about it. I did not even have the rather deadly temptations of being good-looking, for I knew that I was not good-looking. All I had, in a word, was me, and I was forced to insist on this *me* with all the energy I had. Naturally, I got my head broken, naturally people laughed when I said I was going to be a writer, and naturally, since I wanted to live, I finally split the scene. But when I came back to sell my first novel, I realized that I was being corraled into another trap: now I was a writer, a *Negro* writer, and I was expected to write diminishing versions of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* forever.

Which I refused to do. I had not, after all, paid all those dues for that. I had no idea whether or not I could write a play, but I was absolutely determined that I would not, not at that moment in my career, not at that moment in my life, attempt another novel. I did not trust myself to do it. I was really terrified that I would,

without even knowing that I was doing it, try to repeat my first success and begin to imitate myself. I knew that I had more to say and much, much more to discover than I had been able to indicate in *Mountain*. Poverty is not a crime in Paris; it does not mean that you are a worthless person; and so I returned and began what I told myself was a "writing exercise": by which I meant I'm still a young man, my family now knows that I really am a writer—that was very important to me—let us now see if I am equipped to go the distance, and let's try something we've never tried before. The first line written in *The Amen Corner* is now Margaret's line in the Third Act: "It's a awful thing to think about, the way love never dies!" That line, of course, says a great deal about me—the play says a great deal about me—but I was thinking not only, not merely, about the terrifying desolation of my private life but about the great burdens carried by my father. I was old enough by now, at last, to recognize the nature of the dues he had paid, old enough to wonder if I could possibly have paid them, old enough, at last, to know that I had loved him and had wanted him to love me. I could see that the nature of the battle we had fought had been dictated by the fact that our temperaments were so fatally the same: neither of us could bend. And when I began to think about what had happened to him, I began to see why he was so terrified of what was surely going to happen to me.

The Amen Corner comes somewhere out of that. For to think about my father meant that I had also to think about my mother and the strategems she was forced to use to save her children from the destruction awaiting them just outside her door. It is because I know what Sister Margaret goes through, and what her male child is menaced by, that I become so unmanageable when peo-

ple ask me to confirm their hope that there has been *progress*—what a word!—in white-black relations. There has certainly not been enough progress to solve Sister Margaret's dilemma: how to treat her husband and her son as men and at the same time to protect them from the bloody consequences of trying to be a man in this society. No one yet knows, or is in the least prepared to speculate on, how high a bill we will yet have to pay for what we have done to Negro men and women. She is in the church because her society has left her no other place to go. Her sense of reality is dictated by the society's assumption, which also becomes her own, of her inferiority. Her need for human affirmation, and also for vengeance, expresses itself in her merciless piety; and her love, which is real but which is also at the mercy of her genuine and absolutely justifiable terror, turns her into a tyrannical matriarch. In all of this, of course, she loses her old self—the fiery, fast-talking little black woman whom Luke loved. Her triumph, which is also, if I may say so, the historical triumph of the Negro people in this country, is that she sees this finally and accepts it, and, although she has lost everything, also gains the keys to the kingdom. The kingdom is love, and love is selfless, although only the self can lead one there. She gains herself.

One last thing: concerning my theatrical ambitions, and my cunning or dishonesty—I was armed, I knew, in attempting to write the play, by the fact that I was born in the church. I knew that out of the ritual of the church, historically speaking, comes the act of the theatre, the *communion* which is the theatre. And I knew that what I wanted to do in the theatre was to recreate moments I remembered as a boy preacher, to involve the people, even against their will, to shake them

up, and, hopefully, to change them. I knew that an unknown black writer could not possible hope to achieve this forum. I did not want to enter the theatre on the theatre's terms, but on mine. And so I waited. And the fact the *The Amen Corner* took ten years to reach the professional stage says a great deal more about the American theatre that it says about this author. The American Negro really is a part of this country, and on the day we face this fact, and not before that day, we will become a nation and possibly a great one.

James Baldwin

ACT I
A Sunday morning in Harlem

ACT II
The following Saturday afternoon

ACT III
The next morning

All the action takes place on a unit set which is the church and home of Margaret Alexander.

Cast of Characters

MARGARET ALEXANDER — Pastor of the church
ODESSA — Margaret's older sister
IDA JACKSON — A young woman
SISTER MOORE, SISTER BOXER, BROTHER BOXER } Elders of the church
DAVID — Margaret's 18-year-old son
LUKE — Her husband
SISTER SALLY, SISTER DOUGLASS, SISTER RICE, BROTHER DAVIS, BROTHER WASHINGTON } Members of the congregation
WOMAN
OTHER MEMBERS OF CONGREGATION

The Amen Corner

ACT ONE

We are facing the scrim wall of the tenement which holds the home and church of SISTER MARGARET ALEXANDER. It is a very bright Sunday morning. Before the curtain rises, we hear street sounds, laughter, cursing, snatches of someone's radio; and under everything, the piano, which DAVID is playing in the church.

