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SF PERUSALS

Degas in New Orleans

by Rosary Hartel O'Neill

A Samuel French Acting Edition



SAMUEL FRENCH

FOUNDED 1830

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CHARACTERS

EDGAR DEGAS – 38, the famous painter

RENÉ DEGAS – 27, Edgar's brother

ESTELLE (TELL) MUSSON BALFOUR DEGAS – 29, René's wife

DESIREE (DIDI) MUSSON – 34, Tell's sister

MATHILDE MUSSON BELL – 31, Tell's sister

MICHEL MUSSON – 60, Tell's father

JOSEPHINE (JO) BALFOUR – 10, Tell's daughter

AMERICA DURRIVE OLIVIER – 24, a neighbor

EMILY CUCKOW RILLIEUX – 45, a cousin, of mixed race, brown skin

MAN #1 – Will Bell— husband of Mathilde, funeral collector, soldier

MAN #2 – Mendicant, servant, soldier

ACCENTS

Family members speak with a soft, gentle, urbane upper-class New Orleans accent. America has a harsher, nasal, lower class drawl. Edgar speaks English with a pronounced accent. René who has lived in New Orleans for six years has lost most of his accent.

SETTING

We are in a two-story rental house on 2306 Esplanade Avenue, New Orleans, Louisiana. It is 1872. A double parlor with the remnants of grandeur: a glittering chandelier, an elegant tattered sofa, a mahogany desk, and a high-back chair. To the right, two floor-to-ceiling windows open onto a galley; to the left, a door to the pantry. Upstage two matching parlor doors lead offstage to an unseen staircased grand hallway that connects the upstairs, and the front and rear of the house. Outside we hear the clanging of a random mule-drawn streetcar. One possibility, throughout the play is to have Degas' paintings or the rapturous colors within them projected onto the rear wall, enriching the bleak setting with their transparent blues, pinks, and violets.

DEGAS IN NEW ORLEANS was first performed in June 2002 in New Orleans.

PROLOGUE

*(**SOUND**: Music playing softly)*

*(***EDGAR** *stands outside the house on Esplanade at an easel painting. As he mentions his cousins and brother they enter and pose in a tableau of beautiful young people)*

EDGAR. I have a picture in my mind of the best painting I never painted: three women and two men in untouched expectation. It's October, 1872. I've come to New Orleans to find myself as a painter and close this hole in my soul. My brother René is there, the bloom of youth on his cheek. We're dining at our uncle's, our enthusiasm buoyed by the lightness of each other. My cousins are there, Didi and Mathilde. And Tell, beautiful Tell, a Civil War widow and already remarried. First time I've seen the girls since they rode out the Civil War with us in France. And oh, the sunlight and the, God knows why, laughter. We are young and dreams seem possible *(Music fades out)*

(Slides—Degas' face and then the Degas house on Esplanade Avenue in New Orleans. Throughout the play we hear music like the compositions of Erik Satie.)

(blackout)

ACT ONE

Scene One

(October 25, 1872—5:30 a.m. Satie music and slides of the Degas House at the same time)

*(***JO BALFOUR***, 10, is asleep on the floor, in a pink tutu and ballet slippers, her hair caught in a ribboned ponytail like Degas' statue of La Fille de Quartorze Ans.* **JO** *rises dreamily and begins to dance. She lies back on the floor, returning to her sleeping state.)*

*(**SOUND:** Music fades, slides out, lights up)*

*(***TELL DEGAS***, 29, crosses the stage. She is exquisite, fragile with a porcelain beauty. Now and then she pauses to stabilize herself. She trips on her daughter's legs, and cries distraught)*

TELL. Jo, You're supposed to sleep on the sofa.

JO. *(Gets up restlessly)* Oh Mommy. I dreamed I was a bird and could fly high, but I flew into a clothesline —

TELL. Fold up your sheets.

JO. Why do I have to give my room to Uncle Edgar?

TELL. Are you listening to me?

JO. I want Uncle to paint you, Mama. You're so beautiful. If he would have painted Papa, he'd have been with me always. I don't know what he looked like. If Uncle paints you, you'll be with me forever.

*(***TELL** *smiles, puts an arm around* **JO***'s shoulder—coaxingly)*

TELL. Get dressed—

(A burst of laughter comes from the hallway. **JO** *hurries out, and* **TELL** *slips out. We see a pantomime of activity occurring in the house as the family awakens and prepares for* **EDGAR***.)*

*(***MATHILDE***, 31, an elegant but frazzled woman, walks in through the pantry with a tray with a coffee pot and cups and saucers. Pours her coffee expectantly and sits on the sofa.* **UNCLE MICHEL***, 60, dressed in a Confederate Army uniform, barges in from the front hallway followed by* **DIDI***, 34, an intense pretty lady with soft features. All move quickly, full of eager anticipation to greet* **EDGAR** *first.)*

UNCLE MICHEL. No matter how early I get up, it's never early enough. *(Goes to the back parlor doorway and calls)* Out, Jo, out.

DIDI. *(Shocked but giggling)* Shush, Papa. Take off that uniform. Someone's going to shoot you.

UNCLE MICHEL. I need to greet my nephew in style.

MATHILDE. *(Pats his shoulder playfully)* Go back to sleep, Papa.

UNCLE MICHEL. I just want to have a quiet cup of coffee alone.

DIDI. I just wanted to have a quiet cup of coffee alone.

UNCLE MICHEL. *(Indignantly)* Jo, out. *(Grumbling)* The dressing room is always occupied in this house. God, I've got a headache.

JO. *(From the rear hallway shouts)* One minute.

MATHILDE. *(With a warning look)* You should stop drinking.

UNCLE MICHEL. Babies screaming through the night.

DIDI. Put some sherry on their lips.

UNCLE MICHEL. Or let me kill one of them. *(Calls toward the back parlor doorway)* Jo. Get out. *(Shrugging his shoulders)* Mathilde, I want you to help Didi fix up. Didi needs a husband. Edgar is her last chance. A girl's life is like a ship. When she's sixteen, you've got to launch her, deck her with flags and ribbons, sail her out. At twenty-three, the ship turns and starts back to port. Didi is at the dock.

MATHILDE. Good morning to you too.

UNCLE MICHEL. *(To* **DIDI***)* Who's going to care for you when I keel over? Your sisters' husbands? The church? Remember what your mother said about those spinsters, who spied on their married neighbor. They'd snicker when they

heard her husband beating her or when they saw bruises on her arm. One day, that wife charged out of her house and screamed, "You can laugh and you can hiss but on me tombstone won't be, 'Miss.'"

MATHILDE. Just let us enjoy Edgar's company as we did in Paris.

UNCLE MICHEL. Keep away from Edgar. You've got a husband.

