

3 Minnie / Miss Leah

Scene 4

if I was, taking in laundry to make an honest living wouldn't be the thing I'd pick. (A beat.) You don't have to apologize to me for your husband Min. If he's good to you, he's good enough for me. Is he good to you, Min?

MINNIE. Yes, he's good to me.

SOPHIE. Then he's all right with me.

FANNIE. Well, since you two are getting along so well, let's do it before you start fussing again!

MINNIE. Do what?

FANNIE. The ritual. Let's do it now!

MINNIE. Oh, yes, please! Can we? (Wil can be seen sharpening a small knife on a stone. Frank takes out a cigar, prepares it, smokes. The women stand in a circle, holding hands.)

SOPHIE. Because we are free Negro women ...

FANNIE and MINNIE. Because we are free Negro women ...

SOPHIE. Born of free Negro women ...

FANNIE and MINNIE. Born of free Negro women ...

ALL. Back as far as time begins ...

SOPHIE. We choose this day to leave a place where our lives, our honor and our very souls are not our own.

FANNIE. Say it, Sister!

SOPHIE. We choose this day to declare our lives to be our own and no one else's. And we promise to always remember the day we left Memphis and went west together to be free women as a sacred bond between us with all our trust.

FANNIE and MINNIE. With all our trust ...

SOPHIE. And all our strength ...

FANNIE and MINNIE. And all our strength ... (As they talk, Frank walks over to the window, smoking. He looks at the women holding hands in the moonlight.)

SOPHIE. And all our courage ...

FANNIE and MINNIE. And all our courage ...

SOPHIE. And all our love.

FANNIE and MINNIE. And all our love. (A beat.)

SOPHIE. Welcome home, Baby Sister. (The three embrace, laughing happily. Frank still watches from the window.)

BLACKOUT

Miss Leah is on the stage alone. She is mending something. Minnie kisses the sleeping Frank in the bedroom and goes quietly out, closing the door behind her. She is brushing her hair. She looks much younger than she did with her fancy hat and sophisticated hairdo.

MINNIE. You're up early.

MISS LEAH. Habit, chile. I don't know how to sleep past sun up.

MINNIE. Where are Fan and Sister?

MISS LEAH. Fan's already up washing and Sophie's probably off somewhere driving some other poor soul crazy. Come sit by me, chile. I couldn't hardly get a word in at dinner last night.

MINNIE. You always hold your own.

MISS LEAH. If you don't hold it, who gone hold it? Let me look at you. (A beat.) You look more like yourself this morning.

MINNIE. I'm going to braid my hair with ribbons like you used to do it, remember?

MISS LEAH. I remember. (Minnie messes up a braid.) But don't look like you do. Sit down here, girl, and let me fix that head. (Minnie sits with her head between Miss Leah's knees.)

MINNIE. Don't you think Frank is fine looking?

MISS LEAH. He'll do.

MINNIE. I want all my babies to look just like him!

MISS LEAH. He ain't that pretty.

MINNIE. Do you think I'll be a good mother?

MISS LEAH. You better be. Fan gone be too old for many babies by the time her and Wil stop dancin' around each other and Sophie's too mean for anybody to marry. So I'm countin' on you, Baby Sister. None of this makes any sense without the children.

MINNIE. It would be hard to have a child way out here.

MISS LEAH. There's a lot worse places than this to have a baby. I'd of given anything to a had my babies in my own little house on my own piece of land with James pacing outside and the midwife knowin' what to do to ease you through it. Is that too tight?

MINNIE. It's perfect! *(Frank gets up and begins dressing in the bedroom. He is wearing more expensive city clothes. He takes great care with his cuff links, tie, etc. He is especially pleased with his hair.)*

MISS LEAH. *(Resumes her braiding.)* I was only thirteen when I got my first one. They wanted me to start early 'cause I was big and strong. Soon as my womanhood came on me, they took me out in the barn and put James on me. He was older than me and big. He already had children by half the women on the place. My James ... *(A beat.)* But that first time, he was hurting me so bad and I was screamin' and carryin' on somethin' awful and that old overseer just watchin' and laughin' to make sure James really doin' it. He watch us every night for a week and after the third one I hear James tryin' to whisper somethin' to me real quiet while he doin' it. I was so surprised I stopped cryin' for a minute and I hear James sayin' "Leah, Leah, Leah...." He just kept sayin' my name over and over. *(A beat.)* At the end of the week, I had got my first son. Do you have another ribbon? *(Minnie hands her one from her pocket.)* Fan's gonna skin you about her ribbons, Missy!

MINNIE. Did you love James?

MISS LEAH. I always thought I would've if they'd a let me find him for myself. The way it was, we stayed together after the war 'cause we was closer to each other than to anybody that wadn't dead or sold off and because James said we had ten babies that they sold away from us. We ought to have ten more we could raise free. Done! *(Finishes the braiding.)*

MINNIE. I love my hair in braids.

MISS LEAH. Braid it or shave it off, I say. All the rest takes too much fussin' with. Don't leave a woman no time to think.