When the scrim rises we see, stage right, the church which is dominated by the pulpit, on a platform, upstage. On the platform, a thronelike chair. On the pulpit, an immense open Bible. To the right of the pulpit, the piano, the top of which is cluttered with hymnbooks and tambourines. Just below the pulpit, a table, flanked by two plain chairs. On the table two collection plates, one brass, one straw, two Bibles, perhaps a vase of artificial flowers. Facing the pulpit, and running the length of the church, the camp chairs for the congregation.

To the right, downstage, the door leading to the street. The church is on a level above the apartment and should give the impression of dominating the family's living quarters. The apartment is stage left. Upstage, the door leading to the church; perhaps a glimpse of the staircase. Downstage, the kitchen, cluttered: a new Frigidaire, prominently placed, kitchen table with dishes on it, suitcase open on a chair. Downstage, left, LUKE's bedroom. A small, dark room with a bed, a couple of chairs, a hassock, odds and ends thrown about in it as though it has long been used as a storage room. The room

ends in a small door which leads to the rest of the house.

Members of the congregation almost always enter the church by way of the street door, stage right. Members of the family almost always enter the church by way of the inside staircase. The apartment door is stage left of the kitchen.

At rise, there is a kind of subdued roar and humming, out of which is heard the music prologue, "The Blues Is Man," which segues into a steady rollicking beat, and we see the congregation singing.

ALL.
One day I walked the lonesome road
The spirit spoke unto me
And filled my heart with love—
Yes, he filled my heart with love,
Yes, he filled my heart with love,
And he wrote my name above,
And that's why I thank God I'm in His care.

(*Chorus*)
Let me tell you now
Whilst I'm in His care,
I'm in my Saviour's care,
Jesus got His arms wrapped around me,
No evil thought can harm me
'Cause I'm so glad I'm in His care.

CONTRALTO.
I opened my Bible and began to read
About all the things He's done for me;
Read on down about Chapter One
How He made the earth then He made the sun.

Read on down about Chapter Two
How He died for me and He died for you.
Read on down about Chapter Three
How He made the blind, the blind to see.
Read on down about Chapter Four
How He healed the sick and blessed the poor.
Read on down about Chapter Five
How it rained forty days and Noah survived.
Six, seven, about the same
Just keep praising my Jesus' name.
Read on down about Chapter Eight,
The golden streets and the pearly gates.
Read on down about Chapter Nine
We all get to heaven in due time.
Read on down about Chapter Ten
My God's got the key and He'll let me in.
When I finish reading the rest
I'll go to judgment to stand my test.
He'll say come a little higher, come a little higher,
He'll say come a little higher and take your seat.

ALL.
Let me tell you now
Whilst I'm in His care,
I'm in my Saviour's care,
Jesus got His arms wrapped around me,
No evil thoughts can harm me
'Cause I'm so glad I'm in His care.

MARGARET. Amen! Let the church say amen!

ALL. Amen! Hallelujah! Amen!

MARGARET. And let us say amen again!

ALL. Amen! Amen!

MARGARET. Because the Lord God Almighty—the King of *Kings*, amen!—had sent out the word, "Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die and not live."

And King Hezekiah turned his face to the wall.

ODESSA. Amen!

SISTER MOORE. Preach it, daughter! Preach it this morning!

MARGARET. Now, when the king got the message, amen, he didn't do like some of us do today. He didn't go running to no spiritualists, no, he didn't. He didn't spend a lot of money on no fancy doctors, he didn't break his neck trying to commit himself to Bellevue Hospital. He sent for the prophet, Isaiah. Amen. He sent for a saint of God.

SISTER BOXER. Well, amen!

MARGARET. Now, children, you know this king had a mighty kingdom. There were many souls in that kingdom. He had rich and poor, high and low, amen! And I believe he had a lot of preachers around, puffed up and riding around in chariots—just like they is today, bless God—and stealing from the poor.

ALL. Amen!

MARGARET. But the king didn't call on none of them. No. He called on Isaiah. He call on Isaiah, children, because Isaiah lived a holy life. He wasn't one of them always running in and out of the king's palace. When the king gave a party, I doubt that he even thought of inviting him. You know how people do, amen: Well, let's not have him. Let's not have her. They too sanctified. They too holy. Amen! They don't drink, they don't smoke, they don't go to the movies, they don't curse, they don't play cards, they don't covet their neighbor's husband or their neighbor's wife—well, amen! They just holy. If we invite that sanctified fool they just going to make everybody else feel uncomfortable!

ALL. Well, bless the Lord! Amen!

MARGARET. But let the trouble come. Oh, let the trou-

ble come. They don't go to none of them they sees all the time, amen. No, they don't go running to the people they was playing cards with all night long. When the trouble comes, look like they just can't stand none of their former ways—and they go a-digging back in their minds, in their memories, looking for a saint of God. Oh, yes! I've seen it happen time and time again and I know some of you out there this morning, you've seen it happen too. Sometimes, bless the Lord, you be in the woman's kitchen, washing up her cocktail glasses, amen and maybe singing praises to the Lord. And pretty soon, here she come, this woman who maybe ain't said two words to you all the time you been working there. She draw up a chair and she say, "Can I talk to you, sister?" She got a houseful of people but she ain't gone to them. She in the kitchen, amen, talking to a saint of God. Because the world is watching you, children, even when you think the whole world's asleep!