JO. *(Shouts from the dressing room)* Finished.

UNCLE MICHEL. Excuse me, girls. *(He leans over, kisses* **DIDI***'s cheek, then adds with a constrained air)* Mathilde, do Didi's hair like yours. She looks like a gargoyle.

*(***UNCLE MICHEL** *exits.)*

(Seconds later, in the hallway, **RENÉ** *tosses back his dark hair as* **TELL** *goes to embrace him. Gorgeous, he wears a single-breasted coat reaching mid-thigh over his white night shirt.)*

RENÉ. Did you already spoil your dress?

TELL. I stumbled—*(Pause)* Have you seen the children?

RENÉ. Yes, but they're asking for you. Mind them inside. I don't want to see grass stains on their outfits. Your son's knickers are already split...I'm sleeping till noon. Don't let the babies wake me. *(He turns to go, rubbing his sweaty forehead.)* Sorry about last night. The trip back from Paris was rough.

TELL. You fell right to sleep. I hoped to...–

RENÉ. I can't seem to get romantic when first thing I spot is bills on my dresser. Didn't you pay a thing while I was gone!

TELL. With what?

RENÉ. Maybe I'm exhausted from the overseas crossing. *(He gives her a cold peck.)* You're the center of my universe. I dote on you like the sun rising.

*(***RENÉ** *slouches off. A horn from a lone ship howls in the distance.* **TELL** *enters the parlor.)*

TELL. Sorry I couldn't go up to the station. How did you find Edgar?

MATHILDE. Last night? *(She chuckles—then with a pleased, relieved air)* He seemed uncertain, tentative, as if he had some secret. He was all dressed the part of the painter/poet—so kind and so subdued. You know how bachelors do.

TELL. It's sad. They're not going to get drawn into matrimony, but they practice in case the real thing—

(From the hallway, **JO** *and* **UNCLE MICHEL***'s voices are heard)*

DIDI. *(Hastily)* Have you told René about the new item?

TELL. *(Too vehemently)* Not yet. Don't say anything. Y'all promised.

*(***UNCLE MICHEL** *and* **JO** *dash in, enthusiastically fencing with canes.)*

JO. Mommy.

TELL. Stop, Jo.

DIDI. It's not her, it's him.

UNCLE MICHEL. Move back the furniture.

DIDI. *(Resentful)* It's not my turn to watch him.

*(***UNCLE MICHEL** *and* **JO** *go out into the front hallway, still fencing.* **DIDI** *and* **TELL** *follow. She turns back irritated.)*

TELL. Yes, but if the furniture is off—

MATHILDE. By an inch, I know.

*(***DIDI** *hurries* **TELL** *off through the back parlor doorway.* **MATHILDE** *gets some coffee, looks out the gallery window and spots* **EDGAR***.)*

MATHILDE. Edgar? Oh Lord. Come on in. There you are—*(Calls out)* Everybody! Edgar is up!

*(***EDGAR** *pokes through a gallery window. She stops abruptly, overcome by acute self-consciousness.)*

MATHILDE. Why are you looking at me like that? I know I've changed.

EDGAR. *(With awkward tenderness)* You look wonderful as I told you last night. *(Drawn to a picture)* Is this Tell's wedding portrait?

MATHILDE. To Joe Balfour. She was sixteen.

EDGAR. She looks like a pouty child.

MATHILDE. Not with those breasts. She got the family collection.

*(***UNCLE MICHEL***'s and* **JO***'s voices are heard in the hallway. They enter in a flurry)*

UNCLE MICHEL. There you are. Welcome, Edgar.

EDGAR. *(Takes her hands and gently lifts them up)* Can't be Jo. Such a big girl.

JO. Will you stay with us forever—

*(***DIDI** *comes in from the back parlor)*

DIDI. You're up already.

EDGAR. You've a different hair-do.

DIDI. You noticed.

(She smiles and hugs him gratefully. He turns, sees **TELL** *standing quietly in the front parlor doorway.)*

EDGAR. Tell, is that you? You're even more beautiful than when I—

TELL. *(Embarrassed and pleased)* Hello, Edgar.

EDGAR. *(Catches himself)* All the Musson sisters...beautiful.

*(***DIDI***,* **MATHILDE***, and* **JO** *surround* **EDGAR***.* **UNCLE MICHEL** *salutes him.)*

ALL GIRLS TOGETHER. *(To* **EDGAR***)* Paint me. And the children. A family group!

DIDI. It doesn't matter what you draw. Friends think you're great, soon as they know you studied paintings at the Louvre.

EDGAR. I'm hoping I'll paint best here. I love your big trees that throw their arms before the sky, your flowers that change colors— Audubon went to Barataria—I'll claim Louisiana. Stake out the galleries, the pillars, the shade. I want to find a new spatiality in my drawings ... I have always been ambitious. Too much so. *(Looking at* **TELL***)* Family, beware. I don't know where I'll settle down, near you probably, but I'm not going to live near a park with nurses and swings.

UNCLE MICHEL. Yes, Didi is the one who knows about art. *(Rings a bell and screams)* You can clear now.

COOKS. *(offstage)* "We ain't no slaves."

DIDI. *(Self-righteously)* It's fine; I'll get it.

(**MATHILDE** *makes a great business of stacking the cups, and gathering napkins.* **DIDI** *bangs silver.)*

UNCLE MICHEL. The family want to know what Edgar is really going to do in New Orleans—

EDGAR. To paint!

UNCLE MICHEL. *(Jolting back)* Excuse me. Some of us have to work! Let's leave Didi with Edgar.

TELL. Fine.

(With a knowing nod to **DIDI**, **UNCLE MICHEL**, **MATHILDE**, **JO***, slip out. But* **EDGAR** *takes* **TELL** *by the hand, leaves* **DIDI** *and scoots* **TELL** *to the gallery.)*

TELL. What are you doing?

EDGAR. I paint by intuition. I have to capture you, before the lights fade.

TELL. That's not what Papa and my brother-in-law have —

EDGAR. What does Will do?

TELL. He ... He used to sell materials for bagging cotton.

*(**SOUND:** Street cries. Peddlers hawk their wares, a horn strains from a ship on the Mississippi.* **EDGAR** *backs against the column lit by the sun and paints)*

*(***WILL***, a short stocky man bursts through the door, walking with a stiff wobble. A flask peeks out of his pocket. He hurries over to* **EDGAR***.)*

WILL. I'm late for a meeting. But when I get back, I want to talk you.

*(***WILL** *shakes* **EDGAR***'s hand three times, wipes his palm against his jacket, and stumbles off.)*

TELL. Stay away from him as long as you can.

(Their eyes pause on each other. Inside, trays bang about.)