MINNIE. Why won't you let Fannie write down your stories?

MISS LEAH. Everything can't be wrote down. No matter

what Fannie tell you, some things gotta be said out loud to keep the life in 'em.

MINNIE. Do you think James would have liked Kansas?

MISS LEAH. I think he would of if he could have walked his mind this far from Tennessee. It takes some doin' to be able to see a place in your mind where you never been before.

MINNIE. Frank's been so many places. London. Paris. Rome. Sometimes it seems like he's been everywhere and seen everything.

MISS LEAH. Well, I know that ain't true.

MINNIE. Why?

MISS LEAH. 'Cause this is his first time in Nicodemus.

MINNIE. I kept hoping he would like it here. I miss it so much. I tried to describe it to him, and sometimes I'd read him Fannie's letters, but ...

MISS LEAH. Well, some people truly are city people. They like all that noise and confusion. It gives them somethin' to hide behind. Can't do that out here. First winter teach you that. Out here, nothin' stands between you and your soul.

MINNIE. It's more than that for Frank. He doesn't just hate the South and the frontier. He hates the whole country.

MISS LEAH. Well, maybe the boy's got more sense then I thought he did.

MINNIE. He said the first time he went to Europe he begged his father to leave him behind when it was time to go back to New Orleans. But he was only fourteen so his father refused.

MISS LEAH. Fourteen can be a grown man if you let it.

MINNIE. But he said he knew right then that as soon as he could, he was going to get on a boat for England and never look back. And he did, too.

MISS LEAH. *(A beat.)* Baby?

MINNIE. Yes?

MISS LEAH. Do you ever miss colored people?

MINNIE. I miss colored people so much sometime I don't know what to do!

MISS LEAH. Well, that's good to hear. I thought you might

be getting as tired of Negroes as Frank seems to be.
MINNIE. Frank doesn't mean any harm. He just doesn't feel like we do about Negroes. He might miss a friend or two, but when I ask him if he doesn't ever just miss being in a big group of Negroes, knowing that we are all going to laugh at the same time and cry at the same time just because we're all there being colored, he just shakes his head. I don't think he's ever felt it, so he can't miss it.

MISS LEAH. How can a Negro get that grown and not know how it feels to be around his own people.

MINNIE. He isn't used to being treated like other colored people. He gets so angry when we have to get on the Jim Crow car. When we can't go in the restaurants. I think if Frank had to live here, he might go mad.*

MISS LEAH. Well, Negroes are supposed to get mad, so that's a good sign.

MINNIE. Not get mad, Miss Leah. Go mad.

MISS LEAH. Six of one. Half a dozen of the other. *(Frank enters from the bedroom.)*

FRANK. Good morning! Darling! I didn't hear you get up.

MINNIE. *(Jumps up to hug him quickly.)* I didn't want to wake you.

FRANK. What have you done to your hair?

MINNIE. Miss Leah braided it for me like she used to? Do you like it?

FRANK. I've never seen you with your hair in plaits.

MINNIE. Yes you have. I was wearing braids when you met me.

FRANK. *(Being charming for the benefit of Miss Leah.)* You looked like such a little country girl then. When I first took Minnie to London, I made sure to take her shopping before I introduced her to my friends. But I always knew she had potential. Anybody could see that. And that's why I married her. Because Minnie deserves the best. Doesn't she?

MISS LEAH. She is the best.

FRANK. Yes, she is! I'm going to step out for a smoke, if you two will excuse me.

MINNIE. I'll come, too. Do you want me to make you some

breakfast before we go out? My coffee isn't as bad as Sister's.
MISS LEAH. Fan left me a fresh pot. Go ahead, chile. I'll be fine. I've been up long enough to be lookin' for a nap soon. *(Frank and Minnie exit to the yard.)*

FRANK. *(Angrily.)* I want you to put your hair back the way it was.

MINNIE. I always wore my ...

FRANK. You look like a damn picaninny! We haven't been here twenty-four hours and look at you.

MINNIE. I'm sorry ...

FRANK. You're always sorry, aren't you? Of course you are, but if you weren't so busy being sorry, you'd know there are some interesting things going on in Nicodemus these days.

MINNIE. What do you mean?

FRANK. Nothing. I'm going to ride into town to check at the telegraph office and ... take a look around.

MINNIE. Don't be too late, will you? *(He exits. Minnie sits down on the porch wearily and draws her knees to her chest, rocking back and forth wearily. In the kitchen, Fannie and Sophie are oblivious.)*

BLACKOUT

Scene 5

It is late that evening. Sophie and Fannie and Minnie are up. Fannie is sewing something. Sophie is pulling some papers from her desk. Some of these are rolled maps or plans, etc. These are Sophie's plans for the development of the town. Minnie is standing at the window. Fannie takes off her glasses, rubs her eyes sleepily. Minnie goes over to the fire and stirs it up, puts another log on.

FANNIE. Well, I think I'm going to leave the rest to you night owls! Don't worry. Nicodemus isn't big enough for Frank to get into trouble, even if he's looking for it.