ALL. Amen! Amen!

MARGARET. But, dearly beloved, she can't come to you—the world can't come to you—if you don't live holy. This way of holiness is a hard way. I know some of you think Sister Margaret's too hard on you. She don't want you to do this and she won't let you do that. Some of you say, "Ain't no harm in reading the funny papers." But children, *yes*, there's harm in it. While you reading them funny papers, your mind ain't on the Lord. And if your mind ain't stayed on Him, every hour of the day, Satan's going to cause you to fall. Amen! Some of you say, "Ain't no harm in me working for a liquor company. I ain't going to be drinking the liquor, I'm just going to be driving the *truck*!" But a saint of God ain't got no business delivering liquor to folks all day—how you going to spend all day helping folks into

hell and then think you going to come here in the evening and help folks into heaven? It can't be done. The Word tells me, No man can serve two masters!

ALL. Well, the Word *do* say it! Bless the Lord!

MARGARET.

Let us thinks about the Word this morning, children. Let it take root in your hearts: "Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die and not live."

(*MARGARET begins to sing and instantly DAVID strikes up another "shout" song and the congregation sings—loud, violent, clapping of hands, tambourines, etc. MARGARET rises and sits.*)

MARGARET.

I got the holy spirit
To help me run this race.
I got the holy spirit,
It appointed my soul a place.
My faith looks up to heaven,
I know up there I'll see
The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit
Watching over me.

BARITONE.

Once I was a sinner
Treading a sinful path;
Never thought about Jesus
Or the fate of His wrath.
Then I met the Saviour
And ever since that day
I been walking my faith,
Praying with love,
Looking up above.
With His arms around me,

I'm just leaning on Him.
For there is no other
On Him I can depend
When my life is ended
And I lay these burdens down
I'm gonna walk with faith,
Pray with love,
Lookin from above.

ALL.

I got the holy spirit
To help me run this race.
I got the holy spirit,
It appointed my soul a place.
My faith looks up to heaven,
I know up there I'll see
The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit
Watching over me.

(*SISTER MOORE comes forward. The excitement begins to subside.*)

SISTER MOORE. Well, I know our souls is praising God this morning!

ALL. Amen!

SISTER MOORE. It ain't every flock blessed to have a shepherd like Sister Margaret. Let's praise God for her!

ALL. Amen! Amen!

SISTER MOORE. Now, I ain't here to take up a lot of your time, amen. Sister Margaret's got to go off from us this afternoon to visit our sister church in Philadelphia. There's many sick up there, amen! Old Mother Phillips is sick in the body and some of her congregation is sick in the soul. And our pastor done give her word that she'd go up there and try to strengthen the feeble knees. Bless God! (*Music begins and underlines her speech.*) Before we close out this order of service, I'd like to say,

I praise the Lord for being here, I thank Him for my life, health and strength. I want to thank Him for the way He's worked with me these many long years and I want to thank Him for keeping me *humble*! I want to thank Him for keeping me pure and set apart from the lusts of the flesh, for protecting me—hallelujah!—from all carnal temptation. When I come before my Maker, I'm going to come before Him *pure*. I'm going to say "Bless your name, Jesus, no man has ever touched me!" Hallelujah! (*Congregation begins to sing.*)

ALL.

Come to Jesus, come to Jesus,
Come to Jesus, just now.
Come to Jesus, come to Jesus just now.
He will save you, He will save you,
He will save you, just now.
He will save you, He will save you just now.

SISTER MOORE. Now before we raise the sacrifice offering, the Lord has led *me*, amen, to ask if there's a soul in this congregation who wants to ask the Lord's especial attention to them this morning? Any sinners, amen, any backsliders? Don't you be ashamed, you just come right on up here to the altar. (*tentative music on the piano*) Don't hold back, dear ones. Is there any sick in the building? The Lord's hand is outstretched. (*silence*) Come, dear hearts, don't hold back. (*Toward the back of the church, a young woman, not dressed in white, rises. She holds a baby in her arms.*) Yes, honey, come on up here. Don't be ashamed. (*The congregation turns to look at the young woman. She hesitates. MARGARET rises and steps forward.*)

MARGARET. Come on, daughter! (*The young woman comes up the aisle. Approving murmurs come from the congregation. SISTER MOORE steps a little aside.*)

That's right, daughter. The Word say, If you make one step, He'll make two. Just step out on the promise. What's your name, daughter?

YOUNG WOMAN. Jackson. Mrs. Ida Jackson.

SISTER MOORE. (*to the congregation*) Sister Ida Jackson. Bless the Lord!

ALL. Bless her!

MARGARET. And what's the name of that little one?