TELL. *(Quickly)* We do our own cooking now—They say you arrived in the wee hours… where have you been?

EDGAR. Outside, drawing. Taking the winter blues off the land, up with the sun. *(He picks up his paints and sketchpad awkwardly, unable to look at her.)* Smelling the magnolias and honeysuckle—I'm here to *(Pause)* find a new approach to my painting. *(Pause)* But the ground is so untamed.

TELL. *(Clearing her throat)* The servants refuse to do yard work.

(He wipes off a dewy chair, seats her.)

EDGAR. You wouldn't believe how my brother went on about the landscapes I could paint. But the streets look so unsettled.

TELL. Why not paint on the gallery. We can protect one place from children.

*(**SOUND:** "Oh, no, no, no!" A woman wails next door.)*

TELL. Doctors have fled; men starve in the streets… *(Another wail pierces the air)* There's always a child in a sick room…But…you're resilient.

*(***EDGAR** *keeps looking at her as if waiting for something more.)*

TELL. Did you expect the city to be different? Why are you staring?

EDGAR. You're still the beauty. *(Pause)* René wants me to paint Jackson Square *(Pause)* the Mississippi *(Pause)* the Cotton Exchange.

TELL. Be sure you... avoid the back streets.

(Sounds of children burst from the house. **EDGAR** *and* **TELL** *shrink back, while her sisters walk outside and empty their own slops into the gutter.)*

TELL. Didn't René tell you we have to do everything? The plantation was leveled.

EDGAR. And your in-town home—

TELL. Lost to taxes. You can't read the lists of the dead in the paper; there are so many pages.

(From inside a woman screams, "I'm not doing the wash again.")

TELL. I'm glad Mama died before we moved.

*(**SOUND:** Inside the house, a woman shrieks and a child whines.)*

TELL. My sisters! One cares for rowdy kids. The other tends to Papa.

*(**SOUND:** The clanking of pots and cutlery soars from the kitchen, and the bustle of children.)*

EDGAR. How many of your family live here?

TELL. Eighteen plus a few servants. . .

EDGAR. I should leave.

(Lamps are turned up, brooms rush over the floors.)

TELL. *(Confrontational)* No! After such a long journey! Everyone is counting on you.

EDGAR. Father financed my trip to paint to find new opportunities—

TELL. But you're successful in Paris.

EDGAR. On a slow incline. At my last gallery opening, which I myself financed, announcements, caviar, champagne, one thousand hungry people showed up and no one bought a painting. Critics called my work "derivative." I quote, "With this exhibition, Degas has sent his death knell throughout Paris."

TELL. How do you recover from—?

EDGAR. I don't paint for a while. *(He shrugs, returns to painting)* It's hard to extract the arrows alone. Now, when I was with you in France—

TELL. "Our Raphael." That's what we called you.

EDGAR. One Raphael even in a thousand years is enough.

TELL. I'll help you.

EDGAR. How?

TELL. By sparing you too much bad news. By fending off relatives. *(He looks at* **TELL** *with shining eyes; as if she possesses an energy and vitality he needs.)*

EDGAR. You wouldn't advise me to leave painting and have a family?

TELL. Never!

*(***DIDI** *pokes her head out, speaks quickly, unable to tame her excitement)*

DIDI. It's my turn with Edgar.

*(***TELL** *starts to go.)*

EDGAR. Wait. I can keep painting while Didi talks.

*(***TELL** *sits back down and he continues painting.)*

DIDI. *(Pacing, annoyed)* I made a list of things we can discuss. I jotted down novels you might like, and borrowed those I could. We can't always get the latest books, it's not Paris. But I did find *Madame Bovary*, some Dumas *père* and Baudelaire.

EDGAR. I haven't read poetry for a long time.

DIDI. I got Alfred de Musset and George Sand. Are you following... the controversy about her novel, *She and He*?

EDGAR. Not yet.

(He smiles, and **TELL** *smiles back. Then* **DIDI** *changes to a brisk, businesslike air)*

DIDI. The principal figures are artists... I suppose you've read the *Son of Titian*?

EDGAR. Are you still reading a book a week?

DIDI. I do more. I'm writing a novel. Now whenever you paint, I'll work on it.

EDGAR. *(Hesitates, to* **TELL***)* And how are you, Tell?

DIDI. *(To* **EDGAR***)* Fine. Why shouldn't she be? *(Her hands flutter up to her hair)* Did you get my letters? You didn't respond much.

EDGAR. *(Evasively, painting* **TELL***)* Most painters aren't good with words. That is why we draw pictures.

DIDI. I don't like people who talk all the time but say nothing. I like your new signature. One word like Delacroix, not De la Croix. "Degas," not the two words "de Gas" that implies aristocracy. Your brothers were furious. They paid for that false coat of arms. They don't want people to know the family goes back to a bunch of bakers. What I admire most about you is your awareness of the smallest element of art, even one so peripheral and personal as the signature. I've studied the signature and there are similarities between the D in Daumier, the e in Delacroix and the final S in Ingres. I need to find a distinctive professional signature for my writing and a male name like George Sand. With a woman's name you can't become successful. Don't you agree?

EDGAR. Sorry. I wouldn't know.

(He stiffens, looks at her awkwardly, but she flounders on)

DIDI. I amuse myself with letter writing. I used to so look forward to sealing that envelope, placing a stamp. Some I rewrote four or five times to get them perfect. Want to see? *(Takes out letters)* These are the ones I never sent. Next to the ones I received. Silly, but I like to reread them both. My way of being in Paris with you. *(Pause)* I love your stationery and bright blue ink. The paper is so smooth and

every letter signed boldly. "Degas." Just like your paintings. I've a special folder for each letter.

*(***EDGAR** *is lost in his painting. Rebuffed and hurt,* **DIDI** *minces toward the door, peers back)*

DIDI. Edgar I insist you talk to me. Tell, come inside!

(Embarrassed, **EDGAR** *puts down his brush and follows* **DIDI** *inside.* **TELL** *is alone.)*

TELL. Edgar? Edgar. *(Worriedly)* Good. He's gone.

*(***TELL** *rises. She is silent, keeping her chin up, she crosses. She bumps into a chair, with a sigh recovers, moves forward.)*

*(***EDGAR** *enters. His expression becomes somber as he stares at her with a growing dread. Suddenly she is self-consciously aware that someone is staring fixedly at her.)*

TELL. Edgar?

EDGAR. *(Hesitates, then bursts out guiltily)* Tell, what's wrong? Can't you see me?

TELL. I wasn't paying attention.

EDGAR. I've been watching you. *(Concerned, he touches her arm)* I don't know what to say.

TELL. *(Quickly)* Don't say anything. I'm so ashamed. I wanted to fool you completely.