MRS. JACKSON. His name is Daniel. He been sick. I want you to pray for him. (*She begins to weep.*)

MARGARET. Dear heart, don't you weep this morning. I know what that emptiness feel like. What's been ailing this baby?

MRS. JACKSON. I don't know. Done took him to the doctor and the doctor, he don't know. He can't keep nothing on his little stomach and he cry all night, every night, and he done got real puny. Sister, I done lost one child already, please pray the Lord to make this baby well!

MARGARET. (*steps down and touches MRS. JACKSON*) Don't fret, little sister. Don't you fret this morning. The Lord is mighty to save. This here's a Holy Ghost station. (*to the congregation*) Ain't that so, dear ones?

ALL. Amen!

MARGARET. He a right fine little boy. Why ain't your husband here with you this morning?

MRS. JACKSON. I guess he at the house. He done got so evil and bitter, looks like he don't never want to hear me mention the Lord's name. He don't know I'm here this morning. (*Sympathetic murmurs from the congregation. MARGARET watches MRS. JACKSON.*)

MARGARET. You poor little thing. You ain't much more than a baby yourself, is you? Sister, is you ever

confessed the Lord as your personal Saviour? Is you trying to lead a life that's pleasing to Him?

MRS. JACKSON. Yes, ma'am. I'm trying every day.

MARGARET. Is your husband trying as hard as you?

MRS. JACKSON. I ain't got no fault to find with him.

MARGARET. Maybe the Lord wants you to leave that man.

MRS. JACKSON. No! He don't want that! (*smothered giggles among the women*)

MARGARET. No, children, don't you be laughing this morning. This is serious business. The Lord, He got a road for each and every one of us to travel and we is got to be saying amen to Him, no matter what sorrow He cause us to bear. (*to MRS. JACKSON*) Don't let the Lord have to take another baby from you before you ready to do His will. Hand that child to me. (*takes the child from MRS. JACKSON's arms*)

SISTER MOORE. Kneel down, daughter. Kneel down there in front of the altar. (*MRS. JACKSON kneels.*)

MARGARET. I want every soul under the sound of my voice to bow his head and pray silently with me as I pray. (*They bow their heads. MARGARET stands, the child in her arms, head uplifted, and congregation begins to hum "Deep River."*) Dear Lord, we come before you this morning to ask you to look down and bless this woman and her baby. Touch his little body, Lord, and heal him and drive out them tormenting demons. Raise him up, Lord, and make him a good man and a comfort to his mother. Yes, we know you can do it, Lord. You told us if we'd just call, trusting in your promise, you'd be sure to answer. And all these blessings we ask in the name of the Father—

ALL. In the name of the Father—

MARGARET. And in the name of the Son—

ALL. And in the name of the Son—

MARGARET. And in the name of the blessed Holy Ghost—

ALL. And in the name of the blessed Holy Ghost—

MARGARET. Amen.

ALL. Amen.

MARGARET. (*returning the child*) God bless you, daughter. You go your way and trust the Lord. That child's going to be all right.

MRS. JACKSON. Thank you, sister. I can't tell you how much I thank you.

MARGARET. You ain't got me to thank. You come by here and let us know that child's all right, that's what'll please the Lord.

MRS. JACKSON. Yes. I sure will do that.

MARGARET. And bring your husband with you. You bring your *husband* with you.

MRS. JACKSON. Yes, sister. I'll bring him.

MARGARET. Amen!

(*MRS. JACKSON returns to her seat. MARGARET looks at her watch, motions to ODESSA, who rises and leaves. In a moment, we see her in the apartment. She exits through LUKE's room, returns a moment later without her robe, puts coffee on the stove, begins working. SISTER MOORE comes forward.*)

SISTER MOORE. Well now, children, without no more ado, we's going to raise the sacrifice offering. And when I say sacrifice, I *mean* sacrifice. Boxer, hand me that basket. (*BROTHER BOXER does so. SISTER MOORE holds a dollar up before the congregation and drops it in the plate.*) I know you don't intend to see our pastor

walk to Philadelphia. I want every soul in this congregation to drop just as much money in the plate as I just dropped, or *more*, to help with the cost of this trip. Go on, Brother Boxer, they going to give it to you, I know they is. (*The congregation, which has been humming throughout all this, begins singing slightly more strongly as BROTHER BOXER passes around the plate, beginning at the back of the church.*)

ALL.

Glory, glory, hallelujah, since I laid my burdens down,
Glory, glory, hallelujah, since I laid my burdens down,
I feel better, so much better, since I laid my burdens down,
I feel better, so much better, since I laid my burdens down,
Glory, glory, hallelujah, since I laid my burdens down.

(*MARGARET leaves the pulpit and comes downstairs. The lights dim in the church; the music continues, but lower, and the offering is raised in pantomime.*)

ODESSA. Well! My sister sure walked around Zion this morning! (*MARGARET sits at the table. ODESSA pours coffee, begins preparing something for MARGARET to eat.*)

MARGARET. It ain't me, sister, it's the Holy Ghost. Odessa—? I been thinking I might take David with me to Philadelphia.

ODESSA. What you want to take him up there for? Who's going to play for the service down here?

MARGARET. Well, old Sister Price, she can sort of stand by—

ODESSA. She *been* standing by—but she sure can't play no piano, not for me she can't. She just ain't got no *juices*, somehow. When that woman is on the piano, the service just gets so dead you'd think you was in a Baptist church.

MARGARET. I'd like Mother Phillips to see what a fine, saved young man he turned out to be. It'll make her feel good. She told me I was going to have a hard time raising him—by myself.

(*Service is over, people are standing about chatting and slowly drifting out of the church.*)

ODESSA. Well, if he want to go—

MARGARET. David's got his first time to disobey me. The Word say, Bring up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it. Now. That's the Word. (*at the suitcase*) Oh Lord, I sure don't feel like wasting no more time on Brother Boxer. He's a right sorry figure of a man, you know that?

ODESSA. I hope the Lord will forgive me, but declare, I just can't help wondering sometimes who's on top in that holy marriage bed.

MARGARET. (*laughs*) Odessa!

ODESSA. Don't waste no time on him. He knows he ain't got no right to be driving a liquor truck.

MARGARET. Now, what do you suppose is happened to David? He should be here.

ODESSA. He's probably been cornered by some of the sisters. They's always pulling on him.

MARGARET. I praise my Redeemer that I got him raised right—even though I didn't have no man—you think David missed Luke? (*DAVID enters the apartment.*) Ah, there you are.

DAVID. Morning, Aunt Odessa. Morning, Mama. My! You two look—almost like two young girls this morning.

ODESSA. That's just exactly the way he comes on with the sisters. I reckon you know what you doing, taking him to Philadelphia.

DAVID. No, I mean it—just for a minute there. You both looked—different. Somehow—what about Philadelphia?

MARGARET. I was just asking your Aunt Odessa if she'd mind me taking you with me.

DAVID. Mama, I don't want to go to Philadelphia. Anyway—who's going to play for the service down here?

ODESSA. Sister Price can play for us.

DAVID. That woman can't play no piano

MARGARET. Be careful how you speak about the saints, honey. God don't love us to speak no evil.

DAVID. Well, I'm sure she's sanctified and all that, but she *still* can't play piano. Not for *me*, she can't. She just makes me want to get up and leave the service.

MARGARET. Mother Phillips would just love to see you—

DAVID. I don't hardly remember Mother Phillips at all.

MARGARET. You don't remember Mother Phillips? The way you used to follow her around? Why, she used to spoil you something awful—you was always up in that woman's face—when we—when we first come north—when Odessa was still working down home and we was living in Mother Phillip's house in Philadelphia. Don't you remember?

DAVID. Yeah. Sort of. But, Mama, I don't want to take a week off from music school.

MARGARET. Is the world going to fall down because you don't go to music school for a week?

DAVID. Well, Mama, music is just like everything else, you got to keep at it.

MARGARET. Well, you keeping at it. You playing in service all the time. I don't know what they can teach you in that school. You got a *natural* gift for music, Da-

vid—(*A pause. They stare at each other.*)—the Lord give it to you, you didn't learn it in no school.

DAVID. The Lord give me eyes, too, Mama, but I still had to go to school to learn how to read.

MARGARET. I don't know what's got into you lately, David.

DAVID. Well, Mama, I'm getting older. I'm not a little boy anymore.

MARGARET. I know you is getting older. But I hope you still got a mind stayed on the Lord.

DAVID. Sure. Sure, I have.

MARGARET. Where was you last night? You wasn't out to tarry service and don't nobody know what time you come in.

DAVID. I had to go—downtown. We—having exams next week in music school and—I was studying with some guys I go to school with.

MARGARET. Till way late in the morning?

DAVID. Well it's a pretty tough school.

MARGARET. I don't know why you couldn't have had them boys come up here to *your* house to study. Your friends is always welcome, David, you know that.

DAVID. Well, this guy's got a piano in his house—it was more convenient.

(*BROTHER and SISTER BOXER and SISTER MOORE leave the church and start downstairs. The church dims out.*)

MARGARET. And what's wrong with that piano upstairs?

DAVID. Mama, I can't practice on that piano—

MARGARET. You can use that piano anytime you want to—

DAVID. Well, I couldn't have used it last night!

(*The BOXERS and SISTER MOORE enter. DAVID turns away.*)

SISTER MOORE. I come down here to tell Sister Margaret myself how she blessed my soul this morning! Praise the Lord, Brother David. How you feel this morning?

DAVID. Praise the Lord.

SISTER BOXER. Your mother sure preached a sermon this morning.

BROTHER BOXER. Did my heart good, amen. Did my heart *good.* Sister Odessa, what you got cool to drink in that fine new Frigidaire? (*opens the frigidaire*) You got any Kool-aid?

SISTER BOXER. You know you ain't supposed to be rummaging around in folks' iceboxes, Joel.

BROTHER BOXER. This ain't no icebox, this is a *Frigidaire.* Westinghouse. Amen! You don't mind my making myself at home, do you, Sister Odessa?