EDGAR. You can't see? God, you can't see.

TELL. I see a little...I had an infection...a year ago-

EDGAR. Go on.

TELL. A few operations—

EDGAR. You don't have to be embarrassed.

TELL. I want you to remember me the way I was.

EDGAR. I do. *(Awkward pause where they smile at each other affectionately.)* All those letters—Didi said nothing. Why didn't René tell me? I'd have come.

TELL. I'd have thrown you out...

EDGAR. Perhaps in Paris the specialists can help. But...What can I do?

TELL. Ask me what I need and I'll tell you. If I'm walking towards a chair and you bring it to me, I'll trip.

EDGAR. You see nothing? Nothing at all?

TELL. Just blurs.

EDGAR. How do you cope?

TELL. I get by working with contrasts. Analyzing the whole moving environment.

EDGAR. Is that so?

TELL. Move and I'll find you. *(He hesitates)* Go on.

EDGAR. I can't...I'm so...I just can't imagine...

TELL. Do it for me.

EDGAR. *(Reluctantly, he moves away)* All right. Should I talk?

TELL. *(Laughs, a lilt comes into her voice)* No, that would make it too easy. Go on.

(He moves away; she walks in the wrong direction; he steps into her path)

TELL. There! I found you. *(Changing the subject)* See? Do you look different?

EDGAR. I have a few gray hairs, but they say my shoulders are stronger.

TELL. May I touch your face? *(Her hands glide lovingly over his features. He squeezes her hands)* You haven't changed much. What's this scar?

EDGAR. A ricochet wound. From fighting in the Commune.

TELL. Fighting!

EDGAR. I've staggered through blood baths and watched my friends die. Anybody in any way connected to the Commune or in the wrong place was shot.

TELL. But you survived.

EDGAR. Because I was mistaken for a corpse. All the friends I had in Paris are unhappy or dead. I'm here to make a new life in New Orleans. Here let me paint you.

TELL. I'm not as pretty as I was.

EDGAR. You've a gentler, more refined beauty.

NURSE. *(offstage)* Miss Tell. Time for the children's baths.

*(***EDGAR** *goes to the doorway and yells)*

EDGAR. She's gone for a walk. Start without her.

DIDI. *(Peeking out)* Edgar should visit with Papa over his paper and Tell rock her baby.

EDGAR. Later.

(He moves his easel, and sits **TELL** *in a corner chair. The warm morning sun brightens her face. He unbuttons her collar.)*

EDGAR. Your life is so demanding.

TELL. I don't work harder than you. Tell me what you do each moment.

(He takes off his coat and yanks out his spotted cotton shirt.)

EDGAR. I work with broad strokes. Keeping the design simple—.

(A Negro in a gray wool cavalry shirt, carrying a baby, creeps to the gallery. **EDGAR** *gives him some money and the man retreats.* **TELL** *grasps her chair.)*

TELL. Now, they'll all be begging here.

EDGAR. We can't let them starve.

*(***EDGAR** *hands* **TELL** *a little fan, his movements awkward as he touches her.)*

TELL. *(Fanning herself)* You've no idea how difficult life has been. No progress has been made since the War. I think in Europe you call it the War Between the States. We call it the War against Northern Aggression.

(Mournful sounds drift in from a funeral procession down the street.)

TELL. They parade toward St. Louis Cemetery No. 3, to the tombs of the old Creole families.

(Bells toll from the Saint Louis Cathedral)

EDGAR. My god. A man heading the cortege is coming to the gallery, collecting for the casket. I'll oblige him.

*(***TELL** *shudders, wipes her brow.* **EDGAR** *gives the man money, returns to his painting.)*

TELL. What are you doing now?

(He puts down the brush and steps from the canvas to the railing.)

TELL. What's going on?

EDGAR. Some soldier has left the procession and fallen on a crutch. Is this normal?

TELL. Yes. I guess we've gotten used to it...funerals. Everyone has a brother, father, cousin, husband...

EDGAR. I'm so sorry. *(He comes over, bends down, and repositions her in the chair. He looks away as he speaks.)* Our revolution, the Commune, sprang from the masses, and found its martyrs. . . in the little people. Artists and—

TELL. Is that why you came?

EDGAR. Travel is a more gracious way to bid farewell than sobbing at the scene. Now there will be less in my life—just painting and brave people like you. Most of us can only let go of a little at a time.

TELL. Emptiness will create new paths. Paint what you see now!

EDGAR. But no one, even family, wants me to paint.

TELL. We all need art; we take it for granted.

EDGAR. What if I spend 18 hours a day painting while the family starves?

TELL. Shoosh. Once you're successful...your glory will revive our dreams.

EDGAR. But if I fail?

TELL. Paint with a velocity that won't let you.

EDGAR. Whom should I paint?

TELL. The family. Me. Make us important.

EDGAR. If I paint well, there won't be time for anything else—

TELL. Be selfish. Cut people before you cut painting.

*(***RENÉ** *shouts from the hall, "Tell! Tell!" She fans her sweaty cheeks.)*

TELL. *(Calls out)* I'm here! *(To* **EDGAR***)* Don't leave anything outside, you don't want stolen.

*(***EDGAR** *collapses his easel, throws his paints in a box.)*

EDGAR. I'll complete your portrait from memory inside.

RENÉ. *(Scowling from the front hallway)* Tell, Tell.

TELL. Up already?

*(***RENÉ** *saunters over, enthusiasm covering his hangover)*

RENÉ. Morning.

EDGAR. Morning.

*(***EDGAR** *exits)*

RENÉ. *(Uneasy)* I made a fool of myself, posturing about the wonders of Louisiana, but—

TELL. I have a surprise for you. My heart is racing.

RENÉ. If you're happy that's all that counts.

TELL. I'm so distracted with the thrill of it. I don't want to disappoint you. I'm afraid I'm going to now.

RENÉ. You can't hurt me, Sugar.

TELL. Oh, René, we're going to have a baby.

*(***RENÉ** *stops short—then smiles broadly, with a painful effort to be a good sport)*

RENÉ. Another child? Oh my God. *(Hugs her, unable to conceal an almost furtive uneasiness)* You said you couldn't get pregnant...A...a third child. We agreed two were enough.

TELL. True, but a baby!

RENÉ. Didn't the doctor forbid this? The other children aren't even three. One a year. Don't you remember how we had to walk the floor! Always some infection, earaches, sore throats, colic.

TELL. You won't have to do anything.

RENÉ. Your father keeps prodding me about making money, about my place as head of the house. I turn around and you're having another baby. Can nothing be done? How did this occur? I thought you were nursing.

TELL. Yes...it's a miracle. God wants this for us, René.