MARGARET. Just make yourself at home, Brother Boxer. I got to get ready to go. David, you better start packing—don't you make me late. He got any clean shirts, Odessa?

ODESSA. I believe so—I ironed a couple last night—he uses them up so fast.

SISTER MOORE. Why, is you going to Philadelaphia with your mother, son? Why, that's just lovely!

DAVID. Mama—I got something else to do—this week—

MARGARET. You better hurry. (*DAVID goes into LUKE's bedroom, pulls a suitcase from under the bed.*)

BROTHER BOXER. I believe David's sweet on one of them young sisters in Philadelphia, that's why he's so anxious to go. (*DAVID re-enters the kitchen.*) How

about it, boy? You got your eye on one of them Philadelphia saints? One of them young ones?

MARGARET. David's just coming up with me because I asked him to come and help me.

SISTER MOORE. Praise the Lord. That's sweet. The Lord's going to bless you, you hear me, David?

BROTHER BOXER. Ain't many young men in the Lord like David. I got to hand it to you, boy. I been keeping my eye on you and you is—all right! (*He claps DAVID on the shoulder.*)

SISTER BOXER. How long you figure on being gone, Sister Margaret?

MARGARET. I ain't going to be gone no longer than I have to—this is a mighty sad journey. I don't believe poor Mother Phillips is long for this world. And the way her congregation's behaving—it's just enough to make you weep.

ODESSA. I don't know what's got into them folks up there, cutting up like they is, and talking about the Lord's anointed. I guess I *do* know what's got into them, too—ain't nothing but the Devil. You know, we is really got to watch and pray.

SISTER MOORE. They got more nerve than I got. You ain't never going to hear me say nothing against them the Lord is set above me. No sir. That's just asking for the wrath.

ODESSA. It'll fall *on* you, too. You all is seen the way the Lord is worked with Sister Margaret right here in this little tabernacle. You remember all those people tried to set themselves up against her—? Where is they now? The Lord is just let every one of them be dispersed.

SISTER BOXER. Even poor little Elder King is in his grave.

BROTHER BOXER. I sort of liked old Elder King. The

Lord moved him right out just the same.

SISTER MOORE. He'd done got too *high.* He was too set in his ways. All that talk about not wanting women to preach. He didn't want women to do nothing but just sit quiet.

MARGARET. But I remember, Sister Moore, you wasn't so much on women preachers, neither, when I first come around.

SISTER MOORE. The Lord opened my eyes, honey. He opened my eyes the first time I heard you preach. Of course, I ain't saying that Elder King couldn't preach a sermon when the power was on him. And it *was* under Elder King that I come into the church.

BROTHER BOXER. You weren't sweet on Elder King, were you, Sister Moore?

SISTER MOORE. I ain't never been sweet on no man but the Lord Jesus Christ.

SISTER BOXER. You remember Elder King, son? You weren't nothing but a little bundle in them days.

DAVID. I was reading and writing already. I was even playing the piano already. It was him had this church then and we was living down the block.

BROTHER BOXER. I reckon you must have missed your daddy sometimes, didn't you, son?

SISTER MOORE. If he'd stayed around his daddy, I guarantee you David wouldn't be the fine, saved young man he is today, playing piano in church, would you, boy?

DAVID. No'm, I reckon I wouldn't. Mama, if I'm going to be gone a whole week, there is something I've got to—

BROTHER BOXER. He better off without the kind of daddy who'd just run off and leave his wife and kid to get along the best they could. That ain't right. I believe in a man doing *right,* amen!

MARGARET. You hear him, don't you? *He* know—miss his daddy? The Lord, He give me strength to be mother and daddy both. Odessa, you want to help me with my hair? (*They start out.*)

DAVID. Mama—!

MARGARET. What is it, son?

DAVID. There is something I got to get down the block. I got to run down the block for a minute.

MARGARET. Can't it wait till you come back?

DAVID. No. I want to—borrow a music score from somebody. I can study it while I'm away.

MARGARET. Well, you hurry. We ain't got much time. You put something on. You act like you catching cold. (*ODESSA and MARGARET exit through LUKE's room.*)

BROTHER BOXER. You got to say goodbye to some little girl down the block?

DAVID. I'll be right back. (*He rushes into the street, vanishes in the alley.*)

BROTHER BOXER. Hmmph! I wonder what kind of business he got down the block. I guarantee you one thing—it ain't sanctified business.

SISTER BOXER. The Word say we ain't supposed to think no evil, Joel.

BROTHER BOXER. I got news for you folks. You know what I heard last night?

SISTER BOXER. Don't you come on with no more foolishness, Joel. I'm too upset. I can't stand it this morning.

SISTER MOORE. Don't you be upset, sugar. Everything's going to turn out all right—what did you hear, Brother Boxer?

BROTHER BOXER. That boy's daddy is back in New York. He's working in a jazz club downtown.

SISTER MOORE. A *jazz* club?

SISTER BOXER. How come you know all this?

BROTHER BOXER. Heard it on the job, honey. God don't want us to be ignorant. He want us to know what's going on around us.

SISTER MOORE. Do Sister Margaret know this?

BROTHER BOXER. I bet you David, *he* know it—he been keeping bad company. Some young white boy, didn't have nothing better to do, went down yonder and drug his daddy up to New York—for a comeback. Last time anybody heard about him, he was real sick with TB. Everybody thought he was dead.

SISTER MOORE. Poor Sister Margaret! A jazz club!

SISTER BOXER. Poor Sister Margaret! She ain't as poor as I am.

BROTHER BOXER. You ain't poor, sugar. You got me. And I ain't going to stay poor forever.

SISTER MOORE. I'm going to talk to her about that job business now. She reasonable. She'll listen.

SISTER BOXER. She ain't going to listen.

SISTER MOORE. Of course she's going to listen. Folks is got a right to make a living.

BROTHER BOXER. Uh-huh. Folks like us ain't got nothing and ain't never supposed to have nothing. We's supposed to live on the joy of the Lord.

SISTER MOORE. It ain't like Brother Boxer was going to become a drunkard or something like that—he won't even *see* the liquor—

SISTER BOXER. He won't even be selling it.

SISTER MOORE. He just going to be driving a truck around the city, doing hard work. I declare, I don't see nothing wrong with that.

SISTER BOXER. Sister Moore, you know that woman I work for, sometime she give a party and I got to serve them people cocktails. I *got* to. Now, I don't believe the

Lord's going to punish me just because I'm working by the sweat of my brow the only way I *can*. He say, "Be in the world but not of it." But you got to be *in* it, don't care how holy you get, you got to *eat*.

BROTHER BOXER. I'm glad Sister Boxer mentioned it to you, Sister Moore. I wasn't going to mention it to you myself because I was sure you'd just take Sister Margaret's side against us.

SISTER MOORE. Ain't no taking of sides in the Lord, Brother Boxer. I'm on the Lord's side. We is all sinners, saved by grace. Hallelujah! (*MARGARET and ODESSA re-enter. The BOXERS and SISTER MOORE begin to sing.*)

SISTER MOORE.
What a mighty God we serve!

SISTER and BROTHER BOXER.
What a mighty God we serve!

TOGETHER.
Angels around the throne,
'Round the throne of God,
Crying, what a mighty God we serve!

MARGARET. Bless your hearts, children, that sure done my spirit good. You all ain't like them wayward children up in Philadelphia. It sure is nice to be here with my real faithful children. (*DAVID enters the alley, slowly, looking back; enters the apartment.*)

BROTHER BOXER. Oh, we's faithful, Sister Margaret.

(*Jazz version of "Luke's Theme" begins.*)

SISTER MOORE. Yes, I'm mighty glad you said that, Sister Margaret. I'm mighty glad you *knows* that. Because the Lord's done laid something on my heart to say to you, right here and now, and you going to take it in

the proper spirit, I know you is. I know you know I ain't trying to find fault. Old Sister Moore don't mean no wrong.

MARGARET. What is it, Sister Moore?

DAVID. Mama, can I see you for a minute?

MARGARET. In a minute, son.

SISTER MOORE. Why, Brother and Sister Boxer here, they just happened to mention to me something about this job you don't think Brother Boxer ought to take. I don't mean no wrong, Sister Margaret, and I know you the pastor and is set above me, but I'm an older woman than you are and, I declare, I don't see no harm in it.

MARGARET. You don't see no harm in it, Sister Moore, because the Lord ain't placed you where he's placed me. Ain't no age in the Lord, Sister Moore—older or younger ain't got a thing to do with it. You just remember that I'm your pastor.

SISTER MOORE. But, Sister Margaret, can't be no harm in a man trying to do his best for his family.

MARGARET. The Lord comes before all things, Sister Moore. All things. Brother Boxer's supposed to do his best for the Lord.

SISTER MOORE. But, Sister Margaret—

MARGARET. I don't want to hear no more about it.

(*SISTERS MOORE and BOXER exchange a bitter look and they begin singing a church tune. ODESSA closes MARGARET's suitcase and puts it on the floor. LUKE appears in the alley, walking very slowly.*)

SISTERS MOORE and BOXER.

'Bye and 'bye when the morning comes
All the saints of God are gathering home,

We will tell the story how we overcome,
And we'll understand it better 'bye and 'bye.

(*LUKE climbs the stairs into the church, walks through it slowly; finally enters the apartment as they finish the song.*)

LUKE. Good morning, folks. (*Silence. Everyone stares, first at LUKE, then at MARGARET. MARGARET stands perfectly still.*) Maggie, you ain't hardly changed a bit. You *still* the prettiest woman I ever laid eyes on.

MARGARET. Luke.

LUKE. Don't look at me like that. I changed that much? Well, sure, I might of lost a little weight. But you gained some. You ever notice how men, they tend to lose weight in later life, while the women, they gain? You look good, Maggie. It's good to see you.