RENÉ. The doctor says you're a high risk. Let's wait to tell the others till you're further along.

(Stung, **TELL** *disappears out the front parlor. He watches her then takes a flask from his pocket and takes a swig.* **MATHILDE** *comes through the pantry, her face worried. She is reassured to find* **RENÉ** *alone.* **RENÉ** *turns, adjusts his jacket.)*

MATHILDE. Coffee? It's wonderful to have you home. Did you have a grand time with Edgar in Paris? *(Pause)* I like your new suit.

RENÉ. I've got to give the impression I'm successful, to make money in the future.

MATHILDE. You sound bitter.

RENÉ. That's what I seem like when I'm amused.

MATHILDE. Soon as you settle in we must talk.

RENÉ. Can this wait until later?

*(***UNCLE MICHEL** *and* **JO** *explode through the back parlor door, fencing with canes)*

JO. Parry.

UNCLE MICHEL. Out of my way.

MATHILDE. Papa, please...

*(***UNCLE MICHEL** *and* **JO** *go out the front parlor door.* **RENÉ** *turns on him reproachfully)*

RENÉ. The man doesn't see I'm here. He's my father-in-law.

MATHILDE. You said Edgar would—

RENÉ. *(Yells, in* **UNCLE MICHEL***'s direction)* And he can't say hello. Why is that?

MATHILDE. Is that a yes for—

RENÉ. Yes, but not today...*(She goes to exit with the coffee tray)* Leave the coffee.

MATHILDE. This has to last the week. *(Exits)*

*(**LIGHT:** Focus changes to gallery)*

*(***RENÉ** *stares at his flask slinks in a chair, drinks.* **EDGAR** *enters, goes to him with a resentful look.)*

EDGAR. She's blind. You couldn't tell me?

RENÉ. *(Floundering)* She swore me to secrecy. She didn't want to see you. And now...

EDGAR. What's wrong?

RENÉ. Tell's...pregnant...I never get sandbagged by men, just women. I've pretty much decided my life is over for the next few years...

EDGAR. Here. *(Unfolding bills from a stack in his pocket)*

RENÉ. That's too much...all right. *(Jovially passes him the flask)* Have some.

EDGAR. So early?

RENÉ. I'm celebrating your arrival New Orleans style. *(Takes another sip)* The thing about Louisiana is nobody's trying to get ahead. You meet amazing people who are not looking for money. They go to parties given by their best friends, that's all. I believe in New Orleans and her possibilities. No place has the flamboyance, the charm this city has. And I don't want us to sell cotton unless selling it makes our lives every day so much richer.

UNCLE MICHEL. *(Comes in from back parlor. He gives a quick suspicious glance from* **RENÉ** *to* **EDGAR***)* Edgar...Welcome. Good you came. I need to talk to you about...Didi.

EDGAR. Why, is something wrong with her?

UNCLE MICHEL. No, no, she is fine. All right, we will talk about her later. *(Solemnly)* First things first...

EDGAR. René is doing well in the cotton business.

UNCLE MICHEL. René is not in the cotton but in the manufacturing business. He manufactures unhappiness.

EDGAR. You are always joking.

UNCLE MICHEL. I won't talk about what it used to be like—when I ran things because that would involve adverse comparisons.

EDGAR. I know René is doing his...

UNCLE MICHEL. The man gives his best energy to traveling and drinking, activities that are clearly not lucrative.

RENÉ. That's not fair.

UNCLE MICHEL. Did you do any business in Paris or did you just have fun?

RENÉ. I negotiated business with my father and I met with Edgar and I spoke to...

UNCLE MICHEL. René used to never say, "I." Then he married Tell...that word became his new toy. He can say, "I want financing for a new venture. I want tickets to Europe. I can't afford another child." Now he pretends he handles things but he runs off or takes a nap.

RENÉ. You misunderstand.

EDGAR. May I help in some way?

UNCLE MICHEL. See if René paid the rent, will you, and any of the bills?

*(***AMERICA** *enters. She is a buxom 24 year old beauty, glamorous but overdone, and somewhat loud. Waves a calling card.)*

AMERICA. Oh, René, a caller is at the door.

RENÉ. Edgar, may I present Mrs. America Olivier, married to our neighbor, the judge.

AMERICA. My goal is to move to your exotic Paris.

RENÉ. She reads to Tell and helps the children with their music.

EDGAR. How kind.

AMERICA. René wants to move back, too. René, you must warn Edgar about the *gens de colour*. He's got a visitor... *(Hands* **RENÉ** *the calling card.)*...from the wrong side of the blanket.

RENÉ. *(Looking at the card)* Cousin Norbert. I hope you're not getting involved with him.

AMERICA. Cousin?

UNCLE MICHEL. *(To* **AMERICA***)* My uncle had no trace of the dark brush, but he passed his engineering genes to a Negro. *(To* **EDGAR***)* Haven't you heard of the quadroon balls, where to enter, a lady's skin has to be lighter than tan paper kept at the door.

EDGAR. *(Starting for the door)* That's appalling.

UNCLE MICHEL. Don't walk away while I am talking. You should avoid these *gens de colour* or free people.

(A **SERVANT** *enters to turn up the oil lamps and the carved candlesticks.)*

EDGAR. Free?

TELL. *(Starting for the door)* Intermediate in rights. Skin color between slaves and whites.

UNCLE MICHEL. Everyone is free now so free colored men are the same as other colored; no, they are worse, they are angry and they are a lot smarter. Am I right, America? Tell?

*(***SERVANT** *storms out.)*

EDGAR. I'm very interested in Norbert's inventions. *(Abruptly turns to leave.)*

UNCLE MICHEL. Keep your distance, Edgar. We don't want a family hanging.

EDGAR. The citizens I fought with in the Commune died for—

UNCLE MICHEL. I'm fond of Norbert. We played together as boys. He's the one liable to get lynched.

*(***EDGAR** *goes out with* **TELL.** **UNCLE MICHEL** *hands a bill to* **RENÉ.***)*

UNCLE MICHEL. Invoices with no checks. Both used to come in one envelope. *(He exits)*

(Once he is gone, **AMERICA** *hurries over to* **RENÉ** *. He breaks away, and checks the doors and windows for eavesdroppers.)*

RENÉ. I can't talk now.

AMERICA. Tonight, usual place?

RENÉ. We must postpone our plans.

AMERICA. I don't want to wait any longer.

RENÉ. I can't leave Tell with the children alone.

AMERICA. I care about her children, about the whole household more than—

RENÉ. Tell is...pregnant.

AMERICA. She is...You got her pregnant? You...slept with her while I'm waiting?

RENÉ. She said she couldn't get...

AMERICA. You have...I thought you weren't intimate.