MARGARET. Luke—

LUKE. (*to ODESSA*) Hey, you look good too. It's mighty good to see you again. You didn't think I'd come to New York and not find you? Ain't you going to say nothing, neither?

ODESSA. Ah. You bad boy.

LUKE. I bet my son is in this room somewhere. He's got to be in this room somewhere--(*to BROTHER BOXER*)— but I reckon it can't be you. I know it ain't been that long. (*to DAVID*) You come downtown last night to hear me play, didn't you?

DAVID. Yes. Yes, sir. I did.

LUKE. Why didn't you come up and say hello? I saw you, sitting way in the back, way at the end of the bar. I knew right away it was you. And, time I was finished, you was gone. (*a pause*) Cat got your tongue, Maggie?

(*to DAVID*) I never knowed that to happen to your mama before.

MARGARET. I never knowed my son to lie to me, neither. God don't like liars.

DAVID. I was going to tell you.

MARGARET. Luke, how'd you find us?

LUKE. I had to find you. I didn't come to cause you no trouble. I just come by to say hello.

ODESSA. Luke, sit down! I can't get over seeing you, right here in this room. I can't get over it. I didn't reckon on never seeing you no more—

LUKE. In life. I didn't neither. But here I am—

ODESSA. With your big, black, no-count self. You hungry?

LUKE. Odessa, you ain't never going to change. Everytime you see a man, you think you got to go digging for some pork chops. No, I ain't hungry. I'm tired, though. I believe I'll sit down. (*He sits. ODESSA and DAVID glance at each other quickly.*)

MARGARET. How long you going to be in New York, Luke? When did you get here? Nobody told me—(*She looks at DAVID.*) nobody told me—you was here—

LUKE. A couple of weeks is all. I figured I'd find you somewhere near a church. And you a pastor now? Well, I guess it suits you. She a good pastor?

SISTER MOORE. Amen!

LUKE. What do you think, David? (*DAVID is silent.*) Well, she sure used to keep on at me about my soul. Didn't you, Maggie? Of course, that was only toward the end, when things got to be so rough. In the beginning—well, it's always different in the beginning.

MARGARET. You ain't changed, have you? You still got the same carnal grin, that same carnal mind—you ain't changed a bit.

LUKE. People don't change much, Maggie—

MARGARET. Not unless the Lord changes their hearts—

LUKE. You ain't changed much, neither—you dress a little different.

MARGARET. Why did you come here? You ain't never brought me nothing but trouble, you come to bring me more trouble? Luke—I'm glad to see you and all but—I got to be going away this afternoon. I stay busy all the time around this church. David, he stays busy too—and he's coming with me this afternoon.

LUKE. Well, honey, I'm used to your going. I done had ten years to get used to it. But, David—David, you can find a couple of minutes for your old man, can't you? Maybe you'd like to come out with me sometime—we could try to get acquainted—

DAVID. You ain't wanted to get acquainted all this time—

LUKE. Yes, I did. It ain't my fault—at least it ain't *all* my fault—that we ain't acquainted.

ODESSA. Luke!

DAVID. You run off and left us.

LUKE. Boy, your daddy's done a lot of things he's ashamed of, but I wouldn't never of run off and left you and your mother. Your mama knows that. (*a pause*) You tell him, Maggie. Who left? Did I leave you or did you leave me?

MARGARET. It don't make no difference now.

LUKE. Who left? Tell him.

MARGARET. When we was living with you, I didn't know half the time if I had a husband or not, this boy didn't know if he had a father!

LUKE. That's a goddam lie. *You* knew you had a husband—this boy knew he had a father. Who left the

house—who left?

MARGARET. You was always on the road with them no-count jazz players—

LUKE. But who *left*?

MARGARET. I ain't going to stand here arguing with you—I got to go—David—

LUKE. *Who left?*

MARGARET. *I* did! *I* left! To get away from the stink of whisky—to save my baby—to find the Lord!

LUKE. I wouldn't never of left you, son. Never. Never in this world.

MARGARET. Leave us alone, Luke. Go away and leave us alone. I'm doing the Lord's work now—

DAVID. Mama—you just said—God don't like liars.

MARGARET. Your daddy weren't hardly ever home. I was going to explain it all to you—when you got big.

LUKE. I done spent ten years wishing you'd leave the Lord's work to the Lord. (*He rises slowly.*) You know where I'm working, boy. Come on down and see me. Please come on down and see me.

MARGARET. Luke, he ain't going down there. You want to see him, you come on up here.

LUKE. He's big enough to find his way downtown.

MARGARET. I don't want him hanging around downtown.

LUKE. It ain't no worse down there than it is up here.

MARGARET. I ain't going to fight with you—not now—in front of the whole congregation. Brother Boxer, call me a taxi. David, close that suitcase and get yourself a coat. We got to go. (*BROTHER BOXER hesitates, rises, leaves.*)

ODESSA. Maggie, he's sick. (*LUKE sways, falls against the table. SISTER BOXER screams. DAVID and ODESSA struggle to raise him.*)

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