(Moves to her restlessly, motioning for her to keep her voice down)

RENÉ. Ah, sugar. I'm just as upset...

AMERICA. Ah, sugar. Don't touch me.

RENÉ. Now Edgar's here we'll repay you. I can't let our cotton business go under. *(Squeezing her hand)* Can't we talk later?

AMERICA. My husband's going to kill me if I don't give him that money right away. When he discovered it was missing he tore up the house looking for it. At night he rolls over and makes awful grunting sounds, cursing under his breath. Money and retaliation, that's all the judge cares about. One nod from him and I'm in prison or a mental hospital. If he finds out I stole that money...

(A burst of laughter comes from the pantry.)

DIDI. *(Offstage)* Where are you taking me?

*(***EDGAR** *comes in carrying a birthday cake.* **DIDI** *follows coaxed by* **MATHILDE**, **TELL**, **UNCLE MICHEL** *and* **JO***)*

ALL. SURPRISE!!

DIDI. I don't like surprises. I said I'm not celebrating.

JO. It's just three candles.

MATHILDE. *(Lighting the candles)* You are still on the sunny side of thirty.

UNCLE MICHEL. From now on you should freeze. Your mother was forty for years.

*(***DIDI**, *half-reassured, blows out the candles)*

JO. Round the table you must go. You must go. Must go...it's your birthday.

UNCLE MICHEL. *(Glancing at* **EDGAR***)* Let's give Didi a kiss.

*(***EDGAR** *is about to do so when babies' crying comes from the rear hallway.* **RENÉ** *walks between* **DIDI** *and* **EDGAR** *spoiling the kiss.)*

RENÉ. Estelle. You think it's right to ignore the children? *(***TELL** *turns her head, stung, jumps up, and starts out. He reaches for her arm, guiltily but she stiffens and keeps going past)* Take the cane. You're going to kill yourself, swear to God. I can't raise these monsters alone.

*(***DIDI** *gives* **EDGAR** *a frustrated look and then leaves with* **MATHILDE** *and* **UNCLE MICHEL***)*

RENÉ. *(to* **EDGAR***)* My God, what's happening to me? I used to love children but I can't stand the sight of them. America, help Tell with the...

*(***AMERICA** *exits.)*

EDGAR. You were the one with the vision of family life.

RENÉ. I've no vision. My creditors have it but I don't. *(Puts an arm around* **EDGAR** *and hugs him appreciatively.)* You've no idea of the hardship conditions here. You can't just go out and find clients. There is always someone who can get there before you. *(Takes a swig from his flask)* Country traders bartering cotton.

God knows who they are. Negotiating is getting ugly. Hell, I'd like nothing more than to get away from here as soon as possible.
(Another drink) When are you coming to the office?

EDGAR. I'm here to paint.

RENÉ. Couldn't you do that later...Hey...

EDGAR. I just gave you money...look...Cousin Norbert is here.

RENÉ. I can't work with him.

EDGAR. Why not? He could hire you to work on his... His sugar refining inventions are renowned.

RENÉ. It's not that simple. He can't do anything without facing threats.

EDGAR. From whom?

RENÉ. The White League. *(Glances uneasily to the entranceways with a change of tone)* They fight against the rising tide of colored people. Names like the Ku Klux Klan, the White Brotherhood, Camellias of Louisiana, mean anything to you? Uncle runs one white group. Our brother-in-law runs another.

EDGAR. *(His face hardens)* And you?

RENÉ. I'm involved also...I have to be.

EDGAR. This is what your Confederacy has given you?

RENÉ. You don't understand how it works here.

EDGAR. I fought for a dream. I joined the Commune because I believed all citizens were brothers.

RENÉ. Nice theory.

EDGAR. I still believe it. The White League is the opposite of everything the Commune fought and died for...

RENÉ. This is another world.

EDGAR. Then it's not mine.

*(***EDGAR** *exits.)*

*(***AMERICA** *slumps against the pantry doorway.)*

AMERICA. René, when are you going to tell your wife?

RENÉ. Right now, I can't. Tell is very fragile.

AMERICA. And me? What will happen to me?

*(***RENÉ** *grins at her provocatively, and takes a ring from his pocket)*

AMERICA. A silver ring? I want you, I want a future, not a silver ring.

RENÉ. This isn't silver. It's platinum. Handmade in France. The jeweler was so snobbish I could barely talk to him.

*(***JO** *eavesdrops at the gallery window)*

Later. Believe me, we'll talk later.

*(***AMERICA** *goes to the window, looking at the ring in dismay. She hears* **JO***, looks up annoyed.)*

AMERICA. What do you want, anything?

JO. No.

(blackout)

(Slide then lights for street scene with another slide and music)

Scene Two

(A week later at five o'clock, **EDGAR** *and* **TELL** *stroll along the levee, twenty feet high and full of shadows.)*

TELL. You see Norbert?

EDGAR. No. The levee is full of whites. A giant lady with a parrot just sashayed by.

TELL. *(Laughing into her hand)* Any sign of a well-built brown man?

EDGAR. A tall white man just went by. He was very dashing in his checked jacket—

TELL. You like clothes?

(He laughs and squeezes her arm.)

EDGAR. When I paint. Colors set the tone.

TELL. Who's that up there scaling the levee?

EDGAR. Some white couples–the women in bustles and carrying parasols.

TELL. I like how you see things.

EDGAR. Precision is everything.

TELL. What time is it?

EDGAR. Don't worry. We're doing the right thing. Patience.

*(***EMILY***, a pretty middle-aged woman of color, sneaks in panting, nervous. She spots* **EDGAR** *by a street lamp, touches his shoulder, and draws him into the shadows.)*

EMILY. You don't recognize me?

TELL. No. Should I know you? You can't be Cousin Emily... Norbert's wife?

*(***EMILY** *tosses back a hood, lifting off an alpaca turban.)*

EMILY. I'm Emily.

*(***EDGAR** *gives her an arresting smile and tips his cap.)*

EDGAR. I'm Edgar. This is Tell.

TELL. We know each other. Should we go somewhere inside. We're so exposed here.

EMILY. Where?

EDGAR. *(***EDGAR** *looks around.)* Here's fine. Where's your husband?

EMILY. *(Embarrassed)* Home. I took the back route. My legs got so cold, walking through the damp.

EDGAR. *(Noticeably upset)* He's not coming? Can you go back and get him?

EMILY. He's sick. Bad virus.

EDGAR. Well, I'll go to your home. I've got to see him.

TELL. Papa shouldn't have been so rude when Norbert came by—

EDGAR. I'll take Tell home and come back here if he'll meet me.

EMILY. *(Noticeably winded)* Norbert's a proud man . . .

EDGAR. Sit. Rest.

TELL. *(Startled)* No. Those benches used to be just for whites.

*(***EDGAR** *begins touching* **EMILY***, wiping off rain from her shoulder.)*

TELL. Keep your manner business-like.

*(***EMILY** *backs off and shakes out her drenched hem and petticoats.)*

EMILY. You better get used to the rain. Don't look like New Orleans is ever going to dry out.

TELL. Take my hankie. You shouldn't have risked danger by coming here. A colored woman alone...

EMILY. Let's wait for these whites to pass... Norbert wants to move to Paris.

TELL. Keep walking.

EDGAR. Who'd have thought you'd have to meet this way after the war.

EMILY. Any Negro is a target. Doesn't matter if you are free.

(Offstage sound of soldiers passing with a hard stride.)

TELL. Union soldiers

EMILY. Hope they don't want to fight.

(Offstage. Sounds of a skirmish.)

TELL. We should go.

EDGAR. No. Not just yet.

EMILY. Better make Edgar understand.

TELL. Lets go closer to the river.

*(***TELL** *leads* **EDGAR** *and* **EMILY** *away.)*

EMILY. Do Negroes keep apart in Paris?

EDGAR. No.

EMILY. Nobody lynches them? My dream is to go somewhere they don't punish you for your skin. Norbert deals with it better. It's been seven years since the War and the hatred's gotten worse. God knocked Saint Paul from his horse, but how many men fall and begin to see... in the South? Norbert says, "A new age is coming with shining, kind people. Inventions will multiply. Carriages and streetcars gonna' go by themselves." That's why we want to move to Paris, because people are more forward-thinking there.

(Sound of horsemen riding along the river edge, brushing past them. **EMILY** *wipes sweat from her lip, sticks the hankie back up her sleeve.)*

EMILY. If you'll excuse me, Miss Tell. I think you and your children should go back to Paris with Edgar. Leave this town and your...difficult situation. It ain't going to get any better.

TELL. *(Awkward)* I don' know—but I do miss Paris.

EMILY. I better go check on Norbert. *(She pulls down her turban over her shiny clamped hair.)* I tell myself I'm closing the book on one life to open it on another. I'll look at the river one last time. I fear I want something a woman can't have: equality.

TELL. Smart women shouldn't be in the South. It's difficult for whites and impossible for Negroes.

*(***EMILY** *turns to* **TELL***, tears sprouting by her eyes.)*

EMILY. I'd feel better if we travel with you and Edgar.

TELL. Oh, no. Not now. Not yet.

EDGAR. There are people I can't leave.

EMILY. I know it's hard. Inside, I want to scream. I have a sister and a mother, all from here. When that ship pulls off, that horn blows, and my mother waves, tears will burst me apart. I tell myself, serve as an example of a woman who got away. What do you think God wants me to do?

*(**SOUND:** Chimes from Saint Louis Cathedral soar.)*

EMILY. *(Withdrawing)* Terrible thunder. Looks like Satan's afoot.

TELL. You sure you want to go to Paris?

EMILY. Y'all come too. *(Lowering her voice)* We're dealing with evil that Yanks and the Freedmen's Bureau can't stop.

(They see men walk nearby in deer stalking caps and heavy lace-up boots. **EMILY** *pulls up her hood.)*

EMILY. Oh, Lord. We're being watched. By that fellow over there, and there. I better go.

EDGAR. They can't harm you. I'll make Uncle receive you—

EMILY. Don't go getting yourself shot. You dealing with some mean men. No one can stop—*(With bitter irony)* You haven't seen your Uncle's getup? He and Will are planning a battle. They are so mad they can't carry a gun and vote. *(Her voice trembling with rage)* They'll kill any Negro that tries to stand up, and any white man that helps him.

EDGAR. Yes, I know. My brother also. *(He reaches out shamefaced and takes her hand, but she drops it immediately)*

EMILY. Colored politicians can't save no one. You watch out.

TELL. *(Takes* **EMILY***'s arm.)* I'll go home with you.

(Rain creeps down. **EDGAR** *swoopes up his umbrella.)*

EDGAR. I'll escort you both.

(Distant cries and a random gunshot hurl them back to reality.)

EMILY. No, it's best I go alone!

(She lifts her skirts, vanishes through the shadows and breaks free.)

(slide fades out)

(blackout)

Scene Three

(Two weeks later on the gallery. **UNCLE MICHEL** *sits boredly; behind him,* **JO** *crouches with her puppets, singing, putting warring puppets on his shoulders.* **MATHILDE** *and* **DIDI** *sit restlessly, sewing.)*

(Apart, **TELL** *relaxes into the pose* **EDGAR** *has created for her while he paints.)*

EDGAR. *(To* **TELL** *intimately)* I try to capture something deeply felt. I'm not the artist you knew. My energy doesn't always flow. And in Paris, the bad news is if you've been the new talent, they may think it's someone else's turn. I'm thirty-eight and haven't found the right—. Papa wants me to go to law school—...I thought I'd relocate here. Do landscapes, but I have a problem with your heat and sun. So I'm exploring faces and interiors. *(Brittle, pauses)* Only when painting you do I feel relaxed. Then it feels effortless to blend colors, lead white, Naples yellow, vermillion. To catch the shifting sun in less than an hour of painting time. To lay in the important masses...like the rocker on the gallery. I keep my eye on you and the world on canvas drifts magically into place.

UNCLE MICHEL. *(Calls out)* Shouldn't the painting session end?

DIDI. Isn't drawing in front of others disrespectful?

EDGAR. I don't think so. Since I joined the military, I always feel I'm painting apart.

UNCLE MICHEL. Edgar should paint you Didi.

*(***DIDI** *scoops up her embroidery and she and* **MATHILDE** *make a great business of sewing.)*

JO. *"Frere Jacques, frere Jacques, dormez-vous? Dormez-vous? Sonnez le matines. Sonnez le matines..."*

MATHILDE. If I were single, I'd marry Edgar. I would surely. Yes indeed.

DIDI. *(Embroidering diligently)* You've three children and a husband.

MATHILDE. I'm tired of living for them. Last night, I dreamed I was by Will's casket and I whispered, "Thanks for freeing me." And off I went to Paris. Does that mean my husband will get shot and die? It's awful."

UNCLE MICHEL. *(Affectionately reprimanding)* Come watch our puppet show. Someone needs to give Jo attention. Call all the children out.

MATHILDE. No. Not now.

UNCLE MICHEL. You don't want to see your children?

MATHILDE. I need some time with Edgar. Desiree will later.

DIDI. *(Stung)* No, I won't.

(With a baffled shrug of his shoulders, **UNCLE MICHEL** *leaves with* **JO**. **DIDI** *puts her sewing down.)*

DIDI. I'm waiting to read my writings to Edgar. Literature has always deeply interested him. Many of his paintings are based on Biblical, Classical and Romantic literature.

MATHILDE. So he'll be proposing soon?

DIDI. Our discussions are purely intellectual.

MATHILDE. How disappointing.

DIDI. *(Quickly)* Who knows? He admires women writers and protagonists. He reads repeatedly *Madame Bovary—*

(Focus swings to the gallery, **EDGAR** *painting* **TELL** *with an awkward uneasy tenderness)*

*(**SOUND:** Something like Satie's music)*

EDGAR. It's amazing. You have these moments of terrific intensity and utter passiveness. I can't wrap my mind around it. *(Coming over to her, he kneels and puffs her overskirts.)*

TELL. I wish I could see your drawing.

EDGAR. You mightn't like it. No, you...would. You're a good liar. I always felt I had to paint. But when you left Paris, painting seemed a necessity.

TELL. It's your gift!

EDGAR. I'm no prodigy. My talent comes through merciless work...

TELL. I used to watch you painting at the Louvre for hours.

EDGAR. I sensed you watching me.

TELL. You didn't.

EDGAR. That's where the extra red came in my "Daughters of Japheth." I was blushing.

TELL. It was a crush.

EDGAR. I was observing you even when you didn't know it.

TELL. I felt you, observing me.

EDGAR. I felt you...feeling me observing you. *(Laughs)* That's what painters do.

(The family exits the gallery. **EDGAR** *continues painting* **TELL***)*

EDGAR. *(Hesitates—then slowly)* Still there was something inexplicable—sacred in the way we connected.

TELL. You were lonely.

EDGAR. Don't diminish what I'm saying.

TELL. I wish I could see your painting.

EDGAR. *(He stares at her sheepishly, his voice drifting deep into himself)* When you touched my face earlier, I said nothing. But there's those intricacies of feeling even I can't understand. *(He continues painting)*

Scene Four

(Later, at the House. **RENÉ** *sits at the desk, struggling with bills.* **JO***, lying on the sofa, makes one of her puppets beat another.)*

PUPPET–JO. I've had enough of her. I'm going to do something to her. I'm not going to kill her but she's got to suffer.

AMERICA. *(From the pantry, calls out)* Jo!

*(***JO** *hides behind the sofa. Strolling in, speaks with peevishness)*

AMERICA. Come practice piano. She is always hiding somewhere. *(Pause)* Oh René. I went looking for you upstairs.

RENÉ. This place is turning into a nursery. I had to come down. I'm going to pay for my children to grow up, then I'm going to Paris and stay drunk.

AMERICA. *(Inches behind him, romantically)* How long can I be expected to take all this? Have you talked to Edgar?

RENÉ. I can't yet. Look...You're married too.

AMERICA. What kind of marriage do I have? At least before the war my husband never worried about money, because there was always more, more. Now he counts every penny. My grandma used to say what would you rather be, an old man's darling or a young man's bride? I settled for the old man's darling, but now I'm not even that. He thinks because I worked in the kitchen before, I should be grateful. *(Sits on* **RENÉ***'s lap, throws her arms around his neck.)* I'm young. I want to travel. He never expected me to want that. I'm so bored. When he talks, it's only to repeat himself or say something ugly. He hates everybody I like and one day all his meanness will come out at me. When it does, I'm a dead woman. We've got to leave. When will you talk to Edgar?

RENÉ. How can I leave when the pregnancy is in trouble? *(There is a silence in which* **RENÉ** *moves away awkwardly. A strange aloofness comes over him.)* What time do the guests arrive at your house?

AMERICA. They're not coming.

RENÉ. But I'm supposed to introduce Edgar to...new clients.

AMERICA. I canceled the Christmas party.

RENÉ. You decided not to have it.

AMERICA. You won't leave your wife and give me back my money.

RENÉ. What?

AMERICA. I had to accuse my servants of theft. The judge sent them to jail.

RENÉ. But... You were supposed to—help me get money from the judge--

AMERICA. His friends have no money. They're looking for money from you.

RENÉ. Everybody cannot be broke. Some people have inherited money.

AMERICA. Yes, but the rich really love their money. They'll turn from you.

RENÉ. So you're calling off the Christmas party?

AMERICA. To which I'm barely invited, although it's at my house. I'm the servant who happens to own the house. I don't act like one of y'all. But Tell's the angel mother. If I've to hear once more about her first husband being nephew to Jefferson Davis—

RENÉ. You said the judge would lend money, if Edgar approached him.

AMERICA. Yes, but we haven't had relations in eight months.

RENÉ. You think it's fair to punish me? You know I'd love to run off with you. Never look at this wanting house again. How can I act dishonorably? So many people are depending on me. Every night when I go to bed I imagine you alongside me. Every other second I think of you. When I'm shaving, combing my hair, stepping off the gallery, hopping on the streetcar, opening the office door, picking up the mail. *(He gives a little despairing laugh)* There's hardly an action I do without daydreaming about you. That's my personal torture.

AMERICA. Well you'll just have to bear it.

*(***RENÉ** *gives her a dark look and exits.* **JO** *sneaks out onto the gallery, frowning, leaving a puppet behind.* **AMERICA** *watches her, then picks up the puppet and throws it and walks out)*

(Outside it thunders, and rains. Moments later, **MATHILDE** *and* **JO** *come in with a vase of red gladioli.)*

JO. It's true, I did see Mr. René and America kissing here. They're gone but they were here, kissing.

MATHILDE. My. They are just good friends.

JO. Good friends don't kiss so long...Is she going to have a baby?

MATHILDE. Heavens no. It's Christmas time. People are drinking, full of friendliness.

*(***JO** *tries to look in her aunt's eyes, but she keeps them averted, arranging the flowers)*

MATHILDE. Some things you can't understand until you grow up. Now let's get you dressed for the Christmas party.

*(***MATHILDE** *coaxes* **JO** *out to the front hallway as* **TELL** *comes in the rear parlor dressed in splendid velvet and satin, her pregnancy heightening her voluptuous sensuality. On hearing the rain and thunder, she adjusts her sleeves with a forlorn gentleness.)*

*(**SOUND:** Christmas music plays, something like "Oh Holy Night," as* **TELL** *moves to the desk and smells the vase of red gladioli)*

*(**LIGHTS:** Lights dim and a slide is displayed briefly)*

*(***EDGAR** *comes in from the back parlor. A pause. His expression becomes thoughtful, almost as if he's seeing the painting, "Portrait of Estelle")*

TELL. Edgar. I know it is you.

EDGAR. How is that?

TELL. By your footsteps.

EDGAR. Is that it?

TELL. Well, actually there's an energy.

EDGAR. Can you sense what I'm doing?

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